



# Memories of Luxury, Aspirations Towards Glamour, and Cultivations of Morality: How south Indian Muslim women craft their style

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## Introduction

Among Muslims in Calicut<sup>1</sup> (a town in Kerala, South India), neither the strict observance of Islamic reformist dress codes, nor even their binding to the South Indian region's wider sense of modesty and simplicity as a valued marker of distinction (against allegedly 'loose' North Indian public moralities and displays), in any way work to cut women off from a keen interest in beauty, fashion and glamour. In fact, shopkeepers and popular discourse alike characterise Muslim women as distinguished by their exceptionally high spending on personal adornment and by their particularly strong interest in clothes and jewellery. As I settled into this community during long-term fieldwork and learned to adapt my own preferences concerning fabric, colour, degree and style of embellishment – in order to 'fit in' better at Muslim weddings and parties – I also began to discern specificities in aesthetics and to ask about about this<sup>2</sup>. Shopkeepers and non-Muslims alike claimed to recognise a particular Muslim aesthetic: flashy, prone to excess and showy. All of these were thinly euphemised codes for 'vulgar'.

At the same time, non-Muslims also lamented the increased adoption of reformist dress styles. The lower middle-class women and girls I spent my time with were always in 'proper Islamic modest dress' (Osella C & F 2007). This usually means a floor-length loose house-dress indoors, which covers arms down to below the elbow; and an outdoor outfit, which masks body shape and covers all except the hands and face. Outerwear might be the old-style loose dark coat (referred to locally as *pardah*) with *maftah* [headscarf] or the newer Gulf-style *abaya* [fitted black coat] and *shaila* [long soft black scarf]<sup>3</sup>. Under this outerwear, older women wear *saris* and younger prefer *salwar kameez*<sup>4</sup>, a long loose tunic worn over loose drawstring trousers. Women are very careful about

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<sup>1</sup> Calicut and Bombay are older names with colonial lineages, and have been replaced officially by Kozhikode and Mumbai. I choose to follow the usage of research interlocutors, who are holding on to the older names.

<sup>2</sup> Two years' fieldwork was funded by ESRC; the period of writing-up was funded by AHRC. Thanks for comments on drafts go to: A Moores, E Tarlo, F Osella, T Kuldova.

<sup>3</sup> The *abaya* is the Gulf Arab version of *pardah* dress, a Muslim women's long dark outer garment worn over clothing.

maintaining a *decent* appearance, decent being a layered concept into which colonial Victorian ideals, post-colonial and, specifically, regional ideas about South Indian feminine modesty (Devika 2005), and post-1930s successive waves of Islamic reformism have all set certain clear boundaries and expectations.

One analytic predicament is that, as Tereza Kuldova has argued (*ibid.*), the Indian fashion business blurs several lines which both academic analysis and often consumers and producers would rather keep clearly separate. High-end fashion and vernacular style engage in mutual borrowings, a process which is intensified by the power of film to pick up and spread trends. In an economy where the 'ready made' mass clothing market still lags behind individually produced pieces, the figure of the tailor – as a humble paid servant – and that of the designer-producer – as a high-status creative – likewise blur into each other.

Another paradox is that adornment has been understood in academia as a preoccupation especially associated with the feminine, a gender style stamped with abjection and marginality to the proper business of life, something then at once trivial and also associated with subaltern subjects, one of the compensatory activities of those who are excluded from real power and activity in the world (Lunning 2001). It has also – contrarily – been understood as world-making practice, as a form of cosmic ordering and an expression of timeless and universal principles (Papapetros 2011). It has recently also been read as part of 'erotic capital', an asset which can be cashed in on employment, marriage and other markets (Hakim 2010). I will sidestep these debates here, to follow here one simple theme: tracing some of the ways in which corporeal materiality and embodiment are expressive and self-making processes (Van Wolputte 2004), which I then understand as bearing the traces of entanglements in other realms, to different scales (following Strathern 2004). To clarify, global histories of trade, regional flows of money and faith-wide waves of revivalism have all left their material trace – even on the small scale of the individual body or a single piece of fabric. Calicut's Muslim women locate themselves simultaneously within worlds of Indian luxury and worlds of Islam – where the latter can draw upon both Islamicate ornateness and opulence and also reformist moralities and simplicity.

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<sup>4</sup> This dress is now subcontinental-wide, although for formal occasions a *sari* is still required by married women. The *salwar* is the trouser part and the *kameez* is the long loose tunic worn on top. Calicut Muslims observe what they name as decent dress by wearing a long, loose, black overcoat on top of either a *sari* or *salwar-kameez*.

<sup>5</sup> Whether it is inhabited by women or by feminised, same-sex desiring or gender-queer males.



Contemporary desires for opulence, willing attachment to orientalisng images of the self and of the historically close relationship with the fantasy Arab Other, together with cinematically driven identifications with stars and their dream-world of leisure and luxury all seep into a habitus already formed through a long history of Indian ocean trade, which brought Calicut's Muslims both fortune and intimate encounters.

### **Vernacular Cosmopolitanism, Embodied Histories.**

Muslim women's practice in Calicut acts as material outpouring of histories that have spilled out onto the bodies of those who now live there. Bourdieu's work on consumption has helped us think about how yesterday's histories are lodged in our bodies in the form of today's preferences and tastes (e.g Bourdieu 1984). Calicut Muslim history is one of business and smuggling, fortunes which have waxed and waned, a profitable entanglement with the Gulf region and with Indian ocean trade which dates back to at least the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and rescue from post-independence economic doldrums via Gulf migration. The community here is part of the Indian ocean's coastal trading erstwhile elite and widespread culture of vernacular cosmopolitanism, something which we find in locations as widespread as Mombassa through to Zanizibar, Gujerat, Dubai and Malaysia, and all the other places which found themselves connected in a network through trans-oceanic travel and trade (Simpson & Kresse 2007; Vora 2013; see also Werbner 2008). If 'Muslim style' is recognised locally as leaning especially towards fantasies of opulence and extravagant display, this history – of a business community that has lived through some spectacularly prosperous moments – is influential.

With a population of roughly 500 000, Calicut is the third largest town in India's southern state, Kerala, and, even though Muslims do not comprise the majority, it is often called the 'Muslim capital' of Kerala. Calicut prospered due to maritime trade from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, rapidly developing over the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries as a commercial hub between West Asia, Southeast Asia and the North-Western shores of South Asia. Upon Vasco da Gama's arrival here in 1492, a long and bloody struggle began to wrench away control of the pepper trade from the 'Moors', merchants from Egypt and the Arabian peninsula. The 17<sup>th</sup> century saw the wane of Portuguese power; the rise of Dutch companies and, at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Mysorean conquest of Malabar. During this period, Calicut lost its position as an international hub although remained an export centre for local products and an entry point for goods from West Asia and North India. The eventual defeat of Tipu Sultan and the establishment of British rule exacerbated this

shift: Bombay developed as the main international export centre and Calicut trade was reduced predominantly to the movement of goods to, and through, Bombay and Gujarat. Emerging as a major regional rice market, Calicut also saw a resurgence of Arab trade. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the mid 1980s, the colonial and post-colonial economy boosted Calicut's position, the town became a world centre for timber export and, later, a centre for (legal) copra commerce and (illegal) gold-smuggling. By the late 1970s, the timber trade declined and, following the Gulf oil boom, Arab *dhow* ships stopped coming to the city, leading to the eventual closure of all port facilities. As in the rest of Malabar, and Kerala as whole, since the 1980s, Calicut's economy has become dependent upon revenues and remittances from the Gulf. Some entrepreneurs run trans-oceanic or Gulf-based businesses and a large number of migrant workers send cash back home (Osella F & C 2007).

Contemporary Calicut sprawls across several zones: the old commercial district of narrow lanes and beach-front *godowns* [warehouses] in the south-east, along and behind the sea front, gives way in importance to new and more spacious commercial zones further inland; new residential areas grow to the city's north and north-east. In the old district, right next to a densely populated Muslim 'old town', the small bazaar meanders, including the famous S.M. [sweet meats] street, where formerly famous halva was made and sold and where now a plethora of cheap and very fast-moving clothing businesses compete for mainstream trade. Most of Calicut's gold shops, from tiny one-man workshops to prestigious three-storey gold and diamond showrooms, are located off and around this zone. Away from the old town, several new areas are emerging, such as Mavoor Road, where concrete three-storeyed open shopping plazas are located or Cherooty Road, where franchises of prestigious chain brands (all-India shops like Raymond's Park Avenue or global brands like Lee jeans) sit beside costly boutiques offering one-off women's 'designer' saris and *salwar* sets – pieces of better quality fabric, hand-worked to individual designs produced by English-speaking middle-class owners who might have a professional design qualification or some higher level experience in Bangalore or Bombay, marking them off from the smaller local tailors. Unlike S.M. Street bazaars' mostly small, crowded and simple shops, run by one or two men, these post-1990s shops have air conditioning and glass frontage, uniformed assistants, and service professional and business-class clients who live in the more exclusive housing colonies.

Muslim aesthetics mixes strands from past and present flows of cultural influence: Calicut's cosmopolitan past and status as a smuggler's port

and space for Arab sailors, traders, ship-owners, visitors, even sometimes lovers and husbands; ghosts of Calicut's past glory as a town of lavish wealth; participation in a rich media culture, woven from 'Bollywood' styles and Kerala movie fashions, from specific local Muslim arts and from attachments to fantasy ideas of specifically Muslim aesthetics (the gauzy veil, the henna decorated hand); and ideas about beauty, life-style and glamour which are continually pouring in from the Gulf.

### **Muslim style: Glamorous modesty**

There is surely a certain exuberance regarding what is often named as 'Muslim style' and part of my understanding of this style is that it speaks of desire for a powerful presence via personal adornment. It therefore makes sense that Calicut's 'Muslim style' strongly overlaps with what in other locations might be understood as 'low class Hindu' style. Calicut desires for shine, impact, strong colour and eye-catching novelty design can be read – paradoxically – as indices of both richness and of poverty. It speaks to the past that I alluded to above of trade, wealth and social prestige, and to the fast cash of the present Gulf remittance economy, yet at the same time it is also part of an India-wide recognisable sub-altern 'flashy' aesthetic, characterised by Srivastava as 'ishtyle' (as opposed to high-class 'fashion' (2007)<sup>6</sup>; which I've written about as being distinctive of low-prestige forms of conspicuous consumption, which are transient, body-centred and personal (Osella & Osella 1999).

In the realms of sexual morality and discussions of desire, South Indians cherish their self-proclaimed superior morality and 'simplicity' over North Indians; and even as Calicut Muslims prize Gulf items, fashions and habits, they adopt them selectively. Both the (imagined) North Indian metropolitan and the Arab woman act as dire figures of abjection or warning, an example of how the desire for glamour can lead one too far and into forms of self-presentation and then to behaviours which are *haram*. In the Arab Gulf states, we sometimes find the 'immodest modest', in the form of flashy *abayas*, body-hugging – albeit body-covering – clothing, and heavy use of cosmetics (Al-Qasimi 2010). By contrast, Kerala Muslims cultivate sets of body practices and conjure up desires and yearnings that gather carefully around only those aspects of adornment that are understood locally as not being *haram*. Therefore, women will not use makeup or nail varnish, but will engage in a frantically fast-moving fashion culture; they have adopted the stylish black *abaya* as outerwear, although not the most heavily embellished forms

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<sup>6</sup> Kuldova has recently complicated this distinction, pointing out a shared fascination at the top and bottom ends alike of Indian markets with opulence, lavish work and display, epitomised in garments like a prestigious Sabyasachi sari (Kuldova n.d.).

of it. One interesting and specific effect of observing Islamic modesty norms of covering the *awra*<sup>7</sup> is that particular parts of the body can then become objects of attention and elaboration: glamour settles upon the hands and feet, in the form of henna, jewellery and fancy shoes.

## Hands ...

At Calicut Muslim weddings, the *vettilettu* or *mailanchi* night, a party at the bride's house the night before the reception proper, is as grand as the family can afford. Tubes and tubes of henna paste are bought, guests are invited and come richly dressed to stay at the bride's home for the entire evening, to enjoy a feast, to admire each other (in safely segregated space, such that women remove their outerwear (*abaya/pardah*) to show off their party-wear outfits) and in the mood to be entertained: an occasion for music and maybe even dance.

Learning to paint henna is a popular art among young women, and it can – for the skilled – become a respectable source of income later in life, a service offered from home to women and girls who have weddings or functions to attend. Sometimes community organisations offer courses or competitions. Women hone their skill in experimenting with henna powder and oil mixtures to produce different colours and long-lasting effects, offering ranges of designs. The photographs here show the subtle difference in designs offered as 'Indian' style or the increasingly more popular 'Arabic' style, which tends to have bolder and larger blocks of henna, covering the fingertips and nails, and to employ more abstract geometric patterning and cross-hatching, rather than using peacock or flower motifs. This is in line with Islamic injunctions against representational/figurative art, and with reformist desires to purge themselves of Hinduised practice and observe or claim what they perceive as more authentically Muslim forms; it also indexes exposure to 'Gulf style', as a form of sophistication and distinction.

## ... and feet.

Calicut Muslim women are often very shoe conscious and spend more on shoes; own more pairs; and have more elaborate and fancy pairs than their Hindu or Christian neighbours. Little girls are enthusiastic participants in this generalised feminine passion for shoes: they commonly wear high heels – this is sometimes noted with amusement by

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<sup>7</sup> The part of the body that is, according to most understandings of Islam, to be kept covered. The *awra* is usually understood as the trunk and immediate surround, although often also extending along the limbs. The most common consensus among Calicut's Muslims is that only face, hands and feet can be shown in public.



**Fig 1: 'Araby' style henna**

This was an entry in a henna hand painting competition run by an NGO in the Muslim area, and shows what Calicut Muslim women believe to be a more 'Arab' style, in that it uses heavy lines rather than lighter cross-hatching, completely covers the fingertips, and avoids any figurative motifs (flowers, hearts) in favour of strictly geometric patterning.



**Fig 2a: Hybrid style henna**

In this design, there are some aspects which women claim as 'Arabic style': large blocks form strong contrast with empty space; the fingertips are heavily covered. There are also aspects which women associate more with Hinduised styles of henna: heart and flower motifs; fine cross-hatching.



**Fig 2b: Henna stencils available in stores, coming in from Bombay**

In practice, of course, the designs used are a blend of those passed from woman to woman; taught in courses; copied from beauty parlours; seen in magazines and on the TV; carefully reproduced from stencils or pattern books coming from Bombay, along with a good dose of individual creativity and experimentation too (from the most skilled hand-painters). Once again, vernacular cosmopolitanism is at work - a variety of influences flows through and blends into innovative and attractive forms.



community outsiders – and may own three or four pairs of glamorous, glittery or shiny high-heeled shoes. Shoes, of course, like henna and bangles, are a permissible adornment, drawing the eye towards the body's peripheries and away from the modestly concealed central area. High-heeled shoes are especially interesting in that they offer an acoustic announcement of the feminine, an amplification of feminine presence. As work on the anthropology of the senses teaches, the dominance of the visual in the modern western is specific, and other senses may be equally important (Howes 1991). South Indian Hindu women commonly wear anklets, and the jingling they produce is both marked as a highly significant 'sound of femininity' and is also eroticised (as commonly depicted in films and songs). Reformist Muslim women often eschew anklets, but their high heels are essentially fulfilling a similar function.



**Fig 3: 'Women's shoes**

**While these shoes are 'party wear', even everyday footwear is often highly embellished and glamorous. Women follow fashions here too, as wedges give way to kitten heels, to stilettos, and so on.**



**Fig 4: Girls' shoes**

**Little girls' shoes are often effectively scaled down versions of adult women's shoes.**

## Getting a rush from gold

According to the World gold Council, India is globally the largest gold market. Gold is a useful, quickly convertible, investment and durable commodity, perceived as safe and anonymous as currency, but with stronger value. It holds the glow of being an auspicious metal in Hindu traditions: harbinger of prosperity, beauty, good health and good fortune; it is an essential part of a bride's outfit (generally her dowry too) and is a major player in conferring solidity to the fantasies of luxury and opulence that emerge in full power at weddings. A low rate of tax on gold exchange and a competitive market with low, or no, surcharge means that gold in India holds – and lately substantially increases – its value as a near instantly liquid form of wealth, while still allowing women to use it as fashion item, in a fast-moving market of trading and changing jewellery.

Within India's seemingly inexhaustible love for gold, Kerala has 3% of India's population, but a staggering 25 % of its gold market (The Hindu newspaper, December 6<sup>th</sup> 2012; see also Kerala page at 'Indian gold Trends' website). It is hardly surprising that in Calicut - a town partly built upon gold smuggling<sup>8</sup> Kerala state's famous and notorious appetite for gold reaches powerful proportions. Many Muslim families here have built their fortunes by way of the gold trade - licit and illicit - and the town is saturated with gold stores, from back lane bazaar artisans to three storeyed a/c showrooms. When I was asking about 'Muslim style', many people mentioned one aspect of it as being an even greater use of gold than other groups, and a preference for heavier-looking, more bulky pieces. The traditional Muslim grandmother's dress and jewellery is well known in films, folk art stage presentations and so on, and does indeed shine out boldly, with multiple helix piercings, many necklaces, and even a precious metal waist belt. In the present reformist moment, when Muslim men (against Kerala-wide trends in masculine adornment) eschew gold and generally use only a watch as decoration - at most a silver semi-precious stone ring - then the burden of carrying and displaying a family's objectified wealth falls more starkly upon its womenfolk.

While the bride at a contemporary wedding is naturally the most bedecked, because she is often wearing a large part of her dowry on her body, women guests too pull out all their gold for the occasion, and also

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<sup>8</sup> This is common knowledge and even now still widely referred to with pride rather than embarrassment. The perils of gold smuggling and Calicut's part in this achieved literary fame in the novel *Arabiponnu*, N P Muhammad and M T Vasudevan Nair.

borrow to increase the effect. Those who feel a bit 'gold poor' might risk bulking up with one or two pieces of 22ct covered fake 'one gram gold' (see Varsha website and FIG 5).



**Fig 5: Fake, 22 ct covered 'rolled gold' or 'one gram gold'**

A fake 22 ct covered 'rolled gold' or 'one gram gold' necklace, which looks like a classy piece of modern branded jewellery (such as Tanishq). This sort of piece can be used to 'bulk up' the appearance of how much gold is being worn as a wedding guest, and can be worn above the more traditional Kerala style long gold pendant chains or long necklaces.

There are classic pieces like bangles, which all women own at least a couple of.



**Fig 6: Bangles**

Bangles vary in thickness and weight, and a bride will wear several sets at once. For everyday use, women often keep just one thin pair or a single thick bangle. A fairly minimal amount of gold to own use for everyday wear would be (in order of degree to which they are felt essential) earrings, a long neck chain with pendant plus bangles. Not to have any one of these three key items is felt as a shame, and even a working class and relatively badly off woman would not attend a wedding without wearing at least those three items.

Earrings, are deemed essential and are often very large, albeit beaten thinly, to provide maximum effect at a minimal cost.



**Fig 7: Earrings**

A 'bridal set' comprises heavy and immensely costly pieces – even weighing up to half a kilogram –only a bride would wear adornment such as this.



**Fig 8: Bridal 'set'**

A 'bridal 'set' is designed to make maximum effect, by using gold hollow-moulded and spread very thinly. Kerala brides famously wear a lot of gold, and to wear five or six necklaces of different lengths – to achieve a 'step' – is absolutely expected. Usually not much heed is paid to whether the necklace styles blend in with each other, but in this set two have been provided which do match.

Novelty items designed to allow more gold to be worn on the body, and to be talking points and thereby bring prestige.



**Fig 9: Gold fingernail or belt**

In the attempt to find ever more novelty talking points and parts of the body to which gold can be attached, we have seen gold fake nails – attached to chains for safety – appear.



Although a wedding proper calls for real gold (or even fake gold), costume jewellery is also often worn to maximise the impact of glitter and colour. Such pieces are typical at pre-wedding henna nights, post-wedding dinners, and even at weddings (as a supplement to real jewellery). Mostly younger women (teenagers and newly-weds) use such fake rhinestone pieces for extra embellishment, typically alongside high style *salwaar kameez* sets, or high fashion embellished saris, Here's a cocktail ring.



**Fig 10: Cocktail ring**

**At less formal functions and among younger women who are wearing maximum impact colours and designs of salwaar sets, costume jewellery like this cocktail ring – carefully chosen to match clothing – appear.**

## **Fashion: Making and subverting distinction hierarchies**

Wholesalers and retailers all agreed in interviews that fashion in Calicut – as it is elsewhere in India – is heavily influenced by the movies. A new film introduces a new style, colour and pattern, adopted two to three months after the film's release. Although there are also clear fashion seasons when new styles appear and everyone buys new clothes – the two Eids, summer hot season, rainy season – movie-related fashion trends appear all-year-round and business keeps going throughout the year. Calicut shops can be tied into the local, the Gulf economy or both: strictly local ones say that monsoon is a relatively dead time; by contrast, Gulf-style upmarket shops are at their most busy then, as this is the season when Gulf families return home during the vacation and stock up with new clothes. As Emma Tarlo notes, since economic liberalisation, fashion seems to have accelerated, with new styles continually appearing (1996:337). A distinction we might try to draw here, following Sanjay Srivastava (2007), is that which is between fashion proper – driven by metro city designers and trends, part of branded global styles, available in high end boutiques – and what I am mostly talking about here in Calicut, a more vernacular, popular, *ishtyle*, driven more by cinema than by global or even metro trends. *Ishtyle* veers towards the extravagant, albeit done on the cheap: bright colours, shiny or two-tone fabrics and strong designs with impact, heavy embellishment and contrast. *Ishtyle* draws the eye and is a heavily externalising aesthetic.

The ready-made market is small, since women prefer carefully measured and fitted *salwar kameez* sets. Some sew their own clothes, although most use tailors; and almost all make use of the ready printed, embellished and embroidered *salwar* sets, which allow the purchaser to choose length, fit, flare, cut and neckline style. Tailors have pattern books of different cuts and the individualisation of a design is a project undertaken with considerable commitment, with women spending a great deal of time, comprehensive measurement and discussion with friends. There is a competitive market among tailors in terms of offering quality stitching and techniques, extra embellishments and singular style points, such as quality buttons or particularly well-cut *salwars*.

Another effect of clothing that blends glamour with modesty is that borders and hems become sites of attention and embellishment, while the parts counted as *awra* and needing - under Islamic injunctions - to be covered are kept plain. One aspect of the Muslim *kameez* is that, unlike Hindus, the neckline is invariably covered; even when women remove their outer dress in women's rooms at functions, they keep the *mafta* headscarf on, covering the neckline. So, while Hindu women often favour *salwar* fabric sets with a little work around the neckline, Muslim women prefer work on the bottom hem of the *kameez*, where it can be admired<sup>9</sup>.

*Salwar* fabrics mostly arrive from Gujarat, Bombay, Tamil Nadu and Bangalore. Some of Calicut's small shopkeepers buy from travelling wholesalers, but shops at the cutting edge of style - which is where Muslim women of all social classes like to be - send their staff out on buying trips, to try to be the first out with a new fashion. Upmarket shops stock a few pieces of 'foreign' material - prestigious and costly even though not necessarily better (Chinese, Gulf).

The owner of an up-market Cherooty Road boutique, Nasreen, accompanied her sister on shopping trips to Thailand. Nasreen told me that

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<sup>9</sup> There are two interesting aspects in which the universal Indian fabric sets, which arrive in Calicut from wholesalers, are not helpful. Firstly, *sari* sets commonly have a matching piece for making a *sari* blouse, however these pieces are never large enough to make a long sleeved, body-covering loose blouse, which is how Calicut Muslim women prefer to dress; and *salwar* sets often have strong design or embroidery around the neckline, rather than what would be the *kameez* bottom hem. I also note that girls' ready-made party-wear sets arrive sleeveless, with matching short sleeves. Kerala mothers generally sew the short sleeves, but the option of having three-quarter or full sleeves is generally not available. There is a clear market for fabric sets designed specifically with 'decent dress' Muslims in mind.



**Fig 11: Salwar set**

**Fabric pieces arrive ready to be sewn according to individual specific requirements. Muslim women prefer long, loose, fully lined and long sleeved. This can call for highly creative and skilled tailoring given that the fabric 'sets' are generally produced with the Hindu majority community dress code in mind – short sleeves, and body-fitting.**

she can buy find and buy there and at cheap prices, which she could then afford to subsequently sell upon her return for just 300 – 400 rupees per set. Selling to the more sophisticated upper middle classes and a mixed clientele, Nasreen also tries to satisfy the local Muslim demand for both striking display and a more subtle aesthetic. She maintained that Thai manufacturers:

... know better than Indians how to match colours and make nice things. The Chinese also. If you go to Dubai and start looking around at fabrics, you will buy Arabian or Chinese, and never want the Indian stuff. If it is blue and yellow, the Chinese will match exactly the right subtle shades of blue and yellow; the Indian one will be too bright, jazzy, too loud. Indians do not understand colour or subtlety.

Nasreen echoes then Kuldova's point that even high-end consumers in India acquire bright fabrics. Nasreen's upper middle-class boutique clientele, the tastes of whom she nudges towards subtlety, stand apart from most locals, who demand the bright colours and strong designs which the S M Street small bazaar shops happily stock. I have written in more detail more elsewhere about the insistence upon heavy work (embroidery, stones, beads) and the fondness for bold colours and synthetic fabrics that seem to be part that which what distinguishes 'Muslim style', something which seemed to me to be most apparent among unsophisticated Muslims from rural areas or working class beach-side communities, but which was for sure generalised among Muslims in contrast to Christians and Hindus (Osella 2007). Higher-end shopkeepers sometimes lamented to me that even their middle-class Muslim customers share this subaltern 'flashy' aesthetics:

They come here, loads of them, in a jeep, look at our pieces, and say 'oh, can't you put a bit more work on it?' It is a *designer piece*, it is done to a style, but they have no sense of style at all; they just want to see lots of work, to show the money: it is just dressing to show off. And it does not look nice ... they just want a very heavy work piece – this is *their* idea of what looks nice. They have so much cash that they do not care at all about the price; actually, they *want* to spend more, they want a high price.

Mid and mid-upper market retailers buy from Bombay and Bangalore; bottom-end retailers buy from nearby Tamil Nadu and cheap Gujarat. Calicut's clothing market is highly segmented and there is a price range for everyone, but these hierarchies can also be subverted. Distinction is a difficult game to play in Calicut.

There are many embroidery classes around Calicut, especially in the Muslim stronghold around the bazaar, in which lower-middle class Muslim women learn to decorate fabric themselves in order to cut costs and for the finished product to still appear unique and cutting edge in dress. I joined a class for the six months it took me to learn 'simple machine embroidery'. More advanced students move onto regional Indian styles, such as Kutch work, and the most advanced learn to do the sort of hand-embroidery that the high-end boutiques sell. In this way too, women can enhance a disappointingly low level of work on a set hemline, and can customise an individual 'look'.

One middle-class woman who knew about my research asked me, critically, "We have social functions all the time also, but we don't wear something new every time; yet they [i.e. the lower middle and working-class Muslims] do – how can they do this? How much money are they spending?" What she and other outsiders may not realise is that she was thinking of buying a 'worked' fabric piece from a retailer at Rs 900 (rupees), then paying a further Rs 300 to get it stitched. Yet a woman with menfolk in the trade (which means almost any women living around the bazaar) can get cloth free or at wholesale rate, perhaps Rs 250 for something otherwise sold at Rs 900. If she then sews it up and embellishes the fabric herself, she has the outfit ready at a far lower cost. When we see a woman, we may think she is wearing Rs 500, but it may actually have been done for Rs 150. Women with men in the rag trade can afford lots of clothes, and enjoy making the most of this privilege, an affordable luxury which allows them to maximise their desires for lavish display and making strong fashion statements (Vanessa Maher 1987).





**Fig 12: A party-wear outfit**

Women hope to find bold and newly-fashionable shades and colour combinations, heavy embellishment, and patterns along the hem rather than the neckline. Calicut women do not generally care about fabric quality, preferring their cash to be spent on the visible component of the work.

As women from a community with a history of trade going back for centuries, these women are also expert shoppers and share knowledge of trends, prices and good retail outlets. As networks are very tightly knit, knowledge is deep. Women enjoy being well turned out and, rather than using their insider knowledge and discounts to cut the cost of dressing, they use it to extend the amount and lavishness of the outfits that they and their children can wear.

### **Children's clothes and the heights of ishtyle**

Glamour tends to shower upon particular bodies. In this instance, where negative stereotypes, like the excessively free and inappropriately glamorous Arab/North Indian woman, warn about the dangers of excessive attractiveness, it is specifically the bodies of pre-teen girls which become safe spaces for fantasies of luxury and beauty. Upon reflection, we realise that the pre-adolescent girl holds a special place: in that she inhabits exactly that cultural space where the feminine is particularly highly marked, but where sexuality has not broken through

to public display and therefore requires regulation and containment. Desires for exuberant display can, and do, reach their peak here.

As we have seen above, it is certainly not the case that older girls and women do not participate in fashion. Having said that, a lot of what appears as Bombay movie high style is clearly simply not modest for an older female, whatever her community. South Indian 'simplicity' and modesty are jealously maintained throughout all religious communities in socially conservative Kerala.

Calicut Muslim families mostly consider sleeveless attire as improper for girls over around the age of five, and there is a gradual shift towards modest (*decent*) dress, using the headscarf consistently by puberty, full covering by the age of 16. So we have an interesting pattern whereby two, three and four year-old girls are allowed to adopt the most cutting edge fashions, ones that are worn by adult women in the movies and by teenagers and younger women in Indian metro cities.

Families commonly spend more on the *party wear* item for their small girl than for the adult women's clothing. A girl's party *salwar* will often be more elaborate in its work; more fashionable; a prestigious branded ready-made item from Bombay. At Eid, I have seen men and boys get a new shirt, pants and shoes; mothers get one or two new outfits and a pair of shoes; while small daughters receive four or five new outfits, with several pairs of shoes and matching fashion jewellery: hair-slides, bangles and so on. The total expenditure on girl's clothes is often the greatest Eid expense.

Adults and children give full rein to fantasy dressing when buying *party wear* for their small girls – the fancy outfits to be worn at weddings or functions – such as one of Calicut Muslims' endless round of social dinners.<sup>10</sup> The fun of playing with hyper-femininity, with no risk of sexuality, is what the body of a small girl can offer. When a Bollywood fashion appeared for a one shouldered top, with one half sleeve and one small strap, it was small girls under five who appeared at weddings dressed in shoulder-revealing salwar tops. Another style which came into local children's clothes-shops (again, via Bombay-wholesalers and copied from a hit Hindi movie) consisted of hugely flared trousers, worn with three-quarter length flimsy over-coats, of perhaps semi-transparent lu-

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<sup>10</sup> Hosting lavish dinners at home for extended family and friends is another singular aspect of the visions of opulence still practiced in this community, despite increasing financial difficulties in maintaining hospitality.



**Fig 13a:**  
**Typical Calicut clothing shop**

This was an entry in a henna hand painting competition run by an NGO in the Muslim area, and shows what Calicut Muslim women believe to be a more 'Arab' style, in that it uses heavy lines rather than lighter cross-hatching, completely covers the fingertips, and avoids any figurative motifs (flowers, hearts) in favour of strictly geometric patterning.



**Fig 13b:**  
**Girl's ready-made party wear**

In Calicut, this kind of outfit is understood as a kind of ethnicised 'dressing up'; it is named as a frock and is associated by Muslims with Christian community dress styles.



**Fig 13c:**  
**Girl's ready-made party wear**

This is a more traditional style, given a fashion twist. The sleevelessness makes it unsuitable for girls over about age 5 or 6.

rex or shimmering taffeta, worn over a short top with spaghetti straps. Muslim girls up to the age of eight or nine were to be seen going around in this style (they didn't remove the overcoat to completely show their shoulders).

Many women also stitch their own, and their children's, clothes. Mumtaz and her sister showed me *party* outfits that they had recently made. Made for a seven-year old, was a pink crepe long skirt with a one-shoulder top and shawl, finished with bead and sequin work; and a floor-length red chiffon dress, with silver embroidered flowers. Lastly, they showed me a fantastic piece in red velvet, intended for a 6 month-old niece. The outfit consisted of a mini-skirt and strappy top; the mini-skirt had a split at the back and the top was one-shouldered. It was finished with sequin-work, patterns of individual silver sequins, each sewn in with one blue bead in the centre.

## Conclusion

Although the heyday of Calicut's trade wealth has long since passed, memories of the (real and imagined) luxury living in that period blend with an Indian-wide love of heavy embellishment and with a specific subaltern aesthetic, and all compound in a relatively free-spending stance towards personal consumption, which expects plenty of shine and show for its money. Muslim women's preferences in gold jewellery are for large, hollow pieces which look heavy; in shoes, for high-heels and embellishment; and in clothing, the latest and most directional trends, where fabrics shimmer, have bold colours, and are heavily embroidered with work.

The tiny girl – in her Bollywood party-wear style, heavy costume jewellery, hair decorations and high heels – is the epitome of 'Muslim style'. On from this matter, I'd rather not see tiny girls' Bollywood high-style as a displaced or vicarious display, in any negative sense, nor as reflecting mother's thwarted desires. As I have shown, mothers themselves engage energetically in glamour and fashion: from lavish hennaed hands to glitzy platform shoes.

A productive tension between Islamic reformist ideals and aspirations of glamour settle into an interesting distinctive style, where a continuous thread of an orientation towards luxury and opulence draws a highly specific community habitus and set of sedimented embodied memories together, with the contemporary fantasies pouring in from all sides. Something worthy of reiteration, as I have argued elsewhere (2007), is that it is not only Muslim girls who have a dress code; all Ker-



ala women work within social expectations of decency, modesty and appropriate femininity - just as women everywhere tend to do. Islamic dress codes and South Indian modesty norms allow Calicut women to have a more critical relationship to clothing styles than women whose engagement with fashion is channelled only through what is offered by the market, and then broadcast via positive endorsements presented in women's magazines.

Moreover, quite simply, small girls are permitted to go the whole fashion five-miles into fantasy wear under local modesty expectations, and so they do. However, more importantly, it is not simply modesty or Islamic reformism which displaces the highest expression of 'Muslim style' onto small girls. I would argue that we have to see the Bombay movie high-style fantasy fashion as akin to the 'Disney princess' flouncy net and satin long frocks that pre-pubescent girls in the USA and Europe often love to wear. Such extreme fantasy wear may certainly tell us something about specific forms of femininity and glamour in a particular setting. Nevertheless, at the same time, very few adult woman (outside cosplay scenes, Lunning 2011) would choose to wear one of those Disney-style pink flouncy outfits. In just the same way, Bombay fashion - from a Southern stance - appears as exaggerated fantasy wear, which settles more happily on kids than upon adult women.

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