

Debating the difference: *Khuṭbah* practice among the Mappila Muslims of Kerala, India

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the Islamic practice of *khutbah* and the historical trajectory of its articulations in Malabar, revealing a multiplicity of interpretations of Islamic theology and its practices. The paper, apart from giving a glimpse of the history of *khutbah*, demonstrates the varied representations of it and brings the various contesting views on its practice to the light. In addition, it also attempts to show the ‘true’ representation of Islamic ideals according to each Islamic school of thoughts as well as the reasons why they claim themselves to be the ‘true’ Muslims. While the plurality of opinions among the Mappila Muslims in Malabar may be attributed to the nature of *Qur'an* and *Hadiths*, it is the active efforts of each of these groups to interpret these texts differently that requires special consideration/mention. To bring out diverse dimensions to the topic, I have taken recourse to documentary sources as well as oral representations obtained during the study.

Keywords: *khuṭbah*, *Mappila Muslims*, *Malabar*, *Kerala*, *Muslim religious groups*, *discursive tradition*, *vernacular khutbah*

Introduction

The Islamic practice of the *khutbah*¹ is considered as one of the most important public rituals a Muslim has to practice, irrespective of whatever ethnicity or geographical part he may represent. However, what is significant is the multiplicity of representations and the regional variations, which influence the manner in which the *khutbah* is practiced in every different region. To understand these dynamics, I

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¹ Special lecture in the Friday congregational prayer. *Khuṭbah* serves as the primary formal occasion for public preaching in the Islamic tradition. The *khutbah* originates from the practice of Prophet Muhammad, who used to deliver words of exhortation, instruction, or command at gatherings for worship in the mosque, in the courtyard of his house in Medina.

focus on the profile of Kerala Mappila¹ Muslim community with an emphasis on the diversity of ‘lived Islam’ in Kerala region. By tracing the ways in which the Mappila community of Kerala regards the Friday sermon, its importance, rules, and effects, I reiterate that the text and ideology apart, the community has certain characteristics, which determine the varied contestations, and interpretations of the texts and the practices. To substantiate my claim, I follow the ritual practices performed by different Muslim groups as dictated by the ‘ulamā while simultaneously taking into account the opinions of these ‘ulamā through personal interviews.

The intention here is not to look at the theological aspects of *khutbah*, but to examine how Muslims see this practice as a means to become a pious Muslim. Therefore, my interest in this study is to look at the variations in its pronouncements in the process of claiming the true Islamic credentials by the Muslim religious groups. Therefore, my intention is not to judge the veracity of the different theologies, but rather to bring out the multiplicity of theologies that exist among Kerala Muslims and to capture this, I focus on the Islamic discourses and practices and on *khutbah* in particular. The *khutbah* should be understood not merely as a medium for conveying a message to the Muslim community once in a week but also as a spiritual practice with certain features and considerations.

Analysis of debates among the Muslim groups from a theological point of view is bound to be fruitless as it belies the very spirit of anthropological as well as sociological enquiry. It is therefore pertinent to ask, under what circumstances is a particular kind of theological explanation adopted and why? Thus, any academic study of religion is primarily concerned with studying people, their beliefs, practices etc., rather than assessing ‘the truth’ or ‘truths’ of their various beliefs. I am not interested in evaluating the veracity of the

¹ Mappila is also spelled as Mappilla, Maplah, Moplah, and Moplamar. Etymologically it has been glossed as a contraction of *Maha-pilla* (big child, a title of honor conferred on immigrants). The term Mappila is used to refer to Christians in the southern part of Kerala.

conflicting arguments made by Muslim groups. Instead, I focus on the reception of various competing claims in these discussions to trace the evolution of the emerging language of politics. Thus, the study remains descriptive in its nature rather than normative/prescriptive.

Understanding Islam in India, Kerala: Theoretical implications

The contestations among different Muslim religious groups over several socio-religious issues to claim authority over what constitutes ‘true’ Islam in Kerala has produced complicated processes that cannot be understood through the existing theories and frameworks of ‘great and little traditions’, ‘Islamisation’, ‘syncretism’ and ‘reformism and orthodoxy’. The terms reformism and orthodoxy and their practical expressions cannot sustain as a given set of stable ideas or a single uniform body as these positions are historically drafted and are products of numerous discourses. The perspectives explaining the diversity of Islam in India can be seen through the trope of four conceptual frameworks - Islamisation thesis (see Eaton, 1984), co-existence, syncretism (Ahmad, 1973; 1976; 1981) and hierarchical model (Madan, 2007). According to Richard M Eaton’s Islamisation thesis, the process of Islamisation was a homogenous phenomenon among the Muslims in India. To counter Eaton’s Islamisation thesis, Imtiaz Ahmad put forward the theory of co-existence wherein he identifies textual Islam and folk Islam as two mutually exclusive entities and among other things, emphasizes the uniqueness of syncretic aspects of Indian Islam. Robinson, on the other hand, attempts to show the gradual marginalization of syncretic practices and indicates how Muslim societies have moved towards a greater realization and victory of what he calls a “pattern of perfection” (2000, p. 52). This, for him, is readily discernible in the *Qur'an* and the life of the Prophet. For Robinson, the course of Islamic history is clear. As knowledge of this perfect Islamic pattern spreads in countries like India, the process of Islamisation will sweep away various ‘dubious’ practices that have crept into local Islamic cultures (Das, 1984, p. 294). Behind the apparent divergent views of scholars, there is a remarkable similarity as Ahmed and Robinson come to

identify ‘tradition’ as an unchanging set of cultural prescriptions that stand in contrast to what is changing, contemporary or modern (Sitharaman, 2010, p. 209). According to Das, these perspectives have prevented scholars from seeing the diversity and wide-ranging aspects of Islam(s) and thus failed to interpret the diverse strands in the ‘scripturalist’ or ‘textual Islam’ (Das, 1984, p. 294). One way of overcoming this binary between text and practice was attempted by T. N Madan in his essay *Islam, One among Many* (2007). Drawing from Dumont’s hierarchical model that he adopted in his study of the caste system, Madan analyses the complementarities between the binary – folk and scriptural. Urging us to go beyond the binaries, he states that the syncretistic model of South Asian Islam does not address the crucial issue of the relative weight of the constituent element of the syncretistic tradition (Madan, 2007, p. 19). However, Madan fails to historicize the Muslim communities in South Asia and thus ‘what is encompassing’ and ‘what is encompassed’ remain ambiguous and blurred. Are these frameworks, provided by these various scholars, adequate to address the complex dynamics that operate within the Muslim communities in India? If so, the question emerges as to how does one speak of the Islam in practice? Here, Talal Asad’s argument (1986) that Islam is best regarded as a discursive tradition, and is clearly indebted to Foucault’s formulation of “discursive formations”, becomes relevant (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). Asad states that for the anthropologist of Islam, the proper theoretical beginning is an instituted practice set in a particular context, and a particular history into which Muslims are inducted as Muslims (Asad, 1986, p. 14).

This understanding of Islam as a discursive tradition also throws up the possibility of looking at Islam not as a constant set of given ideas and practices, but as something constantly changing according to the specificities of diverse locales and power relations. Saba Mahmood elaborates on Asad’s approach to understanding Islam as a discursive tradition as those involving pedagogical practices that articulate a conceptual relationship with the past, through an engagement with a set of foundational texts (the *Qur'an*, the Holy text and the *Hadith*), commentaries thereon, and the conduct

of exemplary figures. Tradition, viewed such, Saba Mahmood suggests, is not a set of symbols and idioms that justifies the present practices, neither is it an unchanging set of cultural prescriptions that stands in contrast to what is changing, contemporary, or modern nor is it a historically fixed social structure. Rather, the past is the very ground through which the subjectivity and self-understanding of adherence to a tradition are constituted (Mahmood, 2005, p. 115). Tradition, in this sense, may be conceived as a particular modality in which reflection upon the past is a constitutive condition for the understanding and reformulation of the present and the future. Islamic discursive practices, in this view, link practitioners across the temporal modalities of past, present, and future and through the pedagogy of practical, scholarly, and embodied forms of knowledge and virtues deemed central to the tradition.

An ethnographic account of Muslim religious groups in Malabar, Kerala

I would introduce some of the major Muslim religious groups of Malabar,¹ Kerala. First, the Sunnis, the dominant and majority Muslim community in Kerala, belong to the Shāfi‘ī School of jurisprudence.² In 1989, the Sunnis were divided into two factions: one led by E.K Aboobakr Musliyar (E.K Sunni) and another by Kanthapuram A.P Aboobakr Musliyar (A.P Sunni). Apart from these two groups (E.K and A.P), secondly, there exists another Sunni group the Kerala Samasthana Jam‘iyatul Ulama. The basic difference between these groups centres on the issue of the use of loudspeaker in the practice of the *khuṭbah*, which we will discuss later, in detail in this article. Based on *Hadiths* (*Hadiths* are a collection of reports purporting to quote what the Prophet Mohammed said verbatim on

¹ The Northern part of Kerala, which consists of the present day Kasargod, Kannur, Wayanad, Kozhikode, Malappuram and Palakkad districts, collectively called Malabar was part of Madras Province before the formation of the Kerala state.

² Sunni Muslims prefer one *madhab* out of the four (normally a regional preference) but it is not believed that *ijtihād* can be exercised by the contemporary scholars, so the Sunni Muslims promotes the idea of *taqlīd*.

any matter) and early Islamic practices, the ‘*ulamā*, Sadaqatulla Moulavi opposed the use of loudspeaker for delivering *khuṭbah*.

Resigning from the Sunni ‘*ulamā* body (Samastha), he formed a new group which is widely known as ‘Samsthana’ Sunnis. Fourth, the Jamaat-e-Islami, yet another major organisation among the Mappila Muslims of Kerala is an integral part of the pan-Islamic movement in Kerala, whose followers are known as Islamists and they are branded as a fundamentalist Islamic group in India. Fifth, The Mujahid or Salafi, another major group among the Mappila Muslims of Kerala, is influenced by the reformist effort of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb of Saudi Arabia. Since the rise of movements such as Mujahid and Jamaat-e-Islami, the term ‘Sunni’ is used to refer to ‘traditionalist’ Muslims. Besides, these movements among the Mappila Muslims do not give any priority to any religious schools of jurisprudence. The two groups have fundamental disagreements with Sunni Muslims as they believe that the form of religion practiced in Kerala by Sunnis in the name of Islam is far different from true Islam.

Defining the practice of *khuṭbah*

For a pious Muslim, the Friday prayer or *Jumu’ah ṣalāt* is an important ‘*ibādah* (obedience, submission to Allah), purpose of which is to gather the people for the prayer. It is a *fard* (mandatory practice) for a Muslim to attend the *Jumu’ah ṣalāt* and it cannot be waived off except for an acceptable excuse ordained and attested by the Islamic jurists. In the Friday prayer sermon, the Imam addresses the ‘state of the community’ motivating, galvanizing, educating, propagating Islam, and creating a sense of community within themselves. Moreover, it makes them aware of their togetherness, which has been emphasized as an integral part of Islam. The *Qur’ān* declares “O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed for prayer on Friday (the day of assembly), hasten earnestly to the remembrance of Allah and leave off business. That is best for you if you knew” (*Qur’ān*, 62: 9-10).

It is important to differentiate *khuṭbah* from the *Zuhr*¹ (noon) congregation prayer. While the *Zuhr* is practiced daily, at noon, the *Jumu'ah khutbah* is a special noon prayer conducted only on Fridays² and is practiced in two parts. The first part of the *khuṭbah* begins with the Imam greeting the congregation with ‘assalāmu ‘alaikum’ (Peace be unto you) followed by a lecture on a topic selected by the higher authorities of his particular group and the call for *adhān* (call for the prayer). The second part is the ritual prayer. Both parts of the *khuṭbah* will have at least one *āyat* (verse) from the *Qur'an* and one *Hadith* of the Prophet. Finally, the *khuṭbah* comes to an end with the *du‘ā* (asking forgiveness) and seeking Allah’s guidance for the believers. It is *wājib* (compulsory) for a Muslim to attend the *khuṭbah* in its entirety (that includes the two sections), and the believer is expected to be present even before the prayer begins. The Friday congregational prayer is not considered complete if he attends only one section of the *khuṭbah*. There are special rules and guidelines that distinguish the *khuṭbah* from the normal lectures and sermons, two of which are the *khuṭbah* sermon and *salāt* (ritual prayer). Friday congregational *khuṭbah* and the following ritual prayer are held in each *mahall*. Due to the numerical strength of Muslim population, in regions like Malabar, there are several mosques in each locality. Therefore, each *mahall* will mostly have a main mosque (*Jumu'ah* mosque) and other small mosques to conduct the normal prayers.

Approaches of the different schools of jurisprudence towards *khuṭbah*

There are mainly four schools of jurisprudence among the Sunni Muslims all over the world and these schools differ in their idea of the necessary and obligatory parts of the *khuṭbah*. The Mālikī School of

¹In the Islamic practice of *Zuhr*, a Muslim has to follow four *rak'ats* except on Fridays whereas the *khuṭbah* requires only two *rak'ats* to be followed as the other two *rak'as* is substituted by the imam’s sermon/lecture.

² While *khuṭbah* is the regular special prayer on Fridays, there are two other important occasions in a year on which prayers as special as *khuṭbah* is followed - the *Eid-ul-Fitr* and *Eid-ul-Azhah*.

jurisprudence opines that it is mandatory and valid only if the *Jumu'ah khutbah* is delivered in Arabic and the *khutbah* delivered in any other language is invalid even though there are not many who know Arabic. Moreover, if there is nobody who can perform the *khutbah* in Arabic language, the *Jumu'ah* prayer is not obligatory or mandatory and the believers can conduct the normal *Zuhr*¹ prayer. The Shāfi'i school of jurisprudence is also of the same opinion that it should be delivered in Arabic language following the ways of *sahaba* (companions and the descendants of the Prophet). Therefore, learning Arabic for the purpose of delivering *khutbah* for the Friday prayer is *fard*, and there has to be at least one man from each community or locality (read *mahall* in Kerala context) who is well versed in it. If however, no one learns it, all of them will be considered sinners and their *Jumu'ah* prayer will not be accepted. The Ḥanbalī school of jurisprudence has a slightly different opinion on the issue. While they also mandate the Friday *khutbah* in Arabic, they are willing to compromise if they do not find anyone who can deliver in Arabic and accept the *khutbah* to be delivered in any other language. The recitation of the *Qur'an* as part of the *khutbah* is not valid except in Arabic. The Ḥanafī School of jurisprudence agrees with the two former schools that the prayer should be in Arabic and not in any other language.

Though there are four major schools of practices all over the world, namely Shāfi'i, Ḥanafī, Ḥanbalī, and Mālikī, in Kerala, we can find only the Shāfi'ites and Ḥanafites. The Islamic propagators who came to Kerala were from the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, which is dominated by the Shāfi'i School of jurisprudence. However, the Ḥanafites are the dominant majority in other states of India. They can be seen only in the districts of Idukki, Kasaragode and Thiruvananthapuram of Kerala state. Though there are slight

¹ The *Zuhr* prayer is the prayer after mid-day. It was believed that the name *Zuhr* was given to this prayer because it is held in between two daily prayers, the *Fajr*, beginning at dawn and '*Ishā'*, at the first instance of complete darkness.

differences in religious practices, the textual evidences are almost the same for both the Islamic traditions.

The new movements like Mujahid and Jamaat-e-Islami among the Mappila Muslims do not give priority to any of these religious schools. The Mujahid and Jamaat-e-Islami movements believe that Islam practiced by the Sunnis in Kerala is different from the actual Islam. The Sunni Muslims consider *khuṭbah* an ‘ibādah (a vital part of ritual prayer) while the Jamaat-e-Islami and Mujahids regard it as a public lecture that invokes religious arguments along with textual support. Although there are differences among the Muslims in the Malabar region of Kerala in terms of theory, practice, tradition, and language of the *Jumu’ah khutbah*, all of them consider themselves to be the true practitioners of the *khuṭbah*. For instance, Charles Hirschkind says “sermons have historically served as an instrument of ethical therapy, both in the context of Friday worship at the mosque and outside it, in various formal and informal assemblies where preachers have been called on to enliven an audience’s sense of pious fear through the oratory on such topics as death, the grave, or the coming of the Antichrist (*al-Masīḥ al-Dajjāl*)” (2006, p. 37). Here, the debate becomes decisive when Jamaat-e-Islami and Mujahids propagate the idea of *khutbah* in different ways to communicate the state of the community. There is always the question of Islamic ways of political profoundness related to the delivery of Friday *khuṭbah*.

Sunni Muslims believe that the delivery of Friday *khuṭbah* should be in Arabic language. The question that arises is that how would they communicate a large section of non-Arab population through the Arabic language. As a result, Sunni Muslims introduced *Tharaprasangam*, which is an additional speech in the vernacular language wherein the imam gives advice, suggestions and explains Islamic ideas to the audience either before or after he performs the Arabic *khuṭbah*. This was an innovation of the Sunni Muslims (both E. K and A.P Sunnis) to counter the contention of the Mujahid and Jamaat-e-Islami groups that the Sunni Muslims deliver the *khutbah* in Arabic which its followers are not able to follow. As the

congregational delivery would be regarding a major topic regarding the Mappila Muslims's public life in each day, the question of what kind of topic they discuss and what is their argument on a particular issue is a significant area of concern that one should look into.

Mostly, the contention comes from Sunnis against Mujahids and Jamaat-e-Islami with a negative nuance that their discourse in the Friday prayer would mostly be about the 'petrol price hike', 'today's Gold rate', and so on. This criticism comes from the idea that the *khuṭbah* should be in Arabic, consider as something very pious, fixed, and delivered in its essence at the congregational prayer. Therefore, Sunni Muslims consider *khuṭbah* delivery in a way in which an orator, most probably, the local imam of the mosque requires not knowledge of the audience psychology, but rather a complete performative grasp of the true word, revealed in the *Qur'an* and exemplified in the *Sunnah*. He is a mediator, between the text and the devotee. This argument goes against the idea of a vernacular *khuṭbah*, while we take the words of a Sunni leader, E.K Aboobakr Musliyar, he contends, "in religion, there is no space for inventions and innovations and therefore, no one can decide matters independently. And as the *khuṭbah* is worship and not a speech, it is not necessary that it should be in a language which the people can easily understand. It is like saying that the '*fātiḥah*' (one chapter of the *Qur'an*) of *ṣalāt* should be in a manner in which its meaning should be understood by everyone. Prophet Mohammed has pronounced that, if anyone makes an innovation, which heretofore did not exist in religion, it is "*mardūd*" (rejected). Therefore, the Sunnis who believe that the texts are the only authority that has led us through tradition say that the *Jumu'ah* prayer is valid only if the *khuṭbah* is in Arabic. (*Samastha* 80th Anniversary Booklet, 2009, p. 33). While this standpoint is somewhat rigid, it is remarkable that Sunnis from early times have continued to perform the *khuṭbah* in the traditional way. Here, this process would lead to a kind of depersonalization of the utterance; its agency is more located in God and in the disciplined ears and hearts of devotee and less in the imam or *khaṭīb* who delivers the *khuṭbah*. Charles Hirschkind says, "A *khaṭīb*, in accordance with

this tradition, does not shape his audience at will but serves as a mediator, providing the linguistic and gestural resources through which the listener can undertake the ethical labor involved in properly attuning his or her faculties to the word of God” (2006, p. 39).

The debate over the question of what language could possibly be used during *khuṭbah* becomes more contentious when one tries to understand the historical evolutions and various happenings related with this issue among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar.

Historical account of *khuṭbah* practice among the Muslims of Malabar

In order to trace the historical debates surrounding *khuṭbah* practice, it is important to recognize the role and authority of the ‘ulamā in matters pertaining to the practice of Islamic rituals where their dictates are followed by every section with utmost reverence. It was in the first decade of the 20th century that the Mappila Muslims found the *khuṭbah* being delivered in the vernacular language in the mosques. Interestingly, this practice did not emerge from the Mujahid or Jamaat-e-Islami movement but was introduced by a, Sunni scholar named Muhiyudheen Moulavi, an Islamic scholar who in 1915, translated *Nubātiyya khuṭbah* from the book *Yakoothun Asfiya* into Malayalam. Thereafter, *khuṭbah* began to be recited in Malayalamin a mosque at Vengaloor village in Tirur Taluk, in Malabar. The ulama and the Ponnani Makdhooms (topmost Sunni religious clergies during that period) made an inquiry into the issue and decided to exclude/ostracize Moulavi Muhiyudheen from the *mahall* through *kaikotti purathakkal*.¹ Here one can understand how the community responded towards an innovation (*bid’ah*) that appeared among them. In 1926, the Mujahid leader K.M Moulavi wrote an article in *al-*

¹ It was the duty of the scholars of Ponnani mosque to excommunicate those who indulged in un-Islamic practices. They were excluded from the *Mahall*. The word *Kai* means hand and *kott* means claps. Therefore, the Ponnani scholars clap their hands and issue an order refusing entry to those who committed un-Islamic practices.

Irshād in support of delivering the *Jumu'ah khutbah* in Malayalam. To oppose this, in 1947, the Samastha Kerala Jamhiyathul Ulama (Sunni 'ulamā) passed a resolution opposing the practice of the *khutbah* in vernacular and proclaimed that *khutbah* other than in the Arabic language is *bid'ah* (innovation in religious matters) based on the religious accordance. Sometimes secular court also has come to the scene, for instance, Jamaat-e-Islami began to recite the vernacular *khutbah* in the Karakkunnu mosque at Malappuram in 1960, which was challenged by one Thrikkalangod Nelliparamban Beeran in the High Court of Kerala. The Court gave its verdict stating that the aim of the *khutbah* was to give advice to the believers in a language that they could understand and there were no guidelines in the *Qur'an* that stated otherwise. It further stated that as the believers are bound to follow the Prophet the imam should take the responsibility of conveying the meaning of the *khutbah* to the followers and therefore, the advice can be in their mother tongue (Mathrubhumi Newspaper, 6 April, Saturday, 2000, p. 8). The liberal secular ethics of the Court was not enough to change the belief of the Sunni Muslims and they criticized the state and the court as anti-religious and viewed these secular/state elements as an agency that has no right to involve in the matters of faith.

Another contentious issue surrounding the *khutbah* is the use of loudspeaker, which had been used from the mid-20th century, in *masjid-ul-haram* in Mecca, Saudi Arabia and in mosques all over the world. In Kerala, mosques began to use loudspeaker for the purposes of prayer, which the Sunni 'ulamā opposed from the very outset. In 1955, Samastha introduced a book titled "*Kifāyat al-Wildān*" (Moulavi Muhammed, 1955), for Madrasas. The book says the use of loudspeaker would lead to *bid'ah* and therefore un-Islamic. On the contrary, movements like Jamaat-e-Islami and Mujahids widely promoted the use of loudspeaker in mosques and Madrasas, which provoked the Sunni 'ulamā who called for a strict ban on loudspeakers in the Sunni mosques. The rationale for the ban was that the listeners would not hear the original voice of the reciter due to the mechanical amplification of the voice (Samastha 80 Anniversary

Booklet, 2009, p. 33). It further proceeded to explain the essentials for a *khuṭbah*, that is, the *khuṭbah* should have a quorum of forty people and the ‘reciting person’ i.e. the imam should be healthy so that he will be able to reach the maximum number of listeners without loudspeaker. Therefore, the Sunni ‘*ulamā* proclaimed a joint fatwa and asserted that the new movements were leading the Muslim Ummah away from the Islamic path by promoting the loudspeaker in the Friday prayer. The fatwa prevailed in Malabar up to 1960s, but, after a year, in 1967, the Sunni ‘*ulamā* changed their views, a group of ‘*ulamā* met on 8 April 1967 and decided to change their earlier decision. As a repercussion, the president of the Sunni Samastha, Moulana Sadaqathulla Moulavi opposed this move, decided to resign, and formed a new group, Kerala Samasthana JamhiyathulUlama for the Mappila Muslims who opposed loudspeaker *khuṭbah*.

This controversy over the *khuṭbah* translation continues to be a subject for discussion among the Mappila Muslims as the increasing sectarian movements have advocated rigid engagements in religious practices to uphold a pristine Islam. As a result, there is an increasing polarization among the groups claiming to be the representatives of ‘true’ Islam. After the Khilafat movement, in Malabar, the Mappila Muslims particularly Mujahids began to work within the community. The Mujahid leaders comprehending that the common people ‘lacked’ Islamic knowledge thought it best to recite the *khuṭbah* in the vernacular language so as to reach to them and as a way to preach the ideology of Islam. It is quite interesting to note that though the different factions refer to the same sources pertaining to the basic rules and laws, they have differences in their practices. In addition, each group makes an active effort to discount the authenticity of representation of the other as the true followers of Islam.

Ethnographic account of *khuṭbah* practices in different mosques in Malabar

Here, I offer a detailed description of the different styles and traditions surrounding the *khuṭbah* ritual based on the ideology of each Muslim group and the particular ways it is performed according

to the opinions of their respective imams. As mentioned earlier, due to the surveillance and control of parental organization, the imam of the mosques most probably selects a topic, which he is asked to deliver.

The *khuṭbah* is a *kalām* (speech), which starts with *hamd* (praise) and *ṣalāt* and ends with *wasiyyat du’ā* (praying for the souls, families and other things). The Sunni *khuṭbah* includes topics on the world, hereafter, heaven, hell, award, and punishment from God etc. While both factions of the Sunnis follow the Nabātiya *Khuṭbah*. The E.K faction of Sunni Muslims has the *tharaprasangam* just before the *khuṭbah* starts whereas the A.P Sunni Muslims have it only after the *Jumu’ah* prayer. In the Sunni mosques, there will be two *azans* (call for prayer). One, a call for the prayer before noon and the other, after the *imam* takes his place on the ‘*mimbar*’ (podium kind of a structure in the mosque where the imam stands to deliver the *speech*) for the *khuṭbah*.

It begins with *ma’āshara*¹ by the *mulla* (a Muslim male trained in the doctrine and law of Islam) of the mosque, holding a sword,² or a staff with its tip touching the ground. Then the Imam steps on the *mimbar* and greets the congregation/assembly with “*assalāmu ‘alaikum*”. In the meantime, the *mulla* gives the second azan after which the imam starts the first *khuṭbah* holding the sword or the staff in his left hand and the *khuṭbah* book in his right hand (if it is needed). The imam should complete the first *khuṭbah* ending it with a verse from the *Qur’ān* and a *du’ā* for all Muslims, which is one of the primary conditions of *khuṭbah* according to the Shāfi‘ī School

¹ “*Ma’āshara*” is a call for *Jumu’ah* prayer, which the *mulla* announces before *khuṭbah* that ‘the prayer is about to start.’ *Jumu’ah* is considered the Hajj of the poor and the festival of the believers. Two *khuṭbahs* equals two *rak’ats* of *Jumu’ah* prayer. Nobody speaks in between the *Jumu’ah*, if anyone does, s/he will not get the award.

² Holding a sword or staff is a *Sunnah* of the prophet. During peacetime he used to hold staff while delivering *khuṭbah* and during wartime he used to keep sword in his hand. It is a prophetic *Sunnah* and Sunni Muslims all over the world consider this as a tradition.

of jurisprudence. Thereafter, he will step down from the *mimbar* and give the sword to Mulla. Then the ritual prayer begins by the imam. The particularity of the *khuṭbah* in Sunni mosques is that it is delivered only in Arabic and no other language is used in between. The Sunni *khuṭbah* generally deals with religious issues like ‘ibādah (worship) and the world hereafter, the topics the believers are supposed to be concerned about mostly.

I would introduce how the Mujahid mosques conduct Friday congregational *khuṭbah* prayer. The Mujahids are not particular about the *khuṭba* being only in Arabic and so they recite the *khuṭbah* in the vernacular and justify these innovations by arguing that when an advice is given for the betterment of the Muslim community, all the listeners should be able to understand it. Therefore, in the Kerala context, the *khuṭbah* should be in Malayalam language. The Mujahids do not have a *ma‘āshara*, and the imam does not use a sword or staff except for in the second *khuṭbah* and the topic for the *khuṭbah* is always related with *thawḥīd* (submission to God) and *shirk* (idolatry) and the intention is, to inspire its followers to be pious Muslims. Let me share my personal experience of attending a *Khuṭbah* in the Masjid-ul-Da‘wa mosque in Tirur town of Malappuram district. Upon entering the mosque, I saw that the place was filled with people occupying seats in the front rows and reciting the *Qur’ān* loudly. One aspect, which I found interesting, was that none of those present had a cap or towel covering their head during the prayer, which is an important symbol for the Sunni Muslims even though this practice is only a *Sunnah* (*Sunnah* is the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings, silent permissions (or disapprovals) of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as various reports about Muhammad’s companions).

At around 1 p.m., the Moulavi came on to the *mimbar* and greeting everyone gathered “*assalāmu ‘alaikum*” started to talk about the relevance of *tawḥīd* (submission to God). It being the last week of

Ramadān, he explained the relevance of giving *zakāt*¹ to the needy. From then onwards he began to focus upon larger issues and happenings around the world. He insisted the congregation to pray for the poor of Africa and Somalia, following with a talk about the *Jasmine* revolution.² He criticized al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn party and expressed his happiness over the happenings in Egypt where the military had captured political power. He spoke about the political tensions in Egypt and criticized Mohammed Morsi's authority as being suppressive, lacking a supportive stance towards military power. After the talk on the *Jasmine* revolution, he took a piece of paper and started reciting the *arkān*³ of the *khuṭbah* in Arabic and it was over in about two-minutes, The clergy body of the Salafi movement the world over, follows the commentary of the Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami of the world clergy Islamic group in Saudi Arabia. After the *khuṭbah* prayer, there was another azan and the Moulavi stepped down from the *mimbar* for the ritual prayer. Upon completion of the ritual prayer, the imam stood up for the Sunnah prayer, without

¹Zakāt is the Muslim practice of giving away accumulated wealth in charity, and is obligatory for all who are able to do so. It is considered as a personal responsibility of Muslims to ease the economic hardship of other Muslims and to eliminate inequality among the followers of Islam.

² The *Jasmine* revolution and its victory over the previous rulers became a subject of great many discussions among the Muslim groups in Kerala. From the first period of the revolution onwards, the organizations stated their positions publicly through their media. The Mujahids were opposed to the *Jasmine* revolution as it was against Islam. They preached that the rebels were trying to destabilize the Islamic countries. As the imperialists - the Zionists, the anti-Muslim Europe and America were behind them, the Mujahids were not in a position to support Morsi and they warned the Kerala Muslims to be aware of the hidden agenda of the Jamaat-e-Islami who were supporting the *Jasmine* revolution which would destabilize the entire nation, especially, the Middle East. They opposed the movement of the Islamic brotherhood of Egypt, Ikhwānul Muslimūn because they had no hope that if Ikhwānul Muslimūn wins, the nation would be more liberalized. The Mujahids in Kerala were inspired by al-noor, the opposition party of Egypt who were supporters of the Wahhabi Salafi ideology and so they supported the military movement in Egypt.

³These words are considered mandatory in *khuṭbah* to be recited only in Arabic and not to be translated into any other language.

asking for forgiveness from Allah (Prayer). Here, I saw people praying to God individually whereas, in the Sunni mosques, the scene would well have been a group prayer after the Juma prayer led by the Imam.

Third, the Jamaat-e-Islami performs the Friday *khuṭbah* almost in a similar manner as the Mujahids. Their *khuṭbah* topics encompass religion, science, ethics, and politics to certain extent. Here, the Friday sermon becomes an object of political concerns, and it would affect the sensibilities of the listener and most often, the advocacy from the leader in Jamaat-e-Islami mosque will be about a pan-national Islamic political order, a new possibility and mixture of religion and politics. In the Jamaat-e-Islami mosques, there are no initial speeches nor a second azan and *ma’āshara* before the *khuṭbah*. Moreover, the Imams do not use a sword or staff in the prayer proceedings. In March 2014, on a visit to the Irshadiya mosque situated in Irshadiya College in Feroke, 15 kilometres from Kozhikode and controlled by Jamaat-e-Islami. I had an opportunity to attend the Friday prayer and a chance to talk to the imam, Hamza moulavi.

I took the *wuḍū’* (ablution) and waited for the Imam to begin the prayers. The *Jumu’ah khutbah* started at 12.45 p.m. with the imam’s assistant calling for prayer where only a few did the ‘*sunnah* prayer’ (is the optional prayer that Muslims perform at any time of the day. These prayers are performed in addition to the five daily prayers that are compulsory for Muslims). After five minutes, the imam stood up on the *mimbar* and started to pray for the wellbeing of Muslims all around the world. Greeting the audience “*assalāmu ‘alaikum*”, he began to speak on the current political situation in the Middle East, of hopes of the Jasmine revolution (Arab Spring), of the recent failure of democracy in Egypt and his exchanges with Morsi supporters, and praised the Islamisation process in Egypt. Resting for two minutes, he stood up and recited a few *Qur’anic arkān* in Arabic. The Arabic *khuṭbah* lasted for two-three minutes. In the mosque, the topics discussed before the *salāh* (prayer) was completely political

and I saw the imam convincing the followers of the necessity to purify society through political involvement, extolling them to do *da'wah* (preach the message of Islam) to others and preaching unity for the common cause of the Muslim community.

Fourth, yet another visit of mine was to the Nadapuram Jumua Masjid, located at the heart of Nadapuram town, 59 kilometers away from Calicut, it has more than hundred years of Sunni tradition. The mosque was constructed in the early 19th century with the help of the local king and the British rulers.

When I reached there, it was already late for the *Jumu'ah* and people were filling the empty spaces between the rows. While the Imam was getting ready, the Mullah stood in the front row with a sword in his hand and with its tip touching the ground. He called for “*ma'āshara*” in Arabic and the Imam stepped on the *mimbar*. After he had greeted “*asalāmu 'alaikum*”, the Mulla called for the prayer for the second time. The Imam stood up and started the *khuṭbah* with *hamd* (eulogizing Allah and his last Prophet), and other regular preaching has followed, ending with an offering of *du'ā* (prayer) to Muslims all over the world. Lastly, after the *khutbah*, the *Jumu'ah* prayer of two *rak'at* was held and a collective prayer was conducted, like in all other Sunni mosques. The Imam did not use the loudspeaker to deliver the *khuṭbah*. One of the Samasthana group leaders was a native of Nadapuram and therefore they follow his ideology in the *Jumu'ah* prayer including not using the loudspeaker to deliver the *khuṭbah*. And many of the Nadapuram Sunni mosques follow the same. Here, one can see that the *khuṭbah* is a matter inspired by the social relations, social sentiments and traditions rather than mere ideology or a sanctioned belief rooted in Islam.

Conclusion

An anthropological approach to the study of religion is a distinguished approach from the confessional, religious, or theological approach, which is generally concerned with determining the nature, will, or wishes of a god or the gods. An anthropologically

based approach would bracket out, set aside all normative judgments, and theorize that the difference in beliefs might have something to do with the psychology of people involved, their method of social organization, their mode of economic activity, etc. Even while using the term ‘Muslim community’, the study understands the prolific diversity in the approaches of this ‘community’. While going beyond the typical binary ideas, i.e. traditionalism vs. reformism, orthodoxy vs. heterodox, this study would give an idea that the Kerala Muslim religious groups negotiate each other not to become purist or traditionalists but to claim an authorized agency of true Islam among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar.

The complex and diverse interlinkages between the universal characteristics of Islam, its local manifestations, and counter movements of lived representations in the public space are extremely important in sketching the identity of the Muslim community in Kerala. The detailed ethnographic description and the differences that exist in the practice of the ritual of *khutbah* mapped in this paper questions the idea that Islam is static and monolithic which on the contrary, indicates that the ritual practices in the name of true Islam are not one or unitary and that they exhibit a multiplicity of interpretations of theology and innovations in the practices. Secondly, the study also revealed that these religious organizations with multiple ideologies are constantly negotiating with the processes of modernization resulting in innovative practices in the rituals and changes in their ideas about practices, the details, and arguments to substantiate it being beyond the scope of this paper. Thirdly, the topics brought down during *khutbah*, carries wide range of issues that connect the people to local and international issues and make them aware of a lot many things.

Sunni Muslims contend the vernacular *khutbah* as *bid'ah*; Mujahids consider the *tharaprasangam* then would be an innovation because it is very particular and unique practice of the Mappila Muslims of Malabar. Here, I would rather go to take these foul cries as arguments and thus check the theological veracity of those