Kerala History and Studies Journal
Published by the Kerala History Conference
ISSN No. XXXX-XXXX

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Publication Vol. 1 / Issue 1 / 2026

Stable URL https://journal.keralahistoryconference.org/article/35

Date of Release 28.11.2026

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Cultural Adaptation and Syncretism: The Integration of Indigenous Festivals into Islamic Practice – A Case Study of *Appavanibha Nercha*

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India has extended its rich and composite culture, shaped over centuries by interactions with different ethnic communities, religious groups and used in diverse languages. As is the historical understanding, Kerala is no exception to this cultural assimilation. The people of Kerala have been enriched from different parts of the world who settled in the region and made a great impact on its heritage. The social history of Kerala reflects a continuous process of synthesis, adaptation, and assimilation of old traditions with innovative ideas across all domains of life. Among the societies that have moulded Kerala's cultural landscape, Islam and the Muslim community have a distinct role. They were popularly known as the Mappilas. Their influence on Kerala's social, political, and cultural life has been significant. The development of Mappila culture in Kerala, is often labelled as a unique combination of Indian and Arabian elements, reflecting the deep impact on the development of Islam in the region.

The major festivals of Muslims are generally the same all over the world. In Kerala, some of the celebrations incorporate both Islamic elements and features of local folk traditions. All these festivals are observed within a defined ritual framework. The local Muslim festivals generally known as *nerchas*—votive offerings associated with the tombs of saints or martyrs (*shahīd*). The rituals in connection with *nerchas* are usually performed by the priestly class of the community, such as the Thangals or *Moulavis*. Muslims from all economic backgrounds, from the wealthy to the poor, offer gifts to these religious leaders with deep respect and reverence. They believe that such offerings will bring them the blessings of the saints and of *Allah*.

This paper, *Cultural Adaptation and Syncretism: The Integration of Indigenous Festivals into Islamic Practice – A Case Study of Appavanibha Nercha is* attempts to explore the social and cultural dimensions of the *appavanibha nercha* festival. It also seeks to examine how a local festival represents the collective culture of a region.

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The term *nercha* is used in these local celebrations in a broad sense. The *appavanibha nercha* is one of the major local festivals celebrated within the long-standing cultural traditions of Malabar. This well-known *nercha*, centred in the Idiyangara region of Kozhikode, belongs to the category of *andu nerchas*. Such festivals memorialise leaders or saints—their personalities, *karamat* accepted by society and influence particular local areas and communities during their lifetimes.

Muslim communities in Kerala have been celebrating such festivals as part of life. Festivals such as *uroos*, *chandanakudam*, and *andu nercha*—conducting their different names and forms. Each festivals share a historical traditions and social integration. Beyond the traditions of historical narratives, these festivals preserve the continuity of local beliefs and ritual practices. Therefore, it is not possible to analyse these celebrations exclusively through the lens of religious construction; their cultural, social, and historical insights are equally crucial to fully appreciate to their significance.

In the early Muslim settlement areas of Malabar, the tombs of saints and martyrs (shahids) are commonly seen. Many of these shrines belong to *auliyas,* and some of them were connected with the early colonial resistance movements in Kerala. They fought against foreign powers and became the ideal leaders of particular regions. After their death, the places they lived have become major centres of conducting *nercha*. The personality of the leaders, either religious or through other activities, inspired the local people. The miracles they performed attracted people irrespective of cast and gender. The activities they undertook during their lifetimes are remembered as part of these celebrations. According to local belief, such saints possess *karamat*,[1] which has been preserved from generation to generation. These festivals were conducted to commemorate and honour their leaders. During the *nercha* season, the shrine and surroundings of the masjid are ornately decorated. The event transforms into an exciting regional anniversary. People from all castes, communities, and religions participated enthusiastically. Each celebration is a great cultural event of the particular area. *Appavanibha Nercha* is also considered in this context. The *Appavanibha Nercha* is celebrated in memory of Sheikh Shemsudheen Alaudhin Himsi, whose tomb is located in Idiyangara near Calicut.

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When we study the life history of the saints, most of them became even more popular after their lifetimes. People believe that they were closely connected with the god. So, people were visiting their *jarams*[2] for fulfilling their own needs. Later, the centres began to develop into significant pilgrimage places. People from all groups belonging to different caste backgrounds visit these sites to make offerings with deep faith and devotion. As a result, the *jarams* have occupied an important socio-religious role since early times[3]. In some cases, they have even contributed more to the cultural integration of diverse religious communities than the saints did during their own lives.

Muslims in Kerala have traditionally maintained a culturally distinct identity. But due to regional differences, especially local cultural practices have influenced their own daily life. The elements of local cultural integration can be seen within Muslim communities as well. Naturally, the local festivals itself reflects these confined beliefs and traditions. During the month of *Rabi-ul-Awwal*, the recitation of *mouluds* is very common among the Muslim community in Kerala*. Maulud* text, known as *Mauluth kitab*, describes the life history of the Prophet. It also discusses the activities of great saints. The *mouluds* readings conducted on the Prophet Muhammad's birthday are believed to bring blessings to one's family through the Prophet's grace. During those days, private readings of the Quran and other religious texts within households are also common.

During the month of *Rabi-ul-Awwal* most of the Muslims' houses practised the devotional chants known as *mala*.[4] These *malas* have long been a distinctive feature of the cultural identity of the Mappila community of Malabar. Such *maalas* commemorate the achievements of Muslim saints or heroic events from the community's history. The most popular among them is the *Muhiyuddin maala*. These chants are performed to praise religious leaders who are regarded with divine reverence in particular regions. During the time of *nerchas*, such *maala* are sung to venerate heroic leaders, and people strongly believe that blessings will be conferred upon them through these devotional prayers.

In Malabar, each regional festival shows unique characteristics of the specific locality in which it is celebrated. At the same time, some of the common features have been

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seen in these different festivals. These local variations go beyond mere religious beliefs, representing the cultural expressions and indigenous traditions of the particular region. The integration of local beliefs, practices, and cultural elements highlights the significance of each festival. *Nerchas* and other similar celebrations must be studied within this broader context. They represent not only devotional elements but also the social and cultural fabric of the Muslim communities in Kerala.

Appavanibha Nercha is one of the most prominent local festivals in northern Kerala. It is conducted in memory of Sheikh Shamsudheen Alauddin Himsi at the Idiyangara Mosque, where his tomb is located. He was born in 1511 (Hijra 930) in Idiyangara near Kozhikode, widely known as Sheikh Mamukoya Tangal. Raised in Calicut, he emerged as a respected spiritual leader and guide for the Muslim community of the region[5]. Deeply inclined toward spiritual pursuits, he undertook several journeys in search of spiritual enrichment. His profound knowledge of spiritual matters was rooted in his extensive understanding of religious scriptures.

The Sheikh is believed to have possessed mystical powers and exceptional abilities. He devoted more of his life to meditation and the recitation of the Quran. At the age of twenty, he travelled to Achi, an island near Indonesia, where he had the opportunity to interact with renowned Sufi saints. During that time, he was transformed into a great saint. There is a legend behind this *nercha*. People believe the story that some Mappilas dreamt that one of the graves near the seashore was in danger of being washed away. The saint's body needed to be moved to a safer place. When the grave was opened, they found the body unusually fresh, showing no signs of decomposition[6]. The remains were respectfully re-interred at another site. Later, the local people of this area built a mosque. This mosque came to be known as *Shaykhinte Palli*, and the people nearby mosques of Calicut began celebrating the 15th of Rajab each year as the saint's death anniversary[7].

The festival, called *Appavanibham*, is marked by every Mappila household preparing rice cakes, which are sent to the mosque and distributed among the thousands of beggars who gather for the occasion. People believe that Shaykh Mammukoya was a great patriot who even revolted against the French aristocracy. So he had not only a religious background but also a political one. Thousands of people from various parts

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of Malabar take part in the *Appavanibha nercha*, a festival renowned for promoting communal harmony. Participants offer *appams* at the saint's tomb to fulfil their vows, believing that his blessings can heal injuries and physical deformities[8]. Because of this belief, devotees present *appams* shaped like different body parts—*kannappam*, *kalappam*, *mookappam*, *kayyappam*, *cheviyappam*, and others. These offerings are brought from the 10th to the 20th of Rajab, the Arab month[9].

Although the *nercha* is formally observed on every year at the month of Rajab. The devotees visit the shrine and make offerings throughout the year. Devotees visit the grave along with *appams*, coconuts, arecanuts, salt, goats, and fowls, which are also offered as votive gifts. Devotees believe that blessing to be touched for a few seconds by the Imam with the Quran-inscribed cloth covering the *Makbara*[10]. At the inception of the *appavanibha nercha*, the festival was celebrated with more attractions. The *nercha varavu* (procession) was colourful and elaborate, moving through the streets of *puthiya nirath* (a locality in Idiyangara). Decorated elephants and grand processions were the most attractive features of the festival. Gas lamps emitted blue light, reminiscent of lighthouses along the seashore. The musicians and drummers further enriched the festivities, creating a lively and devotional atmosphere. The arrival of baskets of bread, known as *appakotta*, was considered the main highlight of the procession. Smaller processions accompanied the main *varavu*, featuring traditional prayers such as *Ratheeb*[11] and *kuthu Rathib*, as well as displays of fire, where participants playfully struck each other with the flames. The ritual performance is a very exceptional one and more significant[12].

In the olden days, the local festival was a collective gathering of the people of Calicut. Now the festival's nature has taken on a more religious orientation. The local people were irrespective of their caste, actively participated and were involved as a part of the festival. They were contributing *Appakotta*, bringing baskets of vegetables and rice to offer to the saint. The processions were enriched with traditional art forms, including *Duffmuttu, Kolkali*, and *Kalari Payattu* demonstrations, alongside the majestic elephants[13]. This comprehensive and culturally rich carnival showed the syncretic spirit of the Malabar society. The festival shows that religious devotion, local

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traditions, and communal harmony coexist, making the *appavanibha nercha* a truly unique carnival in the region.

One of the distinctive features of this *jaram* is the Quran recitation. The devotees read and complete the entire Quran recitation within a single night during the *nercha* days. During the festive time, food is also distributed to the devotees[14]. In earlier years, thousands of people gathered for the festivities. The procession featured ten to fifteen elephants along with various forms of entertainment. Nowadays, both the number of participants and the procession have declined significantly. The new committee of *makbara* introduced restrictions, and these grand processions have almost completely ceased.

With the start of the *nercha* celebrations, small temporary sheds are set up on both sides of the road from Calicut town to the beach. These sheds are filled with *appams* and other local market items. The festival has not only a religious character but also a fair festival. The people from coming from different areas. As the crowds grew unmanageable over the years, a separate day was assigned fully for female devotees. During the *nercha* days, members of nearby families gather in their ancestral homes, or *taravads*, making the occasion a time for their family reunions. The families offered silk cloth for cover the *jaram* as part of their ritua*ls*. On the last day of the *Appavanibha nercha*, free food and *appams* are distributed to the devotees.

The local community believe that many supernatural powers are attributed to the *aulia*. People are thought to prevent impending calamities or dangers and to cure various diseases through his *karamat*. The followers believe that hymns composed in their honour, when chanted, can protect against cholera and smallpox. Their names are raised in times of difficulty, and vows are made to them in the hope of achieving one's desires in life[15].

During the present era, the mode of festival celebrations has changed significantly. In earlier times, indigenous cultural elements were clearly visible in these celebrations. The cultural and religious aspects reflected the unique local traditions. During those days, people did not consider these festivals as symbols of any particular religion. Participation in festivals was open to all, irrespective of caste. The personality of the Sheikh was regarded as a divine representative of the entire

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locality. This inclusive approach profoundly influenced the socio-cultural aspects of this region.

Islamic philosophy and religion have spread throughout Kerala, surpassing regional and material differences. The Muslims of Kerala primarily belong to various marginalized communities. A large portion of indigenous populations are a part of the Islamic community. They have developed their own indigenous ways of belief and life. When we look into the multicultural practices of *nerchas*, this socio-cultural aspect must be taken into account. The *appavanibha nercha* has played a significant role in fostering unity among the local community in Malabar. People from diverse castes and creeds actively participate in the celebrations. The local culture reflects its inclusive and integrative character.

Even in the present day, the Nandi Darussalam Committee assumed direct responsibility for organizing the *Appavanibha Nercha.* After that, the existing ritual practices and customary features associated with the *nercha* suffered significant transformation[16]. Under the committee's management, the celebrations were restructured to align more closely with Islamic norms and frameworks. This resulted in notable changes to the nature and conduct of the festivities[17]. The decorated fireworks and elephant procession are completely avoided. The ritual performance of *Vettum Kuthum Ratheeb*, which formed an integral part of the *nerc*in in earlier periods. Now, even tody also continues to remain a prominent attraction of the festival. This highly specialized and symbolic ritual practice were conducted by a distinct group of individuals. They have received specific training for its performance. Their expertise ensures the continuity and structured execution of the ritual within the broader framework of the *nercha* celebrations[18].

Before the intervention of the Nandi Darussalam Committee, the overall management and supervision of the *nercha* were conferred on the *muthavalli* of Idayankara *jaram*. Kathil Koya Mulla was the manager and leader of these festivals. For an extended period, he was solely responsible for organizing and overseeing all rituals and ceremonial aspects connected with the *nercha*[19]. However, due to circumstances that eventually changed the role as Muthavalli. The Nandi Darussalam Committee

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assumed control not only of the *nercha* but also of the administrative and functional responsibilities of the mosque and the *maqbara* (shrine)[20].

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in efforts aimed at constructing and reinforcing a distinct Islamic identity. These developments have contributed significantly to emerging ideological shifts. Naturally, these in turn have reshaped the forms and practices of local festivals. Changing attitudes towards *nercha*—historically celebrated as community festivals that transcended rigid the frame work of caste and religion. The debatable concept was prominent among the Muslim community about whether this kind of festivals Islamic or un- Islamic. The discussions were very much affected the local festivals to a great extent. Once believed that *nerchas* were regarded as integral expressions of local culture and shared social engagement. Now the *nerchas* are increasingly subjected to scrutiny through more rigid doctrinal frameworks. In this process, they are often re-evaluated and, at times, dismissed as being insufficiently aligned with Islamic principles. Such reinterpretations have led to a noticeable decline in the communal ethos and inclusive atmosphere that once characterised these celebrations.

In other parts of Kerala, also faced similar situations in the approach of conducting *nerchas*. The *appavanibha nercha* has also faced considerable opposition from groups. The reformist group advocates for a more standardized and ideologically "purified" religious identity. As a result, the collective participation and cultural vibrancy have been diminished. *Nerchas*, considered as collective gatherings. They inherently incorporate the distinctive local culture. Nowadays, the reality is that the historical significance of this kind of festival has increased. As celebrations shaping the public consciousness have grown in modern times. Therefore, such celebrations should not be confined strictly within a religious framework. They are vital in sustaining the collective identity of Kerala's shared festivities.

Endnotes

1. *Karamat* literally means "acts of grace" or "miraculous gifts." is an Arabic term that refers to miracles or supernatural abilities attributed to awliya (saints or spiritually elevated individuals) in Islamic tradition

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2. *Jarams* (also spelled *dargahs*, *maqams*, or *makams* in other regions) refer to the shrines or tombs of revered saints, scholars, or martyrs in the Islamic tradition, especially within South Asian and Kerala Muslim culture.
3. Personal interview with Ahammad,(63), Zakaf House, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025
4. Mala refers to a devotional poem or hymn, usually written in Arabic-Malayalam, praising a saint, warrior, or religious figure.
5. Personal interview with Iliyas,(56), Palliveed,Idiyangara, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025
6. *Ibid*.
7. P.T Abdul Rahiman, *Appavanibha Nercha Ganangal,* p.28
8. Shakeela A Rahman, *Customs and Practices of Muslims of Malabar with Special Reference to Festivals*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Calicut, 2007
9. Personal interview with Iliyas,(56), Palliveed, Idiyangara, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025
10. [10] Personal interview with Musthafa,(45), Assistant Imam, Idiyangara, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025
11. *Ratheeb* is one of the distinctive traditional prayers performed in Muslim homes and mosques. These prayers, which praise the Prophet Muhammad, are conducted on special occasions. Usually, the *ustads* (religious teachers) in the mosque lead the *Ratheeb*
12. Personal interview with Iliyas,(56), Palliveed,Idiyangara, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025
13. *Ibid*.
14. Personal interview with Abdul Gafar Darimi,(50), Imam,Idiyangara, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025
15. Personal interview with Iliyas,(56), Palliveed,Idiyangara, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025
16. Personal interview with Abdul Gafar Darimi,(50), Imam,Idiyangara, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025
17. *Ibid*.
18. Personal interview with Iliyas,(56), Palliveed,Idiyangara, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025
19. Personal interview with Musthafa,(45), Assistant Imam, Idiyangara, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025
20. Personal interview with Abdul Gafar Darimi,(50), Imam,Idiyangara, Kozhikode, on 22-04-2025

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