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REFORM AND REVIVAL AS 'REVITALIZATION': AN APPRAISAL IN THE KERALA MUSLIM CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The most striking feature of the Kerala Muslim landscape is its organizational vitality. Clearly, the sheer plethora of Muslim organizations and the broad range of their activities, all traceable to the reform agendas instituted in the late 19th century, imply demands on the Kerala Muslim public; they also mark an attempt to both interpret and retain the dictates of their faith. The challenge lies essentially in conceptualizing this historical and sociological space, and in what follows we attempt to do precisely this. Following Wallace (1956), this article intends to characterize the reform and revival among Kerala Muslim as a form of revitalization. Hopefully, this will add a further dimension for describing the trajectories of reform and revival in the Kerala Muslim context, and, therefore offers an alternative window into the specificity of Muslims, both in the pan-Indian context and particularly in the specific context of Kerala.

Keywords: Kerala Muslims, Reform, Revitalization, Revival.

INTRODUCTION

The Muslims of Kerala, often known as *Mappilas*, are perhaps India's first and oldest Islamic community.¹ The Muslim influence – economic, religious, cultural and political – has been an integral part of the Kerala ethos since then the seventh century onwards. The European intervention, however, marked a period of unrest and bitterness for the socio-economic and religious life of Muslims. As a consequence of this intervention from around the 16th century, Muslims in Kerala were constrained to spend their major time combating European efforts to control Kerala's spice trade, as well as to oppose Christian missionary activity in the society (Dale, 1980; Koya, 1983; Kunju, 1989; Miller, 1992; Bahauddin, 1992). Indeed, even during these constrained times, there arose a sense of revitalization among the community under the inspiration and spiritual guidance of some 'traditional *ulama*' (Panikkar, 1989). Perhaps the most striking feature of the Kerala Muslim landscape at present is its organizational vitality.

Clearly, the sheer plethora of Muslim organizations and the broad range of their activities, all traceable to the reform agendas instituted in the late 19th century, imply demands on the Kerala Muslim public; they also mark an attempt to both interpret and retain the dictates of their faith. The challenge lies essentially in conceptualizing this historical and sociological space, and in what follows we attempt to do precisely this.

In a much cited paper first published in the mid 1950s, Anthony Wallace (1956) defined revitalization movements as "deliberate, conscious, organized efforts by members of a society to create a more satisfying culture". The concept of revitalization grew out of Wallace's study of the religious movement led by the Iroquois prophet Handsome Lake in the early 19th century. Although the concept was initially designed to explain a religious movement within a small and relatively homogeneous tribal society, Wallace believed it was applicable to more complex societies as well. The several hundred examples of revitalization movements, including of organized religions like Christianity and Islam, which he counted "in a quick preliminary survey

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of anthropological literature” were “only a small portion” of this world-wide phenomenon (Wallace, 1956). As Wallace (1956) defined it, the concept referred to various types of movements – including revolutions, reform movements, messianic movements, and religious revivals – that met the following criteria: “the persons involved in the process of revitalization must perceive their culture, or some major areas of it as a system (whether accurately or not); they must feel that this cultural system is unsatisfactory; and they must innovate not merely discrete items, but a new cultural system ...”. Wallace used the term ‘mazeway’, which he defined as the image of self and world held by individuals in any given society, to represent the most crucial aspect of his concept of revitalization. A revolution, reform movement, messianic movement, or religious revival qualifies as a revitalization movement if participants offer a new mazeway to members of their society.

Following Wallace (1956), this article intends to characterize the reform and revival among Kerala Muslim as a form of *revitalization*. Hopefully, this will add a dimension for describing the trajectories of reform and revival in the Kerala Muslim context, and, therefore offers an alternative window into the specificity of Muslims, both in the pan-Indian context and particularly in the specific context of Kerala. Our attempt at conceptualization, it is important to point out, would entail a perspective that looks at the reform process from outside itself. In other words, we bring an external perspective to the discussion of reform and revival in the Kerala Muslim context by inviting assent to an anthropological form of analysis rather than to the beliefs characteristic of the people themselves. Much scholarship on religion and religious movements is not very sensitive to this distinction, so that in giving unremitting attention to describing movements and/or the beliefs held by the people themselves; scholars have often overlooked the imperatives of analysis and conceptualization that answer to the protocols of theory and research. Of course, the anthropological theory we will be invoking to conceptualize aspects of reform and revival in the Kerala context is not without its problems. But it does lead to some insights about the Kerala Muslim context which that context itself does not supply.

NARRATING THE WORK OF RELIGIOUS REFORM AND REVIVAL AMONG KERALA MUSLIMS

The Muslims in Kerala shaped their existing socio-

religious and political life through encountering to various ‘external’ and ‘internal’ challenges. While the process of challenge and response goes on in the community as a whole, the precise patterns of change were gradual and within an accepted Islamic context. Even as the Portuguese and later other Europeans with native landlords helped to shape an Islamic community in which a socio-religious solution was always sought to transcend contingent circumstances, there were also processes set in motion within the community to help forge a self-consciousness of community and identity unique to the Kerala context (Dale, 1980).ⁱⁱ Without doubt, the place of the community in the socio-religious and political domain of Kerala is a consequence of the work of religious reform and revival within it.

The earliest sign of religious renewal in the Kerala Muslim context coincided with the ‘external’ challenge, particularly the European intervention in their socio-religious and economic life in the form of the Portuguese and culminating with the structures of British colonialism. There emerged in these contexts various socio-political and religious mobilizations and uprisings among the Kerala Muslims, which provided the backdrop for efforts to renew Islam in the Kerala context. The great movement of religious change appeared, however, at the beginning of the 20th century, initially through the efforts of publicly-spirited and learned intellectuals and through various small and locally centered organizations. These initiatives paved the way for Muslims to critically evaluate their relationship with society and consider ways of addressing traditional Islamic tenets to a contemporary situation.

Historically, the context of the emergence of the Kerala Muslim community and the tribulations that characterized it have led administrators and scholars alike to produce interpretations of it as ‘closed’, ‘negative’, ‘fanatic’, ‘turbulent’ and ‘uncivilized’ (see Ansari, 2005 for an assessment of this imagery). Viewed against this backdrop, the terms ‘reform’ and ‘revival’ would signal attempts from within the community to embrace a progressive, civilized and even ‘secular’ face. In this sense, most historical inquiries into the trajectories of reform and revivalism among Kerala Muslims commence with the modern period, with the work in particular of Sanaullah Makthi Tangal (1847-1912) who is often recounted as being the pioneering spirit behind the efforts at religious change in the Kerala

Muslim context.

Islam spread in Kerala upholding its own culture and style, while at the same time retaining some of the old characteristics of its members before conversion depending up on the places of settlement, the habits and culture of the local people in rural areas and the coastal belt (Kunju, 1989; Panikkar, 1989; Dale, 1991; Kunju, 1995). By the close of the 18th century, and during the 19th century, the religious class of *ulama* - who were commonly designated by the categories of *tangals*, *musaliyars* and *mullas* - began to exert a commanding influence over the religious beliefs and socio-political attitude of the wider Muslim population.ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, it is these religious personages that Panikkar (1989) has characterized as 'traditional intellectuals', while going on to observe that:

'The traditional intellectuals among the Mappilas comprised not only the members of *ulama*, but also less important but equally influential religious functionaries like *musaliars* and *quasis*. In shaping the outlook of the rural Mappilas, they played a dominant role. Their influence was not limited to ecclesiastical matters, but extended also to the temporal life of the laity. ... The attempts at cultural and ideological hegemonization by the colonial state and the activities of Christian missionaries had created a feeling of uneasiness and apprehension among the *ulama* and those who were dependent on religion services for their livelihood. In combating these influences, they sought to bring about a revitalization of their culture and religion. That, in the circumstances, their teachings would have, either directly or indirectly; an anti-British edge is not surprising. The ideological world of the Mappila peasantry came to be circumscribed by the religious notions elaborated and projected by the traditional intellectuals who had close links within community. It was within this ideological world that the Mappila peasantry sought sustenance for their social action'.

Although detailed historical accounts about the traditional *ulama* do not obtain in the Kerala context, the role played by the Makhdam family of Ponnani, Umar Qazi of Veliyamkode, Sayyid ShaykhJifri Tangal, SayyidAlaviTangal and his son Sayyid Fazal Pookoya Tangal of Mamburam and Shaykh Muhammed Shah of Kondotti in the revitalization and regeneration of the Islamic society of the period cannot be denied (Miller, 1992; Panikkar, 1989). Clearly, these representatives of the traditional *ulama* constituted something of a 'school'

of like-minded individuals who played an important role in bringing a sense of solidarity in the community. Aspects of ritual as indeed the scholastic and spiritual part of the religion were emphasized in communicating a sense of oneness among local Muslims. What is perhaps important is that these men did not constitute a formally organized religious, social, or political movement during the 18th and 19th centuries, quite unlike the later "Mujahid" and "Sunni" campaigns which were to articulate themselves in the 20th century (Vazhakkunnan, 2008). The latter movements decisively constituted a departure in the refashioning of the socio-religious and political life of Kerala Muslims.

However, as Bahauddin (1992) observed the emphasis on the ritualistic aspect of religion and the hatred of all that was Western which was common during the 19th century made the Muslims an inward looking community. The overwhelming majority of the Muslims were educated in the traditional educational institutions like *Dars* and *Othuppally*, which are attached to mosques where they received mainly religious education. The very narrow and concentrated learning experiences of the Muslims, as transmitted through their traditional religious institutions, led to problems like their lack of general knowledge. More importantly, their insecurity vis-à-vis secular education made them very suspicious of the latter, even critical of its efficacy and negative towards progress. Such a negative disposition had certain significant ideological and social consequences, in that the early socialization of Muslims was predominantly within a religious framework and, what is more, a professional middle class hardly emerged among them. The uncompromising opposition towards the British rulers was the main reason for their apathy and indifference to secular education and western culture (Ali, 1990). Consequently, they tended to remain within the parameters of religious ideology and submit to the guidance and leadership of traditional religious intellectuals, some of whom we have documented in the previous section. Visibly, the Muslims were marked out as a "negative, defeated and closed society" (Miller, 1992) on the threshold of the 20th century.

Without doubt, the outbreaks and uprisings among the Muslims during the 19th century had compelled the colonial rulers to take remedial action to prevent future incidents.^{iv} Generally, the combination of agrarian discontent, poverty and religious fanaticism were evaluated as the main causes for the outbreaks, but even

more pointedly the Muslims were also characterized as 'less civilized' primarily due to their involvement in anti-colonial and anti-landlord struggles. To the official mind, therefore, the remedy lay in civilizing influences, imparted through formal education and the general principles which informed the administrative institutions (Panikkar, 1989). Accordingly, the British colonial authorities were geared towards 'civilizing' the local Muslim population through modern education and through a gradual modernization of society through administrative fiat. The British introduced the modernizing agenda primarily through administrative and commercial activities, although educational efforts were initiated late in the 19th century, the first college in the Malabar region being opened in Calicut in 1873 (Miller, 1992). The British administration appointed many officials and committees to enquire about these disturbances and sought to combine repressive measures with other softer options.^v

By the beginning of the 20th century, a sharper sense had dawned about the serious deterioration of Muslims in the socio-religious and educational fields and they started to take steps for their uplift. The colonial efforts at educating Muslims initiated at the end of the 19th century and the influence of various socio-religious reform movements which had gained momentum among other parallel communities of Kerala were important triggers. Efforts to harness secular education and to adjust themselves to the changing conditions of the time came to be initiated, often in ways very different and even antagonistic towards the earlier views of the 'traditional' *ulama*. In fact, it is from these activities that a distinctively articulated 'reform movement' among Kerala Muslims emerged, which sowed the seeds of the *IslahiorMujahid* movement which later grew in full strength in Kerala (Kutty, 1987).

The emergence of this reformist impulse laid the foundation for a strong criticism of various existing socio-cultural activities and practices of the Kerala Muslims. Interestingly, even as this reformism lent strong support for the intensification of rational thought, social awareness and modern education – all directed at the material development of the community - it also sought to consolidate a certain view of Islam and the order of its faith. The early stages of this reformism, certainly, was met with resistance under the guidance of the traditional *ulama*, as represented by the Mamburam Tangals, and was even castigated as 'un-Islamic' (Miller,

1992). This internal opposition also meant keeping a large section of the Muslims, especially of the interior areas, without any formal education and confined to the religious instruction received at *madrasas* (Gangadharan, 1995). Plainly, the traditional religious leadership made no real effort to grapple with the contemporary socio-economic and political life of the Muslims, and was ineffective in answering to the community's material problems. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Muslim social scene during the second half of the 19th century presented a dark picture, what Miller (1992) has characterized as a "negative, defeated and closed society". Modern education and women's education was taboo and something heretical in almost all Muslim households. English was considered the language of hell, and even the learning of one's mother tongue was heretical. The religious scene presented a mish-mash of practices (Kutty, 1987).

It is in this closed and confusing context that one sees the emergence of reformist intellectuals who gradually came to exert a mass influence on the Kerala Muslim community. The most important among these intellectuals are Sayyid Sanaullah Makthi Tangal (1847-1912), Chalilakathu Kunhahmad Haji (died 1919), Shaikh Muhammad HamadaniT angal (died 1922), K.M. Moulavi (1886-1964) and Vakkom Abdul Qadir Moulavi (1873-1932).

Doubtless, attempts at regenerating the socio-religious life of the Kerala Muslims coincided with the Western engagements, particularly in the context of the British. It also meant reordering the basis of the practice of Islam in the local context. The traditional religious leadership tended to concentrate on interacting with the economic and social conditions of the period by taking their religion and belief as a medium for that negotiation. It was also characterized by hostility towards things 'Western' and 'modern'. The emergence of reformism over half a century since the 1880s marked a break with this orientation (Samad, 1998). Under the sway of this reformist impulse, many critical issues of religion and society were taken up afresh and in a new light. Interestingly enough, the work of the reformists showed a pronounced revivalist tendency, in that an emphasis was placed on a return to Islamic purity by both avoiding and purging of innovations, accretions and the intrusion of local elements. To be sure, the call of 'modernity' was not being ignored by this 'return', for the reformist impulse also took on the mantle of

justifying modern education. Reformism, clearly, in the Kerala context could not – and did not - repudiate an earnest engagement with modernity, indeed with the rising challenges of a changing material world.

Common to most of the reformists was the theme of emphasizing *tawhid* (the unity of God) and condemning *shirk* (actions that compromised the unity of God), both of which meant critiquing indigenous syncretistic forms of religiosity as un-Islamic. Interestingly, they combined such revivalist activism with intellectual efforts to pronounce the imperatives of modern education. Thus, for instance, the work of Makthi Tangal combined efforts to challenge the distorted image of Islam transmitted by Church missionaries with an exhortation to his Muslim brethren to shake off their apathy towards English and secular education. Similarly, Vakkom Moulavi sought to restore Islam to its pristine purity, even as he attempted to revamp religious education and rid Muslims of extant attitudes towards things ‘western’ and ‘modern’ (Kutty, 1987). Miller (1992) has noted that even as the winds of Arab reformers had influenced Vakkom Moulavi and his circle, the reforms that the latter initiated was only feeding on a new spirit developing among Kerala Muslims as a result of secular education and modern life influences; also that this reformism avoided the ‘aggressive puritanism’ of the Arab Wahhabi reformers.

As a matter of fact, the role played by the reformists in the Kerala context, although oriented towards a renewal of the structures of faith, was predominantly a moralist one (as opposed to the orthodox *ulama* who tended to operate more as ‘preservers’ and ‘caretakers’). Such a ‘moralist’ disposition meant taking on both the mantle of examiner and evaluator of local traditions. Thus, even as they stressed the need for all Muslims to follow the obligations of their faith, they were also critical of practices that they deemed not in keeping with the tenets of Islam. This certainly meant renewed efforts to dismantle aspects of the structure of popular Islam in Kerala; but significantly enough this was designed more as a strategy of cultural reform or regeneration than as a form of fundamentalist activism. Interestingly, the justification that the reformist current seemed to offer through its figures was the need to train a new generation committed to and capable of contribution to modernization and development. Accordingly, as could be inferred from the above sketches of the reformist intellectuals among Kerala Muslims, they saw themselves not simply as guardians of a fixed and

established tradition but as legitimate adaptors of the faith to the new circumstances. Without doubt, if traditional tenets had to be interpreted in the light of modern needs, it was imperative that they understood what the modern world represented – and, in the Kerala context, this meant the initiation of efforts to systematize not only religious education, but also opening to the benefits of modern secular education.

Clearly, a certain secularization process was being inaugurated among the Kerala Muslim fold by this reformist impulse. Even as it proved facilitative of challenges to definitions of social reality made by traditional authorities, it did not totally de-sacralize authority claims within the fold. All the same, the process initiated by the reformists was to be marked by further shifts and turns.

The early individual efforts at reform had clearly brought about a rudimentary form of cultural consciousness among the Kerala Muslims, but by about the 1920s this incipient consciousness had crystallized into a distinct movement. Epitomizing this crystallization was the formation in 1922 of the *Muslim Aikya Sangham* - subsequently designated as *Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham*, possibly around 1925 (hereinafter *Aikya Sangham*) – which was the first effort to organize Muslims on a state-wide basis for the realization of their socio-religious and educational objectives (Samad, 1998). The organization took its inspiration from the activities of such reformists as Vakkom Moulavi, Hamadani Tangal, and K. M. Moulavi as well as from several local organizations like *Nishpaksha Sangham* of Kodungallur, *Islam Darma Palana Sangam*, *Travancore Muslim Mahajana Sabha*, *Chirayankeezh Taluk Muslim Samajam* etc (Samad, 1998). The *Aikya Sangham* was founded at Kodungallur of Cochin state in 1922 by such illustrious Muslim leaders as Manappattu P. Kunhu Muhammad Haji, Kottappurathu Seethi Muhammad Sahib, K. M. Seethi Sahib, K. M. Moulavi and E. K. Moulavi (Kutty, 1987). The organization was set up primarily to promote the united uplift of the community and to bring about reforms, especially the advance of modern education, while of course also avowing to overcome the superstitious and un-Islamic practices and beliefs among the Muslim masses (Miller, 1992).

Although the *Aikya Sangham* functioned only for a short duration of twelve years, it was quite epoch-making in the history of Kerala Muslims, indeed in the forging of a sense of community. Noticeably, the *Aikya Sangham* was

keen to protect various socio-religious, educational and political interests of the community. Within a short span of twelve years, the *Aikya Sangham* brought about a significant awareness and awakening among the Muslim scholars and masses alike. Particularly, the realization began to sink in about the need to overcome the educational and social backwardness of the community. It inspired and encouraged activities designed to promote modern education and, what is more, revolutionized the community's approach to women's education which had been neglected for long. Emphasis was also placed on the modernization and reorganization of the *Madrasa* system. Significantly, in what seems a shift of focus, the *Aikya Sangham* came to graft a political agenda to its program of cultural and social reform, arguing specifically for protecting the political interests of the Muslim community through electoral representation in various political fora (Samad, 1998). Through its multi-pronged approach of conferences, speeches, dialogues and scholarly publications in Malayalam and Arabi-Malayalam, the *Aikya Sangham* ushered in an era of civic engagement in the social, religious, educational and cultural life of the Kerala Muslims. It published two influential periodicals, *Muslim Aikyamin* Malayalam and *Al-Irshad* in Arabi-Malayalam to propagate its ideas among the Muslims (Ali, 1990). Many primary and high schools were established under its guidance and inspiration; and, what is more, its leaders played an important role in the establishment of the Farook College, the first Muslim College of Kerala (Ali, 1990).

After its 12th annual conference in 1934 at Cannanore, the *Aikya Sangham* dissolved itself in order to merge into the *Kerala Muslim Majlis* and transferred its properties to the Farook College (Samad, 1998). It is important to reiterate that the *Aikya Sangham* is considered to be the precursor of today's *Mujahid* movement in Kerala.

The leaders of the *Aikya Sangham* felt that the reform movement could only be successful if it was guided and led by an organization of the Islamic scholars. Such a feeling was premised on the conviction and theological reform was a vital aspect of all reform, and that this could only be ensured by giving religious scholars their due. The *Kerala Jamiyyath-ul-Ulama* (hereinafter *KJU*) was visualized under the auspices of the *Aiky aSangham* for precisely this purpose. By around the 1930s, the momentum created by the *AikyaSangham* was beginning to wane, and its merger with the *Kerala Muslim Majlis*,

which was prominently a political outfit, entailed that theological reform and cultural work would recede to the background. It was primarily to restore the importance of cultural resources and theological reform that the *KJU* was activated by K. M. Moulavi, who registered it as a formal body under the Societies Act in 1932-33 (Samad, 1998). The beginnings of the *Mujahid* movement, the attempt really to articulate a 'modern Islam' in the Kerala context, spring from these initiatives.^{vi} Indeed, 'reform' in the contemporary Kerala Muslim context is identified with this strand, which even as it subsumed a good deal of the early reformism recounted in the foregoing pages also incorporated new elements.

The *KJU* adopted vigorous and effective programs (primarily through public lectures) with the support of local organizations that were founded for reformist activities earlier in order to educate masses about the menace of superstitious beliefs and practices in the name of Islam. It also sought to reorganize religious education from primary to higher level and give maximum encouragement to secular education and women's education. It published journals, arranged for translations of the holy Quran, as well as serving up other classic works in Islam and books on various subjects. Alongside these efforts at consciousness-raising, the *KJU* also articulated a socio-political agenda of uniting Muslims and striving for the protection of their rights in the public domain. All the same, it is the specific stridency of its campaign for renewing the cultural resources of the community that is most striking.

The clarification of the basic concept of *Tauhid* (or monotheism) and the challenge to various forms of *Shirk* (or polytheism) were among the main subjects taken up for active campaigning by the *KJU*. Even as they examined these opposed concepts, they were keen to highlight the dangers posed by blind faith as expressed in practices of saint and tomb-worship. The *KJU* passed many resolutions as a part of its campaign against such populist beliefs. Thus, even as it sought to reorder the manifestations of popular Islam in Kerala, the attempt to articulate the rational and modern foundations of Islam also took the shape of efforts to reorganize religious education. For this purpose, they established many religious educational institutions like *madrasas* and Arabic Colleges in various parts of the state.

As a counter to the reformist zeal of the *Aikya Sangham* and *KJU*, the *Samastha Kerala Jamiyyath-ul-*

Ulama (hereinafter *SKJU*, although in the local context it is often designated as *Samastha*) came to be established under the leadership of Varakkal Mullakkoya Tangal and Pangil Ahmed Kutty Musaliyar as early as 1926 (Samad, 1998). A recent pamphlet issued by the educational wing of the *SKJU* notes that the organization was a response on the part of the traditional religious leadership to the conditions of post-1921 period in which the Kerala Muslim community generally witnessed a radical shift from the folds of individual leadership to the folds of organizations.^{vii} The *SKJU* was further rattled by what they saw as ongoing modernization trends in western attire, as well as the first public circulation among Kerala Muslims of the fundamentalist and puritanical views of Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab (1702-1793), *Salafism* of Rashid Rida (1865-1935), Islamic modernism of Muhammad Abduh (1819-1905), and the pan-Islamism of Jamaluddin Afghani (1839-1897) and Tahreek e-Mujahidin in North India. These ideologies came to circulate among Kerala Muslims through the *Aikya Sangham* and the *KJU*. In fact, the pamphlet alleges that the traditional *ulama* were compelled to form a scholar's organization when the platform of the *KJU* was taken over by the reformists to attack traditional Islam. It is pointed out that the old scholarly and intellectual traditions of Kerala Muslims with local accretions and deviations had been followed for centuries and nurtured under the guidance of eminent scholars headed by Makhdums of Ponnani. Clearly, at this point of resistance to the reformist attempts at founding an Islam free from local accretions, one discerns a counter-revivalism which similarly speaks of rigidly adhering to Islamic tenets. The *SKJU* was officially registered as a formal body in 1934.

The *SKJU*, as a form of counter-revivalism, had as its primary aim the propagation of a 'true' Islam. It too campaigned for imparting religious education to the Muslim masses, while also arraigning against activities and practices that it saw as un-Islamic. Significantly enough, it also sought to combine religious and secular education, while imploring religious tolerance, interfaith amity and national progress.

The formation of these two organizations – namely, the *KJU* and the *SKJU* – implied that the leadership was divided; but, what is more, it also entailed a division of the Kerala Muslim community along two ideological planks, each speaking for the obligations of faith and in the name of authentic Islamic principles. This 'reformist'

division along two planes has gradually translated into a differentiation among Kerala Muslims - between the 'modernists' who came to be labeled as *Mujahids* (or *Salafis*) comprising element that had belonged to the *KJU* and the 'conservatives' who were represented as *Sunnis*, subsumed under the banner largely of the *SKJU*. In the late 1940s, the *Jama'ath-e-Islami* too would open its Kerala chapter, similarly voicing the idea of a 'true Islam' among the Kerala Muslim public while also orienting itself in terms of a politically nuanced Islamic theology.

It is important to reiterate that most Kerala Muslims are *Sunnis*, adhering to the *Shafi* school of thought.^{viii} With the emergence of organizations like the *Aikya Sangham* and *KJU*, and in the context of their reformist thrust, a sharp difference has appeared among the Muslim scholars particularly on matters of theology and religious adherence. The formation of the *SKJU*, as a counterpoint to these imperatives, and geared "to protect the Muslim community from the infiltrations and influences of western un-Islamic culture on the one hand, and to defend the traditional Islam from being absorbed by the modernist, fundamentalist, and puritanical as well as reformist versions of religion on the other hand" (citations are from the pamphlet published by Samastha Kerala Islam Madha Vidyabhyasa Board, 2007) only served to sharpen the lines of division. As each formation becomes very exacting with respect to its principles of religious adherence, both obligatory and optional, the separateness of each entity becomes all the more visible and real. Broadly, in the self-descriptions of their adherents, the *Mujahid* ideology is held to derive its lineage from the 19th century 'reformist' *ulama* that challenged the popular veneration of the 'traditional' religious orthodoxy and gave a fillip to the activities and programmes of the *Aikya Sangham* and *KJU*. Alternatively, the *Sunnis* are those who stand opposed to the 'reformists', particularly about the edifice of traditional Islam, and trace their lineage to the activities of the *SKJU*.

Surely, the organizational difference need not translate into deep-seated differences in the Islam professed by their adherents. Indeed, the division also reflects foundational theological differences. The basic contrast between the ideals of the 'traditional' *Sunnis* and the 'modernist' *Mujahids* is based on three fundamental religious topics, namely, *Istighaza*, *Tawassul* and *Taqlid*.^{ix} In addition to the observance of the basic requirements of religious practice - that is, namaz, fasting, zakat and

pilgrimage – Muslims in Kerala have traditionally observed many other form of religious devotion. In keeping with these forms, *Sunnis* advocate a form of Islamic religious practice grounded in custom and reverence at shrines through mediation. On important family days, such as the death anniversary of a loved one or before the start of an undertaking, special prayers are conducted, like *mawlid* and *ratheeb*, where an antiphonal reading of the life of the prophet or saint will take place.^x Similarly, in addition to regular Quran reading, there is some other incantation of religious materials within the family circle. The most important among them are the *malas* (or song-stories) which commemorate the exploits of Muslim saints or historic events in the past of the community.^{xi} For the resolution of daily problems like lack of prosperity, sickness, childlessness, disputes etc, the *Sunnis* generally turn to religious saints, dead or living, who are said to possess the grace of *karamat* (or mystical power) as well as to certain *Tangal* families regarded as highly blessed.^{xii} Besides, special festivals called *nercha* are conducted, which are connected with particular localities and mosques.^{xiii}

For the *Mujahids*, *Istighaza* to any prophet or saintly person is *shirk* and heresy. On this basis, they strongly object to some of the traditional customs and practices like *nercha*, *urus*, *chandanakkudam*, *mawlid*, *ratheeb* etc., which are performed in the name of prophets and different saints. The *Sunni* counterpoint is that *Istighaza* is not only allowed in Islam, but is also an act of piety. Interpreting several Quranic verses and traditional sources, the latter believe that prophets or saints, dead or alive, with their supernatural powers, can help those who invoke their aid, and consequently that a believer can seek after such intermediaries for redeeming his faith. Similarly, as in the case of *Istighaza*, *Mujahids* declare that the *Tawassul* is also a part of *shirk* and taboo in Islam. But according to *Sunniversion* *Tawassul* is a prayer making use of the special rights and privileges enjoyed by saintly intermediaries to seek communion with Allah; also that such prayer is not only allowed in Islam but is regarded as a sacred act. Precisely on this basis, they also declared that practices like *nerchas*, *urus*, etc. held in the name of saints and martyrs are valid in Islam.

With reference to *Taqlid*, the *Mujahids* affirm that strict adherence to any one of the four *madhabs* (or juridical schools) is not compulsory. For the *Sunnis*, however, adherence to a juridical school is essential for the

perfection of religious rituals; indeed, that the capacity for independent research (*ijthihad*) professed by the *Mujahids* is not only impossible under the present circumstances but presupposes a deep knowledge of the holy texts. Accordingly, while the ideological adherents of the *Sunni* faction are attached to the *madhab* of Imam Shafi or Imam Abu Hanifa, for the *Mujahid* faction, given their antipathy to *Taqlid*, accept *ijthihad* (independent research) as a means for refining rituals and obligations. These contrasting views of the *Sunnis* and *Mujahids* about the obligations of faith also oversee other disagreements. Thus, there is much controversy between them concerning the question of women's participation in congregational prayers, with the *Mujahids* open to the question while the *Sunnis* find the very thought objectionable. Likewise, there are disagreements over observances during Ramzan, the mode of collection and distribution of *zakath* and so on. An even more contentious issue relates to the question of the language to be used by the mosque. While there is no dispute that the language of the formal prayers ought to be in Arabic, the contention is about Friday sermons (or *Khutba*). Mosques under the control of the *Sunnis* continue to use Arabic, even asserting that it must be in Arabic, while mosques under the jurisdiction of *Mujahids* use the vernacular language on the ground that it is only then that the avowed purpose of *khutba* can be fulfilled. Notwithstanding this debate over the intricacies of faith, it is important to recognize that the basic rationale behind these ideological fissures in the movement for reform is to restore and promote basic Islamic truths. In that sense, both the 'modernist' *Mujahids* and the 'traditionalist' *Sunnis* are fundamentally very 'inward-looking', even conservative, although both are equally predisposed towards harnessing the benefits of modern education without compromising on religious education. As a consequence, both these modes of articulating the truth internal to Islam are compelled to fashion an organizational agenda targeting both the layman and the scholar alike, including the young and old. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to assert that it is precisely this organizational endeavor that has enabled the Kerala context to make it visible its Islamic cultural moorings. Indeed, the Muslim organizational landscape became even more dynamic and vigorous when the *Jama'ath-e-Islami* made its presence in Kerala during the late 1940s. These multiple organizational endeavors, especially in the post-1950 period, meant a new impetus

for the socio-religious and public life of Kerala Muslims. Without doubt, given an active legacy of reform and revival in the Kerala Muslim context, there are a number of Muslim organizations working under the banner of the *Sunnis*, *Mujahids* and the *Jama'ath-e-Islami*, each combining 'religious' tasks of affirming the faith with 'secular' functions of lobbying for the Muslim cause. Each of these formations has its own mosques and *madrasas* in most of the localities of Kerala, while also having their own respective student and scholar wings. The publication profile of these organizations is very impressive, and there are separate magazines for children, youth, women, etc. It is an obvious fact that these organizations have kept alive a sense of identity and community among Kerala Muslims, which in a context bearing the combined influences of modern education, communist critique and economic survival is clearly an achievement. Currently, both the *Sunnis* and *Mujahids* are formally split into two rival factions. The former are divided between two groups - one led by E. K. Aboobacker Musaliyar and the other by Kanthappuram A. P. Aboobacker Musaliyar - and their respective followers are commonly referred to as "E. K. Sunnis" and "A. P. Sunnis". The causes for the split within the *Sunnis* were largely personal and practical rather than ideological. The 'A. P. Sunnis' claim to oppose any form of political involvement, a standpoint that represents a distinct departure from the pattern of their traditional political view, which has looked to political action and alignment with the Muslim League as a major means for the transformation of Muslim life. Alternatively, the 'E. K. Sunnis' continued the traditional mandate of supporting the Muslim League. All the same, both the factions remain critical of the *Mujahids* (Miller, 1992: 334-38 has the details). Likewise, the *Mujahids* are divided between an 'official' group led by T. P. Abdulla Koya Madani and another group commonly branded as 'Madavoor Group' led by Hussain Madavoor (Osella & Osella, 2008).

Adding further dimension to the organizational landscape of Muslim organizations in Kerala - and sharpening the religious polemics of the region - is the *Jama'at-e-Islami Hind (JIH)*, an Islamic organization founded by Abul A'la Mawdudi (1903-1979) in 1941 as a part of his endeavors for an Islamic revival in the Indian sub-continent. The Kerala Muslim context had known of the ideals of Mawdudi since the early 1930s through the renowned monthly *Tarjumanul Quran* which was edited

and published by Mawdudi from Hyderabad (Samad, 1998). The scholars who used to receive a complimentary copy of this journal became the propagators of Mawdudi's ideas in Kerala. V. P. Mohammed Ali of Edayur, who was known as Haji Sahib among his followers, was one such scholar, and he became the founder of the *JIH* in Kerala (the first unit coming up in 1948). Within a short period, through serious efforts like organizing public lectures, study classes and personal contact, he won over a small group and very strategically united all of them under the banner of *Jam'iyatul Mustarshid* in formed in 1946 at Valancherry, where he was working as an *Imam* in a mosque (Samad, 1998). Subsequently, in 1948, this organization converted itself into the first unit of the *JIH* in Kerala. The Kerala unit of the *JIH* has been working primarily with Muslim youth, especially students, in an effort to mobilize them for the cause of Islam, and since 1984 has stepped up its organizational activities among Muslim women also in an effort to augment their religious beliefs and activities.

CONCLUSION: REFORM AND REVIVAL AS 'REVITALIZATION'

The work of reform and revival in the Kerala Muslim context fits Wallace's definition of revitalization movement (Vazhakkunnam, 2008). In their protests against the traditional practices regarded as un-Islamic and their proposals for renewing the obligations of their faith - interestingly in the name of a 'modern' Islam - the reformists were offering a new mazeway to members of their society. Indeed, Wallace's stipulation that participants must believe that their visions offer a genuine alternative to the images of self and world that dominate their society is met by the self-understanding governing the *Mujahid* movement:

'Islam has been polluted by false knowledge. People are kept in ignorance and superstition so that priests [Sunni clergy] can fill their bellies and keep control, justifying their existence. You can read in Logan's book [Malabar Manual] about the pitiful condition of Muslims in 19th century Kerala. People were not allowed even to learn Malayalam script - it was considered *haram*. Ignorance leads to superstition and other un-Islamic practices. When in crisis, people call the name of Sheik Moihudeen. You may have heard of the Moihudeen *mala* in his honour. Women especially read the *mala*, and they believe they will get merit from doing so. He might have been a great man, but this is *shirk*. Praying to saints,

prostrating in front of their *jarams* (tombs) is forbidden. The Prophet himself did not want to have a grave! People go to shrines asking saints for help or miracles, but only God can help (Osella & Osella, 2008)'.

This self-understanding of *Mujahid* reformism – which, incidentally as we saw above, had its basis in the activism of the *Aikya Sangham* – qualifies as a revitalization movement because it is perceived by its participants as a radical alternative to the dominant worldview of the Sunni orthodoxy.

As well as providing a general definition of revitalization movements, Wallace also characterized the social situations in which revitalization movements arise and identified a series of stages that revitalization movements pass through to become successful agents of cultural transformation. These aspects of Wallace's model make it possible to identify some of the important social functions of the processes of reform and revival in the Kerala Muslim context and to understand its emergence and development during the 20th century.

In Wallace's theory, revitalization movements do not arise in healthy cultures in which individuals are relatively at ease with conventional images of self and world. Only when social contexts are stressed by disequilibrating forces, and only when individual members of the society are forced to choose between shoring up existing mazes or adapting new ones, will a revitalization movement arise. If Wallace's model fits the Kerala Muslim context, the movements of reform and revival must have emerged in an era of cultural distortion and disillusionment when individuals experienced great stress as a result of the inadequacy of reigning concepts of self and world.

The foundational concepts of the reform movement among Kerala Muslims emerged in the opening decades of the 20th century. It is around this time that a sharper sense of the deterioration of Muslims in the socio-religious and educational fields had dawned on the community, which also complemented British efforts at ameliorating a group that they had characterized 'fanatical' and 'backward'. Efforts to harness education, both religious and secular, gathered pace and in due course came to acquire a momentum which lent robustness to the Muslim social scene. Visibly, as we noted above following Miller (1992), the Muslims in Kerala were marked out as a "negative, defeated and closed society" on the threshold of the 20th century. Kerala Muslim reformism grew out of this social and

cultural perception, in the consciousness-raising activities of the early reformers who lent strong support for the intensification of rational thought, social awareness and modern education – all directed at the material development of the community – while also seeking to consolidate a certain view of Islam and the order of its faith.

According to Wallace's theory, an era of high stress for individuals in which the dominant mazeway is still intact but requires increasing energy to maintain precedes the stage of cultural division in which revitalization movements appear. This line of thought points not only to the early moments of the reformist critique when the Muslims in Kerala were marked out as a "negative, defeated and closed society", but also to the task that the early reformists were giving to themselves – namely, that of 'moralists' (as opposed to the traditional *ulama* who tended to operate more as 'preservers' and 'caretakers'. Clearly, the reformist impulse could not have taken head-on the dominant mazeway as defined by the orthodoxy, so that even as they made efforts to examine and evaluate local traditions, they did so more as a strategy of cultural reform or regeneration than as a form of fundamentalist activism. The protagonists of reform, as we saw above in our interim assessment, presented themselves not simply as guardians of a fixed and established tradition but as legitimate adaptors of the faith to the new circumstances. Indeed, in doing so, they were giving shape to a mazeway that would in due course translate into a renewed understanding of what the modern world represented – namely, the systematization of religious education and the access to modern secular education.

In Wallace's theory, as individual stress becomes more intense and pervasive, some individuals cling to the old mazeway ever more fastly while others seek new mazes. As a result of such division, "the culture is internally distorted ... stress continues to rise", and a "process of deterioration" sets in that "can, if not checked, lead to the death of the society" (Wallace 1956: 269-70). The society either becomes increasingly vulnerable to strife and disorder or it enters an era of revitalization. In the Kerala Muslim context, this is clearly seen in the traditionalist reactions that were directed at the reformists – interestingly, each invoking the other's insistence as un-Islamic – cumulatively adding up to a cultural situation, internal to the Kerala Muslim community, which would see the division of

mazeways between the 'traditionalists' and the 'modernists' yielding to the actively diverse organizational landscape of contemporary Muslim public culture. In fact, as we saw above, the reformists' bitter critique of popular customs associated with the cults of the Sufis and their advocacy of *ijtihad* also directly undermined the authority of many *ulama* that were quick to brand the reformists as 'anti-Islamic' Wahhabis. Wallace argues that successful revitalization movement pass through six stages – mazeway reformulation, communication, organization, adaptation, cultural transformation, and routinization – and that a movement may fail and disappear at any stage in this process. In the first three stages, prophets play a central role. Prophets have a vision of self and world that is an alternative to existing mazeways, they effectively communicate that vision to a group of disciples, and their vision is central to the organization of a larger body of followers. In the later stages of revitalization movement, as the new vision, is absorbed by different sectors of the society, leadership becomes more diversified. Viewing reform and revivalism in the Kerala Muslim context in terms of this process helps clarify the relationship between the early reform efforts of individual intellectuals like Sanaullah Makthi Tangal, Chalilakathu Kunhahmad Haji, Shaikh Muhammad Hamadani Tangal and Vakkom Moulavi, the organizational mandate of the *AikyaSangham* and the *KJU* (formed in the early 1920s) and the later *Mujahid* movement (Samad, 1998). By providing new images of self and world – especially the idea that the Quran is a book of divine instruction that must be properly understood by every Muslim, and certainly not a monopoly of religious specialists nor is it a book of esoteric mantras to be chanted in religious schools – the celebrants of the early initiatives and the organizations that came in their wake have played the leading role in the initial stage of mazeway reformulation and in the closely-related second and third stages of communication and organization. In the fourth stage of adaptation, one sees the role primarily of the *Mujahid* movement and the leadership offered by their frontal organization, namely, the *KNM*. Drawing on the vision of the reformist intellectuals and their organizations, the *Mujahid* movement has sought to adapt the central message that Muslims must study the Quran for themselves rather than be dependent on professional mediators into a series of interventions streamlining the

Islamic educational system in Kerala. Indeed, the success of this entire reform effort can be gauged by the fact that, not long after their reformulation and adaptation, the 'traditionalist' *ulama* too started to modify and reorganize similar educational centres, even setting up their own organizations – the *SKJU* in particular - for the purpose.

To be sure, even as the new mazeway begins to transform established structures, the values, goals, and language of those structures redefines the new mazeway.^{xiv} Thus, in keeping with the reformist thrust, if traditional tenets had to be interpreted in the light of modern needs, it was imperative that they understood what the modern world represented: that indeed there could be an Islamic understanding of modernity that willingly embraces new developments in the world but remains firmly embedded in the Islamic world-view.

Still engaged in this adaptation process, one might argue that the patterns of reform and revival in the Kerala Muslim context has yet to reach the stage of cultural transformation in which, according to Wallace (1956) “a controlling portion of the population comes to accept the new religion”, dramatic changes occur in the culture, and stress on individuals is greatly reduced. This is perhaps true – if one were to take the national situation of Muslims into account, characterized as it is by suspicion and 'othering' - although scholars like Sikand (2005) see in the system of Islamic education routinized in the contemporary Kerala context a pathway for reform of *madrastas* elsewhere in India. All the same, in the light of the work of reform and revival that we have narrated in the foregoing pages, it is important to state that the rising tide of reform has over time been recast into something more than just cultural reform or renewal; it has meant a redrawing and sharpening of the contours of political community and identity (without, of course, lapsing into separatism).

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ⁱ The Muslims of Kerala was founded by Arab missionaries either during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime or shortly after his death in 632 A.D., definitely pre-dating Muhammad Bin Qasim's conquest of Sind (711-715 A.D.) It is a little known fact that Islam entered the Indian subcontinent via Kerala on the West Coast through a process of peaceful communication and economic relationship between Arab traders and the Kerala region. The descendants of Arab merchants intermarried locally and also gained in numbers from conversion. Miller (1992: 39) has argued that Islam in India, in all probability, began in Kerala, and the Kerala Muslims are the descendants of the first Indian Muslims.

ⁱⁱ The Portuguese were the first wave of Westerners, whose intervention in Kerala affairs began in 1498 and ended in 1656 when they were upstaged by the Dutch (who in turn were displaced by the English in 1662). Portuguese intervention had a far reaching impact on the everyday socio-economic and religious life of Muslims in Kerala. The impact was such that it served to intensify the Muslims' awareness of their own identity, and thereby to increase their sense of separateness from the rest of Kerala society (Dale, 1980:64). All the same, by the seventeenth century the Portuguese power declined and in their place the new European powers like the Dutch and the British began to establish their power over different parts of Kerala. With the exception of the British, these other interventions did not have any visible long term impact on the life of the Kerala Muslims.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Tangals* (often known as the *Sayyids*) were the leaders of the community, who claimed descent from the Prophet. Most of them emigrated from Arabia, especially from the Yemen and Hadramawth. *musaliyars* are a group who usually acted as religious teachers and mosque officials; whereas *mullas* were generally individuals who performed local or household ceremonies. See Dale, 1980: 110-18 and Miller, 1992: 255-65.

^{iv} The advent of British and their depressing policies towards Muslims created a feeling of bitterness among the Kerala Muslims, and eventuated a series of violent outbreaks (often called as 'Moplah Outrages') as indeed to a state of

- 'perpetual ferment' that occurred throughout the nineteenth century (see Panikkar, 1989: 48-91; Miller, 1992: 108-14; Bahauddin 1992: 94-131; Gangadharan, 2008; and Dale, 1980: 119-52). In the following decades, Muslims in Kerala passed through many vicissitudes and withstood many tribulations against both (in the modern historian Panikkar's words) 'lord' and 'state', finally culminating in the famous 'Mappila Rebellion' of 1921.
- ^v It can be seen that, soon after the first few uprisings, H. V. Conolly, the District Magistrate, had urged the adoption of punitive steps and submitted his report to the government in 1841. Subsequently, in 1852, T. L. Strange was appointed by the Madras government 'to trace out the causes which have produced or influenced the unhappy state of feeling between the Mappilas and the Hindu population'. Likewise, William Logan was appointed as Commissioner in 1881 to enquire into and report on agrarian relations in Malabar, which yielded the prognosis that agrarian disabilities were at the root of the problem. The stringency of the measures advocated by various officials and committees included: (a) the disarmament of the population; (b) the deportation of Tangals in whose jurisdiction the outbreaks had occurred; (c) the fining of wealthy Muslims who lived in the villages where outbreaks had occurred; (d) the appointment of Muslims as revenue officials; (e) the appointment of special qazis to adjudicate disputes between Muslims; and (f) the establishment of a permanent garrison in the outbreaks zone. These stringent recommendations were often grafted into legislations outlawing specific acts. For discussion, see Panikkar, 1989: 68, 93; Miller, 1992: 112-14; Dale, 1980: 154-78.
- ^{vi} As Samad (1998: 101) notes: "The word *Mujahid* refers to one who strives hard for a noble cause especially for the sake of religion. Sometimes the movement is called *Salafi* Movement. It is because they exhort the Muslims to return to the religious style of the early believers or the righteous followers of the Prophet, whom the word *Salaf* represents. As the *Mujahids* uphold the ideals of Ibn Abdul Wahhab they were sarcastically termed *Wahhabis* by their opponents".
- ^{vii} The citations if from the pamphlet published by the *Samastha Kerala Islam MadhaVidyabhyasa Board, 2007*, the author's name is consequently are absent.
- ^{viii} The word 'Sunni' is derived from the term *Ahlusunnah-walJamma'ah*, which means those who adhere to the traditions of the Prophet and his righteous followers. Following the historical evolution of the Shia-ites, the rest of the Islamic community who opposed the former's doctrines came to be known as *Ahlusunnah-walJamma'ah*. Thus the world of the Islamic community was divided into Sunnis and Shias. In this sense, although both the so-called reformist groups *Mujahids* and *Jama'ath* adopt a separate nomenclature among Kerala Muslims, they all come under the banner of *Sunnis*. However, in the Kerala context, the ideological label *Sunnis* has come to refer to the cluster of Muslims having allegiance to the organizations other than that of the *Mujahids* and *Jama'ath-e-Islami*. See *Islam Vignana Kosham* (1993).
- ^{ix} The term *Istighaza* means to pray or to seek help. Technically, it means to invoke help or protection of the saints or prophets, either who are dead or alive. *Tawassul* means to make these great souls and persons as mediators between men and God, and consequently using these exemplary mediators in seeking the blessings of God. *Taqlid* is a matter related to the relevance of the acceptance of any of the four juridical schools of thought (generally called as *madhab*) and which has been a matter of dispute among the scholars all over the Islamic world since the very inception of the faith on the world stage.
- ^x *Mawlid* is the most important and commonest among the rituals performed. It originally referred to the celebration of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, in which reading and recitation of his history, his supernatural powers, his sayings are performed. Likewise, *ratheeb* is another important ritual exclusively performed in honour of Muslim Saints like Mohiuddin Shaikh and Rifai Shaikh.
- ^{xi} The most popular *mala* is the *Moideen mala*, representing the history of Al-Jilani, the founder of the *Qadiri* order. Another favorite among the Kerala Muslims is the *Rifain mala*, commemorating the less known saint Al-Rifai. See Miller, 1992: 241-42.
- ^{xii} The shrine of Sayyid Alavi Tangal of Mambram, Muhammad Shah Tangal of Kondotti, and the Ponnani shrine of MakhdumZein-ud-Din are among the most important holy places within the Kerala Muslim fold

^{xiii} The most famous is the Malappuram *nercha*, which commemorates the death of Muslims martyred in battle against the Hindu ruler of the area. Another well known *nercha* is conducted at the Shaikh mosque in Calicut, which is constructed near the grave of a 16th century Muslim saint named Shaikh Muhammad Koya. See Miller, 1992: 244-46.

^{xiv} Note, for Wallace, the prophetic visions at the basis of revitalization movements are characterized by the conviction that the existing world is demonic and will be destroyed, by the hope that a new and better world will take its place, and by intense moral concern. Clearly, the visions informing reform and revival in the Kerala Muslim context are neither so messianic nor millennial. An intense moral concern does obtain in the contexts probed though, but this is internal to the orders of faith; and indeed is intrinsic to the Islamic world-view.