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Poetics of Piety: An Ethnographic Engagement on Spiritual Ageing and Fostering Resilience

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Abstract:

Several theories have been advanced to foster the resilience among the elderly. Tornstam's Gero transcendence, Sherman's Contemplative Aging, Atchley's Spirituality and Aging are few among them. Studies in social science and psychology such as disengagement theory, activity theory, continuity theory and developmental stage theories also, in some or other way, are discussing the ways to boost the resilience and well-being. In the light of these theories this paper argues the "self-fashioning" poetics of piety, which is mostly religio-culturally preserved and practiced, are going a long way in ensuring the well-being of oldsters. Taking a poetic text which is prevalently recited and performed among Malabar (Kerala, India) Muslim community, I made an ethnographic enquiry about how the "self-fashioning" poetics are influencing the 'technologies of life' of the elderly. In the light of the study, this paper also makes a case against replacing historically preserved poetics and its practices with modern ways of entertainments for the larger benefits of the older people.

Keywords: Literature and Aging, Narrative Gerontology, Devotional Poetics, Aging and Spirituality, Conscious Ageing.

A host of theories have been advanced in ensuring the well-being of the older communities. Among those theories, theories to foster resilience and spiritual wellbeing (SWB) have got much momentum in academics in the recent years. Tornstam's Gero transcendence, Sherman's Contemplative Aging, Atchley's Spirituality and Aging are few among them. Studies in social science and psychology have also contributed in terms of disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry) activity theory (Havighurst and Albrecht), continuity theory (Atchley), and stage theories (Erikson's; Kohlberg's; Fowler; Koenig's; Moberg).

All these theories revolve around a few fundamental (traditionally philosophical) questions of human life, happiness, well-being, death and facing the death etc. Tornstam's theory discusses old-age experiences under three major heads. a) feeling a greater connection to the universe; a cosmic consciousness, (b) finding greater satisfaction in one's inner life, and (c) changed perspective about social personal relationships. In the changes of cosmic dimensions, he argues that old people transcend limited understanding about the time and generations, they get adjusted

with complex ideas of life and death and mysteries of life, they become less afraid of death and they admit the restriction of human intellect. Secondly, in the dimension of “Self”, introspection, discovery of the hidden self, greater understanding about the self being a very small unit of the greater universe, disregard of body and rediscovery the self beyond the body, altruistic approach to the life are the major changes. Thirdly, disinterest in superficial socializing events, transcendence of needless social conventions and norms (“emancipated innocence”), preference to the lighter luggage of life during the last part of life etc. are major changes in social-personal dimension (Sherman, 256; Tornstam, 166-178).

Erikson, a prominent stage theorist who developed psychoanalytic theory with eight stages based upon complex interactions of societal values and psychological growth, identifies the “ritualization” of old age as “philo-sophical for in maintaining some order and meaning in the dis-integration of body and mind; it can also advocate a durable hope and wisdom” (64).

Moberg argues that social gerontological theories are complimentary to spiritual gerontology. Disengagement theory, which ‘assumes that both individuals and society benefit when older persons withdraw from roles and activities in which they were previously engaged’, does not posit that the oldster must be completely disengaged mentally rather it only calls of shifting of roles so that s/he can be more mentally engaged in ‘gradual’ ‘inevitable’ ‘universal’ dying process in a way that would be more mutually satisfying, enhancing the life satisfaction and happiness of withdrawing persons, while helping society maintain equilibrium by fitting younger people into the vacated positions(35). He also views that the continuity theory which came in reaction to ‘limitations of activity and disengagement theories and stimulated by research evidence’ can also partly be a complementary theoretical base for enhancing the Spiritual Well Being. ‘Continuity does not mean that there is no change, but “simply that change occurs in the context of considerable continuity” (Atchley, 104). Continuity of self and personality, of activities and environments, of relationships, of lifestyle and residence, of roles and activities, and of independence and personal effectiveness is “a central adaptive alternative in coping with many of the changes associated with aging’(38). Here, Moberg seeks to revive the continuity of spiritual preference in the elderly care.

Other similar concepts include ‘resilience’ by Antonovsky and Sagy, ‘self-transcendence’ by Reed, and ‘hardiness’ by Maddi. Though these concepts are not identical, it is made up of the warp and weft of the major philosophical questions of life and spirituality and inner self. (Ostwald and Dyer, 50)

With the underpinning of these theories, I would argue that the traditional, religious or cultural self-fashioning poetic scan go a long way in fostering the resilience of the older communities. There are many cultural/religious performative practices which various cultural/religious communities Such as Christians and Muslims have preserved in the course of the history. For this purpose, I will take such a ‘self-fashioning’ Muslim devotional performative genre (which

are ‘best construed as arts of the self’), best known by mawlud or mawlid, found commonly practiced among ‘traditional/orthodox’ Muslims of Malabar Region in Kerala State of India and I will also bring some ethnographic details in to the light in support of my argument. (Muneeer, 3) Before embarking on the ethnographic analysis, a brief description about mawlud would be pertinent. The Arabic word “mawlid” which literally means birth place or time of birth and popularly refers to the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (mawlid al-nabi), is used to designate both the observance and celebration of his birthday (also known as milad), and the literary genre appropriate for recitation on such occasion. However, Mappilas [Malabar Muslims] more commonly use the term “mawlud” which in local parlance appears to be a slight corruption of mawlid, the classical Arabic word for the observance of the Prophet’s birthday, rather than refers to the related Arabic noun of the same construction (i. e. mawlud) which means “new-born child” (10). Hence, my use of mawlud rather than mawlid throughout this essay.

Mawlud is recited and performed both in groups and individually. At times, the mawlud is also administered, rather recited in the presence, of old people who have infirmities of various kinds.

‘A typical mawlud gathering in Malabar is a group of men (and women) who are seated on the floor of a house/mosque, for example, in a circular or semicircular fashion where incense burns throughout, and sometimes perfume changes hands from one corner of the room to the other. Usually, the mawludis led by a team of musliyers (religious teachers, usually employed at local madrasas/mosques), in front of whom is placed some adorned pillow or decorative cloth to hold the prayer manual from which to recite a particular mawludtext’ (Muneeer, 11)

There are several mawlud texts such as Manqoos Mawlud (literally ‘abridged mawlud’) Sharrafa al- anaam (meaning ‘honoured human being’). This ethnographic enquiry is exclusively about manqoosmawlud which was written and abridged by renowned Mappila ‘alim (religious scholar) of Arab descent, Zainuddin bin Ali Al- Ma’bari.

Manqoosmawlud, like other mawlud texts, begins with a certain prose narrative (better known by the Arabic word hadith, which technically refers to the tradition of the Prophet) followed by a corresponding poem (often called bayt, which means “verse” in Arabic). The prose narratives in ornate, classical Arabic describing vignettes concerning the birth and life of the Prophet.

All mawlud recitations are antiphonal. The prose sections are read/ recited only by one of the participants, who is confident in reading the Arabic language, without errors. ‘Once a prose narrative comes to a close, the entire group fervently chants salat three times, thereby paving the way for the corresponding poem to be sung with much more fervor. Each poem that follows a prose narrative has a familiar refrain, usually called jawab (literally “answer”) to it that all the attendees know by heart. The jawabis repeated after each line of the poem.’ (Muneeer, 11) The jawab part ensures the equal involvement for all the participants. This composition of laudatory poems about the Prophet, interspersed with prosaic sections does not have any semantic demands

on the participants since Mappila Muslim's literacy in Arabic is mostly phono-graphic and they can't understand the full meaning of the through-and-through Arabic texts of mauluds. Their involvement, beyond semantics, is spiritually motivated by awareness of a relationship or connection that goes beyond sensory perceptions. Significantly, that the attendees of mawlod recitation are mostly aged people.

An Ethnographic Enquiry

What follows is a report of an ethnographic engagement in some mawlod ceremony in which only aged people were under observations. I used the method of participant observation and interviewing. Apart from the select ceremonies I attended for this study, I have also attended many of such mawlod ceremonies, since I was born and brought in Malabar Muslim culture. Though any of such participations were not meant specifically to be put in to the gerontological perspective, it, of course, gives me an immense amount of confidence and familiarity to the mawlod ceremony in the context of this specific study.

As part of this study, I personally attended and recited the mawlod in the presence of an 80-year-old man, Mr. Abdu Rahiman Panali, who is under medication for diabetes and cholesterol for many years but can perform his daily needs on his own and his 74-year-old wife, Ayisha, whose hearing and eyes sight are both declining. It is notable that it was not a ceremonial gathering, rather a closed, controlled setting comprising of two of the aged and myself (which I would refer to as 'individual sessions' in the following part of this essay). I recited it for them for 12 days between 15th December 2015 and 30th December 2015 between 7 PM to 9 PM. Each session ended with an informal conversation which was meant to know their responses and measure the feeling of well-being after the recitation ceremony.

In the individual session, both the aged participants felt increasingly happy to be actively involved in it. They "felt transcended their age boundaries and problems at least for some moments", as I observed and verified through their responses. Mr. Abdu Rahiman who mostly walks with assistance, once suddenly got in to his feet and started rhythmic body movements in accordance with the poetic lines. To my surprise, both of them wanted to still continue the session after the end of every session, because I had not disclosed to them the last day of my recitation for them. They expressed so much satisfaction about it that he said it gives "more energy than the medicine" that he takes. When the session was consciously delayed, in a day, from its usual timings, they called me over phone and asked me to come for the session. Both the participants claimed this religiously motivated verses as giving them "unprecedented energy and resilience". The daughter-in-law of Mr. Abdu Rahiman who takes care of him said that the "mawlid recitation has tremendously boosted the resilience of dad and mom, and both of them are infinitely pleased these days". At times, I also observed both of them blushing with extreme delight. Mr. Abdu Rahiman who knows the meaning of most of the verses, unlike a normal Malabari Muslim, sometimes unconsciously raised his voice and the modulation of his voice

suddenly raised to high pitch. Though I used to take lead and read the prose part of the text all the days, once in a burst of enthusiasm he tried to read the text by himself despite his deteriorating vision. Though he could not complete the reading of the entire passage, his happiness in so doing was conspicuously visible.

Apart from the individual sessions, I also attended three gatherings where people recited in conventional congregational ceremonies, as explained above. The first congregational ceremony was in Mr. Muneer's House, a UAE-based business man who came to his House in Kerala only to conduct mawlut during the month of the Prophet's birth, at Nediyruppu in Malappuram Dt. In this session, I could observe and interact with at least 10 aged participants (including men and women). The second congregational session was at an Islamic Seminary located at Karipur in Malappuram Dt. where at least 20 aged male participants attended. Though aged women participants were also present there, I was not given access to them for observing and interaction. The third congregational session was at a Mosque where not less than 25 aged male participants attended. In all three congregational sessions, random conversations/ informal interviews were done, besides the participant observation and engagement.

In the congregational sessions, participants looked highly active, although, by nature, the programme is very much energy consuming. In Muneer's house, an octogenarian participant, Muneer's mother, who is having several medications, was the most fervent participant. One of them also went to the extent of saying that ceremonies like mawlut are the only recourse where "I can really compensate for my memories of the past. I feel it really helps me to be more positive and futuristic". Some participants who at their 65-75s at Seminary session also complained against "replacing such traditional program with more innovative, 'television-based' non-spiritual ways of entertaining". It is also notable that globalization, technological advancement has tremendously rescheduled, reprogrammed the Mappila life-scape of Malabar Muslims. They were remembering their nostalgic past when spiritual gatherings like mawlut were more common. In ratification of the continuity theory, they wanted to continue with the previous life-scape and environment. Female participants were more outspoken about such a spiritual connectedness and transcendence.

In both individual and congregational sessions most of them said that, since they are 'apparently closer to death than others', mawlut session, boosted their morale, increased their happiness, enhanced their spiritual connectedness to the God, their past and future, made them energetic, transformed them as futuristic, felt them relieved from the 'pains of age', at times, made them feel it as a substitute to the medications and made them more confident to face death courageously than otherwise.

Summing up, this study concludes the increasing importance of self-fashioning poetics of different communities. The programmes such as mawlut can go a long way in enhancing the

spiritual connectedness and well-being of the elderly community. The spiritually motivated verses like mawlud can also help the aged to redefine the self and relationships to others, as well as to newly understand the fundamental existential questions. It makes the aged more positive towards life and age-related problems. At an age of grievances, it helps them to restore to the normalcy which is often defined as resilience. Hence, it also pleads for the preservation of such religio-cultural programmes for the benefit of elderly and make a case against the replacing of the menu or schedules with more sophisticated entertainment programmes.

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