

Everyday Ethics: Towards an Ethnography of Two Key Texts in the Islamic Everyday Life of Mappilas in Contemporary Kerala, South India

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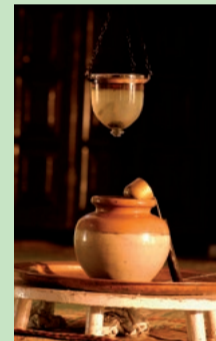


My proposed ethnography of the historically bounded and dynamic textual culture found among Mappilas in contemporary Kerala, South India, is anchored in two key texts that influence the ethical practices of their everyday self-making. The first text is *Adkiya*, a fifteenth century Sufi text authored by Shakh Zainuddin Makhdoom Kabir (d. 928/1522), and the second one is *Fathul Mueen*, a sixteenth century legal text authored by Shaikh Zainuddin Makhdoom Sagir (d. 1028/1619). I intend to study these two key historical texts and seek to ethnographically investigate how, even five to six centuries after their composition, they continue to form, inform and reform ethical practices of everyday self-making among Mappilas in contemporary Kerala. One of my foundational assumptions is that ethnographic attention to the classical project of an Islamic everyday life, well-captured in these two texts, will enable us to understand how Muslims form and reform pious subjectivities as they encounter both textual traditions and contemporary “conditions of possibilities” – the latter spearheaded by a postcolonial state.

What is compelling about these texts is that despite the deep penetration of modern structures into their culture, the authority of these two texts has not faded in the everyday life of today’s Mappilas. It is still intact, and powerful in its contribution to the cultivation of everyday Islamic subjectivities and embodiments. Even today, lay Mappilas find themselves in a discursive and embodied everyday relationship with these two texts through the operation of an “interpretive dynamism” that has been historically fostered between ‘ulema (or Musliyers in the case of Kerala), and lay Muslims.

Research Questions

The central questions that drive the proposed study specifically locate *Adkiya* and *Fathul Mueen* along with Mappila everyday life within the contemporary “conditions of possibilities.” Accordingly, the study engages with two sets of questions: While the first set concerns the productions of everyday Islamic ethics – subjectivities and their embodiments – the second set examines contemporary mutations within the myriad processes of such productions and the reconfigurations therein. Thus, the study asks: 1) How is the classical project of an Islamic everyday life conceived and delineated in these two key texts? 2) How is this classical project embodied and actualized in the everyday life of contemporary Mappilas? 3) Given the putative complexity and intense moral crises that characterize contemporary times, how can we make sense of the ruptures, mutations and reconfigurations within the processes of actualizing this classical project today? Finally, interlinked with all three questions: 4) How would these two key texts potentially diagnose the moral crises of contemporary everyday life and how do today’s Mappilas perceive and receive such diagnoses?



Theoretical Frame

In an important sense, my study responds to a growing recognition by contemporary scholars of the sheer inadequacy of the Kantian ethics of subjectivation and duty to deal with the intense moral difficulties of our time. Specifically, my contribution sets out to combine the anthropology of ethics with the anthropology of texts and the anthropology of Islamic education. Such an approach will allow for insights into the excavations of everyday ethical selves that the present study aims to achieve, in order to bring forth an entirely new set of insights into ethical life anchored in the textual culture of Mappilas – a culture long-sustained by a peculiar system of Islamic education.

Research Methodology

My methodological approach is twofold. I aim to conduct a thorough textual analysis of *Adkiya* and *Fathul Mueen*, as well as undertake an ethnographic immersion in the settings where these key texts are learned, embodied and actualized in everyday life. A genealogical approach will be at the core of my methodology. Working back from the present, I aim to excavate the contemporaneity of subjectivities that underlie the textual genealogies of Mappila everyday life, in order to explore how history’s effects play out today.

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