

Visiting the Dead Among the Muslims of Kerala

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Summary: *This article explores the burial traditions and saint veneration among Muslims in Kerala, highlighting their cultural and religious significance. Graves of saints, or Makhams, are sacred pilgrimage sites for blessings and healing. While these practices reflect Hindu-Muslim syncretism, reformists critique them as un-Islamic. Despite debates, they remain integral to Kerala's Muslim identity.*

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In Surah Ali Imran (The Islamic text, Quran has arranged it into different chapters known as *surahs*. *Ali Imran* is among those 114 *surahs* in the Quran.), verse 185 of the Quran reads, "كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ" (transliterated as *kullu nafsin zaikathul mauth*), meaning "Every soul will taste death." According to Islamic belief, the deceased are buried in graveyards, known as *khobarstans*. In Kerala, common individuals are typically buried in *khobarstans* near mosques. However, religious figures, saints, and martyrs from the community often become venerated at their graves, evolving into respected figures within local culture. The Muslim community places great emphasis on funeral rituals and burial practices, which vary according to geographical and cultural contexts. In a typical rural village in Malabar, after death, the body (*janaza*) is prepared for the funeral accompanied by Quranic recitations and prayers. Following the *sharia* (Islamic religious law) compliant rituals, which include the ceremonial washing of the body, known as *Mayyath kulipikkal*, the corpse is transported to the mosque for burial. The community accompanies the *mayyath* to the mosque, where the burial occurs in the *khobarstan*.

The Graves of the common

"The essential obligations cover four tasks: bathing, enshrouding, performing prayer, and burial"¹ writes Salma in her article while talking about the rituals of the deceased among the Muslims of western Sumatra. These actions are generated out of Islamic *sharia* and are common to all Muslims. As everywhere else in the Muslim neighbourhoods, the ritual remains the same here. After these four obligations are performed, the *janaza* takes to the *khobarstan* and will bury it there. In Sumatra, the Muslims of sumpur kodus use certain symbols over the grave. It includes cultural symbols, individual symbols, etc. At the top of the grave, a stone is plugged into the head position². At the mosque

Khobarstans, the relatives plug these stones over the head position, called '*meesan kallu*.' According to the deceased's social position and fiscal capacity, the stone varies from simple stones to ornamented and name-engraved granite stones. Visiting the dead and their grave and praying for them are very common among the Kerala Muslims. While the graves of ordinary individuals are often forgotten after a few generations, the tombs of saints and the memories shared by those who visit them remain enduring and persist over time. These tombs serve as a 'sacred space' for Muslims, where they seek divine reward and answers to their prayers from the Almighty.

In the context of Kerala, not all mosques maintain a *khobarstan* (graveyard) for the general community. The fundamental unit of Muslim religious life is the *Mahallu*, which represents a mosque and the households registered under it. However, not every *Mahallu* mosque has a *khobarstan*. Instead, several *Mahallus* might share a communal *khobarstan* for burial purposes. Beyond these common graveyards, individuals with special ties to a particular mosque—such as families who donated land for its construction or those closely affiliated with it—are often buried in exclusive *khobarstans*. As a result, many mosques have small, dedicated graveyards reserved for key figures associated with the mosque. For instance, the Kuttichira Juma Masjid in Kozhikode has a small *khobarstan* designated solely for the local theologians. Among Sunni Muslims, visiting graves is integral to their religious practice. In addition to visiting the graves of beloved family members in communal *khobarstans*, they also make pilgrimages to the tombs of saints, whom they revere with the same devotion as their relatives.

¹Salma, S., "The Study of Islamic Law About the Deceased Muslim and Its Cultural Symbols in Sumpur Kodus, West Sumatera, Indonesia," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam* 5, no. 1 (2021).

² *ibid*



Fig. 1. Graves at kuttichira juma masjid, Kozhikkode. Image: Muhammad Shaheel , 2024

The Graves of the Saints

The graves of important theological idols became revered over time. Visiting such tombs and attending festivals there became a solid part of the day-to-day life of the Muslims. Over time, certain rituals, programs, beliefs, myths, and stories are generated around those figures. Like everywhere else, saint veneration is a significant part of the everyday religion of Muslims in Kerala. The Muslims of Kerala, particularly Malabar, have been holding and exchanging all these for generations. In Kerala, not only Muslims but also other sects, particularly Hindus, the majority section of the society, also participate in this as equal to Muslims. Sometimes, in some places, they lead and organise such practices. There are many such tombs all over Kerala. Saints and martyrs, hospices of Kerala, or their burials identify themselves as ‘*Makhams*.’ While the term ‘Dargah’ can denote the tombs of north India, Hyderabad, and other parts of India. The word could have originated from the original Arabic word ‘*maqam*’, which means ‘place,’ ‘location,’ ‘rank,’ or ‘position.’ No letter sounds similar to the Arabic ‘qa’ (ق) in Malayalam. However, there is ‘kha’ (ഖ). Most probably, by this logic, the word *Makhham* (മഖ്ഖം) has originated.

Tombs, shrines, or *Makhams* have significantly influenced Muslim life in Kerala. Beyond serving as sacred spaces for pilgrimage and prayer, they have also shaped the political and social landscape of the region. For example, these *Makhams* were often central to communal gatherings, and the veneration of the saints interred in them played a critical role during the Malabar Rebellion. Historian K. N. Panikkar highlighted the importance of the people’s attachment to the *Makhams* during the uprising, noting, “the Mappilas, who are illiterate and intensely religious with blind faith in and veneration of their religious leaders, like the *tangal* of Mamburam mosque, from whose preaching they imbibed the religious ideal of martyrdom by fighting against injustice and oppression”³. These saints and their shrines are celebrated not only in Mappila popular culture but also in sacred texts such as *maulud* (sacred hagiography of Prophet Muhammad and another crucial religious figure), and *mala* songs. Sutton K discusses *Mappila pattu*, a key part of the Mappila tradition, and highlights its sub-genres like *nercha pattu* and *mala pattu* (the hagiographic songs that glorify saints and martyrs), which are hagiographic songs that glorify saints and martyrs.

“These songs describe the figures, their histories, and their miraculous interventions in the lives of their devotees”⁴.

- Sutton

Over time, many stories have developed around these saints, often focusing on their supernatural abilities or miraculous events, known as *karamath* (miracles and larger-than-life events possessed by a saint, or prophets). Such texts and memories have been deeply embedded in the Muslim community over generations. As part of my MA dissertation, which intended to record the social, political, and cultural

³ K. N. Panikkar, *Peasant Protests and Revolts in Malabar* (1990).

⁴ M. K. Sutton, "Contested Devotion: The Praise of Sufi Saints in Three Māla Pāṭṭūs," *Asian Ethnology* 81, no. 1/2 (2022): 149–172

aspects of saint veneration in Kerala, I have done extensive fieldwork on three vital *makhams* of northern Kerala. Parappalli Makhham of Koyilandy, Vettathu Makhham at Tirur, and the Odungakkad of Thamarasserry were the three.

At the common *khavarstan* of Parappalli, among the graves of ordinary people, a few *qabrs* are enlarged and given particular importance. They are believed to have contained the body remains of the saints who came to propagate Islam from Arabia. Between the *qabrs* of the common, these elaborated burials possess some kind of divinity and importance. People who visit the graves of their relatives also visit those elaborate burials of the saints with piety and pray by standing close to them. They express harsh criticism, such as these rituals are generated out of the Muslim interactions with other co-existing cultures. So, it is added to, and it promotes an impure faith.

According to the reformist section among the Muslims, visiting the grave of the saints, praying there, and the rituals and festivals there are considered as opposite to the idea of the religion propagated by the Quran



Fig 2. Man and women visiting the burial of a saint at Parappali. Image: Muhammad Shaheel, 2024



Fig 3. A boy visits the grave of his relative at Parappalli Khavarstan. The elaborate burial of saints can be seen in the background. Image: Muhammad Shaheel, 2024

The Possible Exchanges

“The cult of saints has been one of the religious steps which have promoted the Hindu-Muslim syncretism”⁵.

- J.J.Burman

As written scholars such as Osella, Bayly, and Burman, some exchanges happened between the Muslims and pre-existing religious cultures in Kerala in the context of saint veneration. Muslim saint veneration showcases many instances of such products of religious syncretism. The annual gatherings at these tombs are called as *Nerchas*. Many scholars have opined it is the Muslim version of the indigenous festival called *ultsavams* (the annual gathering for a deity, still prevalent among the Hindu community in Kerala), the yearly gathering and rituals on a particular

⁵ J. J. R. Burman, "Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 20 (1996): 1211–1215

deity. Dales and Menon, the two prominent scholars who studied such annual gatherings, have noted that the *Nerchas* do not appear in Islamic calendars probably because, as their title *nercha* implies, which means vow, it is a mappila version of the Indigenous religious traditions⁶. Such similarities are evident even in the stories, myths, and rituals that revolve around the tombs.

The ethnographic survey that leads to one of the focal points of my study is the Odungakkad shrine, where one of the nearby shopkeepers conversed the story of Karinthandan, a Paniya tribal leader and a temple dedicated to him. This is located at the base of the Thamarasserry Churam (mountain pass). At the top of the pass, near its starting point, there is a notable feature: the *changala maram* or "chained tree," associated with the cult of Karinthandan. Through this interaction, I was able to document the legend of Karinthandan, a narrative that holds significant cultural importance in the region. This legend has been widely shared among the local community and a part of the oral tradition since childhood. The Paniya are a prominent Adivasi tribe in Wayanad. In the 18th century, Karinthandan Moopan, the leader, guided the British in finding an alternative mountain pass to replace the Kuttiadi Pass, which would better connect Kozhikode and Mysore. Despite Karinthandan's crucial role in discovering the route, legend says the British betrayed and murdered him. Folklore recounts that in the latter half of the 19th century, travellers and vehicles passing through the mountain were attacked by the ghost of Karinthandan. A *thangal* is believed to have chained the ghost to a tree, hence the *changala maram*. Recently, a temple and a complex have been constructed near this site⁷. The travelers ascending or descending the

Thamarasserry Churam often stop at the *changala maram* and the Odungakkad *Makham* to pray for protection during their journey. Those at the top of the pass seek the blessings of Karinthandan's spirit, while those below, at the base of the pass, pray at the Odungakkad *Makham*, asking the *thangal* interred there for *barakat* (blessings) to safeguard them during their travels. While no direct sources link this cult to the Odungakkad shrine, the proximity in time of both cults invites speculation about possible connections and cultural exchanges. This numerous cross-cultural exchange can be seen in the saint veneration tradition of the Muslims of Kerala.



Fig 4. An oil lamp, and other *vazhipadu vasthukkal* (offering place) at the top of At odungakkad shrine which resembles the Hindu Rituals of the present age. Image: Muhammad Shaheel, 2024

As Santhosh pointed out, the Muslim public domain in Kerala is marked by intense contestations among various religious organizations regarding the claim over 'true Islam'⁸. The reformist groups such as

⁶ S. F. Dale and M. G. Menon, "'Nerccas': Saint-Martyr Worship Among the Muslims of Kerala," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 41, no. 3 (1978): 523–538.

⁷ Subha M., et al., *Anthropological Survey of India* (Ministry of Culture, Government of India, 2021).

⁸ R. Santhosh, "Contextualising Islamic Contestations: Reformism, Traditionalism and Modernity Among

Jama-ete-Islami and Mujahids show no affiliation to the *Makhams* and *Nerchas* and denounce their authority. “*Nercha* as a religious festival was not attacked and critiqued by the Hindus. Rather, the attack on the celebration of *Nercha* comes from the Muslims. Intra-religious antagonisms, especially between the Sunnis and Mujahids, are extreme among the Kerala Muslims”⁹. As Haneefa says, they attack *Makhams*, Saint veneration, and the *Nerchas* by saying they are appropriate from the other communities, and it promotes polytheism and *shirk* (attributing partners to a single god), which is a sin that is the first among the major seven sins in Islam.



Fig 5. The statue of Karinthandan at Wayanad mountain pass, where people pray. Image: Muhammad Shaheel, 2024

The Debate Over ‘True Islam’ or Appropriated

“A massive *nilaviakku* (oil lamp) situated in the *Parappalli* was removed a few years ago. Oil from the lamp is believed to have healing power.”

- Shaheel

As I mentioned, the practice of saint veneration and associated rituals among Muslims in Kerala has been subject to considerable intra-religious criticism. This critique, emerging from within the community, has influenced and reshaped these practices over time, reflecting evolving theological and cultural perspectives. After the continuous deliberations and preachings of *Wahabi* (a Muslim movement in Kerala), especially by the *mujahid* (reformist group), *Makhams* limited such so-called un-Islamic practices, which show more resemblance to the contemporary Hindu veneration acts. They viewed and preached these acts as part of *shirk*. Osella Carolin writes that *shirk* means attributing partners to God or diluting God’s singular power. In Kerala, reformists deplore tombs, saints, shrine festivals, intercessory prayer, *zikh* (remembrance chants), *mawlid*, etc. Traditionalists engage in such practices and defend them. *Mujahid* reformists battle against shrines, saints, festivals, and customary practices. Traditionalists continue to engage in a range of practices and appear to hold beliefs that diverge from the modernist reform styles of Islam.¹⁰

Over time, revivalist preachings started influencing the people, culminating in avoiding certain practices. “The older generation remembers that the *Nercha* and its characteristic features have changed. The change has happened mainly due to

Muslims of Kerala,” *Indian Anthropologist* 43, no. 2 (2013): 25–42.

⁹ M. Haneefa, “Celebrating with Beef: Omanur Nercha Shows South Malabar’s Religious Syncretism,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2018).

¹⁰ C. Osella, “Debating Shirk in Keralam, South India: Monotheism Between Tradition, Text and Performance,” *Open Library of Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2015).

criticism from the “reformist” *Mujahids*. They consider all such practices as *shirk* (polytheism)¹¹. Haris and Naseef also talk about such removal of practices, and they count the removal of *Nilavilakkus* as part of it. They opined that many, many *Nerchas* removed practices like Fireworks, *varavu*, *Nilavilakku*, etc., and replaced them with Islamic speech, *Moulid sadass* (The gathering to recite mawlid and to remember Allah and prophet.), etc. The key reasons for these changes are the opposition from the reformist groups such as *mujahids* against the *nerchas*, gulf migration of people, and the *madrassa* movement” (A large number of people are migrated to the gulf from Malabar. Saudi Arabia and such places are seen as the cradle of Islam where Makham veneration is missing¹². From the writings about the *Nerchas*, many writers emphasized its changed nature due to this reformative criticism. For instance, Santhosh says that the *Nerchas* of the *Makhams* of Puthiyur are much restricted, limiting food distribution to the visitors and the recital of the Quran. It used to be a grand affair conducted with much fanfare and festivity, with a procession of caparisoned elephants and musical instruments followed by a feast. He further says that the reformists criticized these practices as they were against the foundational idea of *tauhid*, monism¹³.

The Lamp of Tirur

Inside the Vettathu *Makham* of Tirur, a *nilavialkku* remains lighted always. Like the veneration acts, the *nercha* and the related procession were held in a non-Islamic way over time. It was with music and elephants, which are prohibited and not a part of

Islamic ways ceremonies. A few years ago, a prominent Muslim leader asked the *Makham* committee to stop these non-Islamic elements of the *nercha*, including the procession, and they agreed.



Fig 6 and 7. An oil lamp, blankets for the jaaramoodal (covering the grave of a saint with chadar), etc, in Vettathu Makham. Image: Muhammad Shaheel, 2024

However, a group of people objected to this decision, and they emphasized these as part of the long-standing culture of the place; after that, *Makham* started to show no affiliation with that *nercha* procession

¹¹ M. Haneefa, "Celebrating with Beef: Omanur Nercha Shows South Malabar's Religious Syncretism," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2018).

¹² M. N. Haris and H. K. T. Naseef, "Political and Cultural Resistance Through Rituals: A Sociological Analysis of Nerchas Among the Muslims of Kerala," *Muslim Heritage*, n.d.

¹³ R. Santhosh, "Contextualising Islamic Contestations: Reformism, Traditionalism and Modernity Among Muslims of Kerala," *Indian Anthropologist* 43, no. 2 (2013): 25–42.

with many so-called non-Islamic acts. *Nercha* is on 22 of *Safr* of the *hijra* calendar. Even though *Makham* officials do not express any affiliation to the *nercha*, it happens yearly, with procession and programs such as *arikkarude varavu*, *kodivaravu* (procession with rice and flag), and so on.

The *musliar* in the *Makham*, while having a conversation with me, said that “we, the *Makham*, do not show any affiliation with the *Makham Nercha* that happened in recent years. We do not want to be a part of such non-Islamic practices” But, he insists on the arguments that uphold the ‘truthiness’ and prestige embodied in loving and venerating the saints.

Folk Persistence

“Mujahid group says venerating saints and Nerchas are not part of Islam and we should shirk (venerating the saint). My parents taught me to love these awliyas. If we love them, they will protect us. I am proud to say I am a Khwaja Muinuddin child.”¹⁴

- A woman pilgrim from Parapalli, R. Remya's YouTube Channel

Many who venerate saints are conditioned and used to it from their childhood. Most of the time, they follow what they see in their parents and other family elders. It is prevalent among the Malabar Muslim households to seek help from *Badr Shuhadas*, *Mmaburam Thangal* and *Muinuddin shiekh*. As Razak says, an average Muslim in Malabar calls out *Muinuddin Sheikh* in times of trouble.¹⁵ This is precisely what reformists found prohibited seeking help other than God. But, as a counter-argument, the believers say, ‘it is reverence, not devotion, devoting one other than Allah is prohibited. But

venerating saints is not. Desplat describes Ethiopia's saint veneration in his article and records a conversation. As a reply to the question about the shrines, people perform forbidden acts by praying to someone other than the god in there. Imadj, whom the author records in the article, replies that people do not pray to the saints in shrines. They pray to the god, and they do it communally. Praying together increases the effectiveness of the prayer.¹⁶

Being a Sufi, or entirely devoted to Allah, is not limited to particular sections such as sayyids or *thangal*. Yousef Mosa and Saied have analyzed the birth of saint cults in Egypt and the contribution of folklore to it in their article ‘Merchants and Mujahidin: Beliefs about Muslim Saints and the History of Towns in Egypt.’ They wrote, “The members of all classes had a chance to turn into *awliya* (Beloved of the God) after their death, and thousands of folk tales have been told about their piety and *karamat*. Although those tales were a kind of literary creation invented by the popular imagination, they can be used to explore some aspects of the social history whose recording was neglected in formal history books.”¹⁷ The cult of saints and their tombs are inseparable from the identity and history of a specific region and the people who live there.

Makhams are sites of veneration that follow some common patterns seen in religious practices across the globe. In Kerala, these practices share similarities with certain Hindu and Dravidian customs. Pilgrims assert that they are venerating, not worshipping, the saints, while reformists critique this as saint worship, arguing that the core principle of Islam is that no one should be worshipped except Allah. Despite this tension, for centuries, saint veneration has been deeply integrated into the popular culture, writings, songs, and everyday life of

¹⁴ R. Remya, “ആദം നബിയുടെ പാദം പതിഞ്ഞ പാറപ്പള്ളി മലാമിലേക്ക് | അമ്മൂത കിണറും ഖബറും കാണാം” [Video], YouTube, 2022.

¹⁵ P. P. A. Razak, “From Communitas to the Structure of Islam: The Mappilas of Malabar,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 68 (2007): 895–911.

¹⁶ P. Desplat, “The Making of a ‘Harari’ City in Ethiopia: Constructing and Contesting Saintly Places in Harar,” in *Dimensions of Locality* (2008): 149.

¹⁷ S. E. S. Y. Mosa, “Merchants and Mujahidin: Beliefs About Muslim Saints and the History of Towns in Egypt,” in *Dimensions of Locality* (2008): 169.

Kerala's Muslims, particularly the Mappilas. Believers often seek the mediation of saints, entrusting them with requests for healing and other blessings. This faith is reinforced by celebrating myths and stories of *karamath* (miracles) attributed to the saints (*valiyy*). Singing and reciting the saints' hagiographies is considered sacred, with the belief that Allah will reward such acts. Participating in *nerchas* (ritual

festivals) and pilgrimages to *Makhams* is essential to many Muslims' religious and cultural identity in Kerala. This practice is likely to continue across future generations.

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