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The Mappilas and Their Composite Culture Setting

Who are the Mappilas? Where are they located? How was their culture formed? Our study of Mappila Muslim culture begins with these basic questions.

It is possible to answer the questions in a simple, straightforward manner. The Mappilas are the Malayali Muslims of southwest India, where they constitute a large and distinct community of more than eight million members. Their culture is the offshoot of a successful marriage between the Malayalam and the Islamic cultural traditions. Their way of life has developed over more than thirteen centuries as the oldest Muslim community in South Asia.

Yet simplicity conceals as well as reveals. The Mappilas are not stick figures, but flesh and blood. They are living people in motion. Their culture is not an abstract time-bound collection of habits and customs. It is, rather, the ongoing behavioral reflection of a dynamic human development. At a deeper level, therefore, our answers to the questions raised above require a journey into the life and spirit of a people. In a sense, they require a personal meeting, one that brings both learning and pleasure.

The primary purpose of this opening chapter is to point to and to delineate the twofold source of Mappila culture. It flows from both the Malayalam and Islamic worlds, and both stream into the living culture of the Mappilas down to the present. Before beginning that story we will look more closely at Mappila identity through a visit with Abdulla and Amina.

Mappila Identity

I had traveled along the road to Malappuram many times, but its liveliness never seemed to lessen or to become dull. The road teems with

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people and activity. On both sides pedestrians walk briskly, dodging one another and the endless stream of cycles, three-wheelers, cars, buses, and lorries. The goats, "brake-testing" water buffalo, and ox-carts that once occupied much of the road space are no longer visible. People move in and out of the open-front shops that line the streets—general provision stores, cloth and clothing establishments, pharmacies, hardware suppliers, restaurants and tea-shops, and many more. Behind them stretches an open area, the town playing-field or *maidan*, where football teams are active. Next to it is the site of the weekly market, where everything from brinjals to books are on sale. It is evening, and from the nearby educational institutions children and youth pour out in huge numbers. Evening is also the going-out and visiting time in Mappila culture. I am on my way to see old family friends.

Abdulla and Amina are expecting me. They live in a house that overlooks this busy scene. This is their space, their town, in their state called Kerala. A quarter of the state population are Mappila Muslims who live in towns like this, alongside Hindu and Christian neighbors, interacting harmoniously. Their name "Mappila" is an honorific title meaning "great child" that goes back to their origins.[1] It was quite respectfully given to them by Hindus when they first came to Kerala. The name carries intimations of their double-streamed Arab–Malayalam cultural background. Many centuries have passed by since then, and now Mappilas are experiencing tremendous change.

Abdulla's family is an example of that phenomenon. His parents were very poor, but he went to school, became a lawyer, and worked hard to pull himself up on the economic scale. Amina also went against the trend and managed to become a teacher. Now they have a nice home, proudly cared for. As I arrived I was greeted with great warmth by all the members of the family. For a time we talked happily together in Malayalam, the common language of the region, sharing family news. I was then led to a sumptuous meal, with special Mappila ingredients. It was not only a culinary feast but also a friendship-fest, especially meaningful because of our differing backgrounds. Abdulla brought in my taxi driver, a stranger to both of us, and seated him also at the table. The time flew by all too quickly.

As I returned to my destination through the now darkened streets of this emotional center of Mappila culture, I reflected on the remarkable story of this society and pondered its future. Abdulla's family represents a community that goes back to the earliest days of Islam experiencing a long period of peaceful intercultural growth, then passed through terrible and testing times, but is now developing

a behavioral synthesis. The saga has cultural significance, heaped up and overflowing. It begs for wider recognition and fuller description. The Mappila Muslims are better known now than they once were, but still labor under a shadow of concealment. The course of historical events, especially in the Malabar[2] region of northern Kerala, conspired to put the Mappilas into a defined image box. There is an old Malabar proverb, however, that declares: "If you put anything inside, it will surely be known outside."[3] It is time, and for good reasons high time, for the Mappilas to be better known outside.[4]

One of those good reasons is the sheer size of the Mappila Muslim population. In their numbers they make up a major social group both within the Indian nation and within the global Islamic profile. The estimated Muslim population (2014) in Kerala State is over 8,900,000[5]: this is a figure that is larger in size than 22 out of the 44 Muslim majority countries in the world. There are other substantial reasons, however, for making Mappila culture more widely known. They represent a significant example of successful Muslim cultural adaptation, one that points to possibility for contemporary Muslims engaged in cultural interrelationships. The Mappilas are a notable example of self-change, moving from a negative to a positive cultural image. Finally, the culture content of Mappila life has unique customary aspects that make up a fascinating chapter in the wider story of human cultural development.

The Mappila Muslims have both a clear identity and social significance. The rich complexity of their learned behavior cannot be appreciated, however, without examining its two forming streams. The Mappilas are Malayali Muslims. They draw on their Malayalam heritage for their everyday life and at the same time on their Islamic heritage for their faith, religious ethos, and many customs. We turn first to the Malayalam culture stream.

The Malayalam Culture Setting

The task of making Mappila culture better known takes us to a lively society in southwest India set amidst a lush tropical splendor. The home of the Mappilas stretches from Cape Comorin to Mangalore but for our purposes we will confine ourselves to the state of Kerala where the overwhelming majority reside. Its culture and language are called Malayalam, and the people are Malayalis.[6] Generally quick of mind and independent in outlook, they have produced a distinct culture that constantly draws on external influences but never loses

its traditional core ethos. The Mappila Muslims are contributing members of that vibrant culture. Some of its informing factors that we will consider are the state's natural endowments, the extreme population pressure, the enterprising spirit of the people, the paradoxical factors of social diversity and solidarity, and the mobility of the society.

The word Malayalam means "the place between the mountains and the sea." It refers to Kerala's geographical setting as a coastal strip of land bordered on one side by the Arabian Sea (=the Indian Ocean) and on the other by the Western Ghat mountains. It is only 576 kilometers (360 miles) north and south and never exceeds 112 kilometers (70 miles) east and west. The first impression it gives is that of an extended garden. The terrain is alternately hilly, the tops often crowned with coconut palm trees, or it is flat, well-watered alluvial fields that produce rice and other crops. Almost countless homes cluster under the trees, alongside the rice paddy fields, or near the rivers and canals that run down to the sea. The tropical scene is the product of two annual monsoons that bring an average of 320 centimeters (160 inches) of rain a year to the area.

If the beauty of nature is the first impression one has of Kerala, its productivity is even more important. While the state has the hustle and bustle associated with modernity, with high technology one of its major new industrial developments, statistically and at heart the Malayalis are still heavily involved with agriculture. The state produces 92 percent of India's rubber, 70 percent of its coconuts, 60 percent of its tapioca, and large amounts of coffee, tea, and bananas.[7] Many of the spices that were so important in Mappila history continue to be raised, especially pepper and ginger. Paddy fields still remain despite the steady encroachment of the growing population and the intrusive development of crops other than rice. They stretch out in undulating flow, glowing with their delicate shades of green.

Could there be any shadow on such a lovely scene? Alas, its beauty cannot hide the tensions in Mappila history that revolved around the ownership of the fields. At a very early stage in Kerala history, a complicated land tenure system had evolved that was marked by echelons of ownership and management. The system gave Mappilas and other tenants and poor laborers no ready access to land ownership. Therefore, when the Marxist government in 1969 decreed that the maximum holding of the most productive rice fields would be ten acres and the remainder would have to be distributed among the landless, agricultural workers from all backgrounds breathed a sigh of relief. Through modest payments tenant farmers could now

become the absolute owners of the land they tilled. It was one of the most radical property decisions ever taken in a free society.[8]

The coconut plantations contend with the rice paddies for Malayali affection. By some the word Kerala is said to signify "land of the coconut." Others derive the term from Chera, the name of a prominent ruling dynasty. Whatever the fact may be, Malayalis regard the coconut as a divine gift. It thrives almost everywhere, in low-lying, well-watered areas, on the roadside, in the yards of homes, and on hill plantations. All of its parts are useful—the leaves for the roof; the fruit fiber for ropes, baskets and mats; the pulp for food and for the extraction of oil; and the juice of the tender fruit for a refreshing drink on a hot day. When, after fifty years or so, the tree dies, its decay-resistant wood is used for building. Only a Malayali who has lost his soul will cut down a tree before that time. And, if necessary, he will even let it grow through his roof!

The mountains and the sea also contribute their share to Kerala's productive beauty. In the mountains grow great hardwood trees. Although declining in number, they are still hauled by elephants from inaccessible jungles and are either floated down rivers or placed on lorries to be taken to lumberyards. The great groves of multipurpose bamboo, however, are now virtually exhausted. The sea too is bounteous with the fish that mean so much both for the diet of Malayalis and for the economy of the state. It has made its fierce power so clearly evident that granite rock protecting walls have been constructed along Kerala's coast to prevent its shore from disappearing under the waves. Without exception Malayalis are united in their affection for their home.

If beauty reigns in southwest India, density is her consort. If nature's grandeur impresses, humanity's mass overwhelms. There are two important things that must be said about Kerala's population. The first is that it is massive considering the space. The second is that it is unusually balanced in its religious makeup. The state is one of the most crowded places in the world. It contains 33,406,061 people (2011 census) within an area of 38,863 square kilometers (15,175 square miles). The ratio of 859 per sq.km. (or 2199 per sq.m.) is extraordinarily high, and can be matched by only a very few other global regions. In fact, Kerala is simply one big village. A low infant mortality rate of 16 per 1,000 and an average life expectancy of 70.3 ironically contribute to the population pressure that is the state's major problem. Family planning awareness is strong and the annual growth rate is now below one percent. This achievement is remarkable, but its full

effect will not be felt for another generation. In the meantime, the demographic reality has major implications for domiciliary decisions, for employment possibilities, for human relations, and for lifestyles in general.

Equally remarkable is the relatively balanced nature of Kerala's religious population. Its people are 56.2 percent Hindu, 24.7 percent Muslim, and 19.1 percent Christian. This ratio has no parallel elsewhere. The relative equilibrium points to three critical factors in the state's history. The first is the cultural spaciousness of the host Hindu society that was open to the development of both Christianity and Islam. The second is the centuries-long interreligious harmony within this trialogical situation that made possible the development of new faith communities.[9] The third is the cultural interaction inevitably involved. No one who has observed children pouring out of the state's elementary schools can be insensitive to the various levels of interaction entailed by this unusual religious profile.

A final comment on Kerala's religious population is that the Muslim share is steadily increasing. Fifty years ago the comparative percentages were 61.6 for Hindus, 17.5 for Muslims, and 20.8 for Christians. The increase is not unique since it parallels the national statistics.[10] The number of Mappilas is particularly high in the northern region of the state, where 34 percent are Muslims.

The statistics underline what the traveler discovers, namely, that Malayalis live in an intermingled manner. Mappilas are dispersed throughout the southwest coastal region; there are areas where more Mappilas reside than elsewhere, but there are few places where only Mappilas live. Behind that reality lies practical necessity related to the availability and cost of living space. The price of land is almost unbelievable high in comparison with personal income. Many people cannot afford to purchase their own home and must live with relatives or rent space. When they do get a chance to obtain a house and compound, it is the cost rather than the makeup of the neighborhood that is the main factor. In sum, Malayalis make their choices as to where to live based on practical rather than on religious grounds. Hindus, Muslims, and Christians commonly live together.

It is not religious ghettoism but another kind of cultural dream that is visible in the Malayali living pattern, and that is the deep desire for some separation and independence. While nature is a beneficent self-giving friend, one's fellow human beings are inevitably competitors. They crowd in on you, and compete for the good things of life. The partial answer is a place of your own. There you can include a portion of kindly nature, however small, and to a degree exclude

an ever-present humanity. So you build a compound wall, or even a thorn fence, around your little space. That also serves to keep out the omnipresent and voracious goat! Within that guarded space is your home, a little garden, always some flowers, a coconut tree, perhaps even a papaya tree. From its privacy and serenity the Malayali develops the accommodating spirit that makes possible a neighborhood culture within the turbulence of a highly compressed society. A journey through Kerala, from Kasaragode District to the north to Trivandrum District in the south, is therefore a journey through a village of homely compounds interspersed by commercial areas.

The density of Kerala's population affects not only its home life, but also its economy. It creates the great search for jobs that characterizes the society. The search for jobs!—it is the dominant drive in all of India where more than three million new jobs are created annually but fifteen million new babies are born. Yet nowhere is the pressure more deeply felt than in Kerala where the male unemployment is calculated by some to be 25 percent, including many educated and qualified individuals. The rate among women is even higher. The perpetual problem has many social and political repercussions. On the one hand, it has forced Malayalis into a global diaspora and family disruption. On the other hand, within the state, economic disappointment was a major factor that gave rise to the communist movement which swept past social and religious defenses to capture the hearts of many Malayalis. Not only did this result in long years of governance by the Communist Party–Marxist, but it also produced one of the most volatile sociopolitical scenes in the nation.

Fed by the burning desire for social justice Kerala began to be known as a culture of protest. The powerful labor unions refined its instruments: the strike, the *gherāo*, and the *jātha*. The *gherāo* is a forced sit-in. The *jātha* is street march of protesters. No cause is too slight to attract a procession, especially by those who felt oppressed. The sight is sobering; the sound disturbing. The leader, often a professional, declares the cause and the single-file procession responds with slogans shouted in unison. Kerala society has passed through decades of protest. As conditions improve, it is now emerging from that activity, but heated remonstrance continues to be a social reality. Malayali survival and the current economic advance have not come from protest, however, but from sheer determination.

Productive nature and population density are two shaping factors in Malayalam culture, but to them we now add a third element, namely, personal enterprise. Here is where the generally resolute Malayali personality comes into play. Much has been written and said

of the Malayali initiative, creative energy, and venturesome disposition. They are at work in the forces re-shaping the society, including the development of an industrial base, the commitment to education, and the enthusiastic involvement in democratic political debate.

The current commercial and industrial surge in Kerala is challenging agriculture as the state's lifeblood. The commercial habit has been in the Malayali blood for centuries. However, the current age has added a new and vibrant interest in technological development. The billboards along the roads entice observers to the full range of high-tech consumer goods. Within Kerala today their manufacture is under way. The state's culture has always had a great range of folk arts and crafts, but industry is now surpassing them in its forward march. It includes the processing of food and textiles, the production of chemicals, fertilizers, aluminum and titanium, electrical equipment, and even ships and rockets. The factories are drawing Malayalis into an urban-industrial mode with its culture-leveling modalities. In that process the new leaders are the producers of computer and electronic hardware in the busy cities of the central region. As the economy surges forward there is more capacity to buy the advertised consumer goods, and there are new smiles on many faces.

No description of Malayalam culture is complete without highlighting its commitment to education. Fundamentally, it stems from the well-known Malayali intellectual ability and love for the things of the mind. The latter manifests itself not only in formal schooling but also in the general interest in public discourse and in the unusual skill in rational debate. The commitment has made Kerala the most educated state in India, and one of the most literate populations in the world. The overall literacy rate in 2011 was 94 percent (males 94.2; females 87.9). Almost everyone goes to school, schools and colleges dot the landscape, and the seven crowded universities pour out graduates (many of whom leave Kerala) in every conceivable field. It may be said that the state's greatest product and largest export is educated people.

The educational development in Kerala, the most literate state in India, benefited from various stimuli that played on the innate intellectualism of its citizens. Interest in Western education was aroused already in the early 1800s by Christian missions and later by colonial administrators, but the modern stimulations have come from the need for jobs. Malayalis surged ever higher on the scale of educational degrees to get employment. They recognized that the knowledge of English was a key factor in getting jobs outside the state, and as a result its study became a cottage industry. Its continued flourishing

is attested to by the upsurge of English medium schools. While the need for employment in a highly competitive environment became the most powerful factor in the educational drive of Malayalam society, a supplementary motivation flowed from the highly developed dowry system that, in varying degrees, affects all Malayalis. It was partly to avoid extortionist demands that parents encouraged the education of their daughters, so much so that the state claims the second highest percentage of female university graduates in the world. We will leave until later the Mappila struggle with modern education; it was all the more trying for many in view of the fact that Mappilas share the basic Malayali abilities.

Much of what we have said so far points to the fourth element in Malayalam culture that we will highlight, namely, its combined characteristic of diversity–solidarity. This is a quality of many states in India, but in Kerala it has a special intensity related to its small size. Diversity within population compression easily leads to turbulence. No visitor in the state can fail to be struck by the great variation that exists in a small area. Some of the differences are related to wealth and class. A large home and a small hut stand side by side. Toyotas flash along the roads, but the buses groan with their overloads. Within a small radius a temple, a church, and a mosque may meet the eye. They represent differing views on life, dissimilar customs, and varied festivals. Siva Ratri, Christmas, and Bakr-Id each have their particular qualities. The common language, especially the religious language, has dialectical variations. The educated and the uneducated travel different roads. At a deeper level, there are varying opinions about the meaning of life and questions of right and wrong. Political differences are often acute, whether the issues are local, national, or international

The enthusiastic Malayali participation in the political process testifies to the society's diversity as well as to its energetic commitment to the democratic principle itself. Issues are debated, voting participation is high, parties proliferate, newspapers highlight political reports, and politicians are everywhere. But the phenomenon is marked by a paradox—the side-by-side existence of individualism and groupism. They are like an alternating current. On the one hand, groupism is powerful. The caste system of the Hindus—be they Brahmin, Nayar, Ezhuvar, or—is legendary in the influence it exercises. Syrian Christians are often referred to as a virtual caste, and there are other contending groups. Muslims have major divisions despite the concept of a single unified community. The factionalism is a powerful factor in the political process affecting alignments and realignments,

in the process producing a constant flux. On the other hand, the pro-
verbial Malayali individualism is equally powerful. Individuals go on
making up their own minds despite group pressures. They cannot be
driven but must be persuaded. The unpredictable interplay between
groupism and individualism, and the mutual accommodations aris-
ing from and essential to it, are important elements in the society's
cultural development and its communal harmony.

What saves the society from fragmentation or unmanageable
turbulence is the remarkable fact of Malayali solidarity. The diversity
is a diversity within fellow-feeling, a diversity in oneness. Malayalis
are sometimes charged with being clannish. That spirit is forged in the
heat of experience. They have had to learn to give and take, to hold
on to that which they consider crucial for their personal existence,
and at the same time to give the same privilege to others, avoiding
contention. The experience has created an emotional bond that under-
lies intra-Malayali relations. It is strengthened by a common pride in
their Kerala home. That is why, wherever there are Malayalis in the
world, they sooner or later create a Malayala *samaj* or association. To
others that emotional bond appears as proud clannishness, but to the
Malayalis themselves it is their sense of solidarity that holds them
together against high odds. The Mappilas contribute to the diversity
and participate in the solidarity.

For the final characteristic in Malayalam culture we point to
its mobility. Malayalis give the appearance of being a people on the
move. Mobility runs deeper than physical movement, but that alone
is impressive. Every means of transportation is used and is crowded.
Join me as I stand on a railway platform in the evening. The Manga-
lore Mail is due to arrive any moment. Hundreds of people are poised
for the struggle ahead, the effort to find a seat. They come from every
social and economic class, but their common purpose causes them to
crowd together. Unity within diversity! The hawkers are ready to run
up and down beside the train to sell their wares, while the porters
tie up their turbans and get ready for business. The train arrives and
disgorges a host of passengers. As they get down from the passenger
bogies they meet those getting up. Confusion prevails! With only ten
minutes for the process, how will it end? A women's compartment is
opposite to where I am standing and watching. There is huge pres-
sure as the women strive to climb into the compartment and find a
seat, but there is also an inherent decency and understanding. They
have learned to deal with the problem of mobility. But where are
they all going?

The employment market, the educational system, and political activity are all factors in the embracive mobility. It is accentuated by the practice of the government, Kerala's major employer, to transfer its staff every three years. The mobility, however, also takes Malayalis far from their home soil. They themselves joke about "the Malabar hotels" found everywhere in the nation, and some say, even on the moon! Long before it was fashionable to take advantage of job opportunities in the Gulf states, Christian nurses from Kerala were already staffing many of the hospitals in the Middle East. Malayali businessmen, teachers, and health professionals have gone to every shore. The incessant traveling causes family strains and financial burdens, but certainly within Kerala it draws people together. It is easy to see that on the train. Once the passengers are seated they begin conversing with each other as though they were old friends.

Productive nature, population pressure, an enterprising spirit, diversity–solidarity, and constant movement are some of the main elements in Malayalam culture. There are many other characteristics that could be cited. The Mappilas share them as Malayalis, and their behavior accords with that reality. Hence, we must view their image through the Malayalam lens. As resident citizens of the Malayalam village and full participants in its life they are the co-creators of the Malayalam culture as well as its heirs and benefactors. Yet that is only half the story. *The Mappilas are Muslims as well as Malayalis*. We therefore turn next to Islamic culture, the second stream in the shaping of their society.

The Islamic Cultural Setting

Into the Malayalam world came Muslims from South Arabia. They came early, but not overnight. When they came, they brought Islam with them in their cultural dress, in turn adopting Malayalam ways. In the next chapter we will examine in greater detail who the South Arabs were, how they came, and the reception they received. Here we restrict ourselves to a basic and critical question. In Islam, and hence in an Islam-based culture, what are the principles that help Muslims who are in a trans-cultural movement, whether they are Bangladeshis coming to Canada in modern times, or South Arabs coming to Kerala in yesterday's world? From the Islamic perspective, what enabled Mappilas to be part of the remarkable intercultural development that followed their arrival in southwest India?

In examining that important issue we must first consider what is meant by the phrase "Islamic culture." Is it simply a collective term meaning the sum of all individual Muslim cultures in the world? Or does it have a core content of its own? Muslim believers would say it is the latter. There is indeed a core that is common to all individual Muslim cultures. That core is the classical Muslim faith as it was worked out in the first Islamic century, which concentrated on the teaching of the Qurʾān and the life pattern of the Prophet Muhammad. What builds on that in Muslim societies is culture, but it is Islamic culture because it is permeated by the spirit and ideals of the core. The relation of the two—core of faith and behavioral buildup—is understood differently by various Muslims. Two Muslim nations demonstrate that difference: Saudi Arabia virtually identifying the two and Turkey sharply distinguishing between them. Muslims, in short, do not have a worked-out, agreed theory of culture.[11] There is a blurring of distinction between religion and culture, complicating change and development.[12] Reflecting that reality, the Islamic terminology used for culture is also imprecise and varied (see Appendix A).

Nevertheless, if we take Islamic religion in the narrow sense to refer to the basic revealed truths about faith and life, and Islamic culture to signify the Muslim community's general learned behavior, we may say that Islam has provided at least four clear ways to deal with cultural matters. Even though they have not always been referred to or evenly applied, they have enabled Muslims to respond to, to sift, to absorb, to tolerate, or to decline aspects of another culture. They naturally constitute the Mappila resource for their engagement with Malayalam culture. The four elements are:

1. Religious conviction: Islam inculcates a Godward direction and frame of reference for all of life. Mappila religious conviction is legendary for its intensity.

2. Practicality: Islam allows an accepting attitude toward various facets of human culture as long as they do not violate God's will. Mappilas are pragmatic in relation to culture.

3. Legal Flexibility: Islam provides a basis in law for dealing with human folkways. While remaining loyal to Muslim personal and cultic law, Mappilas have been culturally accommodating.

4. Equality: Islam teaches the importance of personal responsibility, and allows individual freedom in behav-

ioral practice. Mappilas honor tradition and respect clergy, but they espouse the right to culture change.

In one way or another Mappilas have drawn on these principles of Islamic culture. In their early tradition they may have done so intuitively; in the middle period the principles were overlaid and smothered by a blanket of traditionalism; but in the present period Mappilas are consciously raising up and discussing culture theory as they contend with modernity.

In the remainder of this section we will consider in greater detail each of these crucial principles: religious conviction, practicality, legal flexibility, and equality.

Religious Conviction: Life Has a Godward Direction

The Forming Attitude

Muslim life and culture are informed by the religious conviction that life has a Godward direction. During the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime a qibla or direction was established for prayer. The earliest Muslims prayed toward Jerusalem, but that was changed to Mecca. There is an indentation in mosque walls that marks the direction. As some theologians have put it, this is a symbol of a fundamental truth.

To live in the Godward direction includes everything we think, say, or do. Of course, there are certain specific religious duties, each having their own significance, but they too are reminders that our whole life should be turned toward God and conducted in the aware-ness of God. The idea of life direction is therefore associated with the concept of life unity or *tawhīd*. A believer is not to think that he or she lives in two separate worlds—the one sacred and the other non-sacred. There is nothing non-sacred because God created it all and rules it all. He is "the Lord of the Worlds" and "the Best of all Creators." My life, therefore, is to be a unitive life, a *tawhīd* life. Physically, mentally, and spiritually, all of it is to have its direction toward God. There are some areas of life that are non-prescribed, as we shall see, but the entire world of culture is to be infused by the conviction that life is sacred and is to be entirely surrendered to God. This means that in the undelineated areas of culture, the divinely commanded ethics of goodness and righteousness, justice and kind-ness, and respect for all of God's creation, are to be reflected through personal and community behavior.

This fundamental attitudinal approach sets the relation of religion and culture for Muslims, and gives them a reference point for both cultural growth and cultural criticism. As to cultural growth, Muslims are free to express themselves, in good conscience, through all of God's forms. The Qurʾān, the basic authority of Islam, makes that clear. God "hath made of service to you whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth: it is all from Him . . . portents for people who reflect" (45:13). And again, "All that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth glorifies Allah" (64:1). This applies then to the treasures of Malayalam culture (to which Mappilas adapted) as much as to Arab culture, to Indonesian culture as much as to Persian culture. It may be a lute or sitar or gamelan, a pagoda or a dome, all good things that are in the world are potential means to build a culture if those who utilize them do so in the spirit of awe and gratitude.

Since Muslims are to consider the forms and values of culture from a spiritual center, that is also their basic guide for cultural criticism. Does something, in general, pass the test of loyalty to God's will? If it does, it is certainly acceptable. If it does not, it should be reformed or abandoned. The will of God is the clear reference point.[13]

Muslim life in this world is God-referenced. The practical issues are not dealt with as though God has nothing to do with them. That cannot be imagined! . . . Muslims want to do what God wants them to do.

THE MAPPILA ATTITUDE: A SPECIAL CASE

Mappila religious conviction also informs Mappila life and culture, but its intensity is proverbial and makes it a special case. All Malayalis are aware of the characteristic, and many commentators have noted it. Mappila religious emotion runs deep and imbues societal affairs. But what are its marks? The answer is not so obvious as might be expected if a statistically high performance of prescribed religious duty is taken as the criterion for measuring strength of conviction.

The basic Islamic beliefs called *imān* are faith in God, in God's angels, in prophets, in sacred books, and in the resurrection and the day of judgment. Mappilas accept these as all other Muslims do. The fundamental religious duties, called *dīn*, are the confession of faith, the fivefold prayer, fasting during Ramadan, alms-giving, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. These too are routine for Mappilas. All together, the beliefs and practices constitute *islām*, one's surrendering to God, or *ibādat*, one's service to God. Are Mappilas in any way noteworthy

in their performance of these constitutive religious duties? That would be hard to prove.

The confession of faith, "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the apostle of God," is pronounced in Arabic, but that is common in the Muslim world. In regard to the required prayers, Mappilas are relatively relaxed in their observance. Although many pray five times daily, some who have busy days do not. Mosque attendance at the Friday noon congregational prayer has been increasing, but it does not include an especially high percentage of the eligible male worshippers. As to fasting, the percentage of those who observe the requirements is also unquestionably on the rise, and the Ramadan night lectures are well attended, but quite a few are lax in their performance. While Mappila generosity is a common characteristic, the standard of alms-giving does not exceed that of comparative Muslim societies. Only in the attendance at the pilgrimage do Mappilas exceed the average, but often other factors than piety are involved. Except for the ever-present nominal adherents, Mappilas in general do strive to be faithful in the performance of their religious duties, but that is true of many Muslims. We must look elsewhere then for specific marks of the singular Mappila religious conviction.

We find them in two characteristics—the attribute of personal commitment and the readiness to give public expression to religious concerns. We take first the factor of quiet commitment. Mappilas on the whole are deeply devoted to their faith. They do not, as it were, wear it on their sleeve. It is reserved rather than ostentatious. There is a serenity in it that is stronger than mere contentment. In this context the Islamic expression "to be satisfied with their faith" comes to mind. Yet Mappila inner devoutness tends to transcend satisfaction. It is a feeling that they are on the path of those who receive God's blessing and guidance, protection and sustenance. Mappilas not only feel sustained by what they believe, they are strongly dedicated to the honor of God. The latter explains why under certain conditions Mappilas can become aroused, even enflamed, despite their general reserve, when they believe that elements of their faith are being impugned or threatened. All this describes the personal inward side of Mappila religious conviction that is not open to statistical measurement but fundamentally conditions cultural understanding.

The second decisive element in the Mappila religious conviction is a paradoxical contrast to the quality of quiet commitment. Not football, not the price of food, not even politics can attract Mappila public expression and controversy as much as religious issues. The intensity

of those expressions defies description. Public meetings focusing on religious matters are massively attended, the open critiques are vehement and biting, and the faithful are eloquently exhorted to move in one direction or another. This is not a form of communalism for most of the issues argued are internal to the Muslim community—whether it be the role of saints, the method of *zakāt* payment, the place of secular education in the community's priorities, or the relative merits and demerits of certain religious leaders. The basic Malayali spirit is evident in this debating interest, but that is not the whole story. The phenomenon declares that Mappilas are people who believe that religious truth is determinative for life, and that religious concerns are worth attending to.

The Practical Muslim Approach to Culture

The second element in Islamic cultural theory is pragmatism. Muslims take some pride in viewing their religion as a quite practical approach to life. They regard Islam as "the middle way," a path that conforms to natural capacities. From this it is a very easy jump to an accepting attitude in regard to the habits and customs of others, as long as they are not specifically un-Islamic. The approach developed when Islam spread, since no other attitude is functional for a global religion. However, the tilt to workability has been present in Islam from its very inception when it was still a peninsular faith. This fact is clearly evident from the practical behavior of the first Muslim believers in regard to their cultural environment.

The early Muslims were committed to the elimination of anything that conflicted with the unity of God or threatened the welfare of the believing community but in other respects they were very down to earth on cultural matters. They certainly did not reject everything in their pre-Islamic tradition. Its values were dear to them, including honor, loyalty, hospitality, endurance, self-control, love of story, and ballad. Its customs were cherished, and they did not believe that by becoming Muslims they would have to give all of them up. In taking that approach they simply followed the pattern of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qurʾān. The Prophet, for example, retained many aspects of the pre-Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, eliminating only its idolatrous aspects. This is a fact of critical importance for worldwide Muslims as they deal with cultural issues. It implies a general principle of respect for local traditions, even admiration and free choice.

Using that approach the first believers created what we might call the western Arabian Muslim cultural model.[14] Its profile is derived

mainly from the culture of Medina where the Prophet lived his last ten years. Mecca, the original home of Muhammad, saw the beginning of various rituals associated with the basic religious duties, but it was from Medina that the pattern for everyday community living emerged, the Prophet himself being the model. Its social ideals were that of a new fellowship based on common faith rather than tribal kinship, but its context was Arabian culture. That affected everything.

Prescribed Muslim behavior comes from two primary sacred sources. The first is the Arabic Qurʾān, the Word of God for Muslim believers. It calls them to the straight path and describes it. Although the amount of specific behavioral legislation in the Qurʾān is only about three percent of the total material, the legislative verses deal with significant areas of life. They include the performance of religious duties and such key family matters as marriage and inheritance. In addition, ethical instructions are given for general behavior. Beyond the relevant Quranic passages there is a second source for Muslim manners and customs. That is the life and custom of Muhammad whose conduct or *sunna* is recorded in hallowed stories called Hadīth. In these traditions the narrators set forth a life pattern that Muslims regard as divinely guided. Nevertheless, since the Prophet was an Arab and lived in Arabia, the Hadīth also reflect that cultural environment. Thus, both by sacred Word and by respected life, the Arabian cultural stream entered the life of all Muslims wherever they might be in the world. In the case of Mappilas the influence of that cultural idiom is especially strong because of their direct and ongoing linkage with southern Arabia.

While the influence of Arabian culture through the sacred language, through specific instructions, and through the behavioral model is undeniable, nevertheless it is also a limited one. Non-Arab Muslims do not for a moment believe that they must become Arabian in culture in order to be Muslims. They are aware that there is a distinction between being Muslim and being Arabian. They remember the practical approach of the first Muslims to their culture, and in that same pragmatic and respectful spirit they deal with their own customary traditions. As Islam moved out of the Arabian Peninsula into the Palestinian, Persian, Syrian, and Turkish worlds, the spirit of cultural pragmatism and love for their personal heritage guided new Muslim believers. It is true that Arab Muslims always regarded their Arabian culture as superior and for a time even required new Muslims to take associate membership in an Arab tribe through a patron, so becoming known as clients (*mawālī*). This placed the new non-Arab Muslims into a position of dependency that at times came close to

enslavement.[15] The unequal status ended in 750 CE with the fall of the Arabian Ummayad dynasty and the rise of the Persian Abbasids. Even the very idea of Arab cultural superiority went into decline and was replaced by the principle of practicality in cultural relations. Inevitably the Muslim world became what it is today, a kaleidoscope of varied Muslim cultures. Within that panoply the Mappilas have an honored place as pioneers in adaptation.

A Legal Basis for Cultural Flexibility

We turn next to the role of law in Muslim behavior. The sharia, the code of law in Islam, tends toward the detailed prescription of Muslim behavior, but it also draws some flexibility from three legal principles that modify its rigidity. They are the right of personal interpretation, the recognition of unregulated areas in personal behavior, and the acknowledgement of supplementary sources of law to deal with non-Muslim customs. These principles have been accepted by most legal scholars, though sometimes grudgingly and with differing interpretations. They undergird the Muslim ability to deal with varying cultural situations and to integrate their lives accordingly. Many contemporary Muslims, and especially Muslims in minority situations, regard them as essential for a workable modern Islamic approach to culture.

These enabling provisions have special significance for Muslim communities who by choice or necessity live without the full scope of the traditional religious law. That includes Muslims in India who never had the full sharia during many long periods of Muslim rule and do not have it today. Modern India is a democratic nation with a secular constitution. It does not recognize religious law except for ritual and family law. The latter provision allows religious communities, including Mappilas, to enjoy their personal law, but otherwise they are obligated to observe the law of the national state.

It is significant that this cultural flexibility was inherent in the Muslim attitude from the earliest Islamic times and long before the sharia was formulated. The history of that attitude is enlightening. The Arabic term *sharī'a* means "clear road to the watering place." We may define it as the defined path along which the believer travels under the guidance of God. At first only the matters that the Qur'ān takes up were regulated. In their conceptual eagerness, however, most Muslim legal scholars gradually extended the idea to incorporate all human actions. They argued two things: first that the Creator Lord is the Master of His creation and nothing is outside His sovereignty, and second that the whole of a believer's life is to be surrendered to God in righteous living. From these two primary motifs they made a

quantum leap to the conclusion that, in principle, all actions should be regulated. They also assumed that because of their training they were the ones to decide on the regulations! Not only was it a self-important assumption, but it also left them with a virtually impossible task.

The problem is that the Qurʾān does not offer a list of rules for every human action and every cultural decision. It provides instruction for the essential duties that give form to Muslim behavior, but beyond that it presents principles for general application rather than regulations. The scholars, however, wanted specific rules. They therefore turned to the model or custom (*sunna*) of the Prophet Muhammad. They drew guidance from Hadīth, the stories of what he said and did. Nevertheless, there remained many aspects of life regarding which both the Qurʾān and the Hadīth were silent. So the scholars went on to develop the ideas of analogy and community consensus as further sources of law. Out of the process came the first legal ground for flexibility, namely, the right of private interpretation (*ijtihād*). To draw an analogy someone must apply their reasoning power. To have consensus there must be an accumulation of opinion. The admission of rational judgment and opinion meant cultural movement rather than rigid tradition.

The second ground for flexibility came when scholars realized that it is quite impossible to have a regulation for every human action. The best that can be done is to identify those actions that are obligatory or recommended, and those that are forbidden or discouraged. The bulk of human actions, it was agreed, fall into the intermediate zone of "neutral" for which there is no regulation and no reward or punishment. It does not matter what football team you like, or what kind of tea you prefer! Some essentially neutral actions like watching television may, for certain reasons, move into the discouraged category. Contrariwise, a discouraged action may become neutral or even recommended. An illustration of the latter comes from the 1930s in Saudi Arabia. Sheikh Abdullah ibn Hassan, then the chief religious judge (*qādī*), had quite violently opposed radio as the work of the devil. One day he was with King Ibn Saud in Riyadh. The king, who was distressed, made the judge listen to the call of prayer being delivered in Mecca, a full 1,280 km. away. "Is this wrong?" he asked. The jurist changed his view and radio migrated to the recommended category![16] The recognition that there is a large sphere of unregulated behavior, and that movement within categories is possible, helps to ensure a measure of legal flexibility.

A third legal factor entered the picture with the unofficial recognition that *non-Muslim* cultures can also be considered a legitimate source of allowed practice. This was a forced development.

The scholars had to contend with the fact that many people were not prepared to give up their cherished customs when they became Muslims. They brought their traditions with them into Islam. This was taking place before the *sharī'a* was fully formed. The influx of Greek culture was instrumental in the development of what has been called "the Golden Age of Islam." Other cultures brought valuable gifts. The legal scholars were compelled to find a place in their system for indigenous custom.

While the traditional Muslim jurists never formally admitted local culture as an official source of law, they gave it *de facto* unofficial recognition. The technical terms they used for customary behavior are *'urf* and *'ādat*. They coined a third term, *qanūn,* for acceptable non-Muslim administrative practice. Despite their unofficial status *'urf* and *'ādat* have a high level of importance in the Muslim world.[17] An Indian Muslim legal scholar Asaf Fyzee, even refers to them as a "material source" of law.[18] Those Mappilas who follow the matriarchal system of inheritance, which we will later examine in detail, are benefactors of this legal permissiveness. An Indonesian Muslim who is the chief editor of a journal of Muslim culture renders his opinion that this cultural tolerance strengthens rather than weakens Islam:[19]

> . . . Islam demonstrates distinctive dynamics in its encounter with local cultures. The dynamics primarily occur since culture develops systems of symbols, where Islam is being negotiated creatively, and given new meanings.

In the light of this legal flexibility we may conclude that in the Mappila adaptation to the local Kerala culture the community was operating within the frame of reference of Muslim legal principles.

Cultural Decision-Making: The Principle of Free and Equal

As the final element in our consideration of Islamic cultural theory we will consider the connected principles of freedom and equality. Who has the right to make cultural decisions? In effect, every Muslim has the right since all believers are created spiritually equal. This is seemingly straightforward. However, the principle runs hard up against the development of clergy authority and the tyranny of rulers. Out of authoritarianism came strong differences of opinion and culture controversies. As Muslims engage with modern cultural developments these have become more heated. Lay believers are contending with clergy for the recovery of their freedom to make appropriate cultural decisions.