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The Indian Ocean between God and Empire

SEBASTIAN R. PRANGE

When Sayyid 'Alawi (*ca.* 1750–1844 CE), the father of the main protagonist of Wilson Chacko Jacob's *For God or Empire: Sayyid Fadl and the Indian Ocean World*, crossed the Indian Ocean in the second half of the eighteenth century, he travelled on a familiar and ancient route. His journey took him along the long-established and well-worn maritime pathway that connected two key regions of the Indian Ocean: Yemen and India's Malabar Coast. Southern Arabia was a crucial entrepôt for both the Red Sea as well as the overland caravan routes that linked the trading world of the Indian Ocean to that of the Mediterranean. On the other side of the Arabian Sea, the Malabar Coast was not only situated at the intersection between the trade circuits of the western and eastern Indian Ocean but it was also the source of the most important ingredient in the transoceanic spice trade: black pepper. As a result, the Arabian coast and southwestern India had been connected by a vigorous commercial exchange since antiquity.¹

Participating in this exchange, however, was not without its challenges. Merchants not only needed to cross the Arabian Sea but also bridge the formidable logistical and cultural fault lines that existed between the two regions. A foreign merchant arriving on the South Indian coast with the intention of trading in pepper required a whole infrastructure of support: from something as basic as a place to eat and sleep (especially important in a region with strict rules around commensality and cohabitation) to safe storage for his goods, intelligence on market conditions, and introductions to potential business partners. Commercial exchange, then, was dependent on another, more fundamental form of exchange: hospitality. Pre-modern trade was an inherently social activity, dependent on kinship ties, personal connections, and communal networks. Reciprocal hospitality was the glue that held these relationships together and made possible sustained long-distance exchanges. Jacob, in his prize-winning book, goes as far as to regard hospitality as an “originary principle” of the Indian Ocean world (2).

The business letters of the Cairo Geniza, which constitutes the richest archive on the commercial practices of the pre-modern Indian Ocean, are replete with a vocabulary of friendship, brotherhood, and love.² As the pioneering Geniza scholars Shelomo Dov Goitein

and Abraham Udovitch noted, the services merchants requested of another in the name of friendship were invariably granted, even if they involved a great expenditure of time and effort. What is more, they were even extended to “friends of friends.”³ In a more recent study, Jessica Goldberg convincingly argues that in specific contexts, the idiom of friendship implied a more formal institution of “balanced reciprocity” with finite terms.⁴ This finds expression, for example, in this business letter from one Jewish merchant to another: “As you know, every kindness (good deed) finds its reward in a like kindness, and you will not do a thing for me that I will not repay sufficiently in kind.”⁵

The use of an idiom of friendship to express reciprocal business relationships is also reflected in a thirteenth-century bilingual inscription from western India. Located at Somnath, near the important port city of Khambhat (Cambay), the epigraph is written in both Sanskrit and Arabic. Its text describes the relationship between powerful local Hindu merchants and a visiting Muslim shipowner (*nakhudba* in Arabic) from Hormuz as that of “righteous friends” (*dharmabandhava* in Sanskrit), echoing in both languages the familiar parlance of amity that underpinned and structured their professional bonds.⁶ The ability to call on the services of friendship, which centrally included hospitality in all its dimensions, was essential to conducting business in faraway and foreign settings. Members of diasporic trade networks who resided (whether temporarily for a trading season or permanently) in a particular trading locale would provide these services to visiting “friends” by acting as hosts, brokers, and representatives. In return, they could entrust their own goods to these itinerant merchants for sale abroad, and call on the hospitality and services of other members of the network.

Hospitality was necessary to the functioning of long-distance mercantile networks, and, as a result, it was deeply embedded within their institutional frameworks. Not just material goods, such as black pepper, were traded within these networks but also relationships, reciprocities, and reputations. This web of exchange also extended to transactions that were not primarily commercial in nature. The transoceanic trajectory of Sayyid ‘Alawi’s life, which unfolded against the backdrop of these historic exchanges between South Asia and the Middle East, is a case in point. He was a prominent member of a Sufi order known as the *tarīqa al-‘Alawiyya*. The term Sufism refers to a mystical tradition within Islam that emphasizes the personal and direct experience of the divine. Beginning around the eighth century, Sufism

developed into a number of different orders known as *tariqas* (properly *turuq*, literally “paths”). *Tariqa al-'Alawiyya* is one such order, which was established in the early eighteenth century in the Hadhramawt region of Yemen. The prominent members of this order belong to the Ba 'Alawi family and are denoted as sayyids, an honorific applied to individuals who trace their genealogical ancestry back to the family of the Prophet Muhammad. Following the ancient maritime routes that linked to Yemen to the wider trading world of the Indian Ocean, from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, a number of these Hadhrami Sufi-sayyids started to move to port cities in South and Southeast Asia. For example, a different person also known as Sayyid 'Alawi became an important religious leader (and opponent of Dutch imperialism) on Java.⁷ Possessed of a carefully crafted identity that included theological, juridical, and political elements, in many of these places members of the 'Alawi order came to be recognized as scholars, respected as sayyids, and eventually revered as saints.⁸

For God or Empire also draws our attention to another dimension of hospitality that underpins these multivalent exchanges: that of the host society toward its “guests.” In their Indo-European etymology, the words “host” and “guest” both share the same root, *ghos-ti-*, which denotes “someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality.”⁹ The very notion of a “host society,” a term that originates within the field of diaspora studies, draws our attention once more to hospitality as an underlying logic of exchanges — not just of commodities but also of people and populations. This terminology is certainly not without its problems, in that it risks reifying and thereby perpetuating the distinction between supposedly native insiders and perpetually foreign outsiders, which too often has been used to exclude and ostracize minority groups. As Jacob shows, from its very inception, the diaspora of 'Alawi sayyids in South India was of a hybrid nature. Sayyid 'Alawi was summoned to Malabar by his uncle, Hasan al-Jifri, in order to marry the daughter from a marriage between al-Jifri to a local Malayali woman (26–7). By the time of Sayyid Fadl's birth, his father was firmly established on the Malabar Coast, where he had helped build a mosque and begun to attract a devoted following of local Muslims and new converts. Hagiographies written about him in the local language, Malayalam, describe his piety and his miraculous powers, which he was said to have passed on to his son (28).

However, Sayyid Fadl's life unfolded in a rapidly transforming context that disrupted and upended established routes, linkages, and

institutions — including the norms of hospitality that had functioned as the backbone of transoceanic exchanges and “friendships.” Coinciding with Sayyid ‘Alawi’s original journey from Yemen to India was what Jacob describes, in lapidary prose, as “a peculiar outfit’s military victory”: the British East India Company’s success at the so-called Battle of Plassey (1757), which opened a path toward colonial rule over an ever-growing share of the Indian subcontinent (3). Sayyid ‘Alawi and Sayyid Fadl encountered this state in its formative period, and their lives mark the transition toward new conceptions of law, politics, and religion. Letters of introduction penned by business associates or a well-known scholar were replaced by passports issued by anonymous magistrates on behalf of a foreign political entity. The authority of the Sufi-sayyid came to be reconfigured as a challenge to the imperial state, and the defiance of those who followed him as religious fanaticism. For these actors, this encounter between two dispensations of sovereignty — one, the product of an “ancient web of Hindu-Muslim relations, in which transregional and transoceanic ties featured prominently”; the other, the juridical claim of a global empire-state — presented in a binary choice: for God or Empire (39–40). It is the remarkable achievement of Jacob’s book to find this conflict, which was not purely symbolic but played out in acts of real violence, within the story of a single life. More importantly, by carefully examining their multiple valences and ambivalences, he does not allow his own conceptualizations of the terms “God” and “Empire” to become reduced to such a simple binary. Rather, by assuming the lens of an individual life, he is able to trace not just the multiple fault lines but also the overlaps between “a changing world of imperial sovereignty and an unchanging multiverse of divine sovereignty” (204).

Hospitality is offered and taken, arrived at and departed from, incumbent but discretionary, unqualified but based in reciprocity. It is also always a trade-off: between intimacy and distance, expectation and investment, status and prestige, power and influence. As Jacob writes, during the lifetimes of Sayyid ‘Alawi and Sayyid Fadl, “hospitality became one of the many casualties of European mercantilist policies applied in the Indian Ocean” (11). One might add that it has also become a casualty of a mode of writing history that has long sought to reify — perhaps even romanticize — vernacular idioms of hospitality into a universal language of cosmopolitanism.¹⁰ It is instructive to read *For God or Empire* as a counterpoint to this, in its resistance to reducing the two peripatetic sayyids to simple tropes of

cosmopolitanism, to regard them as mere metonyms for cross-cultural mobility in the burgeoning imperial age.

Related to this, but more complex, is the book's engagement with the notion of "life," both in its historiographical and historically-contingent senses. In writing the story of Sayyid Fadl across disciplines, and with an avowedly global frame of mind, Jacob expands his interrogation of sovereignty to contend with the possibility — or impossibility, as the case may be — of resisting and countering the reducibility of life to an archival artifact of the sovereign state. Thus, the biography of Sayyid Fadl commences from the archival legacies of a "Moplah Outlaw," from a life conceived by the colonial state as a foil to its own claim to sovereignty. The book very elegantly engages with this question of the archival inception of Sayyid Fadl in the British and Ottoman archives. But importantly, it also seeks to take seriously his own conception of his life within the lineage of the 'Alawi lineage of Sufi-sayyids. A central premise of Jacob's book is that one "cannot do a global history of the Indian Ocean without better histories of fundamental concepts that organize that world, such as life and sovereignty, the meanings of which cannot simply be taken as self-evident" (11). *For God and Empire* is testament not just to the need for such better histories, but also one of the best models we have for developing, interrogating, and creatively applying interdisciplinary methodologies to produce such histories across the Indian Ocean.

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Endnotes

- 1 See for instance James Innes Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire, 29 B.C. to A.D. 641* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, "Provincializing Rome: The Indian Ocean Trade Network and Roman Imperialism," *Journal of World History* 22, no. 1 (April 2011): 27–54.
- 2 Shelomo Dov Goitein and Mordecai Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza 'India Book'* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), for example, 50, 477.
- 3 Shelomo Dov Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Abraham L. Udovitch, "Formalism and Informalism in the Social and Economic Institutions of the Medieval Islamic World", in *Individualism and Conformity in Classical Islam*, ed. Amin Banani and Speros Vryonis (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1977).
- 4 Jessica L. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 129.
- 5 Quoted in Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 130.
- 6 Ranabir Chakravarti, "Nakhudas and Nauvittakas: Ship-Ownning Merchants in the West Coast of India (C. AD 1000–1500)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43, no. 1 (2000): 54.
- 7 See Michael Francis Laffan, "The Sayyid in the Slippers: An Indian Ocean Itinerary and Visions of Arab Sainthood, 1737-1929", *Archipel* 86 (2013): 191-227.
- 8 See Ulrike Freitag and William G. Clarence-Smith, eds., *Hadrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s to 1960s* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Engseng Ho, *Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Husain Randathani, *Mappila Muslims: A Study on Society and Anti Colonial Struggles* (Calicut: Other Books, 2007).
- 9 Calvert Watkins, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 3rd ed. 2011), s.v. "ghos-ti-".
- 10 As Nile Green argues in a recent survey of Indian Ocean historiography, there is a methodological need to render concepts such as "connective" and "cosmopolitan" as substantive categories rather than mere rhetorical *topoi*. See "The Languages of Indian Ocean Studies: Models, Methods and Sources," *History Compass* (13 December 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12703>.