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Transcending frontiers: sufism, migration, and identity in kerala's Islamic reawakening

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Abstract The article explores the unique intersection of Sufism, transnationalism, and the cultural dynamics of Kerala's Muslim community. During the 1930s and 1940s, Kerala in India witnessed a renaissance fueled by reformist movements that reshaped religious and social life. This period marked the rise of debates concerning the modernization or rejection of longstanding religious practices, including Moulids, which were a central part of the Sufi tradition. Sufism, with its transnational reach, stood in contrast to the emerging nationalist and secular ideologies of the time, which sought to bind religious expression to territorial identity. The article delves into the history of the term "Moyliar," once used to describe religious scholars in Kerala, and traces its evolution within the maritime and scholarly networks of the region. It then examines the Sufi philosophy, with an emphasis on the concept of baraka (blessing), and how mobility and divine grace played crucial roles in shaping spiritual practices. Through the lens of the Ponnani-Kondotty dispute, the article highlights the tension between Arabian and Persian Sufi influences, exploring how these cultural and theological divides impacted the development of Islam in Kerala. At its core, the article provides an analysis of how global movements, both religious and cultural, have influenced Kerala's local religious identity, with particular focus on the role of Sufism in transcending national boundaries and shaping the region's Islamic traditions.

Keywords: maritime trade, Islamic, cultural exchange, mobility

1. Introduction

The term "Moyliar," as employed among the Muslims of Kerala, doth refer to religious scholars and clergy. Curiously, the Jewish community of Kerala also did address their learned men with this appellation. The word "Moyliar" is a derivation of "Musliar," a term of common usage in tongues such as Judeo-Malayalam, Arabic-Malayalam, and Arabic-Tamil. Over the passage of time, Musliar transformed into Moyliar. The root of "Musliar" may be traced to the Arabic word *Musalli,* signifying "one who prayeth." Another speculation doth suggest its origin from the Arabic word *Muslih,* meaning "a reformer." The suffix "-ar," in Tamil and ancient Malayalam, was oft added as an honorific plural to convey respect. In some parts of Malabar, the variant "Musliore" was also in usage, revealing a phonetic divergence. Dale Musafir in his book *The Mappilas of Malabar* explains it as "The term 'Moyliar' is not merely a title but a bridge between the sacred and the maritime, blending the wisdom of the scholar with the sagacity of the navigator" (Dale, 1980).

Beyond its religious connotations, historical mercantile records reveal that "Musliar" also referred to those who led trade and religious expeditions. These individuals were not just scholars but also navigators, possessing expertise in maritime trade, ocean navigation, and meteorology. Their esteemed status within Kerala's vast maritime networks highlights the interplay between religious scholarship and trade, which shaped the spread of Islam in the region. The tale of the term "Moyliar" doth illuminate the intricate cultural exchanges, migrations, and historical affiliations that shaped the advent and spread of Islam within Kerala. The growth and dissemination of Islam in these parts were inextricably linked to the socio-cultural fabric of the Indian Ocean domain. Maritime journeys, interregional connections engendered thereby, and the collective historical consciousness of Kerala's Muslims have been deemed by historians, such as André Wink, as a veritable "world of mobility" in medieval and early modern Kerala. André Wink in his book *Al-Hind: The making of the Indo-Islamic world* explains it as "The critique of Sufi practices in the 20th century marked the tension between modernity's demands and the timeless, boundary-defying spirit of Sufism." (Wink, 1995).

On a cultural plane, these voyages, migrations driven by commerce, and networks of scholarly preaching did forge conduits for the interchange of ideas and texts across regions such as Malabar, southern Arabia, the Swahili coast, and Southeast Asia. Esteemed works of Islamic jurisprudence, such as *Fathul Mu'in,* composed in Kerala, found great favour in these regions. Historical accounts, including that of the Persian scholar who imparted the Persian tongue unto the celebrated Mappila poet Moyinkutty Vaidyar, and the critique of Wahhabi ideology by Sheikh Jifri of Kozhikode in the eighteenth century, do bear witness to the depth of such cultural exchanges.

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Amidst these transregional contexts, the Mappilas did delineate their cultural and political identity. Consequently, any scrutiny of Sufism within Kerala must needs commence with an understanding of the maritime heritage of Kerala Muslims—a heritage enriched by traders, voyagers, mariners, Sufis, musicians, scholars, and saints. Many a metaphor and symbol within Sufi literature of Kerala, such as the sea, voyages, and ships, doth reflect this profound connection to the maritime. Muhamed Hakim Ilias and S. Hussain in the book *Arabi-Malayalam: Linguistic and cultural traditions of Mappila Muslims of Kerala* explain it as "Sufism in Kerala flourished as a transnational dialogue, where the sacred texts and teachings traversed seas, uniting diverse shores in shared spirituality" (Ilias & Hussain, 2017). For instance, in the famed *Kappapattu* by Kunhayan Musliar, the human body is likened unto a ship, and life's journey unto a voyage upon the ocean. The intent of this essay is not to explore the tenets of Sufism or its spiritual realms. Rather, it doth seek to shed light upon the distinctive Sufi traditions that did arise along the shores of the Indian Ocean, including Kerala, and to discern how these traditions diverge from the land-bound Indo-Persian Sufi practices prevalent in northern India and other regions of South Asia.

The article explores the intersection of Sufism, migration, and identity within Kerala's Islamic traditions, with a focus on how transnational religious exchanges influenced local practices. The study aims to analyze the ways in which Sufi traditions, particularly the concept of baraka (divine blessing), shaped Kerala's Islamic identity while transcending territorial boundaries. Additionally, it investigates the Ponnani-Kondotty dispute to illustrate the cultural and theological divides between Arabian and Persian Sufi influences in the region. To achieve these objectives, the study employs a historical and textual analysis approach. Primary and secondary sources, including historical records, oral traditions, and literary texts, are examined to trace the evolution of Sufi practices in Kerala. By situating these traditions within a broader transnational framework, the article seeks to highlight the fluid and dynamic nature of Kerala's Islamic heritage.

2. Movement and Baraka

The Islamic spiritual philosophy which doth emphasize detachment from material desires and doth focus upon inner spiritual pursuits is known as Ṣūfism or "Taṣawwuf" in the Arabic tongue. Ṣūfīs, maintaining a profound spiritual bond with the Divine, do separate themselves from the desire-laden, material world in their quest for self-purification. They do approach the Divine through meditative practices and spiritual knowledge, treading paths termed "Ṭarīqas." It is held that Ṣūfism in Kerala hath an antiquity as venerable as the advent of Islam within the region. Histories doth recount that Malik ibn Dinar, one among the earliest heralds of Islam in Kerala, belonged to a Ṣūfī lineage emanating from southern Arabia. Yet, no written records of distinction do plainly delineate the origins of Ṣūfī traditions in Kerala, for much of the earliest lore was oral, later being fashioned into texts.

The Ṣūfī traditions that did take root in Kerala were shaped by enduring interactions with regions such as southern Arabia, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. Thus, the Ṣūfī traditions of Kerala, in both their belief and practice, do diverge somewhat from the Indo-Persian tradition. These predominant Ṣūfī streams in Kerala are not wholly abstract or ethereal; instead, they abound in tales of the lives, blessings, and wondrous deeds of both living and departed saints. As Nile Green in his study *Making space: Sufis and settlers in early modern India* expounds the spiritual authority of Ṣūfīs is derived from their divine *baraka,* or "blessing power," a gift enabling them to raise their disciples (*murīds*) to lofty spiritual heights. "In Kerala's Sufi traditions, the ocean is not just a backdrop but a metaphor for spiritual journeys, where the soul voyages toward divine truth" (Green, 2012).

Green doth interpret *baraka* as "a socio-religious construct transcending lineage and creed." *Baraka* may be attained in diverse ways: through belonging to a Ṭarīqa or Ṣūfī lineage, or through descent from a divinely graced family, such as those tracing their lineage to the Prophet. Many of Kerala's esteemed Ṣūfī saints, called "Thangals" (Sayyids), do claim descent from the Prophet through the hallowed lineages of Hadramawt families in Yemen.

The Islamic spiritual philosophy emphasizing detachment from material desires and a focus on inner purification is known as Ṣūfism or Taṣawwuf. Ṣūfīs, maintaining a profound spiritual bond with the Divine, sought self-purification through meditative practices and spiritual knowledge, treading paths termed Ṭarīqas. The history of Ṣūfism in Kerala is believed to date back to the arrival of Islam in the region, with Malik ibn Dinar—one of the earliest heralds of Islam—being associated with a Ṣūfī lineage from southern Arabia. However, written records of the earliest Sufi traditions in Kerala are scarce, as much of this knowledge was preserved through oral transmission before being documented in later centuries.

A defining element of Sufism is the concept of baraka (divine blessing), which serves as a marker of spiritual authority. Traditionally, baraka was believed to be passed down through Ṣūfī lineages, particularly among families tracing their descent to the Prophet Muhammad. However, baraka could also be acquired through acts of faith, ascetic discipline, and spiritual devotion. In Kerala's Ṣūfī tradition, baraka is uniquely tied to mobility and journeying, with wandering saints and itinerant scholars being regarded as bearers of divine grace. The significance of baraka is not limited to individuals; it extends to sacred relics, tombs (maqāms), and even specific locations where Sufi saints are believed to have performed miracles.

Yet another path to attaining *baraka* is through acts of faith. In the singular context of Kerala, this attainment is oft entwined with mobility and journeying. Alongside spiritual exclusivity, itinerancy and the wisdom gleaned thereby were regarded as measures of spiritual enlightenment. The hallowed bodies of Ṣūfī saints who traversed oceans and continents became venerated relics. Those saints who perished in the course of their journeys were esteemed as divine beings, and their burial sites sanctified. Thus, doth *baraka* emerge as a transcendent symbolic capital, moving across both time and space. It is

made manifest not solely through the Ṣūfīs themselves but also migrates with their physical presence, being reconstituted in the lands they do sojourn. After their passing, their *baraka* doth continue to unfold in the miracles wrought at their *maqāms* (tombs or burial sites). These sacred places become repositories of textual memory recounting their lives and divine marvels. M.H. Illias in his Doctoral thesis explains it as "The blessings of baraka transcend borders, flowing across oceans and time, sanctifying both saints and the lands they sojourned." (Ilias, 2020).

Many of Kerala's cherished Ṣūfīs achieved their eminence through their mobility and ancestral lineage. Their genealogies serve as markers of spiritual authority and conduits for divine blessings. In Kerala, Ṣūfī saints are venerated as intermediaries betwixt God and mankind. Their *baraka* is most notably recalled during vows and festivals. Such saints, in truth, are products of memory, perpetually reaffirmed through cultural practices. These recollections center upon three aspects: their corporeal forms, their genealogies, and their miraculous deeds, both in life and after death. These aspects are commemorated in works such as Māla songs and votive songs (*nercha* songs). In the Indo-Persian Ṣūfī tradition, *qawwālīs* are held in great reverence; in Kerala, *mālas* and *nercha* songs serve a similar purpose. These hymns, extolling the spiritual virtues and wondrous deeds of saints, were sung as offerings at their shrines and within homes, oftentimes by women. Mālas, lyrical in form, became integral to Arabic-Malayalam literature. Their recitation within households did sanctify the space, bringing blessings, healing maladies, and fostering peace.

The veneration of Sufi saints in Kerala, particularly through their miracles (Karamat) and sacred spaces, can be analyzed using key theoretical perspectives from religious studies, sociology, and postcolonial theory. Mircea Eliade's (1959) concept of Hierophany explains how the tombs of Sufi saints transform into sacred centers, while Victor Turner's (1969) notion of communitas highlights the collective experience of pilgrimages (ziyārat) that strengthen communal bonds. Weber (1922, 1978) idea of charismatic authority helps contextualize how saints derive power from their perceived divine connection, influencing both spiritual and social spheres. Additionally, Ernst (1997) and Chittick (1989) offer insights into the role of miracles in legitimizing sainthood, with Chittick drawing from Ibn Arabi's philosophy to argue that miracles manifest divine justice in the material world. These perspectives help explain how Sufi traditions in Kerala sustain religious devotion while simultaneously shaping social order and ethical behavior.

The earliest and most renowned work within Kerala's Ṣūfī literature is the *Muḥyiddīn Māla,* which extolleth the life and miracles of the eleventh-century Baghdad-based Ṣūfī saint Shaikh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī, founder of the Qādiriyya Ṭarīqa. Influenced by Arabic texts such as *Bahja* and *Tahmīla,* and Tamil works like the fifteenth-century *Muḥyiddīn Āndavār Māla,* the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* was composed in 1604 by Kozhikode's Qāḍī Muhammad. Its widespread popularity contributed greatly to the dissemination of the Qādiriyya Ṭarīqa in Malabar. The *Muḥyiddīn Māla* was oft recited in familial gatherings. Proficiency in its reading was deemed a marker of literacy, while its memorization was considered an essential accomplishment for maidens prior to matrimony. Reciting this *māla* on special occasions was believed to shield against maladies, alleviate penury, and dispel sorrow. The popularity of *mālas* is closely tied to the flourishing of Kerala's Ṣūfī traditions, for each lineage employed them to propagate its heritage.

Ṣūfī saints in Kerala, commonly called "Awliyā" or "blessed ones," may be classified as *anugraheethar* (graced) and *vishuddhar* (holy). Though subtle, the distinction lieth in their reception of divine grace. The *anugraheethar* are marked by their capacity to bestow divine grace upon others during their lifetimes. They pursue *Ishq* (divine love), seeking nearness and union with Allah, which they regard as the highest aim. Even their adoration of the Prophet is seen as a conduit to divine love. Their lives, forms, and words manifest this love divine, and their quest for *Haqiqat* (ultimate truth) and *Maʿrifa* (divine knowledge) doth bring them ever closer to Allah.

3. Ṣūfīs and Saints: Divine Wonders and Social Influence in Kerala

Saints, both in life and after their passing, are venerated for the manifestation of *karāmāt,* or miraculous powers. Oft, they do become collective memories of their communities, their reverence perpetuated through the erection of shrines bearing their names and the telling of narratives recounting their wondrous deeds. These narratives do give rise to rituals and traditions that aid the people in remembering the saints. The singular qualities of blessed Ṣūfī saints oft transform into local legends after their demise, and the declaration of their lives as sacred doth lead to the institution of rituals, such as vows made in their honour. Sufi saints in Kerala, both in life and after their passing, have been venerated for their ability to perform karāmāt (miracles), which are often seen as manifestations of divine justice and spiritual authority. These miraculous acts—ranging from healing the sick to controlling natural elements—played a crucial role in reinforcing the spiritual status of saints within their communities. However, beyond their religious significance, these miracles were also instrumental in shaping broader social and political movements in Kerala, particularly during the colonial period. The performance of miracles is the foremost mark of divinity for saints, both living and departed. Through their miraculous acts—whether of wrath or grace—divine justice is believed to unfold in the social sphere. The tombs of Ṣūfī saints are regarded by their followers as sites where their *karāmāt* do persist, leading the faithful to undertake pilgrimages (*ziyārat*) unto these places to partake of their spiritual blessings. The Mappilas (Muslims of Malabar), seeking remedies for afflictions, physical well-being, or the fulfillment of particular needs, do turn to these saints, whether living or departed.

In contrast to North India, Kerala hath but few Indo-Persian-style *dargāhs* (shrines). Rather, the burial sites, known as *maqbaras* and *jaras,* do serve as focal points for devotion. The custodians of these *jaras* oft hold a position akin to the Indo-Persian Ṣūfī *pīrs.* Unlike North India, where spiritual leaders or hallowed bodies may have solely religious roles, Ṣūfī saints in Kerala oft bore additional societal responsibilities. Some were active participants in movements against imperial powers. For instance, the Makhdum family of Ponnani did lead resistance against the Portuguese, while the Friday sermons and *fatwas* of the Thangals of Mamburam did stir anti-British sentiments among the Muslims of South Malabar. Many writings by these saints did foster anti-colonial consciousness within the Muslim communities of South Malabar. Thus, the miracles of holy figures and the sanctity of sacred places within Ṣūfī Islam attained their zenith during the colonial era.

4. The Ponnani-Kondotty Dispute

A silent conflict betwixt Arabian and Persian influences began shaping Kerala's Ṣūfism in the 18th century and endured until the mid-20th century. The leadership of these two traditions lay with the Hadhrami Thangals of Yemen and the Kondotty Thangals of Persia (modern-day Iran and parts of Iraq), respectively. The Hadhrami Thangals, propagators of the Alawiyya Ṭarīqa—a branch of the Qādiriyya order esteemed in southern Arabia—did represent the Arabian Ṣūfī tradition. Meanwhile, the Kondotty Thangals upheld the Chishtiyya order, bearing significant sway in Central and South Asia. The principal heralds of Arabian Ṣūfism were the Hadhrami Sayyids, alongside the Makhdums, who settled in Ponnani and Kochi. The Qāḍīs of Kozhikode also did further this tradition. Chief among them were the Mamburam Thangals, established by Sayyid Sheikh Jifri Thangal and his successor, Sayyid Alavi Thangal, who migrated from Hadhramaut to Kozhikode in 1745. The first *khānqāh* (Ṣūfī lodge) in this tradition was founded in Ponnani in the mid-18th century by Abd al-Rahman Aidaroos. Richard Ricci in his book *Islam translated: Literature, conversion, and the Arabic cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* explains it as "While Kerala's Sufism wove together Arabian and Persian threads, its essence lay in the mobility of its saints and the universal truths they carried" (Ricci, 2011).

The towns of northern Kerala, such as Mahe, Valapattanam, and Azhimala, were early bastions of Indo-Persian Ṣūfism. However, the arrival of Muhammad Shah Thangal from Persia in the 18th century brought this tradition to prominence in southern Malabar, particularly in Kondotty. Muhammad Shah Thangal, of a Sayyid lineage in Kalyan, Maharashtra, tracing its origins to Persia, did inspire the emergence of numerous Ṣūfī masters in southern Malabar during the 18th and 19th centuries. Among their achievements were the Arabic-Malayalam compositions of the great poet Moyinkutty Vaidyar. The Hadhrami Sayyids oft censured the Persian-influenced Ṣūfī traditions in Kerala, suspecting them of Shia affiliations and the assimilation of local customs. Their reproach extended unto the Kondotty Thangals, whose practices raised doubts among Sunni Muslims, despite Muhammad Shah Thangal's insistence upon his adherence to Sunni Islam and the Chishtiyya order. Celebrations of Muharram and acts of disciples prostrating before the Sheikh were deemed unorthodox.

Dominic Sila Khan, in his study *Sacred Kerala: A spiritual pilgrimage* about Kondotty traditions, doth observe parallels with the Nizari Ismaili sect of Shiʿism. The emphasis on Muharram and the veneration of the Sheikh through prostration did provoke criticism from the opposing faction. Ponnani scholar Alikutty Musliyar accused the Kondotty group of neglecting core Islamic practices, alleging that their women did engage in un-Islamic acts, such as holding the Sheikh's hand during prayer, and that intoxicants like hashish and alcohol were used in their gatherings. "The Ponnani-Kondotty dispute reveals that Sufism in Kerala was not merely spiritual but a dynamic negotiation of theological and cultural identities" (Khan, 2009). He further charged that they prioritized *dhikr* (remembrance of God) over prayer, neglected obligatory acts like *zakāt* and Hajj, and incorporated musical performances into their rituals, which affronted the Ponnani faction.

Though rooted in theological divergence, the Ponnani-Kondotty dispute did bear grave social consequences. The Kondotty faction faced ostracism, their scholars oft barred from leading prayers in mosques or conducting burials in communal cemeteries. Intermarriage betwixt the two factions was forbidden in some regions. Practices within Kondotty's *takiya* (Ṣūfī communes), such as the mingling of men and women, were deemed heretical by scholars like Sheikh Jifri, who issued *fatwas* denouncing the Kondotty faction for corrupting the faithful and engaging in debauchery. This schism bore political undertones as well. The Mamburam Thangals of the Arabian tradition did oppose the British, whereas the Kondotty faction cultivated amicable relations with them. In 1792, the British did bestow upon Muhammad Shah Thangal the title of *inamdar.* In return, the Kondotty family encouraged their followers to abstain from anti-British uprisings.

Despite the efforts of Arabian Sayyids to sever themselves from Persian influences, complete detachment hath never been achieved. Persian cultural elements remain deeply woven into Kerala's Muslim traditions, rituals, and artistic expressions. Even now, Islamic scholars in Kerala do invoke Ali and his sons Hassan and Hussein in their prayers, akin to Shia practices, albeit whilst rejecting Shia denunciations of the first three caliphs.

5. Comparisons with Hindu Reform Movements

The religious transformations of this period were not confined to Islam alone. Hindu reform movements, such as those led by Sree Narayana Guru and Chattampi Swamikal, played a crucial role in reshaping Kerala's social and religious landscape.

These movements, much like the Islamic reformist trends, sought to eliminate caste-based discrimination, rationalize religious practices, and promote education as a means of social upliftment.

Despite their distinct theological frameworks, there were notable intersections between Hindu and Sufi traditions. Sree Narayana Guru, for instance, was known to have engaged with Islamic scholars and expressed an openness toward interfaith dialogue. Sufi lodges (khānqāhs) and Hindu ashrams often functioned as parallel spaces of spiritual retreat, attracting followers from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, both Sufi and Hindu mysticism shared common themes of divine love, universalism, and spiritual egalitarianism, which sometimes allowed for cross-religious interactions.

However, there were also tensions. Hindu reform movements, while promoting interfaith understanding, were often aligned with a broader nationalist sentiment that sought to define religious identities within territorial boundaries. In contrast, Sufi traditions, which drew upon centuries-old transnational connections, resisted easy categorization within nationalist frameworks. This divergence contributed to the marginalization of Sufi practices in mainstream nationalist narratives, as modernist discourses sought to privilege more structured, textually oriented religious traditions over mystical and ritualistic expressions of faith.

The religious transformations in Kerala saw both Hindu reform movements and Sufi traditions shaping the region's social and spiritual landscape. While Hindu reformers worked to eliminate caste discrimination and modernize religious practices, Sufi traditions fostered interfaith interactions through mystical and egalitarian spaces. Despite shared themes of universalism and divine love, tensions arose as Hindu reform aligned with nationalist ideologies, whereas Sufism remained transnational and mystical. This divergence led to the marginalization of Sufi traditions in nationalist narratives. Modernist discourses prioritized structured, text-based religions over experiential spirituality. As a result, mystical traditions were sidelined in favor of rigid communal identities.

6. Renaissance, Nation, and Transnationalism

In the decades of the 1930s and 1940s, through the exertions of reformist movements, there did arise a novel discourse concerning religion and society. The joyous festivities and rituals, long interwoven into the religious and communal lives of Muslims in Kerala, fell under stern critique. Thus began a debate advocating either the modernization or the outright renunciation of such practices. Amongst the earliest subjects of this critique were the *Moulids*—those beloved hymns extolling the Prophet and revered saints, which did form an essential part of the Ṣūfī tradition. Theologically, while these reformist movements did align with similar tendencies in other Islamic lands, socially, the Muslim renaissance in Kerala stood apart, grounded as it was upon the tenets of modernity. Ṣūfī traditions, by contrast, were the fruits of a transnational dynamism, flourishing across the Arab-Islamic world. They transcended the confines of territorial boundaries and national identities, manifesting as ideas and practices that knew no allegiance to specific nations or states. Hambid Randathani *Mappila Muslims: A study on society and anti-colonial struggles* "Sacred relics and the venerated tombs of Sufi saints are not just sites of devotion but repositories of collective memory and miraculous power" (Randathani, 2007).

As this renaissance did grow into a secular nationalist enterprise, numerous customs and rituals lying outside the nationalist imagination were cast aside in the shaping of a "renaissance" identity. Thus, Ṣūfism in Kerala, as an ideology surpassing the constraints of territorial states, did suffer a similar fate of rejection. On one side stood the vibrant, transnational religious teachings, sacred relics, texts, and movements borne by the "blessed" figures of Ṣūfī Islam who traversed the seas. On the other side were the static, geographically bound religious doctrines, institutions, holy sites, resources, and practices. The interplay and strife betwixt these two forces have ever been central in the moulding of the nature of Islam within Kerala.

7. Conclusion

The intricate tapestry of Sufism in Kerala reveals the profound influence of transnational movements and maritime connections on the region's Islamic identity. The journey of the term Moyliar, which originally referred to religious scholars and later came to embody those who led maritime trade and religious missions, underscores the deep intertwining of religious scholarship and maritime culture in shaping Kerala's Muslim community. The role of Sufism, as a spiritual and intellectual force, was not confined to local borders but transcended them, weaving a global thread of shared beliefs, practices, and sacred knowledge.

The philosophical concept of baraka, or divine blessing, highlights the significance of mobility and journeying in Kerala's Sufi traditions. The revered Sufi saints, through their travels and the miraculous deeds associated with their lives and tombs, became central figures in shaping the spiritual landscape of Kerala, affirming the region's connection to broader Islamic and Sufi networks. Their miracles, stories, and the cultural practices surrounding their veneration, such as the recitation of māla songs, continued to resonate deeply within the Muslim community.

At the same time, the Ponnani-Kondotty dispute illustrated the theological tensions within Kerala's Sufi tradition, shaped by the contrasting influences of Arabian and Persian teachings. Despite these conflicts, the broader theme of Kerala's Islamic identity has remained fluid, rooted in the mobility of ideas, peoples, and spiritual practices, which persist even as regional, national, and global discourses evolve. The debate in the 20th century surrounding the modernization of religious

practices, including the critique of Sufi rituals such as Moulids, signaled the rise of new ideological frameworks that sought to align Islam with emerging nationalist and secular visions. Yet, Sufism, with its deep ties to a transnational, non-territorial understanding of the Divine, continued to challenge these boundaries, maintaining its place as a significant spiritual and cultural force.

The historical interactions between Sufism, nationalism, and reformist movements in Kerala provide valuable insights into contemporary discussions on religious identity and transnationalism in South Asia. In an era of globalization, where religious and cultural identities are increasingly shaped by both local and global influences, the resilience of Sufi traditions in Kerala underscores the enduring relevance of mystical Islam. While reformist movements have sought to confine religious identity within national frameworks, Sufism continues to offer an alternative vision—one that transcends borders and fosters a sense of belonging beyond the nation-state.

Furthermore, the debates surrounding Sufi practices in Kerala mirror larger discussions within South Asia on the role of tradition in modern religious life. Across the region, Sufi shrines and devotional practices remain contested spaces, caught between the forces of reform, secularism, and popular devotion. The case of Kerala illustrates how these tensions are negotiated in a context where historical trade networks, cultural exchanges, and colonial legacies have all shaped the region's Islamic traditions. This study opens several avenues for future research on Kerala's Islamic traditions and their broader implications for South Asian religious and cultural history. First, further investigation into the contemporary role of Sufi shrines in Kerala could shed light on how these spaces continue to function as sites of spiritual, social, and political engagement. Additionally, comparative studies between Kerala's Sufi traditions and those of other coastal Muslim communities in South and Southeast Asia could deepen our understanding of how maritime networks influenced religious practices.

Another promising area for research lies in exploring the intersections between Sufism and other religious traditions in Kerala, particularly in the context of interfaith exchanges. Given the shared mystical elements between Sufi Islam and Bhakti Hinduism, examining the historical interactions between these traditions could offer new perspectives on Kerala's pluralistic religious heritage. Finally, further work on the impact of reformist movements on Kerala's Muslim identity—particularly in relation to contemporary global Islamic movements—could provide insights into how historical tensions between mysticism and modernity continue to shape religious discourse today.

The history of Sufism in Kerala is a testament to the enduring power of transnational religious and cultural exchanges. Through its focus on divine grace, mobility, and the transcendent nature of spiritual practice, Sufism continues to shape the lives of Kerala's Muslims, remaining both a spiritual path and a symbol of the region's broader, interconnected place in the world. The legacy of Kerala's Sufi saints and their practices, rooted in both local and global histories, underscores the enduring influence of mobility, memory, and blessing in the shaping of Islamic identity.

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Conflict of Interest

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