Research Article

Diagnosing 'Ignorance': Conversion, Race, and Reform among Muslims in Madras and Ceylon

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This article analyses the impact of colonial racialisation on Muslim reform movements in the Madras Presidency and Ceylon. It argues that that the internal racialisation of Muslims into 'racially foreign' 'born Muslims' and 'racially Indian' converts had direct consequences on the manner in which Muslim projects of religious reform in the colonial period were formulated. In the Madras Presidency, the Malayalam-speaking Mappilas and the Tamil-speaking Labbais were identified as communities of 'converts' with a thin 'mixed-race' elite, and consequently addressed by reform movements primarily as Muslim Malayalis and Tamils, who not only needed to purge their Islam of religious practices that were conceived of as remnants of their 'Hindu' identities prior to conversion, but also to remove 'secular' Arabic elements, such as the use of the Arabic script to write Malayalam and Tamil, in order to become properly 'modern' members of their respective ethno-linguistic groups. In Ceylon, in contrast, the claims to Arab-descent by local Tamil-speaking Muslims were recognised by the colonial state. Consequently, the Ceylon Muslim Revival, despite emerging from a similar social position as reform-movements in Madras, and similarly aiming at the upliftment of Muslims in terms of English-style education and the introduction of 'modernity', was more concerned with a quasi-secular Arabisation of its constituency rather than with religious purification.

Islam; race; reform; Madras; Ceylon

Introduction[1]

That 'race' and conversion played an important role in the social history of Christianity in British India means to state the obvious. As in many other colonial contexts, conversion to Christianity by the colonised erased one of the primary distinctions through which the alleged 'superiority' of the colonisers was argued, and it required the production of new distinctions and boundaries that would provide justification for the continued inequality between coloniser and colonised. As the religion of the colonisers, Christianity became embroiled in the murky history of colonial exploitation and racial discrimination, even as it provided converts with a language to challenge colonial inequity. But how far was 'race' a significant category for British India's Muslims, as, ostensibly, Muslims were all part of the Indian population subject to colonial power? And is it possible to link this category to processes of 'conversion', even as scholars have expressed serious doubts about the usefulness of this term in reference to processes of Islamisation in southern Asia (Eaton 1993: 268-269)? When scholarship has considered 'race' and processes of 'racialisation' among India's Muslims, the perspective has usually been a totalizing one, in the sense that it relates Islam and Muslims as a whole to questions of 'race'. An important line of argument has sketched how Muslims were progressively 'minoritised' and 'racialised' by

colonial and post-colonial regimes in India. That is, Muslims have been identified as a group with singular traits and denied power and access on the basis of that identification, while the traits that they have been invested with are seen as immutable, 'race'-like (cf. Morgenstein Fuerst 2022). Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst has identified the Indian Rebellion of 1857 as a watershed moment for the minoritisation and racialisation of Muslims in India through British colonial discourses, but British narratives were soon adopted into Hindu contexts, and they continue to resonate in the treatment of Muslims in contemporary India (Baber 2004, Morgenstein Fuerst 2022). The 'racialisation' of Muslims was, moreover, not a process limited to British India, but tied to a general tendency to racialise Islam and Muslims in 19th-century European discourses, especially in the notion of a 'Muslim World' centred on the Middle East and perpetually opposed to 'the West', and the denial of universality to Islam as an 'Arab religion' (cf. Aydin 2017, Masuzawa 2005: 179-206). But as scholars have noticed, 'racialisation' was not only operative with regard to Muslims as a group, it also divided Muslims along racial lines into those who claimed origins in the Middle East and Central Asia, who supposedly formed the 'nobles' (*ashraf*) of Indian Muslim society, and the 'coarse' (*ajlaf*) descendants of Indian converts. The racialisation of Muslims produced a proclivity to distinguish between 'real' Muslims and 'converts'. In the colonial imagination, 'real' Muslims claimed to hail from the Muslim heartlands and embodied 'correct' Islam as a result of their 'racial' heritage, even if they did not always follow it. Yet most Muslims in Asia and Africa did not originate in the Middle East. They were imagined as the descendants of those hapless 'natives' who had converted to Islam, usually under the coercion of those who had come as conquerors from the Muslim 'heartlands'. This narrative obviously served European colonialists in constructing their own rule as parallel to that of earlier Muslim rulers, but simultaneously as more benevolent towards local populations. It also affirmed the universal pretensions of Christianity as a religion appealing to all human beings, in contrast to Islam, which allegedly had to be forced on non-Arabs, who would otherwise not have adopted the 'national religion' of another people. But this racialisation also had benefits for those Muslims who could convince the colonial power that as descendants of foreign migrants, they embodied the 'real' Muslim of the Middle East. Not only were they recognised as authorities in all matters concerning Islam, they were also able to claim political representation for the whole Muslim community.

In this article, I will argue that the internal racialisation of Muslims into 'racially foreign' 'born Muslims' and 'racially Indian' converts had direct consequences on the manner in which Muslim projects of religious reform in the colonial period were formulated. This is most salient, I argue, in precisely those cases where the racial logic of classifying Indian Muslim populations faced its greatest challenges, namely among Muslims along India's seaboard. Coastal Muslim communities had the clearest and, in many cases, ongoing relationships with the Muslim 'heartland' on the Arabian Peninsula. Yet as they did not belong to the erstwhile Mughal nobility that claimed the status of *ashraf* in the rest of India, their claims to descent from Arabs met doubt and outright rejection. In the first part of the article, I briefly outline how British ethnographers navigated the tensions between the claims of the Ashraf and of coastal Muslim elites by placing the latter outside the *ashraf-ajlaf* binary in separate categories of 'mixed-race' Muslims defined by language. In the second section, I discuss how 'mixed-race' and 'convert' Muslim populations were invested with notions of 'ignorance' of Islam, in contrast to the authority of 'pure' Muslims, who were identified as the sole authority on religious matters. This led to strategies of reform which stressed the 'ignorance' of 'convert' populations, who were to be addressed by increasing Muslim discourse in their respective mother-tongues. In particular, I focus on two such Muslim groups in the Madras presidency, namely the Malayalam-speaking Mappilas and the Tamil-speaking Labbais. In the final section, I contrast this case with neighbouring Ceylon, where the majority Ceylon Moors differed only marginally from the Labbais of Madras. But in contrast to India, where the Labbais' claims to Arab descent met with scepticism and scorn from both the British and North-Indian Ashrafs, there were no

competitors to the Ceylon Moors' claim of being of Arab descent. Consequently, projects of reform in Ceylon were aimed not at educating the convert Muslim, as they were in Madras, but at reviving the 'Arab-ness' of local Muslims.

'Racialising' the Convert Muslim

The classification of Indian Muslims into *ashraf* and *ajlaf* has enjoyed a long-lived popularity in governmental, scholarly, and popular discourses in South Asia.[2] The basic bifurcation of South Asian Muslim societies into these two categories has been widely accepted as reflecting basic divisions on the ground, as has been the assumption that both categories can be further subdivided, even if the basis of that subdivision differs between both groups. The subdivisions of the *ashraf* category, often known as *baradari* or *biradari* (Persian 'brotherhood', 'relationship'), further specify a group's descent from the Prophet (*sayyid*), his tribe and companions (*shaykh*), a Central Asian (*mughal*), or Afghan (*pathan*) background. In contrast, the *ajlaf* category is commonly subdivided into occupational groups (*zat*) such as weavers (*julaha*) or butchers (*qasab*) in a manner that is reminiscent of Hindu occupational castes (*jati*). The racial underpinnings of divisions identified in South-Asian Muslim societies have long been perceived, as has the connection of these divisions with questions of conversion (e.g. Hardy 1979, Levesque 2023: 291-294, Sheikh 1989: 93-96, 114-118). At the same time, the genealogy of this division and the attendant terminologies has only received sporadic attention. On the one hand, it is clear that many divisions of South-Asian Muslim society that later found their way into colonial censuses and official discourse originated in pre-colonial times. This is as true for the *jati*-like occupational terminology through which distinctions among the Ajlaf were conceptualized, as well as for the Ashraf and their sub-divisions based on claimed descent from various West-Asian populations (see Pernau 2013: 60-66). On the other hand, it is also clear that these divisions and distinctions were for a long time shifting and employed only in specific societal and geographic contexts. While the bifurcation of South-Asian Muslim society into Ashraf and Ajlaf, together with the attendant subdivisions, and the racialised idea of 'original Muslims' versus 'converts' that arises from these divisions are common knowledge, the genealogy and history of this classification are murky and unclear. The burgeoning scholarship on the history of caste and the impact of colonial classificatory systems on the practices of caste have largely stayed clear of considering the divisions by which Muslim society in South Asia came to be understood and classified (cf. Bayly 1999, Dirks 2001, Guha 2013). In adopting the *ashraf-ajlaf* distinction, the colonial knowledge economy transformed the manner in which this distinction was understood and operated in British India. First, by linking status in Muslim society exclusively with claims to foreign descent, it made 'foreignness' the *sine qua non* of being a proper Muslim. Second, it formed an absolute distinction – individuals were either of foreign descent, and thereby Ashraf, or not, and thereby Ajlaf, with no middle ground.[3] Third, it thereby transformed individual claims to status into factual communities. It is clear from pre-colonial sources that categories such as *sayyid* or *pathan* were predominantly claims to status, rather than constituting historical fact (Pernau 2013: 62). But in the British reformulation, these categories were seen as indexing factually existing communities, whose validity as an indicator of foreign descent was unconnected to the lack of validity of any specific individual claim. Fourth, this move internally racialised South Asian Muslim society into a small elite of racially distinct 'foreigners' and a majority of those who were racially indistinguishable from their Hindu neighbours, indexing their 'convert' status, even if that conversion lay beyond the memory of the individual concerned. Fifth, it conflated religious knowledge with 'race', in so far as elite Muslims of 'foreign descent' were perceived as lacking

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[2] Other terms used for socially disadvantaged Muslim groups in contrast to *ashraf* are *arzal* ('the despised') and *atraf* ('the margins').
[3] Cf. Gottschalk 2013: 197-198, regarding the importance of exclusive taxa to the colonial census.

a history of conversion from 'ignorant' non-Muslim to knowledgeable Muslim. And finally, sixth, the system was totalising (cf. Gottschalk 2013: 197) in that it was assumed to be valid throughout British India – whoever did not belong to the Ashraf, with their specific cultural roots in the elites of the late Mughal Empire, was simply assumed to occupy the category of *ajlaf*.

The link between race and religious knowledge in this system was reinforced by the overlap between racial 'Indianness' and the idea of conversion. In the 19th century, 'race' and 'religion' were only slowly developing into the exclusive categories that they were later to become. Yet when British observers first integrated the distinction of 'foreign-descent' and 'local-convert' into their perception of Indian Muslims around 1800, they were still used to understanding these categories through a different taxonomy. This earlier European taxonomy divided the nations of the world into 'Jews', 'Christians', 'Mussulmans', and the rest, usually dubbed 'Heathens' or 'Gentiles' (Masuzawa 2005: 46-50). The *ashraf-ajlaf* distinction helped explain the anomaly that predominantly 'gentile' India apparently had a large population of Muslims. These could now be explained as a small elite of foreign 'real Mussulmans' and a large mass of superficially Islamised 'Gentiles'. In other words, racialisation did not simply overlap with an idea of conversion, however far in the past, but the degree of religious knowledge was itself racialised. Being the descendants of Gentile converts, the masses of Indian Muslims could not be expected to be knowledgeable about Islam. Yet despite the pervasiveness of the distinction and the totalising imperatives of colonial knowledge production, the British discovered very soon that this distinction was not recognised in quite the same manner all across their Indian territories. In certain contexts, the logic underlying the distinction could actually prove to upset the distinction itself. This became clear once the gaze was turned from the Muslim communities of the Gangetic plains to those on India's coasts in the Bombay and Madras Presidencies. Here, the colonial state encountered Muslims who claimed descent from transoceanic Arab traders. Nor could this claim be easily dismissed: the presence of Arabs throughout peninsular India was too obvious to be overlooked (see e.g. Dale 1997). But this produced a problem: if coastal Muslims, even only a part of them, were descendants of Arabs, they should be counted among the Ashraf. Yet the erstwhile Mughal nobility did not perceive these groups as being on par with them, even those that could validly argue to be of Arab descent.

Coastal Muslim populations thus came to inhabit an ambiguous space outside the primary distinction into Ashraf and Ajlaf. Throughout the 19th century, coastal Muslims were treated by the colonial state as single communities defined not by status or descent, but by language, such as Mappilla (Malayalam), Navayat (Konkani), and Labbai (Tamil). Their historical interactions with and partial descent from Arabs was acknowledged, but not in the absolute manner in which all North-Indian Ashrafs were presented as descendants of foreigners. Rather, Muslims in the southern coastal belt were identified as being of a 'mixed' racial background, a notion that had been formulated as early as 1810 by Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) (1816: 127). The notion of 'mixed race' actually reveals how much colonial conceptualizations of Muslim social divisions differed from pre-colonial concepts. In pre-colonial terms, Arab-ness was a matter of patriliny: anyone descended through the male line from an Arab could lay claim to that descent, no matter how many intermarriages with non-Arab women occurred in the intervening generations (cf. Ho 2006: 144-151). The colonial concept of 'race', however, operated with a notion of purity in which ideally all ancestors of an individual belonged to a particular 'race' to allow for inclusion in a racialised category. To be of 'mixed' ancestry meant that a person was not sufficiently 'pure' and exhibited the traits of a 'race' lower in the hierarchy of human groups. The idea that certain Muslim communities were of 'mixed' race, descendants of Arab fathers and Indian mothers, allowed colonial observers to simultaneously affirm and undermine the claims made by Muslim individuals about the nobility of their ancestry. While colonial observers conceded to the possibility that coastal Muslims in Madras indeed had some Arab ancestors, they simultaneously highlighted that these Muslims failed to meet the

standards of 'racial purity'. This allowed the maintenance of a hierarchy between coastal Muslims and the Ashraf. While the former were the mixed offspring of immigrant Muslims and Indian women, the latter were "purebred Mussalmans" (Khan 1910: 7, cf. Bjerrum 1920: 172-173), no matter to what degree immigrants and Indians had intermarried in North India.

As with North-Indian Muslims, British observers were quick to 'communitise' and racialise claims to Arab descent made by coastal Muslims in Madras. Arab descent was not perceived as a claim to status made by individuals, but as a fact defining whole 'communities', allegedly visible in the 'racial' features of those communities. This also made it possible for observers to evaluate the claim to Arab descent by judging how far a community literally embodied the physiognomic features associated with Arabs. Mark Wilks (1759-1831), who served as Resident at the Wodeyar court in Mysore between 1803-1808, noted that both the Navayats of the western coast and the Labbais of the eastern coast claimed descent from Arabs. But whereas the fact that the Navayats' "complexions approach the European freshness" served as proof that the Navayats had "preserved the purity of their original blood by systematically avoiding intermarriage with the Indians, and even with the highest Mohammedan families", the Labbais could make no such claim. Instead, while they "pretend to one common origin with the Nevayets, and attribute their black complexion to intermarriage with the natives", Wilks was more inclined to follow the Navayats' claim that the racial characteristics of the Labbais were due to them being the descendants of the Navayats' Abyssinian slaves: "there is certainly, in the physiognomy of this very numerous class, and in their stature and form, a strong resemblance to the natives of Abyssinia" (Wilks 1810: Vol. 1, 242 note*). This rather ridiculous story about Tamil Muslims' African origins continued to be repeated by British observers throughout the 19th century (e.g. Cox 1895: 206-207). That British ideas about Muslims became increasingly filtered through the concept of race can also be traced in visual culture. While company paintings of Labbai traders produced in Thanjavur before 1800 depict them with a fairly light skin tone,[4] another specimen painted in Madurai in the 1830s shows especially the male figure with a distinctly darker complexion (image 5. 1). However, ultimately the notion of large 'mixed-race' communities proved unsatisfactory to the official discourse on Muslim difference in British India. Once the danger that Arab-descended coastal Muslims might upend the hierarchical precedence given to the Ashraf among colonial elites was averted by demoting coastal Muslims to the 'mixed' category, public discourse could reconceptualize coastal Muslim societies from within by applying the logic of the *ashraf-ajlaf* divide prevalent among northern Muslims. During the three decades following the production of the first *District Manuals of the Madras Presidency* in the late 1870s, colonial ethnography increasingly came to sub-divide coastal Muslim communities into those who could claim Arab descent, however mixed, as distinct from purely convert communities. The tendency was most developed in the case of Tamil-speaking Muslims, where the new terminology was adopted as census categories in the early-20th century. Similar debates also concerned the Malayalam-speaking Mappillas (e.g. Khan 1910, Thurston 1909, cf. Tschacher 2014b). The only group that seems to have escaped this re-division into 'original' Muslims and 'converts' were the Navayats, which may be explained by the term itself referencing several distinct groups. While the origins of the Navayats in the Madras Presidency were located on the Canara coast, British colonial officials were most familiar with those Navayats who had been integrated into the Arcot aristocracy in the early 18th century and now formed a group very similar to local Urdu-speaking Ashrafs. As such, the claims of Arcot Navayats were the least threatening to the established *ashraf-ajlaf*

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[4] For copyright reasons, I am not able to reproduce the image here. It can be viewed on the website of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (Lubbee pedlars | Unknown | V&A Explore The Collections [https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O433677/lubbee-pedlars-painting-unknown/]), accessed 26.06.2024.

division, and therefore, there was less need to reinvent the community by splitting it into descendants of 'foreigners' and 'converts' (cf. D'Souza 1955: 23-34).

Image 4.1: "Lapidary (Mussilman)" and "Female"; painting in album *Seventy Two Specimen of Castes in India*, Madurai 1837. Source: Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Yale University. Nkp24 837p, New Haven, CT

The colonial categorization of Muslim communities in coastal Madras thus constitutes a history of making coastal Muslim communities conform to expectations about race, religion, and community that hinged on idealised distinctions between 'real Muslims' of 'pure foreign race' and the descendants of 'converts' who were racially 'Indian'. Thereby, not only were Muslim communities racialised, but ultimately, the religion of Islam itself. There was, however, one territory of coastal South Asia where the coastal Muslims' claim to Arab descent led not to a dismissal or qualification as in British India, but was accepted wholesale by the colonial administration. In British Ceylon, official discourse came to accept Muslim claims to Arab ancestry in contradistinction to the 'native' races, most importantly the Tamils. Already under Dutch rule during the 18th century, Europeans often perceived Ceylon Muslims or 'Moors' as foreigners, though not necessarily as 'Arabs' (Rogers 1995: 158). In Sinhala literature, Muslims generally figured as dangerous Others, though by the 18th century, they occupied a niche more akin to Tamils in the imagination of Sinhala poets (McKinley 2022). The British saw the Moors as potential allies in reviving trade in Ceylon, by attracting Muslim traders from Malabar, the Coromandel Coast, and beyond. It was in this context that they highlighted the presence of Arabs on the island before any adverse measures were taken against Muslims under Portuguese and Dutch colonialism (cf. Johnston 1827). In the course of the 19th century, the question of descent assumed new importance as the British began to introduce systems of communal representation first at the local, and then at the level of the colony. In contrast to British India, where 'religion' provided the most important category for the representation of

native society, in Ceylon, it was 'race', reinforced in part through the introduction of various sets of 'customary law' for different groups. It was these groups defined by customary law and their grounding in a theory of race that became the basis for the first attempts to introduce political representation on the local level in 1866. In practice, this meant that in order to make political claims to representation, it first became necessary to 'racialise' the community that sought to represent itself (see Nissan and Stirrat 1990: 26-30, McGilvray 1998: 449). The main catalyst for the formulation of claims to Arab ancestry among Ceylon Moors consisted of debates surrounding the extension of the Legislative Council. Already from its introduction in 1833, the Council included unofficial representatives of the Sinhalese, Tamils, and Burghers. Ceylon Moors were, in this scheme, represented by the Tamil representative. Yet by the 1880s, several groups demanded separate representation on the council, including the Moorish elites in Colombo and Kandy. This triggered a response from Ponnambalam Ramanathan (1851-1930), who at that time served as the unofficial 'Tamil' representative on the Legislative Council, and whose influence would have been curtailed if a separate representative for the Moors were to be admitted to the Council. In April 1888, Ramanathan presented a paper to the Royal Asiatic Society of Ceylon entitled "The Ethnology of the "Moors" of Ceylon". In this paper, Ramanathan argued that the Moors of Ceylon differed only in terms of religion from the Tamils, but not in terms of language, culture, and race – in other terms, that the Ceylon Moors were nothing but Muslim Tamils, and therefore did not require separate representation (Ramanathan 1888). In fact, it seems that Ramanathan had presented an earlier version of the paper to the Legislative Council in 1885 (McGilvray 1998: 449). His efforts went, however, in vain, for just a year later, the government gave in to the Moorish demands. Backed by official recognition from the government, Moorish elites began to publish critiques of Ramanathan's claims, most importantly a tract originally published by I.L.M. Abdul Azeez (1867-1915) in 1907. Central to these was the claim that the forefathers of the Ceylon Moors had been 'racially pure' Arabs, and not Muslims from the Tamil-speaking parts of India, as Ramanathan had claimed (Azeez 1957). What matters here are not the details of the debate, but simply that the Moorish viewpoint was accepted and enshrined in official colonial policy. To this day, the Sri Lankan government recognizes 'Sri Lankan Moors' as an ethnic group separate from Sinhalese and Tamils, and not coterminous with the religious category of 'Muslim' (see McGilvray 1998). What makes the case of Ceylon so startling is that the claims brought forward in favour of the Arab ancestry of the Moors are not really different from those of the Muslim communities in the Madras Presidency. In both cases, the basic narrative posits that the local community developed out of intermarriages between Arab traders and local women.[5] While Azeez himself could not avoid admitting that there had been intermarriage between Arab men and Tamil women, he maintained the patrilineal approach that only the male lineage mattered, which, though it was in line with pre-colonial conceptions, sat only uneasily with the argument that Ceylon Moors were racially different from Tamils (Ismail 1995: 74-77, cf. Azeez 1957: 11). While this detail was overlooked by the colonial government of Ceylon (as it indeed was in the case of the Ashraf in British India), it mattered in the case of coastal Muslim communities in British India, arguably due to one simple factor: in British India, coastal Muslim aspirations clashed with those of the Ashraf, who ranked higher in the colonial government's perception of hierarchy and importance. In contrast, there was no Muslim community in Ceylon who could have challenged and contradicted the Ceylon Moors' claim to Arab ancestry. It also explains why the claim was not subjected to the same physiognomic scrutiny as in India (again, as in the case of the Ashraf). While the most obvious result of the successful claiming of Arab ancestry by Ceylonese Muslims lies in the official recognition of the community as a separate ethnic group, this simple difference between the Madras Presidency and Ceylon had other consequences in the field of religious reform that may not be quite as obvious.

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[5] Cf., for example, the accounts contained in Azeez 1986 and Fanselow 1989: 265-270.

Racialising Muslim 'Ignorance' and 'Reforming' the Convert in the Madras Presidency

The official colonial perspective on Muslims thoroughly racialised the community as a whole, and also its assumed sub-divisions. But this racialisation was always accompanied by a plethora of other discourses of hierarchisation, which were held together and assimilated through the frame of racialisation. That the Ashraf were racially 'pure' Muslims occupying the top of the social hierarchy also made their culture – comportment, dress, food, language – superior to that of other Muslims. But most importantly, being the descendants of 'born Muslims' rather than 'local converts', Ashraf knowledge of Islam was considered to be better and more reliable than that of racially 'Indian' Muslims. The basic argument, in this case, does not emerge from 'race' per se, but from the implication that being 'racially' Indian meant that non-Ashraf Muslims descended from 'converts'. 'Conversion' implied prior ignorance: a convert was someone who had had to be shown knowledge about the truth that they did not possess earlier. In British India, this was compounded by the suspicion of conviction that converts to Christianity were under. As Gauri Viswanathan argued, in India, conversion was not simply a matter of religious conviction, but even more of legislative and judicial consequences. "Because of the patently material dimensions of religious change, it is not surprising that the official British position on conversion should so strongly stress its political rather than religious aspects…", leading in effect to "a devaluation of the status of belief and religious conversion itself" (Viswanathan 1998: 82). Further, given the material dimensions, the sincerity of converts was easily doubted (see e.g. Dandekar 2019: 15, Webster 2007: 63). The devaluation of conviction in favour of material motives for conversion was even more pronounced in the case of Islam. As Europeans denied Islam any value as a universal religion (cf. Masuzawa 2005: 179-206), conviction in the message of Islam itself emerged as a form of ignorance. However, it was easier to account for conversion to Islam by assuming that this conversion had been motivated not by conviction, but by material benefits, like avoiding violence, gaining patronage, or escaping from the indignities of caste hierarchies. It is therefore unsurprising that all early theories of Islamisation in India revolved around such material incentives (Eaton 1993: 113-119, Hardy 1979). The only Indian Muslims not tainted by the ignorance of conversion were those who allegedly never converted, namely the Ashraf.

Unsurprisingly, it was the Ashraf and the Ashraf-ised Arcot Navayats who formed the main source of information about Islam in the Madras Presidency (Vatuk 1999, 2009). The presence of the Prince of Arcot and his court in Madras city ensured a steady contact between British Officials and Arcot aristocracy, most of whom were either recent migrants from North India or Arcot Navayats. This cemented the conviction that 'correct' knowledge of Islam was limited to this tiny segment of 'pure' Muslims. In contrast, other Muslim communities of the Madras Presidency, especially the coastal ones, soon acquired the reputation of being 'ignorant' problem-populations. This is most visible in Malabar, where a series of peasant disturbances among Muslim agricultural labourers convinced the British that Malayalam-speaking Muslims or 'Mappillas' were particularly 'fanatic'. The diagnosis of 'fanaticism' marked Mappillas as being beyond the pale of reason and exploitable by unscrupulous 'priests'. As converts from the lower castes of Hinduism, they were perceived as being particularly far removed from any 'rational' knowledge that would have permitted them to follow British law and order (Ansari 2016: 73-99). Even observers who were willing to concede that exploitation and economic hardships played a role in the 'Mappilla outbreaks' continued to emphasise the links between 'ignorance' and the 'mixed race' or 'native' ancestry of the Mappillas. William Logan (1841-1914), the Collector of Malabar between 1875-1887, emphasised that the 'pure Arabs' settled on the coast "despise" the learning imparted by Mappilla centres of learning such as Ponnani, which were explicitly depicted as being operated by people of 'mixed' ancestry. Logan's comments on the 'noble' qualities of the 'pure Arab' settlers in Malabar, who "in their finer

feelings… approach nearer to the standard of English gentlemen than any other class of persons in Malabar" (Logan 1887: Vol. 1, 108), are particularly surprising given the hostility between the British colonial government and the arguably most important Arab individual in 19th-century Malabar, Sayyid Fadl (1824-1900), who was ultimately exiled in 1852 for his alleged influence in Muslim insurrections (see Dale 1980: 154-158, Jacob 2019). This demonstrates that some British observers were willing to allow the logic of race to shape their appreciation even when it came to individuals officially deemed 'dangerous'. The British came as close as was possible for them to accept the superior status of Arab Sayyids, provided they abstained from exerting any form of 'sovereignty' (cf. Jacob 2019: 43-48). Elsewhere, Logan explicitly depicted the Mappillas as a "mixed race" (Logan 1887: Vol. 1, 196), though one in which the Indian element grew larger by the day due to conversion of low-caste Hindus. Their religious knowledge was presented as deriving chiefly "from Malayáḷam tracts", by which the Mappillas gained an "accurate description of the outward forms of their religion, in the observance of which they are very strict", but apparently not of the more inward aspects of religious life (Logan 1887: Vol. 1, 198). Some of the prejudices regarding the "intellectual poverty" of Mappilla Islam have persisted well into post-independence times (e.g. Dale 1980: 260).

The Tamil-speaking Labbais of the eastern coastal regions, in contrast, had no such history of causing disturbance, but they were nevertheless eyed with suspicion by the British. While their enterprise and industriousness were praised by some observers (e.g. Maclean 1893: Vol. 3, 437), they had long developed a reputation for being competitors of British traders who were unwilling to play by British rules, i.e. to British benefit. Already in the late 17th century, trader Thomas Bowrey (1659-1713) cast aspersions on the religious commitment of Tamil-speaking Muslims, calling them "a Subtle and Roguish people of the Mahometan Sect, but not very great Observers of many of his laws" (1905: 257), while Bowrey's editor, Richard Carnac Temple (1850-1931), added that he found them "a hard-working but turbulent people in Rangoon" (Bowrey 1905: 256 n. 1). By and large, the colonial government's perspective seems to have failed to recognise the Labbais as anything but a population to be administered. Knowledge of Islam, on the other hand, was sourced from the Ashraf, who were known to "look down" on their Tamil-speaking coreligionists (Maclean 1893: Vol. 3, 437). Other Europeans, such as missionaries, held similar opinions. The activities aimed at Muslims by the South India Mission of the Church Mission Society (CMS), for example, were wholly focused on the Urdu-speaking Ashraf elites of Madras city through the operation of the General Harris School. When the plans to open a school among Muslims became known among local missionaries in 1854, one of the veteran missionaries in the region, Rev. Ludwig Bernhard Schmid (1788-1857), enjoined the CMS to despatch the mission "to the numerous places on the Coast and in the Interior…where so many industrious and wealthy Mahomedans reside", rather than to those "living upon the bounties and pensions of a Mahomedan Prince" in Madras. Moreover, he emphasized that the missionary should know some Tamil beside Hindustani (Schmid 23.09.1854: 4). Yet the Harris School and the attached missionaries focused exclusively on 'Hindustani'. Some were obviously aware of the criticism voiced by Schmid. For example, Rev. Malcolm G. Goldsmith, who joined the Harris School in 1874 as one of the missionaries of the CMS Madras Mohammedan Mission, conceded that the Muslims of Tinnevelly and similar districts "know more of the Hindu languages than *their own*…but the *better educated* must always be better reached through books adapted to their sacred language…" (Goldsmith 21.11.1876: 2, emphasis mine). After a visit to Pulicat in 1880, Goldsmith again complained about the "ignorance and bigotry" of the Muslims of "the Labbay (Lubbay) class, whose language is Tamil", and "very few" of which knew Hindustani (Goldsmith 1881: 304). British discourse thus habitually came to link 'mixed race' and 'convert' Muslims with the 'vernacular' and 'ignorance', while 'knowledge' of Islam remained the preserve of Urdu/Hindustani and 'pure Mussalmans' of the Ashraf.

Given the widespread appeal of this discourse, not only within government circles, but also among missionaries and among many Ashraf Muslims as well,[6] it is unsurprising that these views ultimately came to be adopted in the discourse of local Muslims. Given the emphasis on the lack of 'knowledge' of those Muslims who were deemed as descended from converts, it is not surprising that the greatest impact of such racialised discourse is seen in precisely those discourses that aimed to ameliorate 'ignorance' among Muslims. The Madras Presidency appears as a late-comer in the Muslim reformist landscape of British India, something that, if anything, seems to underwrite the image of South India as an 'ignorant' backwater as far as Islam was concerned. Yet the genealogies of reformism among Muslims in the Madras Presidency were quite diverse. Along the western coast, and especially among the Mappillas, a strong intellectual current connected local reformism to reform movements in the Arab world. In the colonial period, the prime influence came from the Egyptian modernist Salafism of reformers such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935). After independence, 'Wahhabi'-influenced reform projects in the Gulf states have had greater traction (Abraham 2014: 35-39, Miller 2015: 94-100, Osella and Osella 2013). In the Tamil country, the impact of northern Indian thought, such as that connected with Deoband or the Aligarh movement, but also the Ahmadiyya, and in recent years the Tablighi Jama'at and the Jama'at-e-Islami, has been stronger. However, while doctrinal debates and controversies draw on different intellectual genealogies, they nevertheless arise in response to similar contexts and discourses, which are important for analysis (cf. Osella and Osella 2013: 141-142). Despite the diversity in intellectual genealogy, there are some noteworthy parallels between the various colonial-period reform projects in the Madras Presidency which connect them to the racialised discourse on conversion and descent.

Central to Madras-Presidency reformism was an emphasis on the failure of the religious classes or *ulama* to educate local Muslims. Partly, this mirrored the Protestant critique of Catholicism, in which vernacular translations of the Bible supposedly broke the priestly monopoly on religious knowledge kept in Latin. But more importantly, the critique of the *ulama* signalled, from the perspective of the reformers, an identification with the 'common Muslim' of their respective communities against the social and religious elites, precisely those elites among the Mappillas and Labbais who claimed an Arabic background and who were classified by the British as being of 'mixed race'. In this context, it is noteworthy that the pioneers of Muslim religious reform in the Madras Presidency did not emerge from the mixed-race elites. In Kerala, both Makti Thangal (1847-1912) and Vakkom Maulavi (1873-1932) were (somewhat surprisingly) descended from Ashraf families who had recently entered Kerala as parts of local administration. Makti Thangal could further lay claim to Hadrami-Arab descent in his father's line, i.e. he combined the 'pure Arab' ancestry Logan had praised so much with a 'pure Mussalman' (in his case Central Asian) ancestry in his mother's line (Ashraf 2020: 6, Abraham 2014: 22). In contrast, the most prominent reformer on the Tamil side, P.M. Daud Shah (1885-1969), was born into a family of 'Ravuttars', one of the groups among Tamil-speaking Muslims that were declared to be purely of convert ancestry (see Vadlamudi 2018: 457, on the 'Ravuttar' category, see Khan 1910: 34-39). While these reform movements focused much of their criticism on popular practices that were shared with or resembled those of Hindus, and while such practices could easily be blamed on the insufficient Islamisation of converts, the prime blame for this situation was laid on the shoulders of those who could have corrected popular

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[6] Cf. e.g. Khan (1910: 47-59, esp. 52), where the impact of Hinduism on 'superstitions' among South Indian Muslims is directly correlated to the strength of 'Arab blood'. This was despite Khan being on the whole readier to accept and respect the presence of Arab ancestry among coastal-Muslim elites compared to British observers.

practice, but for various reasons of their own did not do so – the local mixed-race elites (cf. Abraham 2014: 81-87, Ashraf 2020, More 2004: 122-131, Osella and Osella 2013: 146-152).

The most significant element in the reaction against these elites and the 'mixing' by which they were defined is the reformers' discourse about language. All the early reform movements in the Madras Presidency laid a premium on the adoption of 'modern', English-style education by Muslims. Indeed, the anxiety to prove that Islam was, and had always been, 'modern', is what fundamentally connects the movements for reform among Muslims in Malabar, the Tamil country, and even Ceylon. While all the reformers under consideration here received a rather elite education and all of them had at least basic knowledge of English, an important part of their reform projects engaged with the instilling of Islamic knowledge through the medium of Malayalam and Tamil. Local Muslims, they argued, needed to be taught in the language they knew, which at least Makti Thangal explicitly referred to as their 'mother-tongue' (*matrubhasha*, see Ashraf 2020: 10). But what appears to be reasonable from a contemporary perspective is in fact far more complex, for neither the standard Malayalam advocated by Makti Thangal and Vakkom Maulavi nor the 'refined Tamil' (*centamil*) claimed by Daud Shah were spoken idioms for a majority of Muslims. In fact, these written standards were far removed from any spoken variety of Malayalam or Tamil. Neither were they traditionally written idioms with centuries of history to them. In the form that they were pushed by Muslim reformers, these languages were hardly a few decades old. They had been developed in response to the introduction of missionary discourse, European-style education, and a local print culture in the course of the second half of the 19th century by precisely those social groups that were closest to the colonial state: Brahmins, agrarian dominant castes like Nairs or Vellalars, and elite Christians (cf. Arunima 2006, Bate 2021, Ebeling 2010: 165-203, Kumar 2010). These 'modern' prose styles responded, as Bernard Bate has shown, to a distinctly Protestant 'ethics of textuality' that demanded texts to be universally understandable and public, open to the scrutiny of every speaker of a particular language. In this process, Protestant textualities enabled the creation of publics based on certain languages, and ultimately linguistic nationalism itself (Bate 2021: 38-41). By claiming their prose idioms as the only legitimate, 'universal' expression of the Tamil or Malayalam nation, native colonial elites could claim to be the sole inheritors of older, 'classical' literary projects, and demand uniformity from all the groups that could validly be claimed as part of the nation. Given that local Muslim groups had already been identified as the descendants of 'converts' within colonial discourse, it was therefore easy to demand that they be taught in the idiom of their 'mother-tongue', however little that idiom was actually their 'own'.

Yet it is not that Muslims had no written idioms of their own. Both in Tamil and Malayalam, texts with Islamic content had been created from around the turn of the 17th century, often with the involvement of religious scholars (Ilias and Hussain 2017: 71-159, Karassery 1995, Uwise 1990). Given the reformers' dismissal of the *ulama* and their support for the newly 'universalized' prose idioms of the colonial elites, it is unsurprising that this corpus of locally created Islamic texts came in for strong criticism. These texts challenged reformers in several ways. In terms of content, they often defended and supported ideas and practices that reformers decried. But more importantly, they failed to meet the reformers' ideas of how texts should convey knowledge. Most of the texts consisted of poetry and songs, which in the colonial context was either considered too opaque and frivolous (cf. Ebeling 2010: 165-171), or too demotic and connected to popular religious practices such as vows and saints' holidays (*nercca*, *kanturi*, or *'urs* cf. Ashraf 2020: 9, Osella and Osella 2013: 147-148). However, somewhat surprisingly, the use of the Arabic script to represent local languages became the prime enemy of local Muslim textual culture. These practices, retrospectively dubbed 'Arabi-Malayalam' and 'Arabu-Tamil' (Ashraf 2022, Ilias and Hussian 2017, Tschacher 2018), were even more surprising targets for reformers on both the coasts in that they, despite some superficial similarities, were rather different in terms of their application. While some elements,

such as certain letters and the tendency to generally write vowel-diacritics in all cases (cf. Tschacher 2018: 18), point to similar origins, there are substantial differences between Arabi-Malayalam and Arabu-Tamil. Most importantly, there is no indication that Muslims were using the Malayalam script at all in Kerala. In other words, nearly all Malayalam texts written by Muslims before the 20th century qualified as Arabi-Malayalam, making any critique of the practice more devastating for the fact that it denounced the whole of Muslim textual culture of Malabar as deviant. In contrast, both Arabic and Tamil script were used side by side on the east coast, sometimes for the same texts or in the same manuscripts. Nevertheless, the pattern of criticism remained broadly the same: the texts were treated as doctrinally suspect, stylistically deficient, and most importantly, they defined a specifically Muslim field of textual practice that was not accessible to non-Muslims, thereby separating Muslims from the 'nation' they, as the descendants of 'converts', naturally belonged to (see Abraham 2014: 74-75, Ashraf 2020: 8-11, Ashraf 2022, Tschacher 2018: 23-28).

The reformist opposition to specifically Muslim patterns of language use and textual culture becomes most apparent in the debates surrounding translations of the Quran. The claim that a return to the Quran was necessary to purify Islam of later 'contaminations' was common to many reform movements of the period, and the movements of colonial Madras were no exceptions. Both Daud Shah and Vakkom Maulavi attempted to translate the Quran into Tamil and Malayalam, though neither achieved a complete translation during their lifetime (Abraham 2014: 40, Tschacher 2019: 460-461). Especially in Kerala, Quran translation has become a hallmark of reformism (cf. Miller 2015: 100, Osella and Osella 2013: 146). Indeed, reformers have often been credited as being the first to translate the Quran into Tamil and Malayalam, while traditionalist scholars supposedly remained opposed to this process of translation (Miller 2015: 79-81, Tschacher 2019: 460-464). What is striking about these claims is that they are mistaken. Both in Tamil and in Malayalam, complete translations of the Quran existed since the 19th century. In Malayalam, Mayankutty Elaya's translation was first printed *in toto* in 1870/ 71, while the first complete Tamil translations, by Habib Muhammad al-Qahiri and Nuh b. 'Abd al-Qadir al-Qahiri, were published in the early 1880s (Kunnakkadan, Ahmad and Abdo Khaled 2020: 17-18, Tschacher 2019: 464-466). Beside these, other, partial translations also existed (Kooria 2022: 99, Tschacher 2019: 466). The obvious disjuncture between the existence of these translations and the claims made by reformers has been explained in two ways. On the one hand, earlier translations were supposedly not considered translations of the Quran but commentaries on the Quran. However, at least in the Tamil case, this claim can be dismissed. The translations were generally literal, with additional exegetical material clearly marked as such; the main difference is that 20th-century translations usually made use of marks like brackets borrowed from English to signal the addition of individual words in the translation. Furthermore, while early translators often identified the Arabic commentaries that they based their translation-choices on, reformist translators, despite protestations to the contrary, similarly followed reformist authorities. In the case of Daud Shah, for example, this authority was the English Quran translation and commentary by the Ahmadi scholar Muhammad Ali (1874-1951) (Tschacher 2019: 470-473). Rather, what distinguished reformist translations, were the changes in the use of written language, such as the use of brackets and other punctuation marks, or the prose style. The most important change, however, *was the shift in script* from Arabic to Tamil and Malayalam.

What the controversy over Quran translations allows us to perceive more clearly is that, behind the debate about style and content that undergirded the reformist critique of Arabi-Malayalam and Arabu-Tamil, there lay an even more important point of contention: the question of audience. In the case of Quran translations, traditionalists defended the use of the Arabic script because in their eyes, it protected the Quran from being slighted and blasphemed by non-Muslims. It was this attitude against the use of Tamil or Malayalam scripts that was often

misrepresented as an opposition against any kind of translation. Reformists, on the other hand, argued for making the Quran available to non-Muslims in the interest of missionising (see Tschacher 2019: 475-476). While the reformers may have genuinely believed that they were benefiting local Muslims by translating the Quran into 'proper' Malayalam or Tamil, employing the written standards and scripts used by Hindu and Christian elites rather than the Muslim prose idioms of 'Arabi-Malayalam' and 'Arabu-Tamil', demonstrated the reformers' modernity and willingness to submit to non-Muslim standards in presenting Muslim knowledge. What is obvious is the degree to which the reformist critique operated in and through the acceptance of a historical framework that thoroughly racialised Madras Muslims as descendants of converts. In this framework, anything 'mixed', whether it was local religious elites claiming descent from the unions of Arabs and local women or whether it was the mixing of Dravidian and Arabic textual practices, became suspect. 'Mixed' traditions were neither here nor there, neither sufficiently Arabic nor sufficiently local. In this context, Muslim reformers in Malabar and the Tamil country identified Muslims primarily as local converts who needed to be addressed first and foremost as Malayalis or Tamils. This required addressing them in their 'mother-tongue', the modern, elevated prose through which non-Muslim elites imagined the Malayali and Tamil identity. Any other idiom, such as the Arabised writing styles employed in the 18th and 19th centuries, was unsuitable for people who were essentially Muslim Tamils and Malayalis. In contrast, none of the reformers critiqued the use of the Arabic script for Urdu, because the racially 'pure' Ashraf were not perceived to belong to the same race as North-Indian Hindus. This critique also made it possible to square the circle between the claim that the *ulama* were deliberately misleading local Muslims and the existence of a sizeable corpus of vernacular texts based in Arabic knowledge systems. Rather than identifying them as the attempts of the *ulama* to impart Islamic knowledge, they could now be criticised as incomprehensible, deliberately obscurantist, and dangerously outdated texts designed to keep the common Malayali and Tamil Muslim ignorant (Tschacher 2018: 27-28). The imbrication of Muslim reformist discourse in the Madras Presidency with the racialised colonial discourse about Muslim 'purity' and conversion becomes most salient when considering the development of a different kind of reformism underway just across the Palk Strait in British Ceylon.

'Reforming' the 'Arab' in Ceylon

As mentioned above, the position of Muslims in British Ceylon was curiously different from those in the Madras Presidency. While the basic narrative of the history of Muslims and Islam in both cases was strikingly similar, the conclusions reached by elite colonial discourse differed diametrically. In the Madras Presidency, the claim to Arab descent was ultimately denied to the majority of Muslims, and the few whose credentials were accepted were eyed with suspicion as primarily interested in exploiting their ancestry for social advancement. In Ceylon, Muslims came to be accepted as being essentially of different 'race' than local Tamils or Sinhalese. This does not mean that Ceylon Muslims became accepted in colonial discourse as authorities on Islam. As religion was deemed less important than 'race' in the administration of Ceylon, there was little need to ascertain the knowledge of Islam among Ceylon Moors, with observers finding it more worthwhile to comment on the customs and rituals of the Moors than on their 'orthodoxy' (Anonymous 1918, Chitty 1834: 254-271). The British acceptance of the Moors' claims to Arab ancestry rested to a certain degree on the good relations the British had with the Moors. The Dutch, who were in greater competition with Muslim traders, had had no compunctions in assuming that the Ceylon Moors were descendants of "Malabar outcasts" (Tennent 1859: Vol. 2, 53 n. 1), while the British saw the Kandyan Moors as allies after their conquest of the kingdom in the third Kandyan War 1817-1818 (Marshall 1846: 180-182). However, on the whole, Ceylon Moors were judged to "care little for education", and the state of religious knowledge in the mid-19th century has been described as "religiously obscurantist and intellectually sterile" (Azeez 1968: 755). The educational condition of Ceylon Moors, and

the contest for representation in the Legislative Council, produced a movement in the late 19th century often described as the 'Muslim Revival'.

The Muslim Revival presents us with an ideal case to gauge the degree to which Muslim reform discourse in Madras and Ceylon was shaped by the racialisation of Muslims in colonial discourse. To begin with, the Muslim Revival in Ceylon shares a number of elements with early reform movements in Madras, though preceding Madras by a few decades. As in Madras, the driving force behind the movement consisted of well-educated elites with close contacts with the colonial government: lawyers, publishers, and contractors (Mahroof 1986: 85-91, Samaraweera 1979). Their prime focus of reform, as across the Palk Strait, was the spread of 'modern', colonial-style education among Muslims, in order to create a Muslim middle-class that would be able to benefit from the modern state while remaining impervious to the enticements of Christian missionaries. In this, the Muslim Revival also paralleled similar movements among Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus, again in a situation comparable to South India (cf. Osella and Osella 2013: 141-142). Muslims, equipped in this manner, could take their rightful place in the public life of a 'modern' colony and future independent nation. But despite these similarities, there are several noticeable differences between the Muslim Revival among Ceylon Moors and early reformist discourse among Tamil- and Malayalam-speaking Muslims in the Madras Presidency. It is precisely these differences that highlight the impact of differential processes of racialisation in the two British colonies. The most striking of these is the largely non-religious character of the Revival. While the reformers in Madras set out to overcome Muslim resistance to English education on religious grounds, the Ceylon Revival was only marginally interested in religious reform beyond convincing Muslims that English education could be compatible with Islam. Occasional criticism of religious practices or fraudulent holy men is of course found in literature connected to the Revival and in the newspapers published by its protagonists; yet the prime concern of the Ceylon reformers lay elsewhere. The Tamil-language Muslim press, especially the Revival's main mouthpiece, *The Muslim Friend* (*Muslim Necan*), was more concerned with discussing the history and identity of Ceylon Moors, reporting on disturbances between Moors and the Sinhalese, and imparting pan-Islamic solidarity by discussing Muslim struggles all over the planet. The *Muslim Friend*'s founder and first editor, Mohammed Cassim Siddi Lebbe (1838-1898), in many ways the most prominent intellectual of the Revival, focused on publishing educational books, such as primers for arithmetic and Tamil language, and most tellingly, elementary grammars of Arabic (cf. Barnett and Pope 1909: 183-184). But throughout his life, Siddi Lebbe identified with a variety of traditionalist Islam and remained a follower of the Qadiriyya Sufi brotherhood. His only primarily religious publication, a book entitled *Asrarul Alam* (The Mysteries of the Universe) that was published a year before his death, is written as a dialogue between a Sufi master and his disciple. Content-wise, much of *Asrarul Alam* is concerned with harmonizing European scientific advancements with traditional Sufi occultism and esotericism, disciplines that would have been anathema to Madras reformers (cf. McKinley and Xavier 2018). Religious reform was thus very muted in the Ceylon Muslim Revival.

There is more similarity between the linguistic and literary concerns of the Revival and those of reformers in the Madras Presidency. True to its support for 'modern', English-style education, the Revival championed a language fit for the task. Given that Tamil was the prime language used among Ceylon Moors, many of the revivalists' publications were in Tamil and championed modern prose styles and genres, such as the newspaper. Indeed, there is an argument to be made that the Revival offers the only major Muslim strand in the creation of the modern Tamil prose style, though characteristically, this strand has been routinely overlooked in histories of Tamil textual cultures. In a rare passage towards the end of *Asrarul Alam*, Siddi Lebbe voiced criticism of Muslim poets, who preferred to compose songs and epics in obscure language rather than to translate useful knowledge for the benefit of Muslims (Siddi Lebbe

1897: 189, translated in Tschacher 2014a: 203). Despite their claims to Arab descent, the Revival's supporters did not favour the Arabic script. However, they did not denounce Arabu-Tamil either, as later Sri Lankan Muslims would do (see Tschacher 2018: 29-31). Unsurprisingly therefore, the Muslim Revival does not seem to have seen much need in augmenting the already existing Arabu-Tamil translations of the Quran. The only case of a partial Quran-translation connected to the Revival illustrates its attitude towards language. The translation is actually written as a primer for children, thereby exemplifying the Revival's penchant for producing modern educational materiel. But at the same time, the text is written in Arabu-Tamil and was vetted by one of the most important traditionalist scholars and Sufi shaykhs of the period, 'Mappillai Labbai' Sayyid Muhammad b. Ahmad (1816-1898) (Sulayman 1897: 3).[7] 'Reform' in the Muslim Revival was, thus, primarily a reform of the methods and sources of knowledge, and not of theological interpretations and religious practices. The intellectual framework undergirding the Ceylon Muslim Revival and its fundamental differences from Madras-Presidency Muslim reformism are perhaps most poignantly expressed in one of the most unusual (and most ignored) texts by Siddi Lebbe, his novel *Asanpe Carittiram* (The Story of Hasan Bey), first published in 1885. Despite being the chronologically second Tamil novel (and the first from Ceylon), the work is usually ignored in histories of the Tamil novel (cf. Ebeling 2010: 205-145). This is perhaps as much due to its connection to a Muslim revivalist movement as it is to the novel's plot, which plays outside the Tamil linguistic area and includes no Tamil-speaking characters of note (see Siddi Lebbe 1922). In its plot, *Asanpe Carittiram* offers a parable of Siddi Lebbe's hopes for Ceylon's Moors: an Arab, orphaned on the shores of the Indian Ocean, gains an English education, converts an English woman to Islam, and finally discovers his true identity as a respected Arab citizen. If Madras reformers were concerned with reforming Islam among the 'converts' of South India by providing them with 'better' Islamic knowledge, the Revival hoped for the ultimate re-Arabisation of Ceylon Moors with the help of English education.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that colonial discourse in British India racialised Muslims not only in terms of creating them as a minority community with immutable features. It also racialised distinctions among Muslims, with the socially disadvantaged segments of Muslim society identified as 'racially Indian', descendants of Hindu converts, contrasted with the elites claimed as being the offspring of 'racially foreign' immigrants from the Middle East. This marked the elite as 'proper', indeed, 'pure' Muslims, juxtaposed to a large number of erstwhile converts who were deemed religiously ignorant and thus legitimate targets for projects of conversion and reform. The effects of that racialisation can still be seen in scholarship, where Muslim engagements with Hinduism are studied as intellectual, philosophical discourses when voiced by elite Muslims in the Persianate context (e.g. Nair 2020), but as evidence of 'Islamisation' and conversion when voiced in the Indian vernaculars (e.g. Eaton 1993: 268-297, Irani 2021: 137-171). Yet while in most parts of India, a neat bifurcation was produced between Muslim communities who were 'foreign' and those who were non-elite 'converts', the internal racialisation of South Asian Muslims reached its limits on India's coasts. The presence of Muslim communities who participated in transoceanic exchanges with the Middle East for centuries produced a conundrum for official models of racialisation in how to rank these communities. Ultimately, discourses were modified to allow for the notion of 'mixed-race' communities. However, the idea of 'mixing' has never rested easily with the notion of 'race'.

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[7] The title 'Mappillai Labbai' is only superficially connected to the ethnic labels 'Mappilla' and 'Labbai'. These have to be understood through their literal meaning, 'bridegroom, son-in-law' and 'mullah, imam'. Sayyid Muhammad was known as the 'bridegroom imam' because he married two daughters of the Sufi *shaykh* whose deputy (*khalifa*) he was.

This tension gave rise to discourses which undermined the idea (and desirability) of such 'mixed-race' Muslims by classifying more and more groups as actually comprising of 'converts'. But the most important challenge to the notion of mixing was provided by Muslim reformists, who, in their aim to 'uplift' local Muslims, targeted all illegitimate forms of mixing. If Muslims had to purify their religion from 'Hindu' accretions, they simultaneously needed to become 'pure' members of their respective 'nation'. Therefore, not only were religious practices that were deemed 'un-Islamic' attacked, but reformists vociferously campaigned against any 'pollution' of 'national' linguistic and cultural inheritance that was instigated by 'Arab' elements, most importantly, the Arabic script. That the opposition to the 'Arabisation' of local Muslim culture by Muslim reformers in the Madras Presidency was motivated by the script provided by racialisation is demonstrated by the fact that the same notions were not applied to communities of 'pure' descent – no reformer ever disparaged Urdu as 'Arabi-Hindi'. Yet in Ceylon, where no other major Muslim community existed that could claim the status of racially 'pure' Muslims, the Tamil-speaking Moors came to be accepted as 'racially' distinct from Tamils and Sinhalese by the colonial government. Despite the largely similar historical, social, and economic background of Ceylon Moors and Madras Labbais, the former came to be considered as being of Arab descent, while the latter were deemed as descendants of converts with a small elite of 'mixed-race' individuals. Consequently, the Ceylon Muslim Revival from the 1880s onwards, despite emerging from a similar social position as reform-movements in Madras, and similarly aiming at the upliftment of Muslims in terms of English-style education and the introduction of 'modernity', was more concerned with a quasi-secular Arabisation of its constituency rather than with religious purification.

Tracing the impact of racialisation on the history of Muslim reform and revival in colonial Madras and Ceylon allows us to question several received narratives regarding these projects and the constituencies they targeted. The first is the realisation of the paradoxical situation Muslim minorities of the region are still regularly placed in. While early reform movements in South India emerge as supporters of regional linguistic (sub-)nationalisms, their inheritors in South India are often criticised for having gone too far in their attempt to distinguish 'race' from 'religion'. Their attempts at purifying religion are often nowadays in themselves perceived as forms of illicit 'Arabisation' leading to an alienation of Muslims from their non-Muslim compatriots (Osella and Osella 2013: 143, Tschacher 2016: 205-206). In this, Muslim reform has become trapped in the 'purification' process it initiated among Muslims. Second, the article has stressed the historical contingency of local identity processes. The Ceylon-Moor identity project has often been criticised as ignoring its links to local society and the heterogeneity of Moorish society(s). Certainly, the racialisation of the Ceylon Moor was a project pushed for the benefits of a small elite. Yet the 'Malayalisation' and 'Tamilisation' of Muslims in Madras were no less contingent, but similarly the effects of elite self-fashioning without considering other links and identities. Indeed, the problematic racialisation visible in these movements results from the very championing of 'modernity' that these movements are often celebrated for today. For 'race' was a foundational category of colonial modernity, and the adoption of its logic by reformers makes it a problematic part of the legacies of modernity that Muslim traditionalists, especially in Kerala, have begun to point to in their critical engagement with reformism (see Visakh, Santosh, and Mohammed Roshan 2021). Finally, this article has hopefully signalled the problematic nature of a tendency that argues with the 'convert' background of South Asian Muslims to explain the forms taken by Islam in South Asia. All Muslims, even Arabs, are the descendants of erstwhile converts. In themselves, 'conversion' and 'Islamisation' are important fields of research, but South Asian Islam does not differ from Middle Eastern Islam because of conversion. The image of the 'convert' Muslim is itself a product of colonial racialisation.

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