



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The point of death: Religious conversion and the self in South India

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## Abstract

To explore the importance of death and the dead to the study of religious conversion, this article adopts an ethnographic and comparative approach to the lives and deaths of two male Muslim converts in the southwest Indian state of Kerala. Paying attention to the treatment of their dead bodies, which were donated and cremated, contrary to their wishes for an Islamic funeral, and the problematization of their proper names, it is argued that death is the point at which selves are made/remade. Death provides the opportunity for the dead, their kin, friends, and state institutions to make claims about religious identities and familial relations. I conclude that these multiple and often contradictory stances converted the dead into religiously indeterminate figures, though their belonging to their kin was successfully established.

**Keywords:** Death; religious conversion; kinship; home; names and naming

## Introduction

This article poses a question: What is the significance of death and the dead to the study of religious conversion? The desire of Simon and Joy alias Najmal Babu, two male Muslim converts in the Malayalam-speaking southwest Indian state of Kerala, for an Islamic funeral was thwarted when Simon’s Catholic kin donated his body for medical research and Joy’s ‘non-believer’ kin cremated him. While Simon’s kin argued that his name pointed to a Christian identity, the names Joy alias Najmal Babu were recruited by Joy’s kin to argue that he was a ‘non-believer’. While some of their friends and comrades challenged the actions of their kin, various state institutions such as the courts and the police backed the family to a certain extent. I focus on this clash of stances—between the dead and the living, and among the living—and its consequences. Joy and Simon wanted an Islamic funeral so as to be permanently identified as Muslims. They wished for a continuity between their chosen religious lives and deaths. Death was to affirm their embrace of Islam. Others, especially their non-Muslim kin, also understood the pertinence of death. For them, the conversions of Simon and Joy introduced fissures in their families. The kin saw death as a chance to fix these divides

by denying them an Islamic funeral. What was done to their bodies—their donation and cremation, the routes they traversed and their last resting places, the exclusion of non-kin in rendering care for the dead—and names were meant to create/de-create their religious selves and their belonging to the kin. Death provided the opportunity to make a point, an assertion about who the dead were. Simon and Najmal Babu were made/unmade at the point of their deaths. ‘In other words, human essence...can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story.’<sup>1</sup> However, the ascriptions of personhood succeed only partially. Whereas attachment to the kin could be successfully claimed, Simon and Joy did not become a Christian or a ‘non-believer’ respectively. The mode and manner of the disposal of their bodies and the controversies and rival interpretations of their names made them into ambiguous figures whose religious affiliations could not be clearly ascertained.

I read the stories of Najmal Babu and Simon by relating them to the anthropological research on religious conversion and death, paying special attention to the Indian context. I am particularly interested in bringing together variations on two themes that are shared by these two broad fields: continuity and rupture. Since Robbins’ path-breaking essay on conversion to Christianity and the question of temporality it foregrounded, ‘conversion-as-rupture...has now become a prevailing orthodoxy in the anthropology of Christianity and religion’.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, research on conversion to Islam among European women has pointed out the limits of the very concept of conversion and recommended ‘reversion’ because ‘Islam [was] not something new and strange but an originary and familiar religion’.<sup>3</sup> In the Indian context, conversions are seen as socially divisive and an outcome of brainwashing (implying a lack of volition on the part of the convert), though these concerns are voiced more in relation to religious changes to Christianity or Islam—especially by the so-called lower castes or outcastes (Dalits), women, and tribal groups—and less to Hinduism.<sup>4</sup> The anthropology of death, since Hertz’s seminal intervention, has observed the diverse ways in which life goes on, despite death.<sup>5</sup> Following Durkheim, Hertz stressed that it was imperative for society to repair the tear in its fabric caused by the death of a member. The discontinuity theme in death studies can also be approached through Hertz: What are the effects of death becoming a ‘mere destruction’ rather than ‘a transition’?<sup>6</sup> A ‘proper burial’ or a

<sup>1</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The human condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958/1994), p. 193.

<sup>2</sup>Joel Robbins, ‘Continuity thinking and the problem with Christian culture: Belief, time and the anthropology of Christianity’, *Current Anthropology*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2007, pp. 5–38. The citation is from Liana Chua, ‘Conversion, continuity, and moral dilemmas among Christian Bidayus in Malaysian Borneo’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2012, p. 513.

<sup>3</sup>Karin Van Nieuwkerk (ed.), *Women embracing Islam: Gender and conversion in the West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), p. 109; cf. Mikaela Rogozen-Soltar, ‘Murabitun religious conversion: Time, depth and scale among Spain’s new Muslims’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 92, no. 2, 2019, pp. 509–539.

<sup>4</sup>Sathianathan Clarke and Rowena Robinson (eds), *Religious conversion in India: Modes, motivations, and meanings* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); Nathaniel Roberts, *To be cared for: The power of conversion and the foreignness of belonging in an Indian slum* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the fold: Conversion, modernity and belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup>Robert Hertz, *Death and right hand* (London: Cohen and West, 1960); Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (eds), *Death and the regeneration of life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Anya Bernstein, *The future of immortality: Remaking life and death in contemporary Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup>Hertz, *Death and right hand*, p. 48.

proper funeral is ‘crucial to peaceful living and to an orderly universe’.<sup>7</sup> Tracing the history of cremation in modern India, Arnold, drawing on Parry, writes that the practice is inextricably linked to notions of sacrifice wherein the corpse is offered to Agni, the Hindu god of fire, to ensure the continuity of the cycle of life.<sup>8</sup> Copeman and Reddy, on the other hand, show that the absence of a ritualistic funeral and donating the body index a ‘instructional idiom’ that rejects religious superstition and promotes scientific modernity.<sup>9</sup> The continuity-discontinuity dyad is useful as a heuristic device that helps structure and read the ethnographic data in this article. But I desist from totalizing the binary and show how categories such as proximity-distance and publicity-secrecy coexist with it as important analytical frames in understanding the ethnography. The self has been a locus in the study of religious transformation, with shifts in language use and sartorial choices indexing the adoption or rejection of faiths.<sup>10</sup> But these are stories of the living. This article hews close to works that have looked at the self from the vantage point of death but departs from them in tying the question of self to religious conversion.<sup>11</sup> In life we ‘disclose ourselves piecemeal’; death terminates that process, summing up everything.<sup>12</sup>

### A ‘born-again’ Muslim

Simon, aged 86, died in a hospital in Aathiyoor in January 2018. A few hours later his body was donated to a public hospital’s anatomy department. The incident was soon in the media because Simon had identified himself as a Muslim and had wished his body be buried according to Islamic rites in the graveyard belonging to the mosque near his house.<sup>13</sup> A retired schoolteacher, he had converted to Islam in August 2000. He had been a Catholic, was married, and had four children—two daughters and two sons. Only he converted to Islam, while the rest of his family remained Catholic. In September 2000 he made a will/declaration stating that he desired to be buried in the graveyard of the nearby mosque. It was signed by him and two of his children. However, in December 2017 another will/declaration was made on stamped paper declaring that

<sup>7</sup>Katherine Verdery, *The political lives of dead bodies: Reburial and postsocialist change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 43; Heonik Kwon, *After the massacre: Commemoration and consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>David Arnold, *Burning the dead: Hindu nationhood and the global construction of Indian tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021); Jonathan Parry, *Death in Banaras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup>Jacob Copeman and Deepa S. Reddy, ‘The didactic death: Publicity, instruction, and body donation’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2012, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup>Simon Coleman, ‘Materializing the self: Words and gifts in the construction of charismatic Protestant identity’, in *The Anthropology of Christianity*, (ed.) Fenella Cannell (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 163–184; Karin Van Nieuwkerk, ‘“Uncovering the self”: Doubts, spirituality and unveiling in Egypt’, *Religions*, vol. 12, 2020, 20, available at <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010020>, [accessed 12 July 2023].

<sup>11</sup>Robert Desjarlais, *Subject to death: Life and loss in a Buddhist world* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); David William Cohen and E. S. Atiano Odhiambo, *Burying SM: The politics of knowledge and the sociology of power in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992).

<sup>12</sup>Arendt, *The human condition*, p. 194.

<sup>13</sup>T. Ramavarman, ‘Body of convert caught in a row over funeral’, *The Times of India*, published online on 12 February 2018, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/body-of-convert-caught-in-a-row-over-funeral/articleshow/62878551.cms>, [accessed 12 July 2023].

his body should be donated. It said nobody, including family members, could claim the body and he entrusted his wife and elder son to make the arrangements for the donation. The document was signed by Simon, his wife, two daughters, and a son.

Soon after the donation, two sets of petitions were filed before the Kerala High Court demanding the release of Simon's body—one by the *mahallu* to which Simon had belonged and another by a set of his Muslim friends.<sup>14</sup> The latter alleged that the state hospital's possession of his body was 'illegal and without authority'.<sup>15</sup> The petitioners noted that Simon, who had changed his name to Muhammad before his hajj pilgrimage, was until his death 'a Muslim and was living in accordance with Islamic religion'.<sup>16</sup> The two petitions claimed that his original will desiring an Islamic burial was subverted by the document pledging to donate his body. The signature in the latter was forged, it was alleged. Simon's family, who had filed a counter-affidavit replying to the petitions, argued that 'a learned man, Simon had some affiliation with Islam during his earlier days and also wrote some books about Islam. But during his last ages [sic] he had no affiliation to Islam and used to live as a Christian.'<sup>17</sup> The court dismissed the petitions demanding the release of Simon's body and said there was no reason to doubt the authenticity of the signatures on the document made a month before Simon's death. The court noted that several official records—a state-issued identity card, death certificate, etc.—produced by his family carried the name Simon, and the signature made in the will matched that which was in the document made to donate his body. The court concluded: 'Moreover, merely because the deceased has written certain articles with respect to Islamic teachings etc. that by itself is not a conclusive document to substantiate the case of the petitioners.'<sup>18</sup>

Among the documents submitted to the court by the petitioners were excerpts from his memoir in which Simon spoke about his path to conversion and experiences as a Muslim. He wrote that becoming Muslim was the 'most intelligent and wise decision that he ever made in his life'.<sup>19</sup> It came after a long process of research, writing, and reflection in which he compared the Bible with the Quran, and Catholicism with Islam. In his memoirs and other works, he compared almost every aspect of Islam and Christianity—their scriptures, rituals, and theology—to underscore the superiority of the former. Noting that 'he died in Christianity to be born again as a Muslim',<sup>20</sup> Simon stressed that his 'conversion to Islam occurred after a personal study of the

<sup>14</sup>*Mahallu* (from the Arabic *mahallah* and the Urdu/Hindu *mohallah*) denotes a basic unit of Islamic social organization in a neighbourhood clustered around a Juma mosque (one in which Friday prayers are offered regularly). Simon's *mahallu*, which is controlled by the Jamaat-e-Islami, initially supported the decision of the family in the interest of avoiding conflict between Christians and Muslims. They changed their position after criticism mounted among Muslims. See Ramavarman, 'Body of convert caught in a row over funeral'.

<sup>15</sup>*Shameer and Others v. The Superintendent, Medical College Hospital, Thrissur and Others*, WP (C) no. 4674 of 2018, High Court of Kerala, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>*Shameer and Others v. The Superintendent, Medical College Hospital Thrissur and Others*, WP (C) 4674 of 2018, High Court of Kerala, Counter Affidavit of Respondents 6 to 10, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup>*Shameer and Others v. The Superintendent, Thrissur Government Medical College Hospital and Others*, WP (C) Nos. 3902 and 4674 of 2018, High Court of Kerala, 12 April 2018, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup>E. C. Simon Master, *Ente Islam Anubhavangal* (Kozhikode: Islamic Publishing House, 2004), p. 10.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23.

Holy Qur'an and was not a result of force or inducement'.<sup>21</sup> Conversion did not lead to a change of name. He continued to be known as Simon, or Simon Master (a reference to his career as a schoolteacher), among his friends, colleagues, and family. All his publications carried that name. In a video-recorded interview made a few years before he died, he said: 'Earlier my name was Simon, and I continued to be known by that name... While applying for a passport before going for hajj in 2002—I needed to be a Muslim to perform the pilgrimage—I gave Muhammad. But it did not become popular.'<sup>22</sup> He recalled that his relationship with his kin went through a rough patch following his conversion. His family, especially his brothers and sisters, were aghast at his decision. They tried to dissuade him, argued with him, and even threatened to break all contact with him.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, he fondly records how he was welcomed into the fold of 'Islamic brotherhood'.<sup>24</sup> When he wanted to become a member of the local mosque, he did not have a family under which his name could be added in the register. Then one of his Muslim friends asked that Simon be included in his family's list.

His wife and children were much more understanding of his conversion. He never left his family or they him. When he went to the mosque to recite the formula of conversion, one of his sons and two grandchildren accompanied him.<sup>25</sup> Simon asserted that his family was a 'good model' because 'for Christmas his brothers and sisters visited him and he also visited them...I don't object to celebrating Christmas in my house...My family also does not object to celebrating Islamic festivals by cooking meat...They participate...Participation is only in sharing food; there is no restriction in that.'<sup>26</sup> Although he underscored the cordial relationship that existed between him and his wife and children, Simon also spoke with a tinge of sadness about his 'misfortune' that his family did not choose to follow Islam. 'It is an unfulfilled wish. It might happen someday. I don't know when the creator will decide that... It is there in all [my] prayers.'<sup>27</sup> In a poignant conversation between Simon and his wife, reproduced in his memoirs, they disagreed about who was more tolerant and understanding in the marital relationship since his conversion. His wife was certain that it was her, but Simon said he was more understanding because he was breaking an important 'religious commandment' by continuing to be her husband. Islam required that as a Muslim he should be married to a Muslim, while his wife was a Catholic.<sup>28</sup>

### The lives of Najmal Babu alias Joy

In October 2018, another convert to Islam—Najmal Babu alias Joy—died in Aathiyoor.<sup>29</sup> He was 69 and a bachelor. His body was cremated on his brother's property a day after

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>22</sup>Aslam Kongad, 'Interview with Simon Master', unedited video footage in three files, n.d. Private collection.

<sup>23</sup>Simon Master, *Ente Islam Anubhavangal*, pp. 21–30.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>26</sup>Kongad, 'Interview with Simon Master'.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Simon Master, *Ente Islam Anubhavangal*, pp. 51–52.

<sup>29</sup>Although Simon and Joy lived in the same town, there seems to have been no regular contact between them. But when Simon was denied an Islamic funeral, Najmal Babu commented on Facebook that the 'cruelty [*krooratha*] meted out to Simon Master scares [*pedippukkunnundu*] me'.

his death. The cremation came at the end of a long day of disputes, negotiations, street protests, and police intervention because it went against Joy's wish to be buried in the graveyard of an important local mosque. Less than two years before his conversion, in December 2013, he had written a letter to the imam of the mosque requesting that he be buried there. Noting that he was not a 'believer [*vishwasi*]', Joy added: 'We do not get the opportunity to "elect" [*thirinjedukkuvan*] our birth. Isn't it appropriate [*shari*] that death and what happens after death [*maranatharam*] are left to our choice [*ishtam*]?'<sup>30</sup> After his death Joy's body was taken to his brother's house from the hospital where he had died. His family—he was the youngest of ten siblings born in a Hindu Ezhava family, an erstwhile 'untouchable' caste—wanted to cremate him on their land where other family members had also been cremated. Najmal Babu was a well-known figure because of his past as a leader of the far-left Naxalite movement which called for an armed insurrection against the Indian state, activism in support of several progressive causes, and his writings. He had a wide circle of famous and influential friends and comrades, several of whom made futile attempts to negotiate with the family to prevent the cremation. Meanwhile, the mosque issued a brief statement that they were willing to bury his body if it was handed over to them. Joy's body was taken to a palliative care home, the Health Care Institute (HCI), which he had helped establish and where he had lived for the last couple of decades of his life (he did not own any land or a house), and later to a *maidan* (open space) for public viewing. Hundreds paid their last respects. When it was time for the body to be removed to his brother's house, Joy's friends and comrades tried to block the ambulance, raising slogans to honour his last wish to be buried in the mosque graveyard. Although some of his friends had filed a formal representation with the state government to prevent his cremation, the police used force to remove the protestors and handed over the body to his family.

Joy's death and cremation garnered much more public attention than did Simon's. Memorial meetings were held, reports appeared in the news media, and edited volumes commemorating his life were published.<sup>31</sup> Several prominent politicians, intellectuals, and activists criticized what the family had done. However, not all agreed on what should instead have been done with Joy's body. While some wanted him to be buried in the mosque graveyard, others preferred HCI as his last resting place. Part of this disagreement was motivated by how to interpret his conversion. Announcing his conversion on his Facebook page and at a media conference in April 2015, Joy had declared it was a 'political statement' in solidarity with Indian Muslims who were the main targets of Islamophobic 'Hindutva fascism' led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).<sup>32</sup> He said in an interview explaining his conversion, which had occurred a year after the RSS-affiliated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in India in 2014: 'I am dedicating my remaining life and energy to the resistance against fascism. When I requested to be buried in the mosque I dedicated my body to that cause. When

<sup>30</sup>Teyen Joy, 'Letter to Sulaiman Moulavi', 13 December 2013. Received on WhatsApp on 20 August 2019.

<sup>31</sup>A. M. Nadwi (ed.), *Charithram Chodikkum: Najmal Babuvinte Qabarevide?* (Kozhikode: Readers Network, 2018); K. M. Gafoor (ed.), *Teyen Joy: Ormapusthakam* (Kozhikode: Pusthaka Prasadhaka Sangham, 2019; Kindle).

<sup>32</sup>MediaOne News, 'T. N. Joy becomes a Muslim and changes name to Najmal Babu (press meet)', published online on 14 April 2015, YouTube Video, 9:19, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkpg34n80tw&t=4s>, [accessed 12 July 2023].

I became a part of Muslim society I committed my soul and remaining life to it....<sup>33</sup> Rejecting claims that his conversion was for ‘publicity’, Joy added: ‘This is the beginning of a journey towards the compassionate God. I am at peace as I am a believer in after-life. Allah knows my heart. He will be compassionate towards me as I am not compromising on my positions.’<sup>34</sup>

These words, however, did not lay to rest debates about the precise nature of his conversion. Venu, an old comrade of Joy, and the latter’s elder brother, Madhu, told me that his conversion had its roots in an attack on him by RSS goondas in 2014. Joy was ‘deeply hurt’, said Venu, and the latter felt that Joy’s journey to Islam began there. Madhu said the attack triggered a desire ‘to teach the [RSS] a lesson, to mock them’. Several of his friends observed that he did not live as a Muslim in the religious way—praying, fasting, performing the hajj, etc. Because of this some asserted that his conversion was not religious, pointing to Joy’s words that it was a ‘political statement’. They disagreed with his cremation because it went against his wishes, not because they agreed that he had become a practising Muslim. These friends also noted that Najmal Babu had taken on many identities throughout his life—he was a Naxalite who had left the movement after facing extreme torture in police custody during the Emergency (1975–1976); he described himself as ‘beauty consultant’ because he had trained to be a cosmetologist; he studied Indian classical music (instrumental and vocal) and participated in public concerts; and he had studied tantric rituals. Simultaneously, he participated in a wide range of political struggles: he was a regular speaker at political meetings organized by the powerful communist parties in Kerala (especially the Communist Party of India-Marxist) and also those organized by Islamist groups like the Jamaat-e-Islami; he fought for the rights of sex workers; campaigned for a state pension for those who were imprisoned during the Emergency; and, just a few days before his death, he stood in solidarity with a group of Catholic nuns protesting against the Church hierarchy for defending a bishop accused of raping a nun. The many lives that Joy lived, claimed several of his friends, showed that he could never be a Muslim in the conventional sense. However, from an Islamic point of view, none of this mattered, averred the former imam of the mosque to whom Joy had addressed his letter requesting burial there. Since there was no evidence that he had rejected any ‘obligatory practices or faith’ of the religion, the Muslim community considered Joy to be a Muslim. It was their collective duty to wash the body, shroud, and bury it, the imam told me.

There were post-mortem disagreements about whether his adopted name indexed his religious identity. Sometimes he wanted to be called by the name he adopted after his conversion and he did change his Facebook profile to Najmal Babu, but on other occasions he introduced himself as Joy.<sup>35</sup> A book of his writings published after his conversion identified the author as Joy, but a column he wrote for a journal carried the byline Najmal Babu. Joy’s brother Madhu told me that Joy had told him he adopted the name Najmal Babu for two reasons. One was that he liked the famous singer Najmal,

<sup>33</sup>T. N. Joy, ‘Islam sveekaranam fashisathinethiraya ente rashtreeya prasthavana’, *Prabodhanam Varika*, 1 May 2015, available at <https://www.prabodhanam.net/article/4155/221>, [accessed 12 July 2023].

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>T. R. Ramesh, ‘Oru veedinum pakamavatha oral’, *Maruvakku: Rashtreeya Samskarika Masika*, vol. 3, no. 10, 2018, p. 28.



and Babu was the name by which he was known among kin. In the media conference announcing his conversion Joy recalled how his father had named him 'Joy' and his uncle's daughter was named 'Aysha', and that there was no 'brouhaha' (*kolahalam*) because at that time the RSS was politically inconsequential.<sup>36</sup> He also recalled how carrying the burden of the name 'Joy', which could suggest a Christian identity in Kerala, meant that he had to attend catechism classes in the Catholic Church-run college where he had studied.<sup>37</sup> His names and their religious connotations divided his friends and comrades. One group organized a memorial event with the name Joy, while another convened a meeting with the name Najmal Babu, alleging that the former event was meant to erase his identity as a Muslim.

Almost all his friends and comrades, however, were united in condemning what Joy's kin did. Several I spoke to stressed that Joy hardly had any regular interaction with his kin. They also did not care for him or support him financially. His friends took care of him; they were his family, so to speak. Some of my interlocutors disconnected his desire to be buried and his conversion, which had occurred about two years after he wrote the letter requesting an Islamic burial. The letter originated in the context of a personal crisis of homelessness and lack of intimacy with his kin. They recalled that when Joy's nephew died he could not be cremated on his property as it was too small; eventually his funeral was held in a public cremation ground. Ameer, a close friend, told me that Joy had lamented that 'he [Joy] did not have a space to cremate his body' implying that he did not own property to do so. A few days after this incident, Joy wrote the letter to the mosque. Joy often described himself a 'proud beggar' and his living space in the palliative care centre his 'burrow'. In an interview given soon after he sent the letter, Joy explained that 'adoption of Muslim rituals was part of his political responsibility to stand in solidarity with the victims [of fascism]'.<sup>38</sup> Homelessness is a leitmotiv nevertheless. In a memorandum he submitted to the state requesting financial support, he wrote that 'he did not have a place to live', he had 'many relatives but it was pointless', and he survived because two friends 'sponsored' him.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, Madhu fondly recalled his brother's younger days as a curious, precocious child who went on to become a committed Marxist. He affirmed the intimacy among them: 'Everybody [in the family] liked Joy...He cared for everybody...The family is really proud of him.' Joy was a bearer of the family's political and social legacy because his father, brothers, and sisters were non-religious, and either full-time activists or fellow travellers of one of the two mainstream communist parties in Kerala. Madhu said: 'Joy was not a Muslim, neither was he a Hindu. He was not a believer, like the rest of us [his kin]...We were not determined to cremate him. It was not because he was a Hindu that he had to be burned. He was dead so the body had to be cremated—that was our only intention. I did not have any objection to his body being taken to the mosque...But we had bought the wood [for the cremation] and arranged everything here [on family grounds]'

<sup>36</sup>MediaOne News, 'T. N. Joy becomes a Muslim and changes name to Najmal Babu'.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Teyen Joy, *Aatmagathavum Prakashavum* (Muziris: Sooryakanthi, 2014), p. 94.

<sup>39</sup>Teyen Joy, *Anubandham* (Kodungallur: Bhoomika Trust, 2007), pp. 94–95.



## What's in a name?

The names of Simon and Joy alias Najmal Babu performed and carried various and shifting tasks and significations during their pre- and post-conversion lives and after their deaths. Conversion and death mark important continuities and discontinuities, but in different ways. Names are changed and/or retained with new denotations after conversion. Such onomastic polysemy and evolution, however, were deliberately undermined post-mortem with rival claims obfuscating their identities.

Simon said that he had changed his name to Muhammad Haji before he went for hajj, but this name did not gain much public acceptance.<sup>40</sup> But no other official document carried a name other than Simon, except perhaps for his passport, which has not come to light. Equally significant, all his writings carried the name Simon Master, by which he was popularly known. This in no way obscured his public religious identity as a Muslim. In fact, the name, rather than being a problem, was an asset in circulation. A person bearing what is generally perceived in Kerala as a Christian-sounding name writing for Islam and rejecting Christianity added credibility to the task of Islamic religious propagation. A former Christian was endorsing the superiority of Islam and inviting his publics to embrace the faith. Here the name Muhammad is less efficient in religious publicity than Simon. Another point needs to be made here: the editions of his books published while he was alive did not mention anything about his religious conversion in their author biography. He was described as a retired schoolteacher who had studied the Bible by enrolling as a remote student with a college in the United Kingdom. And they added that Simon's father had known much about Islam and had Muslim friends.<sup>41</sup> But a collection of articles narrating his experience of the hajj pilgrimage, published posthumously, underscored that he was 'a scholar and a missionary' who had converted to Islam after undertaking a close comparative study of Islam and Christianity.<sup>42</sup>

The use of names to highlight a past that had been overcome but was still pertinent for religious publicity was not something peculiar to the case of Simon. Two examples of Malayalee male Muslim converts include Saeed ibn George, or Saeed the son of George, and Abdurahman, who maintains a Facebook profile under the name Unnikrishnan Unni. Both are Islamic missionaries who are active on social media. In an interview Saeed spoke about his conversion: 'I was a Christian because my parents were Christians. But I became a Muslim because I chose Islam.'<sup>43</sup> He distinguished between 'born Muslims' and those who chose Islam after 'fully realizing that Islam was the only way to salvation...'.<sup>44</sup> In a Facebook post, Unnikrishnan Unni stressed that 'forced conversion' was not endorsed by Islam as the process began with 'a change of heart

<sup>40</sup>A newspaper report, published when Simon visited Saudi Arabia to perform the hajj and which was added as a court exhibit by the petitioners, noted that after his conversion he was called 'E. C. Mohammed'. P. K. Abdul Ghafour, 'Christians urged to learn more about Islam', *Arab News*, 25 April 2003, available at <https://www.arabnews.com/node/231079>, [accessed 25 July 2023].

<sup>41</sup>Simon Master, *Ente Islam Anubhavangal*.

<sup>42</sup>E. C. Simon Master, *Vishudhiyilekke Oru Theerthayathra* (Kozhikode: Islamic Publishing House, 2018).

<sup>43</sup>Faisal Arafa, 'Enthanu Islam? njan engane Muslimayi? Interview with Saeed Ibn George', 18 January 2017, YouTube video, 26:10, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xvGuyV9wEM>, [accessed 12 July 2023].

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

(*manassu*).<sup>45</sup> He signed the post ‘Abdurahman who was Unnikrishnan’. Onomastic choices could be read as indexing an intentional and conscious change of faith. But what was left behind had to be marked, publicized. It was not something to be concealed or forgotten. The transition from Christianity and Hinduism to Islam should be readily evident. Continuity rather than a name change was useful in religious mass publicity. Taken together, the cases of Simon, Saeed ibn George, and ‘Abdurahman who was Unnikrishnan’ are comparable to but different from what Copeman has termed ‘disidentification’ in naming practices among Indian rationalists.<sup>46</sup> Rationalists tried to disconnect the automatic links made between Indian personal names and the name-bearer’s religious/caste background by adopting names ‘purified’ of their caste and religious connotations or used those that deliberately crossed boundaries (by making a compound of Muslim and Hindu names, for example). The names of the Malayalee converts are not aimed at ‘scramble[ing] any attempt at automatic categorization’.<sup>47</sup> Instead, boundary-crossing names like Saeed ibn George or signing as ‘Abdurahman who was Unnikrishnan’ are temporal markers to stress the shedding of one religious identity and adoption of another, even as aspects of the past remain pertinent to post-conversion religious publicity. There is an excess in these names that goes beyond the fact of mere reference.<sup>48</sup>

In court, the polysemy in Simon’s name was brushed aside, and the question about his religious identity entirely bypassed. None of the arguments that the petitioners presented about his Muslim subjectivity was entertained, but neither did the judge agree with his kin and declare him a Christian. The court looked into two questions. What was the name in state-issued or approved documents? Did the signatures in the two documents—one wishing for an Islamic burial and another for body donation—match? It concluded that Simon’s signatures in the documents were not dissimilar.<sup>49</sup> Nor was there a discrepancy in his name in state documents, the court pointed out. In the eyes of the state, the name granted semiotic stability. Interestingly, the judgment cited, without commentary, that there was no consistency in the way his name was recorded across the state documents: the spelling is different (‘Saiman’/‘Simon’), initials are missing, or are omitted altogether.<sup>50</sup> None of this attracted further questions from the court. The repetitive imprecision across various documents, though some sense of phonetic continuity was evident, attested to the authenticity of Simon’s identity. Still the court refused to pronounce his religious identity—he was not declared Christian or Muslim. The court noted that a few writings on Islam did not make Simon a Muslim, but did not go so far as to endorse the family’s argument that during his ‘last ages [sic]... [Simon] used to live as a Christian’. On the other hand, it underscored the

<sup>45</sup>Unnikrishnan Unni, ‘Nirbandhitha mathaparivarthanam’, published online on 2 October 2021, Facebook.

<sup>46</sup>Jacob Copeman, ‘Secularism’s names: commitment to confusion and the pedagogy of the name’, *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 12, 2015, available at <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4012>, [accessed 12 July 2023].

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>William Mazzarella, ‘On the im/propriety of brand names’, *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 12, 2015, available at <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3986>, [accessed 12 July 2023].

<sup>49</sup>Shameer and Others v. The Superintendent, Thrissur Government Medical College Hospital and Others, WP (C) Nos. 3902 and 4674 of 2018, High Court of Kerala, 12 April 2018, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

coherence of the family as a unit in accepting their claim to his body. The court noted that the donation of his body by his ‘wife and children’, as the nearest kin, ‘satisfie[d]’ the provisions of the Kerala Anatomy Act (1957), which governed the donation of bodies in the state.<sup>51</sup> As different agents—kin, friends, state—pulled in different directions, Simon’s religious identity became illegible. Would this have happened if he was alive?

Here it is useful to reflect on Simon’s case in relation to two others concerning conversion that came before the same court. A Hindu convert to Islam, Aysha (previously Devaki), challenged the state government’s order that she needed to produce a certificate from two Islamic institutions recognized by the state to prove her conversion. She argued that this demand by the government subverted her freedom of religion. Noting that ‘the freedom of practice of religion as guaranteed in the [Indian] constitution [was] unrestricted by any qualification’ the court ruled that a ‘mere declaration of change of religion would be sufficient for the government to act upon such changes to be effected in the government records’.<sup>52</sup> The lawyer who appeared for Aysha, and also for Simon’s friends, told me the difference in these two cases was that Simon was dead and Aysha was alive. The latter merely affirmed and proved that she was a Muslim and changed her name, while Simon did not enjoy that privilege in the eyes of the law. Death made it impossible for him to act on his own behalf and created the conditions for a takeover bid. None succeeded in making him theirs in terms of his religious identity, but the opportunity for such claims was created by his absence as a living being. The court, his family—or indeed anybody—could try to fashion Simon in the way they wished, for he was not present to object or accept. While endorsement or rejection by the named subject was a crucial aspect of any procedure to give personal names, done posthumously it was no different from pointing to a star and saying ‘That is to be Alpha Centauri’.<sup>53</sup> The boundaries between person and non-person are erased. Both are dead, so to say, unable to react.

But absence alone is insufficient to make sense of the court’s stance in Simon’s case. Hadiya Ashokan, a Hindu convert to Islam in her early twenties and married to a Muslim man, was produced before the Kerala High Court in 2016 following a habeas corpus petition filed by her Hindu father. The latter alleged that his daughter was ‘forcibly’ converted to Islam and her marriage was ‘fake’ and she was ‘likely to be transported to Syria’, implying that she might join the Islamic State.<sup>54</sup> The father’s claims implicitly drew on the larger Islamophobic propaganda of ‘Love Jihad’, a widely spread but thoroughly discredited conspiracy theory that alleged a plot in which Muslim men lured non-Muslim girls into marriage in order to convert them to Islam.<sup>55</sup> The girl, however, denied all charges and asserted that she was an adult

<sup>51</sup>Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup>Aysha v. Director, Office of the Directorate of Printing Department, WP (C) no. 16515 of 2009, High Court of Kerala, 15 January 2018, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup>Cited in Mazzarella, ‘On the im/propriety of brand names’.

<sup>54</sup>Ashokan K. M. v. The Superintendent of Police, Malappuram et al, WP (C) 297 of 2016, High Court of Kerala, 24 May 2017, available at [https://indiankanoon.org/doc/105191508/?\\_cf\\_chl\\_jschl\\_tk\\_=EKNSVdpoUTfjCstw0QKSZDETzTyQ59BBolQqKk57sSc-1636120164-0-gaNycGzNCNE](https://indiankanoon.org/doc/105191508/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk_=EKNSVdpoUTfjCstw0QKSZDETzTyQ59BBolQqKk57sSc-1636120164-0-gaNycGzNCNE), [accessed 25 July 2023].

<sup>55</sup>Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, ‘Love Jihad and the governance of gender and intimacy in Hindu nationalist statecraft’, *Religions*, vol. 12, 2021, p. 1068, available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/12/1068>, [accessed 12 July 2023].

who had converted to Islam and married a man of her choice. Expressing serious doubts about the genuineness of her conversion because ‘she has not impressed us [the court] as a person who is capable of taking a firm and independent decision of her own’, the court declared her ‘alleged marriage... null and void’ and ‘granted [her] custody’ to her father. The court, importantly, cited the inconsistencies in her adopted name after conversion—‘Aasiya’, ‘Akhila Ashokan @ Aadhiya’ and ‘Hadhiya, D/O Akhil Ashokan’—in various sworn affidavits to conclude that ‘even regarding the identity of Ms. Akhila [the name given by her Hindu parents] there is no certainty’. Compared with Simon’s case, where discrepancies in spelling and incompleteness of the name across state records were of no consequence, in this case it proved to be an important point in the court deciding against the girl. Her very identity as a person was called into question, despite her presence in the court. Rather than the presence or absence of the subject, Indian institutional suspicion of conversion as an ‘intrinsicly “unsettling event” in the life of the community and a source of social conflict’ is pertinent to understand both Simon’s and Hadiya’s cases.<sup>56</sup> This assumption implicitly governed the court’s refusal to go into claims about Simon’s conversion and to be dismissive of Hadiya’s accounts of her conversion. The category of conversion fashioned the court’s thinking. In Hadiya’s case, there is also a particular gendering of conversions that undermined her testimony—accounts of *certain* selves cannot be taken as authentic.<sup>57</sup> I will return to these points below.

Joy alias Najmal Babu’s names were caught in the problem of designation—did they index a religious identity or not? While the name Najmal Babu was meant to point to his new Islamic identity, the name Joy, given by his parents, was meant to deliberately not index his Hindu-Ezhava background. That this succeeded was evident when he had to join Catholic catechism classes in his college days. His family’s progressive anti-casteist and left-wing political heritage were evident in this naming, as it was in the case of his relative who was named Aysha which suggested an Islamic identity. Following conversion he adopted a new name, but, like Simon, there was no evidence that he had followed a formal, state-approved process to notify his change of name and religion. There was a striking contrast in the work done by the names when Joy was alive and post-mortem. He was aware of the politics and the significance of the proper name but did not hesitate to use either name in his social life (recall the case of the book and the journal column, or when introducing himself). Joy said that he had brought his ‘communism with him into Islam’, implying that there were continuities between his commitments as a leftist and his conversion to Islam. His claim that his conversion was a ‘political statement’ of solidarity with the besieged Muslim community could be read together with this. Communism was not a past that was shed to embrace Islam. Politics shaped his conversion too. Before his conversion he was not an atheist (‘A Marxist cannot be an atheist or a rationalist’, he said), but neither was he a ‘believer [vishwasi]’.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Roberts, *To be cared for*, p. 116.

<sup>57</sup>In 2018, the Supreme Court of India overturned the Kerala High Court judgment and granted Hadiya Ashokan complete freedom of self-determination. But the Supreme Court also relied on gendered assumptions to reach its conclusions. Madhavi Menon, ‘Hadiya, Hinduism and heterosexuality’, *Socio-Legal Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2022, pp. 52–66, available at [https://www.sociolegalreview.com/\\_files/ugd/d56aa6\\_402d8438fe6448d684dbee919c54b4d5.pdf](https://www.sociolegalreview.com/_files/ugd/d56aa6_402d8438fe6448d684dbee919c54b4d5.pdf) [accessed 12 July 2023].

<sup>58</sup>MediaOne News, ‘TN Joy becomes a Muslim and changes name to Najmal Babu’.

Instead, there was the equivalence, or even confusion, produced by the name Joy. It achieved what Copeman's rationalists aimed for—'disidentification', or the subversion of the simple equation between names and religious identity.<sup>59</sup>

The assertions about discovering Allah and the quest for peace in the afterlife need not be seen as contradicting this. The Islamic perspective, articulated by the imam, held that since there was no evidence of Najmal Babu renouncing the faith, he was to be treated as a Muslim. Speculation has no relevance. However, others interpreted his conversion in either/or terms—as a political statement (hence non-religious or secular) or a move based on piety (religious). His simultaneous expounding of both aspects suggests his indifference to such a secular framing.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, Joy's (and Simon's) conversion abides by the demands of a secular nation-state in that converts must publicly account for their conversion (through media, interviews, etc.) and explain that they undertook the act of their own volition. The concept of conversion ordered conduct, decided what was legible, credible, and legal.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the family and some of his friends (even those who spoke out in support of an Islamic funeral) tried to minimize the significance of the name change and his conversion by calling it a *tamasha*. This word of unclear epistemology—some trace *tamasha* back to Arabic, others to Sanskrit—in everyday Malayalam can mean comedy, a joke, or entertainment.<sup>62</sup> In Maharashtra and other parts of India it is used to designate a kind of travelling folk theatre which is closely associated with the so-called lower castes. The idea of entertainment and spectacle is key to *tamasha*, pointing to its non-serious nature. The use of *tamasha* to describe Joy's change of name, conversion, and a life that encompassed many lives dismisses him as a mere entertainer, almost a clown. *Tamasha* cancels the significance of his life and conversion. The framing as *tamasha* should be read together with the problematizing of conversions to non-Hindu religions in India. Conversions, especially of the lower castes or Dalits, out of Hinduism are stereotypically interpreted as being 'concerned more with economic advancement than high religious ideals'.<sup>63</sup> There is little role for faith and hapless individuals are lured into conversion by the promise of material rewards. Conversion is not only gendered but also refracted through the category of caste. Narratives of conversion by women and the lower castes or Dalits are not taken at face value and treated with suspicion. Their agency is denied. The voices of the dead, women, and lower castes are equally irrelevant or absent. All are deemed to be unfit or unable to speak for themselves. The boundaries separating the dead from (certain categories of) the living are tenuous, at best.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup>Copeman, 'Secularism's names'.

<sup>60</sup>Talal Asad, *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003); Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning secularism: Islam, sovereignty and the rule of law in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>61</sup>Talal Asad, 'Comments on conversion', in *Conversion to modernities: The globalization of Christianity*, (ed.) Peter van der Veer (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 272.

<sup>62</sup>Shailaja Paik, 'Mangala Bhansode and the social life of *tamasha*: Caste, sexuality and discrimination in modern Maharashtra', *Biography*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2017, pp. 170–198.

<sup>63</sup>Sanal P. Mohan, *Modernity of slavery: Struggles against caste inequality in colonial Kerala* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 29; see also Rupa Viswanath, 'The emergence of authenticity talk and the giving of accounts: Conversion as movement of the soul in South India, ca. 1900', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2013, pp. 120–141.

<sup>64</sup>Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

Najmal Babu hinted at the imperative to account for one's religious change when he said that he 'dreamed of a time when this [conversion] became an ordinary incident [*sadharana sambhavam*]'.<sup>65</sup> He wanted religious conversion to be a non-event in the sense that public statements and approval by the state became unnecessary, and probing the motives behind conversion will have no relevance. This will weaken the power of conversion as a category. He could be placed in the genealogy of conversions out of Hinduism in South Asia that were protests against casteist discrimination—most famously that of Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar who converted to Buddhism in his quest for the 'construction of a moral community' based on equality.<sup>66</sup> Converting to Islam and asking for an Islamic funeral was to stand in solidarity with Muslims as a community at a time of rabid Hindu nationalist Islamophobia. Najmal Babu is also heir to movements within his community of birth, Ezhavas, which witnessed major debates in the early twentieth century about converting to Islam or Christianity to be free from Hindu casteist prejudice and violence.<sup>67</sup> Yet in some important respects he diverged from the familiar conversion-as-protest paradigm in insisting on continuities with his pre-conversion self. Continuing to use the name Joy, which he sometimes discouraged but not always, despite going public as Najmal Babu, should be read as an oblique challenge to taken-for-granted ideas about conversion as a radical break with the past which has been deeply shaped by Protestant and Pentecostal experiences.<sup>68</sup> Neither is it like the narrative of conversion to Islam as a 'reversion'.<sup>69</sup> Instead, his story is akin to ethnographies of religious conversion in India which have shown, for instance, how Tamil Catholics imagined Catholic saints in relational and hierarchical terms peculiar to Hindu divinities, and retained the ritual structure and social distinctions of caste marked by Tamil rites even as other meanings attributed to the latter were either rejected or secularized as custom.<sup>70</sup> This, in turn, connects to older histories of Catholic (especially Jesuit) theological reflections in the Tamil country to separate 'religion' from 'culture', which aimed at deciding which practices from their pasts converts could retain or ought to relinquish.<sup>71</sup> Continuity and discontinuity were not mutually exclusive.

But Najmal Babu's story is also different. He spoke about the significance of his name change but did not insist on being addressed as Najmal Babu. Perhaps the only proper name that he stopped using was Benny, his *nom de guerre* as an underground

<sup>65</sup>MediaOne News, 'T. N. Joy becomes a Muslim and changes name to Najmal Babu'.

<sup>66</sup>Viswanathan, *Outside the fold*, p. 239. Converting to Buddhism in 1956, Ambedkar recalled a vow taken in 1936 that 'though I am a Hindu born, I will not die a Hindu' and declared that Hindu funerary rituals should not be performed for him. Compare Ambedkar's words with Najmal Babu's letter to the imam requesting an Islamic burial: 'We do not get the opportunity to elect our birth. Isn't it appropriate that death and what happens after death are left to our choice?' Ambedkar's words are from Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and mission* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1954), pp. 502 and 500.

<sup>67</sup>C. V. Kunhiraman, *Ezharavude Mathaparivarthana Samrambham* (Kottayam: CMS Press, 1936); K. Sukumaran et al., *Asavarnarkku Nallathu Islam* (Kozhikode: Bahujan Sahitya Academy, 1936/2005).

<sup>68</sup>Robbins, 'Continuity thinking and the problem with Christian culture'.

<sup>69</sup>Van Nieuwkerk, *Women embracing Islam*.

<sup>70</sup>David Mosse, *The saint in the Banyan tree: Christianity and caste society in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 123 and throughout.

<sup>71</sup>Ines G. Županov, *Disputed mission: Jesuit experiments and Brahmanical knowledge in seventeenth-century India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).



Marxist revolutionary. The name disappeared from usage as he left the movement; he considered himself unfit to be a Naxalite after revealing the names of his comrades under police torture. Yet he did not give up his commitment to Marxism. The claim is that his life and the several projects he undertook—as Naxalite, musician, beauty consultant, political activist, philosopher, Muslim, writer, and so on—should be seen as an incessant process of becoming.<sup>72</sup> The differing uses of proper names are one indication of this process. There is no attempt to finish a project in a decisive, coherent sense. Nothing is left behind, as if it is over, complete, in the manner of an accomplished mission (perhaps the only exception to this was leaving the Naxalite movement, but this stemmed from a sense of personal inadequacy). Neither is there a will to consistency, nor a telos to be achieved. It was not as if there was a base of stability behind the facade of discontinuities. Instead, there is the ‘aesthetics of non-closure’ to his life and self, to translate the title of one of his Malayalam books (*Apoornathinte Bhanghi*).<sup>73</sup> Or to cite the title of another of his books, ‘not this, not that’, the translation of *Nethi... Nethi...*, a Sanskrit phrase borrowed from the Hindu philosophical discourses of the Upanishads.<sup>74</sup> The self became a project in incompleteness, in illegibility and plasticity even as he held fast to various commitments and performed diverse roles. It was deliberately designed to evade pigeonholing as this or that. Narratives of continuity and discontinuity need to be situated in this idiosyncratic politics and aesthetics of becoming. Becoming upsets established patterns of knowing and acting. Najmal Babu’s is not a simple tale of rupture and/or flow, but a more complex process in which ‘unfinishedness is both the precondition and product of becoming’.<sup>75</sup> Religious conversion is a decisive, but not the only, element in the trajectory of ‘growing out of [oneself]’.<sup>76</sup>

Post-mortem the complex and rich resonances of the proper names were obscured in conflicting claims over what they stood for. Organizers of and participants in the event to celebrate Joy’s life were accused of deliberately stripping him of his Muslim identity, which was sought to be regained with an event bearing the name Najmal Babu. His names became mutually exclusive and straightforward indexes of the person. Hence Joy was equated with his pre-Islamic past and Najmal Babu with his Islamic identity, between which no connections existed. By reiterating the name Najmal Babu he could be made into a Muslim post-mortem, especially since his last wish for an Islamic burial was unrealized. The events also reproduced an ideological divide that Joy bridged through his political praxis when he did not hesitate to align with both communists and Islamists. While the event that bore the name Joy was organized and attended mostly by his leftist and secular-liberal friends, several of the participants in the event named after Najmal Babu were sympathetic to Islamic organizations. The family found other meanings in his names. While Najmal suggested that he was an admirer of the musician who bore the same name, Babu indexed his proximity and belonging to the family as it was the name by which he was known to his kin.

<sup>72</sup>C. S. Venkiteswaran, ‘Life with a capital “L”: ennum eppozhum evideyum’, in *Teyen Joy*, (ed.) Gafoor, pp. 180–182.

<sup>73</sup>Teyen Joy, *Apoornathinte Bhanghi* (Kozhikode: Pusthaka Prasadhaka Sangham, 2017).

<sup>74</sup>Teyen Joy, *Nethi... Nethi...: Gaveshanakurippukal* (Muziris: Sooryakanthi, 2013).

<sup>75</sup>João Biehl and Peter Locke (eds), *Unfinished: The anthropology of becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. x.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xii.



There was no gap between Joy and Najmal Babu. The adoption of a new name did not signal the adoption of a religious identity, according to the family. At least half of his new name and the old name Joy became a means to assert his belonging to the family. This could also be read as the kin's reply to all those who tried to see a distance and lack of intimacy between Joy and his family. Through his names—both pre- and post-conversion—he was brought back into the family. The kin, in other words, stressed a deep continuity in intimacy between them and Joy in terms of personal relations and absence of religious adherence. These avowals about who Joy alias Najmal Babu was did not reach an agreement. There was no lasting resolution of this problem. Instead, it provoked more debates. Satchidanandan, a close friend and comrade of Joy, referred to these disputes and wished for a material transformation of Joy's body into a bunch of flowers which could be gathered by everybody.<sup>77</sup> He wrote this after recalling an episode attributed to the fifteenth-century Bhakti poet Kabir who became a bunch of flowers when Hindus and Muslims quarrelled over the rights to his body. Satchidanandan's wish may not have come true in a literal sense, and implying that what transpired after Joy's death was a simple inter-religious dispute obscures the multiple levels of the controversy (especially the interventions of the state on behalf of the family). But he is right in so far as the disagreements about who Joy was resulted in converting him into a religiously illegible figure post-mortem. The controversies failed to achieve any clarity on that question.

### What remains

Donation and cremation were intended to refashion the selves of Simon and Najmal Babu. These methods of corpse disposal aimed to disrupt the continuity between their lives and deaths as Muslims. Although the disposal of their bodies de-created their identities as Muslims, it did not manage to make them into their pre-conversion selves as Christians or 'non-believers'. Instead, it produced fuzzy identities that lacked clear religious contours.

The anatomy department of a public hospital in Kerala receives donors' bodies and unclaimed bodies. The law defines the latter as those who die 'in hospitals, prisons and public place' and which are not claimed by 'near relatives or by any recognized religious or public institution' within a prescribed period.<sup>78</sup> Although this differentiation exists when the body is accepted and recorded in a register, once it is taken as a specimen for study no such distinction is maintained or easily retrieved thereafter.<sup>79</sup> There are no more dead bodies, only cadavers. A cadaver can be used for multiple purposes: for dissection, for extracting the skeleton, or for sale to private hospitals. Once a body is donated to a hospital, all body hair is shaved, the cadaver is embalmed and then immersed in a formalin tank for preservation. If the skeleton alone is to be removed, the flesh is allowed to decompose and disintegrate in a natural organic process

<sup>77</sup>K. Satchidanandan, 'T. N. Joy enna Najmal Babu: prathirodhathinte manushikatha', in *Teyen Joy*, (ed.) Gafoor, p. 32.

<sup>78</sup>The Kerala Anatomy Act (1957), available at <https://www.rfhha.org/images/law/2.16%20Kerala%20Anatomy%20Act.pdf>, [accessed 12 July 2023].

<sup>79</sup>This information is drawn from interviews with anatomists at three medical colleges in Kerala: Thiruvananthapuram, Thrissur, and Pariyaram.

(for example, by burying). After dissection, a cadaver can undergo a process of extreme fragmentation wherein internal organs, tissues, arms, legs, etc. are removed for study. It is scattered into multiple pieces and places—a pair of eyes in a bottle containing several others, for instance. The body is literally dismantled, and no recognizable form remains. Even if a cadaver is not used for dissection and only displayed (say, in a public exhibition), identification is not easy because proper names or any other personal details are not attached to it. A cadaver is tagged with a number, and personal details are entered in a register, but this becomes irrelevant if it is dismembered or sold to another hospital. If something remains—say a limb—it is treated as biomedical waste and incinerated or buried. This literal dismemberment, dispersal, or transfer of the cadaver (through sale) is pertinent. Since the court did not release Simon's body for Islamic burial, the questions would be: Where is the body? Does it exist in any coherent form? How does one distinguish Simon (assuming that we can still call a cadaver by a name) from the various body parts that are mixed and dispersed across multiple containers?

The post-mortem material nebulosity of Simon needs to be underscored. The cadaver could have been literally divided and dispersed. No sense of his person would have remained. The point is not that the donation of Simon's body made him a Christian like his kin. Nor did it make him a Muslim, a faith which is not generally supportive of donation, having been influenced by cultural and theological ideas about the soul or mind/body division.<sup>80</sup> The donated corpse's materiality—its indistinct condition—is connected to the question of Simon's religious affiliation. Like the court that refused to proclaim his religious identity, the treatment of his corpse rendered his identity literally unclear. The condition of his body, or whatever remains of it following donation, is indexical of his status as a non-entity.<sup>81</sup> If he cannot even be identified as a person with a coherent and complete body, the question of his religious identity does not even arise. The donation of Simon's body is different from the atheists or communists who wanted to give a social message through body donation.<sup>82</sup> Their intentions were the paramount issue here: to instruct society about the value of science and scientific research, for example. Donation was their 'final chance to rewrite the course of a life, to make a worthy biographical statement'.<sup>83</sup> Their deaths should reaffirm their lives' purpose. Precisely because of this, these were public acts, circulated via news media, that provoked debates and so on. In Simon's case, such publicity was deliberately avoided. Until the donation was over, none other than his immediate kin knew about the existence of a second document made a month before he died. The news of the donation and the revelation of the document was kept a closely guarded secret. If the *mahallu* committee or his friends had known about the plan for donation

<sup>80</sup>Sherine Hamdy, 'All eyes on Egypt: Islam and the medical use of dead bodies amidst Cairo's political unrest', in *Death, mourning and burial: A cross-cultural reader*, 2nd edn, (ed.) Antonius C. G. M. Robben (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 102–114; Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith, *The Islamic understanding of death and resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>81</sup>Hertz, *Death and right hand*, p. 45; Loring M. Danforth, *The death rituals of rural Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 37.

<sup>82</sup>Copeman and Reddy, 'The didactic death'; Jacob Copeman and Johannes Quack, 'Godless people and dead bodies: Materiality and the morality of atheist materialism', *Social Analysis*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2015, pp. 40–61.

<sup>83</sup>Copeman and Reddy, 'The didactic death', p. 60.

in advance, the outcome might perhaps have been different, or at least it may not have gone ahead without objections that would have received widespread publicity, given that two different religious communities were involved. I will come back to the questions of publicity and secrecy, and kinship in the next section.

Najmal Babu's body was cremated in the backyard of his brother's house at the end of a long day of protests, negotiations, and police intervention. Joy's brother Madhu said that the family were not against burying him according to Islamic rites, but practical arrangements for the cremation had already been made. And it was revealed later that Joy's ashes were gathered and immersed in a river. Madhu was categorical that Najmal Babu was not a Muslim or a Hindu, but a 'non-believer' like his kin. These statements hide an important contradiction: it makes cremation and the spreading of ashes, though unaccompanied by any religious rituals peculiar to Hindus or Ezhavas, the ideal method of corpse disposal for the 'non-believer' and glosses over their specific origins in and connections to upper caste Hinduism.<sup>84</sup> Arnold wrote that cremation was not the choice of the majority of Hindus, except the so-called high castes, until at least the nineteenth century.<sup>85</sup> They resorted to other means like burial, dispersal in water, etc. The adoption of cremation by Dalit and lower castes is connected to the process of Sanskritization, which articulated aspirations of upward mobility in the caste hierarchy through resorting to practices followed by the high castes.<sup>86</sup> But adoption alone does not create the conditions that enable the practice. While cremation or burial on private property (in the vicinity of the house, for example) is permitted in Kerala if it is not a hazard to public health, most Dalit and tribal communities have little or no land that allows them to resort to these practices. Now add to this that, though the Kerala government has issued orders—the Kerala Panchayat Raj (Burial and Burning Grounds) Rules, 1998—directing local administrative bodies such as panchayats and municipalities to build public cremation and graveyards, several cases of caste-based discrimination in accessing such spaces have been reported.<sup>87</sup> Further, Arnold added that 'if the bodies of the dead "belonged" to one community or another, then cremation (or burial) was the ultimate sign of that proprietary right'.<sup>88</sup> It was by owning and disposing of the body that their inclusion in a community was recognized. Hindu reformist organizations like Arya Samaj laid much stress on cremation as a crucial part in the 're-conversion' of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism.<sup>89</sup> Cremation rather than burial recognized their 'return' to Hinduism.

These social and historical contexts are sidelined when Madhu presented cremation on family property as an innocuous choice. By cremating him, his kin proclaimed that Joy belonged to them, was part of their family, not part of any religion. They

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<sup>84</sup>Although there was no recitation of religious texts near the corpse, it was not clear if rice balls were offered for the deceased (*pinda danam*) a certain number of days after cremation or if *pula* (death pollution) was observed by the kin.

<sup>85</sup>Arnold, *Burning the dead*, pp. 28–29.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>87</sup>U. K. Ajay, 'A death in Attappady lays bare Kerala's open secret of caste discrimination', published online on 31 December 2021, available at <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/death-attappady-lays-bare-kerala-s-open-secret-caste-discrimination-159342>, [accessed 12 July 2023]; cf. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp. 66–67.

<sup>88</sup>Arnold, *Burning the Dead*, p. 157.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 156.

flagged their ownership of property and the ability to cremate their dead on their land, something that many others lack. The state—the police that removed the protestors blocking the handing-over of his body and the bureaucracy that did not act on a memorandum filed by his friends—facilitated the assertion of Joy’s family’s ‘proprietary right’. The final and lasting integration into the family fold and literal assimilation into family soil—this laying claim to Joy—occurred through his de/recreation in cremation and dispersal of ashes, both upper caste Hindu practices. Here it is appropriate to cite what Joy said soon after he gave his letter to the mosque requesting an Islamic funeral: ‘When even social and cultural intellectuals recognize the hegemonic religion [Hinduism] as secular, it is an act of great resistance to adopt the rituals of the religion which is the target of fascism.’<sup>90</sup> Hinduism’s presence and supremacy were so pervasive that it was taken for granted, or even invisible. People were unable to recognize and refuse the hegemony. I am not suggesting that cremation made them or Joy into Hindus. But, as Joy said, it indexed the hegemony of Hinduism (and casteist ideology) in the ordinary life of Indians. Joy was not buried as a Muslim, but could a Hindu custom make him a ‘non-believer’?<sup>91</sup> He became ‘not this, not that’, to recall the title of one his books.

### The ways home

Simon was not brought home post-mortem, even though he spent his entire life there with his wife and children. After death Najmal Babu joined his family on family-owned space after decades of separation. In these discontinuities between life and death I discern attempts to recast connections to kin and community, and thereby refashion Simon and Joy.

Anthropologists have observed that in Kerala ‘the house is the long-lasting and concrete embodiment of a family’s success or failure, its relative worth and reputation, indicated in the identity between family and house-names’.<sup>92</sup> The house is a monument to the family, writes Taussig.<sup>93</sup> Post-conversion, Simon’s relationship with his family varied, with initial friction and unhappiness giving way to reluctant acceptance, though not total approval of his decision. He experienced outright hostility from some of his siblings, while his wife and children did not go that far. He did not endure any prolonged alienation from his kin and sociality among them was not radically or permanently upset. His house, which bore his family name and which was also part of his proper name, remained the site that mediated and produced relations among kin.<sup>94</sup> But it was also the space (literally and figuratively) where religious difference was acutely experienced and reproduced in everyday life. Recall how he talked about sharing food for Islamic festivals, though his family did not join any religious rituals,

<sup>90</sup>Joy, *Aatmagathavum Prakashavum*, p. 94.

<sup>91</sup>Across much of the Islamic world cremation is considered *haram*, or forbidden, and evokes a mixture of horror and delight among ordinary Muslims. See Amitav Ghosh, *The imam and the Indian* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 6–7.

<sup>92</sup>Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella, ‘Vital exchanges: Land and persons in Kerala’, in *Territory, soil and society in South Asia*, (eds) Daniela Berti and Gilles Tarabout (New Delhi: Manohar, 2009), p. 211.

<sup>93</sup>Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>94</sup>Claude Levi-Strauss, *The way of the masks* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983); Pierre Bourdieu, *The logic of practice* (London: Polity Press, 1992).

and also the poignant conversation between Simon and his wife about the nature of their relationship after his conversion. As a Muslim he had to live with his Christian wife, which was unacceptable to Islamic tradition. He could not grow in the Islamic faith with his family, particularly his wife. For Simon, home was not 'a space open for opportunities'.<sup>95</sup> Home did not impede his religious life, but also did not give any 'sense of possibility' of another future in which the entire family could be united in a common faith.<sup>96</sup> It remained an 'unfulfilled wish', to cite Simon, the burden of which tormented him. Further, the considerable amount of space that Simon dedicated in his memoirs to explaining the cordial relations with kin, despite or in spite of his embrace of Islam, should not be detached from the peculiarly Indian grammar of conversion. 'Protecting the "family"' was a key theme in public debates on the topic and the rationale that guided legislation in various states (not Kerala) aimed at curbing conversion.<sup>97</sup> Conversion, especially to non-Hindu religions, was perceived as upsetting family unity and anti-conversion legislation was aimed at preventing this. This larger context fashioned Simon's representation of his post-conversion experience, along with the assertion that his conversion was not the result of 'force or inducement' which affirmed the cardinal role of choice and sincerity in his decision.<sup>98</sup> However, this perspective on what conversion does to family life is not entirely borne out by the everyday life of Simon, as conversion and death increased attachment. Following his conversion, despite initial discontent and continuing differences, his kin refused to let him go, in life and death. I will elaborate on this point in the next section.

The house remains a key transit point in the journey to the graveyard or the cremation ground for all communities in Kerala. In most instances, the deceased's house or that of near kin becomes the site for the public viewing of the body. In avoiding a last visit to his house and taking his body directly for donation from the hospital where Simon died, his kin achieved several objectives. First, his Muslim friends and well-wishers were kept away. The house was excluded to prevent Muslims from gaining access to his body and affirming his Islamic identity through burial in the mosque graveyard. His last journey out of the house would have been as a Muslim. Letting him leave home as a Muslim would have meant endorsing the religious sociality beyond the kin and home that made Simon. According to the *mahallu* committee, the decision to skip Simon's house was kept a secret from representatives of the community who were present at the hospital when he passed on. Since the ambulance in which the body was transported did not have sufficient room, the *mahallu* members followed the body in another vehicle. In a public notice, the *mahallu* committee said: 'Instead of going to his house, the ambulance went to the hospital. [Simon] Master's family, which had until [his death] committed to abide by his last wishes, changed their position in an incredible and premeditated manner.'<sup>99</sup> In the hospital they got the 'incredible

<sup>95</sup>Ghassan Hage, 'At home in the entrails of the West: Multiculturalism, "ethnic food" and migrant home-building', in *Home/world: Space, community, and marginality in Sydney's West*, (eds) Helen Grace et al. (Annandale: Pluto, 1997), p. 103.

<sup>96</sup>Sharika Thirananagama, *In my mother's house: Civil war in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2013), pp. 89–90.

<sup>97</sup>Roberts, *To be cared for*, p. 114.

<sup>98</sup>Simon Master, *Ente Islam Anubhavangal*, p. 25; see also Webb Keane, 'Sincerity, "modernity", and the Protestants', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2002, pp. 65–92.

<sup>99</sup>C. K. Shahjahan, 'Simon Master: Vivadungalundakkunnavarode Kathiyalam mahallinu parayanulathu', n.d.

information' that a second document authorizing donation was submitted earlier.<sup>100</sup> Second, by not giving Muslims the opportunity to take over his body during a last visit home, the family tried to re-induct Simon into their fold, though this was only partially achieved. They tried to undo years of religious differentiation within the family, within the family home. He lived with them but was also unlike them. A strangeness is introduced into the midst of familiarity, as if to suggest that 'whoever you think you are dealing with, it is always also somebody else'.<sup>101</sup> This mixture of strangeness and familiarity, or proximity and distance, was sought to be overcome in death when he was to be fully assimilated into the family. He had to be kept away from home in order to keep him a part of it, a part of the family. A separation was the condition for his full inclusion into the family and home. It is worth remembering here that the state facilitated this process. The court used Simon's name and the 'proprietary right' over his body—which was declared to belong to his kin—to make clear that he was not distinct from his family. The court tried to reconstitute the family as a united and unambiguous entity by erasing the proximate distance that bound them together while he was alive. Yet post-mortem Simon did not become one of them in religious terms because the court did not declare his religious identity and the obliteration of the physiological integrity of his body reaffirmed this indistinctness.<sup>102</sup> Hence his integration into the family was not entirely on his kin's wishes. He remained different from them even in death. His close distance and intimate strangeness, which was a fact while he was alive, could not be completely eliminated.

There is no radical distinction in Joy's living conditions pre- and post-conversion. He spent the last decades of his life at the HCI, which he had helped establish. And he frequently visited and stayed for long periods in the houses of his innumerable friends and comrades. Although he joined in family events (weddings, for instance) and kept in touch with his siblings, he did not live with them. But he was deeply affected by his lack of a home, a place to belong and grow, a space of affection and care (recall that he called himself a 'proud beggar' and his living space in the HCI a 'burrow'). This was cited as a reason—in the immediate context of a close relative's death who had to be cremated in a public cremation ground because he did not own property big enough to burn the corpse—by some of his friends to explain his request for a burial at the mosque cemetery before he converted. Joy's friends were also implying that his request to the mosque was driven by personal rather than religious reasons. It was an attempt to dilute the religious, as opposed to personal, importance of his wish for an Islamic burial. In this context, some of his friends held that he should have been buried at HCI (his 'home', so to say) without any religious rituals. The wish of these friends of Joy was like that of the kin of Joy in that they also did not want to label him Muslim through an Islamic burial. Like his kin, they also wanted to make Joy into a 'non-believer', or perhaps a 'non-practising' Muslim. Joy's comrade Venu told me

<sup>100</sup>Ibid.

<sup>101</sup>Jacqueline Rose, *On not being able to sleep: Psychoanalysis and the modern world* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 150.

<sup>102</sup>I can only speculate on why the family did not insist on a Christian funeral. They may not have wanted to draw more public attention and controversy, and perhaps the Church would have refused to bury Simon who had evidently lived as a pious Muslim until the end. But, from a theological viewpoint, body/organ donation is not rejected by the Catholic Church.

how the former had requested his help in building a home for ex-Naxalites who did not have a place of their own. It was meant to be a retreat and care home in which to spend their last days, Venu reminisced. But that plan did not materialize. In an interview Joy recounted a childhood incident when a worker at his family home was told that he was not really the child of his parents and that they had found him on a trip to a distant town. He cried a lot that day and never forgot the incident: 'I still have doubts. Otherwise, just think about it, my kin who have several houses [*purakal*] don't accommodate me there [*parppikunnumilla*]...'.<sup>103</sup> In not being allowed to live with them, Joy felt that the kin signalled his non-belonging to the family, his separation from them.

Post-mortem Joy found his way to his family. However, this reintegration was not total or free of ambiguities. Cremation did not make Joy into a Hindu; rather, it converted him into an ambiguous entity without a clear religious identity. His corpse moved from the hospital where he died to his eldest brother's house, then to the HCI, then to the *maidan*, and finally back to his brother's house. Joy's body was kept in a freezer on the front porch of his brother's house, even though the usual practice in Kerala is for the body to be kept inside the house—the living room, for example—for public viewing. Visitors come into the house to pay their last respects. For the viewing at Joy's brother's house visitors came to the front porch or the attached garage where some chairs had been put out. His brother told me the corpse was not brought into the house because the freezer could not pass through the doors. But some of Joy's friends considered this to be another deliberate attempt, like the cremation, to appropriate him by dishonouring him. Even the family's final claim to Joy was not unequivocal, they argued. The corpse was laid not entirely outside the house, but neither inside it. Even in death, or at least until the cremation, distance and proximity were simultaneously maintained. Intimacy and distance were not mutually exclusive. This was not completely unlike what had happened during Joy's life. He kept in touch with his kin, but no regular, everyday exchanges of substance are notable. He had no clearly discernible religious affiliation (recall how the name Joy made it fuzzy during his studies in a Catholic college), like the self-declared identity of his family (though he refused to be identified as a 'non-believer' like them), until his conversion. The difference and distance between Simon and his family were produced after his conversion inside the shared house, but in the case of Joy and his family, physical separation preceded ideational differences created by conversion. After the viewing at his brother's house, Joy's body traversed spots that were important in his life: one which acted as a house for him (HCI), and another where he attended innumerable public gatherings. As with Simon, initially there was a shroud of secrecy over the decision to deny Joy an Islamic funeral. His kin took the body to their house from the hospital, giving the impression that ultimately it would be handed over to the mosque for burial. And they let the body leave their property temporarily only after getting assurances from state representatives that it would be returned to them for cremation.

<sup>103</sup>V. K. Sreeraman, *Lokathe Saundaryapeduthan Shramicha Oraal*, published online on 22 April 2018, YouTube video, 1:02:13, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nycBQQAXTYM>, [accessed 12 July 2023].



## Death of the social

Death reinforces the connections between family and community. Through the exchange of services death expands the social. But in the cases of Simon and Joy the kin kept the community at arm's length and subverted the formation of the social to appropriate and remake them. Continuities between kin and community were breached.

Expanding Levi Strauss's famous thesis that the incest taboo was 'man's first step from nature to culture', Goody pointed out that 'taboos on the disposal of the dead' played a similar role.<sup>104</sup> Among the LoDagaa in West Africa, the immediate kin are not allowed to do any important tasks—like washing and shrouding, for example—for the dead person. This has developed into 'a major mechanism of social interaction' and the 'exchange of services of affliction between social groups and persons is an important method of building up a network of interrelationships...'.<sup>105</sup> The social is constituted through such widening fields of interaction that look beyond the next of kin. Comparable observations have been made about funerals in Kerala. A thick description of the funeral arrangements for an Ezhava matriarch shows that the local unit of the caste-community organization Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) is involved at every stage—from prescribing the rituals to providing the yellow flag with which to shroud the corpse.<sup>106</sup> The kin closely follow the directions of the SNDP. Rather than turning inwards, into the family, relations grow outwards. It cements the connections between the kin and community. We encounter the opposite after the deaths of Joy and Simon; everything is done to undermine the social beyond the kin. There is a deliberate strategy to decouple the links between family and community. They do not complement each other, but work at cross purposes. By defining, disciplining, and reconfiguring the terms of publicity and common access, the kin attempted to remake Joy and Simon post-mortem.<sup>107</sup> Joy's friends, comrades, and a wide range of other people played important roles in constituting his multiple lives and selves as Muslim, communist, musician, and so on.<sup>108</sup> They were able to provide him with post-mortem care during the viewing at the HCI and the *maidan*, but not once the body was with the family. Simon's Islamic identity was crafted, inter alia, through regular interaction and exchange with Muslims. It was also made through the fictive kinship bonds he formed with a Muslim family who let him enrol under their name in the *mahallu* register. After death none except Simon's kin could come near his body, let alone render any services of care.

This exclusion from and challenge to the world of relations beyond the kin is closer to the Hegelian idea of family obligations to the dead. In Ruin's analysis, Hegel's reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* 'bears testimony to the essential confrontation between

<sup>104</sup>Jack Goody, *Death, property, and the ancestors: A study of the mortuary customs of the LoDagaa of West Africa* (California: Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 65.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>106</sup>Olga Nieuwenhuys, 'Mourning Amma: Funerals as politics among South Indian Ezhavas', *Mortality*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2004, pp. 97–113.

<sup>107</sup>Cf. Angie Heo, *The political lives of saints: Christian-Muslim mediation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), pp. 173–205.

<sup>108</sup>Cf. Marilyn Strathern, *The gender of the gift: Problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

two legal spheres and thus the two dimensions of spirit, the universal and the individual, as expressed in the state and the family'.<sup>109</sup> Family duties to Simon and Joy were carried out not in conformity to social and cultural conventions, according to which the community played a crucial role in post-mortem care, but by flouting them. However, unlike in *Antigone*, the Indian state (the police, the bureaucracy, the court) partially endorsed the decision of Simon's and Joy's families to subvert the social and reproduce the two men and themselves. In fact, this could be one reason—beyond the question of religious conversion—that made the disposal of the bodies of Joy and Simon a controversy in the first place. The mode of their disposal, cremation, and donation is neither unique nor strange. But the manner of keeping out the community was. It was unconventional.<sup>110</sup> The wresting of the dead from the community questions certain established Indian assumptions about what conversion does. As noted earlier, 'protecting the "family"' is a key goal of anti-conversion legislation in several Indian states.<sup>111</sup> Conversion of a family member divides and destroys the coherence and continuity of the convert's family life and is seen as 'inherently socially disruptive'.<sup>112</sup> With Simon and Najmal Babu we see something more complex. Instead of permanent ruptures while they were alive, the kinship bonds 'accumulate[s] or dissolve[s] over time'.<sup>113</sup> Relations between Simon and Joy and their kin pass through various phases of 'thinning' and/or 'thickening'. Nowhere was belonging and attachment asserted more vehemently than at the point of death. Death enabled the kin to erase the close distance or strange familiarity between them and the two converts. Whatever divisions—caused by conversion or separate living conditions—that existed while Simon and Joy were alive were to be removed through what was done to their corpses and the resignification of their names. Work for the dead was not to make them into 'others', but to remove their 'otherness'.<sup>114</sup> Simon and Joy had to be removed from the condition—sociality—that made them into 'others' to affirm their attachment to the kin. The kin group's integration and cohesion were recrafted post-mortem, if only in limited terms.

## Conclusion

Benjamin writes that the sentence 'A man who dies at thirty-five... is, at every point in his life, a man who dies at thirty-five' is bizarre only because of the 'wrong tense'.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>109</sup>Hans Ruin, *Being with the dead: Burial, ancestral politics, and the roots of historical consciousness* (California: Stanford University Press, 2018), p. 2.

<sup>110</sup>Threats to the normative and traditional treatments of the dead require innovative solutions. The scarcity of kin or others to care for the dead produces novel forms of neoliberal 'self-sociality' in Japan where 'mortuary plans [are] made by the to-be-deceased'. Unlike the Japanese case, the social in the cases of Simon and Joy was not absent but subverted by their kin. The citation is from Anne Allison, 'Automated graves: The precarity and prosthetics of caring for the dead in Japan', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2020, p. 633.

<sup>111</sup>Roberts, *To be cared for*, p. 114.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>113</sup>Janet Carsten, 'What kinship does—and how', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2013, p. 247.

<sup>114</sup>Cf. Erik Mueggler, *Songs for dead parents: Corpse, text, and world in southwest China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 7.

<sup>115</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The storyteller essays* (New York: New York Review Books, 2019), p. 65.

He adds: ‘the statement that makes no sense in relation to real life is irrefutable in the context of remembered life... It states that the “meaning” of his life becomes clear only with his death.’<sup>116</sup> The life of the ‘man’ in the quote, when looked back on after his death, will forever be seen as ending at 35. It becomes his destiny to die at 35, so to speak. The incontrovertibility of this fact, this permanence, made possible by death, was what made Joy alias Najmal Babu and Simon desire an Islamic funeral, so as to be marked as Muslims. They wanted a continuity between their lives and deaths in terms of their chosen religious identity. And it was the same awareness that moved others to deny them their wish or demand that it be realized. Their kin wanted to break the continuity between their religious lives and deaths. Desjarlais cites Deleuze: ‘death always come from without’ in the sense that death is ‘born of the forces of the world, which often collide with the vital strivings of the self’.<sup>117</sup> The deaths of Simon and Najmal Babu were not theirs to own. Through actions on the corpse and their names—the materialities that compose a person as a social being—others tried to refashion their selves. But it was not a total success. The kin could establish the familial affiliation of Joy and Simon. They could prove, legally and otherwise, that they ‘belonged’ (the boundary between ownership and membership was blurry) to them. Their non-kin relations (not all of them and inconsistently) fought pointlessly to ensure that their written desire for an Islamic funeral was fulfilled. They all had their ideas of who Simon and Joy were, which at times diverged and/or coincided with those held by the kin. Yet Simon did not become a Christian, like his kin, through his name or body donation, and Najmal Babu did not become a ‘non-believer’ through Hindu cremation or the rival claims on his names. They did not become Muslims either. The various moves by the kin and others (including the state) could not clarify or give a final, enduring account of who they were. The efforts to remake them and the multiple conflicts and agreements they generated, converted them into hazy, indeterminate figures lacking a clear religious identity. Instead of continuity or discontinuity with their living selves, they were made anew post-mortem.

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<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup>Desjarlais, *Subject to death*, p. 36.

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