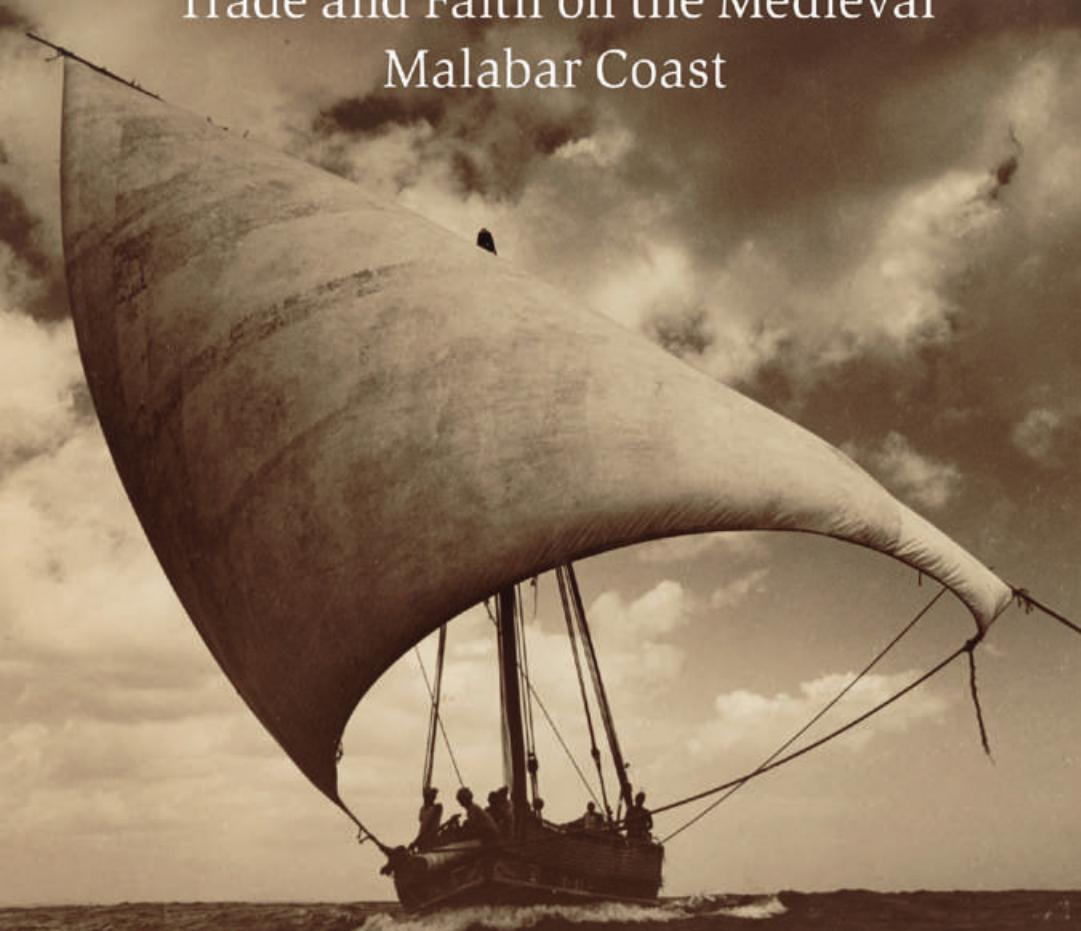


MONSOON ISLAM

Trade and Faith on the Medieval
Malabar Coast



Sebastian R. Prange

Monsoon Islam

Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast

Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, a distinct form of Islamic thought and practice developed among Muslim trading communities of the Indian Ocean. Sebastian Prange argues that this “Monsoon Islam” was shaped by merchants not sultans, forged by commercial imperatives rather than in battle, and defined by the reality of Muslims living within non-Muslim societies. Focusing on India’s Malabar Coast, the much-fabled “land of pepper”, Prange provides a case study of how Monsoon Islam developed in response to concrete economic, socio-religious, and political challenges. Because communities of Muslim merchants across the Indian Ocean were part of shared commercial, scholarly, and political networks, developments on the Malabar Coast illustrate a broader, trans-oceanic history of the evolution of Islam across monsoon Asia. This history is told through four spaces that are examined in their physical manifestations as well as symbolic meanings: the Port, the Mosque, the Palace, and the Sea.

Sebastian R. Prange is Assistant Professor of History at the University of British Columbia.

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Monsoon Islam

*Trade and Faith on the Medieval
Malabar Coast*

Sebastian R. Prange

University of British Columbia, Vancouver



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my reason why.

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The history of Monsoon Islam is about the tension between global impulses and local exigencies. Something similar may be said about the writing of this book, which required me to combine the study of distant places with the need to negotiate frequent changes to my own immediate environs, institutional and otherwise.

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The empirical foundations of this book were laid during my doctoral studies at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. It is only with the passage of time that I have come to recognize how many of what I thought of as my ideas had been discreetly instilled in me by my advisor, Daud Ali. The other members of my committee, William Gervase Clarence-Smith and Avril Powell, were likewise active participants in (what I thought of as) my work. My studies at SOAS, including multiple stays in Yemen and India for language training and fieldwork, were generously supported by the British Academy, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Institute of Historical Research, the University of London, and the Leigh Douglas Memorial Fund. I am also grateful to the International Economic History Association for recognizing my doctoral research with its triennial prize for best dissertation on a premodern topic (2008–2011), an honour all the more gratifying

since my work in many ways challenges the primacy of an economic history lens for understanding the nature of premodern trade.

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Danny Vickers passed away before I could share these pages with him. Suggestions made by the anonymous reviewers have likewise prompted several important corrections and additions to the text. My editor at Cambridge University Press, Lucy Rhymer, has been an early and enthusiastic champion of this project and was instrumental to its timely realization. I am also grateful to the editors of the Cambridge Oceanic Histories series, David Armitage, Alison Bashford, and Sujit Sivasundaram, for their support. In light of all the inputs this work has received over the years, it is only proper to state expressly that any remaining errors of fact or interpretation can only be attributed to my own incorrigibility.

What first drew me to the study of merchants is their shrewd pragmatism. Their prosaic attitude, which manifests in a general preference of profits over philosophy, may well have reminded me of my own father, himself last in a long line of *petits commerçants*. Yet, in spite of this general outlook, both my parents, Ute and Benno Prange, have been unstinting in their curiosity about my academic pursuits and boundless in their support of them. At the same time, they managed to maintain a salutary sense of detachment, best expressed by my mother's insistence, quite rightly, that it's all not such a big deal.

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Note on Dates, Weights, Places, and Transliterations

All dates have been converted to accord to the Common Era; where it is of significance, the original calendar is given in parentheses.

Weights are presented in the original units of measurement, with terms of conversion detailed in the notes.

A good argument can be made for following local usage in referring to places in India. For the Malabar Coast, Malayali place names are usually the basis for variants encountered in other languages; in many cases, these original names have now been restored to official usage in India. However, the renderings of Indian toponyms in European languages mark many of the primary sources and they continue to be used in much of the secondary literature. This has created a certain path dependency in academic usage – to reject it outright risks a bewildering incoherency of place names when quoting from sources or the literature. Moreover, as this book focuses on Muslim traders, there are also the Arabic names for Indian ports and towns to contend with. On balance, therefore, this book follows established usage, except in cases where no anglicized form exists or where it seems needlessly remote. The table below (organized from north to south) serves as a reference for the pertinent place names on the Malabar Coast in English, Arabic, and Malayalam; the variant used in this book is given in capital letters.

English	Malayalam	Arabic
Barkur	BARKUR	Fākanūr
MANGALORE	Mangalapuram	Manjarūr
Kasargode (Cassargode)	KASARAGOD	Harqīlyah
MADAYI	Madai (Pazhayangadi)	—
Mount Eli	EZHIMALA	Hili
—	VALAPATTANAM	Budfattān
CANNANORE	Kannur	?Jūrfattan
—	DHARMADAM (Dharmapattanam)	Dahfattān
—	PANTALAYANI-KOLLAM	Fandarīna

(continued)

CALICUT	Kozhikode	Qāliqūṭ; Kālikūṭ
—	CHALIYAM (Beypore)	Shāliyāṭ
—	PONNANI	Fannanī
Cranganore	KODUNGALLUR	Kulankalūr
COCHIN	Kochi	Kushī
Quilon	KOLLAM	Kawlam

Arabic terms in common usage have been simplified (e.g. Quran, not al-Qur’ān); transliteration of proper names of persons, places, and texts follows a slightly modified Library of Congress standard. For improved legibility, plurals of these terms follow the English convention of adding the letter “s” unless they are quoted from the original. Archaic English spellings have been modernized where they reflect usage by a translator or editor rather than the original author.

Introduction

The First Indian Muslim

I am the space where I am.

– Noël Arnaud, *L'état d'ébauche* (1950)

At the turn of the seventh century, a powerful South Indian king beheld an extraordinary astronomical event. Gazing at the stars sparkling above the Arabian Sea one night, he saw the moon divide into two halves, before it once again merged back into its customary shape. The awestruck king was Cheraman Perumal, the Hindu sovereign of the Chera dynasty, one of the three ancient Tamil royal houses that ruled over southern India. His realm was the westernmost portion of the *Tamilakam*, a region known to foreigners as Malabar or simply “the land of pepper”; its limits correspond more or less to those of the present-day Indian state of Kerala (which takes its name from the Chera dynasty). Upon witnessing this unwonted celestial occurrence, Cheraman Perumal summoned his Hindu astronomers, who although competent enough to accurately forecast eclipses, could not account for this unprecedented phenomenon. Later that night, however, it was revealed to the king in a dream that what he had seen in the night sky had been a miracle, performed by a man called Muhammad from a land across the sea.

Some years later, a group of Jewish and Christian traders disembarked on the Malabar Coast. They had come for the same reason that drew most travellers to this part of India: to purchase black pepper, the most important ingredient in the Indian Ocean spice trade, on which Malabar enjoyed a near-monopoly. Granted a royal audience, these traders told the king about an agitator back in Arabia, a man called Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd-Allāh who claimed to be a prophet and was said to have employed magic to split the moon. A few years later still, a group of Muslim pilgrims arrived at the Chera court on their way to Sri Lanka, where they intended to visit the venerated site of Adam’s Peak. The king quizzed these Muslims about their pilgrimage, but above all about their faith and its prophet. They related to him the miracle of the splitting of the

moon, as recorded in *sūrah al-Qamar* (“The Moon”) of the Quran. The king requested that the pilgrims return to his court on their homeward journey. When they did so, he divided his realm among his ministers before joining the Muslims on their voyage back to Arabia. There, Cheraman Perumal was converted to Islam at the hands of the Prophet himself, becoming the first Indian Muslim. After a few years in Arabia, the convert king decided to return to his native land, but died on the Omani coast before he could set sail for India. Just before his death, however, he instructed a group of Arab Muslims in whose company he was travelling to proceed to Malabar regardless, and to propagate his new faith there. It was this group of Arabs who first introduced Islam to the Indian subcontinent.

Monsoon Islam

This apocryphal account of the South Indian ruler Cheraman Perumal epitomizes a particular trajectory of Islamic history as it intersects with the history of the Indian Ocean. The story-world of the legend – made up of rulers, traders, holy men, and pilgrims who are part of the trans-oceanic exchange of people, ideas, and patronage – is not invented of whole cloth but consistent with the way in which historians have come to understand the trading world of maritime Asia. In recent years, a growing number of studies has shifted our focus onto the languages, cultural content, political projects, and personal ambitions that traversed the ocean alongside trade. During the medieval period, the most momentous of these non-material transfers was the spread of Islam along the shores of monsoon Asia.¹ As Muslim merchants established communities in all the flourishing port cities of the Indian Ocean, Islamic beliefs and practices were carried across vast distances and came into contact with diverse societies on a scale comparable only to the initial expansion of the caliphate during the seventh century. This movement along the maritime trade routes, however, was not predicated on military conquest, political hegemony, or imperial design: the expansion of Muslim communities

¹ Paul Mus recommends the term “monsoon Asia” to encompass the borderless maritime world of pre-colonial East, Southeast, and South Asia as an area that despite its rich diversity shares certain cultural traits and that since the early historical period has interacted through the participation in a common world of commerce. Himanshu Prabha Ray likewise endorses this term for its ability to transcend regional constructs that she regards as a historiographical artefact of colonialism. See P. Mus, *India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*, trans. I.W. Mabbett, ed. D.P. Chandler (Caulfield: Monash University Press, rev. edn., 2010); H.P. Ray, “Narratives of Faith: Buddhism and Colonial Archaeology in Monsoon Asia”, Asia Research Institute (National University of Singapore) working paper (2007).

across monsoon Asia between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries took place haphazardly, incidental to the development of Muslim trade networks. The principal agents in this extension of the medieval Muslim world were not sultans, soldiers, or scholars but ordinary, humdrum traders whose main objective was not to spread their faith but to turn a profit.

It is the central contention of this book that this process was fundamentally shaped by the interaction of these ordinary Muslims – ordinary in the sense in that they were neither representatives of state power nor recognized religious authorities – with non-Muslim societies.² This dynamic informed the development of Islamic norms and practices even in those regions of the Indian Ocean that eventually came under Muslim rule and that over time developed into majority Muslim societies, such as the Swahili Coast, the Maldives, or Aceh. Islam was never a stable, monolithic entity, and in places across monsoon Asia, far from Arabia, local receptions, understandings, and practices were crucial to its historical development. The communities that grew out of the settlement of Muslim traders in port cities across maritime Asia have proved long-lasting: every major historic port-of-trade in the Indian Ocean has a Muslim community that in some way traces its history back to these premodern exchanges. The effects of the interaction between local societies and Islam, however, have differed widely. Some regions, such as East Africa or peninsular Southeast Asia, have been profoundly shaped by their interaction with Islamic beliefs, law, and institutions, while others such as southern India or southern China to a much lesser degree.

This book is a study of both these dynamics: the spread of Islam through the agency of Muslim merchants on the one hand, and the effects on Islam of their interaction with non-Muslim societies across the medieval Indian Ocean world on the other. In other words, it seeks to both look outwards, towards the movements of Muslim communities in space and time, as well as inwards, to ask how these communities understood and responded to changes in their social and political environments. The core argument is that during this period, a particular form of Islamic thought and practice emerged from these twin processes. This Monsoon Islam of the Indian Ocean was shaped by merchants not sultans, forged by commercial imperatives rather than in battle, and defined by the reality of Muslims living within non-Muslim societies.

² Throughout this book, the term “non-Muslim” is used to refer to the diverse individuals and groups who did not identify with Islam; it does not imply that they formed a single community nor that they conceived their identity in an explicit contrast to Islam.

Muslims in the trading ports of monsoon Asia observed the principal acts of their faith, the so-called pillars of Islam (*arkān al-dīn*), in the same manner as Muslims everywhere: they professed their belief in the one god with Muhammad as his messenger, performed the obligatory prayers, gave alms, fasted during the holy month, and strove to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. In other ways, however, they diverged. For example, they produced new interpretations of Islamic law designed to meet the specific needs of their heterogeneous communities; many prayed in buildings that looked like Hindu temples, and some worshipped saints outside of the Islamic tradition; some practised matrilineality contrary to the otherwise staunchly agnatic Islamic tradition; they professed new understandings of religiously sanctioned warfare (*jihād*), and to that end even re-defined what constitutes the “Muslim world” (*dār al-Islām*).

This apparent tension between orthopraxy and innovation reflects the broader challenge of reconciling Islam as an analytical category with Islam as a historical phenomenon. As Shahab Ahmed points out, any meaningful conceptualization “must come to terms with – indeed, be *coherent* with – the capaciousness, complexity, and, often, *outright contradiction* that obtains within the historical phenomenon that has proceeded from the human engagement with the idea and reality” of the Islamic faith.³ It is this human, historical engagement – in the form of religious thought, social practice, commercial connection, and political allegiance – that this book connotes as Monsoon Islam. To be sure, Monsoon Islam is by no means a discrete school of Islamic philosophy: it is an etic category that does not represent a deliberate or coherent set of doctrines. Instead, it describes how Islam was *realized* by Muslims in the context of the trading world of the premodern Indian Ocean; not as abstract principles but in specific acts, attitudes, and ideas that responded to concrete historical situations and challenges. Importantly, these acts, attitudes, and ideas, however contradictory they may appear at times, were made sense of and articulated in terms of Islamic precept, history, and law – in other words, they were understood by these Muslims *as Islam*.⁴

Monsoon Islam developed outside of the traditional Islamic heartlands and independent of the caliphate and its successor states, on the coastlines and in the trade emporia of the Indian Ocean. The term is emphatically not meant to suggest that this trajectory of Islamic history

³ S. Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 6 (original emphases).

⁴ Writes Ahmed: “Islam, meaning-making for the self by one-fifth of humanity, is *Islam* – it is not anything else – and should be conceptualized, understood and appreciated as such; in terms which cohere with its meanings and by which its meanings cohere”. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 546 (original emphasis).

was defined by the monsoon as a climatic phenomenon, that somehow the weather patterns in regions affected by the Asian monsoon account for the prevalence of certain religious beliefs and attitudes there. Nor is it intended as a rebuttal to the kind of nineteenth-century orientalism that identified Islam as the natural religion of the desert: “Le désert est monothéiste”, in the words of Ernest Renan, “[s]ublime dans son immense uniformité”.⁵ Instead, the term summons the “deep structure element” underlying Indian Ocean trade during the age of sail: the system of seasonally opposing trade winds known as the monsoons.⁶ In his survey of global maritime history, Felipe Fernández-Armesto posits ebulliently that compared to the diktat of fixed wind systems, other motors of history, be they culture, politics, or economics, pale in significance: “In most of our explanations of what happened in history, there is too much hot air and not enough wind”.⁷

On account of the persistent maritime corridors created by its wind system, Monsoon Asia formed “a natural space that favoured the long-distance movement of people, commodities, languages and ideas”.⁸ The monsoons determined when ships could travel eastwards or westwards, where merchants settled, and how far their commercial networks extended. In the words of Michael Pearson, the doyen of Indian Ocean studies: “The implications of the monsoons are endless”.⁹ In the evolution of Islam across maritime Asia, the monsoons enabled and structured the exchanges and interactions that shaped how Islam came to be understood, communicated, and applied by Muslims living on the different coasts it connected. It is in this sense, as a link that fostered interaction, exchange, and relationships across the vast distances of the ocean, that the term monsoon is used in this book.

The world of Monsoon Islam was first and foremost a commercial realm, and many of its chief characteristics were defined by the imperatives of doing business in settings that were unfamiliar (in the sense of kinship

⁵ E. Renan, *Études d'Histoire Religieuse* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1857), 66–67. While the desert remains a potent symbol of and within Arab culture – and, synecdochically, for Muslim culture as a whole – from its inception Islam was a quintessentially urban faith. (By way of illustration, different terms for “city” occur more than two dozen times in the Quran, compared to only a couple of references to the desert.)

⁶ M. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), 19. The concrete workings of the monsoons are described in the [next chapter](#).

⁷ F. Fernández-Armesto, *Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 149.

⁸ A. Acri, R. Blench, and A. Landmann, “Re-connecting Histories across the Indo-Pacific”, in A. Acri, R. Blench, and A. Landmann (eds.), *Spirits and Ships: Cultural Transfers in Early Monsoon Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2017), 5.

⁹ Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 22.

ties), foreign (in the sense of political boundaries), and alien (in the sense of cultural difference). Embedded within these complex trade relations across the ocean were many other forms of exchange: of texts, for instance, but most importantly of people with their beliefs, customs, connections, and rivalries. At its core, Monsoon Islam was the product of the tension between the distant and the local, between these Muslims' role in far-flung trading networks and an Islamic cosmopolis on the one hand and, on the other, their need to negotiate the specific social, economic, and political conditions of particular trading locations. Muslim trading communities were interlinked not only by mutual commerce but also by the need for religious and political institutions that could address the particular needs of these far-flung diasporic settlements.

Many of these institutions continue to define the character and structures of Islam across monsoon Asia. One example of this is Islamic law, which is usually seen as the defining hallmark of the influence that Arabic high culture had on the religion. But Muslims in maritime Asia found themselves confronted by issues that were not addressed in the classical legal texts of Islam; so Muslim judges and legists in India and elsewhere began to issue their own legal opinions (Ar., *fatāwā*) to address the specific problems faced by Muslims living in non-Muslim societies, a context that was simply not envisaged by the standard treatises. That there was a real need for such legal commentaries that addressed the everyday matters of social life within a non-Islamic society – that is, in a diaspora setting – is evident from the fact that these texts were almost immediately taken up by other Muslim communities across the Indian Ocean which faced the same situation. For example, a commentary on Islamic law composed in South India was quickly adopted in Java; in fact, in a legacy of these trans-oceanic, inter-diasporic exchanges, this same legal text continues to be used by Muslim judges in Indonesia even today.¹⁰

This example highlights that the spread of Islam across the Indian Ocean was not a unilateral transfer of a stable, fully formed prototype into new settings. To translate is to create anew: Monsoon Islam is the product of the creative, cumulative effort to translate Islam (as a set of religious beliefs, legal norms, and social practices) into new settings. This effort was rooted in the precepts of a universalist faith and its cosmopolitan idiom, but needed to be adapted and justified in ways that were intelligible and acceptable locally. The legend of Cheraman Perumal, the convert king, is another example of this creative effort to bridge the

¹⁰ This text and its trajectories are examined in [Chapter 2](#).

divide between the global and the local, to designate a place for Islam within the social and political landscape of medieval South India.

Monsoon Islam, then, offers a framework for conceptualizing a particular trajectory of Islamic history, one which evolved in the context of trade, accommodation, and the blending of practices and traditions. Arguably, it is this trajectory that has defined the lived reality of the majority of Muslims worldwide, even though it rarely figures in popular images of, or discourses about, Islam today. The history and legacy of this Monsoon Islam is the subject of this book.

Historiography

This study is not the first to explore this history but part of an ongoing effort to decouple Islamic history from Middle Eastern studies. The primary aim of Marshall Hodgson's monumental *The Venture of Islam* is to historicize Islam, for example by focusing on culture rather than the traditional mainstay of Islamic studies, law.¹¹ Hodgson coined the term Islamicate to describe cultural elements that were not directly religious in nature but influenced by (and influential on) the historical development of Islam. This led him to pay much greater attention to the development of Islamic civilization outside of its Arab heartland, in places such as India which he regarded as primary sites of religious innovation in the post-caliphate era.¹² By tracing the development of Islamicate civilization outside of legal texts and beyond the boundaries of the old caliphate, *The Venture of Islam* offers a history of Islam that is not a narrative of the dissemination (or dilution) of an authentic (but increasingly corrupted) Islam steeped in Arabic high culture but rather the story of Muslims' interaction with a much wider, and much more heterogeneous, world.

A central strand of Hodgson's work is the interactive nature of commerce, politics, and cultural change in the expansion of Islam across the Afro-Eurasian oecumene. Hodgson draws particular attention to the special role played by what he calls the commercial community in the expansion of Islam along the Indian Ocean littoral. As a result of this mercantile influence on the spread and development of the religion there, "Islamdom in the westerly coasts of the Indian Ocean formed a political and intellectual world of its own", a world in which "the focus of power

¹¹ M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

¹² On this point, also see M.G.S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*, ed. E. Burke III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), ch.7.

lay in the Muslim communities of the many coastal towns".¹³ From India, the "interregional citied commercial nexus" carried this strand of Islam from the western Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia, which came to be tied into oecumene. Across these regions, Islamic law developed in relative independence from the traditional centres of Islamic scholarship of the period.¹⁴

It is in this cultural and commercial oecumene that Shahab Ahmed seeks the answer to the question posed in the title of his provocative book *What is Islam?* Like Hodgson, Ahmed looks east, to a vast swath of territory spanning from south-eastern Europe to South Asia, what he terms the "Balkans-to-Bengal complex" that is home to the majority of Muslims today:

The Balkans-to-Bengal complex represents the most geographically, demographically and temporally extensive instance of a highly-articulated shared paradigm of life and thought in the history of Muslims – it is demographically, spatially, and temporally, an (if not *the*) historically major paradigm of Islam.¹⁵

In focusing on the historical development of Islam in this region, Ahmed counters a scholarly tradition that has deemed it insufficiently central or authentic to be at the heart of normative discussions about Islam. Acknowledging and studying Islam as a historical and human phenomenon, rather than as divine revelation or as a closed system of theological prescription, means having to grapple with the peoples and societies that have embraced it, claimed it, and shaped it. This approach is shared by Falloum Ngom, whose *Muslims beyond the Arab World* explores the development of Islam through West African literary traditions to show that the faith must be seen as "a set of processes and practices, texts and interpretations" that were adapted to the culturally specific ways of people around the globe.¹⁶ If the study of Islam is ultimately the study of Muslims, then both the Balkans-to-Bengal region and sub-Saharan Africa form essential parts of what Islam is; this book argues that the same holds true for the world of Monsoon Islam.

It is no coincidence that Hodgson's notion of Islamicate culture was taken up most eagerly, and most productively, by historians of India, who were seeking to describe the merger of Islamic, Persianate, and Indic culture that characterized the sultanates of North India and the

¹³ Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 544.

¹⁴ Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 544–545.

¹⁵ Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 82 (original emphases).

¹⁶ F. Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of 'Ajamī and the Murīdiyya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1. Also see J.R. Bowen, *A New Anthropology of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

Deccan.¹⁷ Studies of paintings, architecture, poetry, courtly culture, political thought, military organization, medicine, and many other facets of South Asian history have been analysed through the lens of an Indo-Islamic pattern of society and culture.¹⁸ The focal point of these studies tends to fall on North India, and especially the Mughal dynasty, as the centre of gravity of a Persianate realm of Indo-Islam. André Wink, in his magisterial study of the long-term evolution of this Indo-Islamic world, deviates from this pattern by firmly situating Indo-Islam against the history of the Indian Ocean, a sphere that otherwise tends to be regarded as peripheral to its development:

In an overview of the entire period of Islamic expansion and hegemony in the East one fact stands out: the growth and development of a world-economy in and around the Indian Ocean – with India at its centre and the Middle East and China as its two dynamic poles – was effected by continued economic, social and cultural integration into ever wider and more complex patterns under the aegis of Islam. In a word, Islamization here stands for integration.¹⁹

Wink's emphasis on the Indian Ocean, and especially on the economic connections it embodied, has been an impetus to study South Asian Islam from the perspective of seaborne connections rather than territorial empires.

Patricia Risso's seminal effort to trace these connections has shown that tracing the intersection of Islamic and Indian Ocean history can offer a more accurate perspective on both.²⁰ The general agenda laid out by Risso has been taken up in a series of detailed studies that probe different trajectories of Islam in the trading world of maritime Asia. Two themes have received particular attention: the organization of mercantile networks and the transmission of language and texts.²¹ Both strands of research

¹⁷ A representative example of the immense scholarship on this topic is D. Gilmartin and B.B. Lawrence (eds.), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2000).

¹⁸ For a recent anthology of such studies, see for instance, A. Patel and K. Leonard (eds.), *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

¹⁹ A. Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1990–2004), I, 4.

²⁰ P. Risso, *Merchants and Faith: Muslim Commerce and Culture in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

²¹ See for instance A. Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010); P. Malekandathil, *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010); H.P. Ray and E.A. Alpers (eds.), *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); T. Tschacher, *Islam in Tamil Nadu: Varia* (Halle: Südasienwissenschaftliche Arbeitsblätter der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 2004); R. Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

emphasize circulation as the defining hallmark of oceanic networks. This interest in the circulation of people, goods, and ideas, rather than their mere transmission, has produced innovative new frameworks of enquiry that have rejected the conventional parameters of national and regional histories and have upended received chronologies. For example, Engseng Ho recovers the 500-year history of an “ecumenical Islam in an oceanic world” by tracing the material, genealogical, and imaginary exchanges of a trade diaspora that spanned between Arabia, India, and Southeast Asia.²² Ronit Ricci uses the lens of translation to reveal interconnected processes of Islamization in South and Southeast Asia, arguing for the existence of an “Arabic cosmopolis” that over centuries bound together Muslims from different parts of the Indian Ocean.²³ Nile Green takes his readers to the intersection of Islam, imperialism, and industrialization to reveal colonial Bombay as a “primary city of Islam” that complicates notions of a uniform, global form of Islam centred on the Middle East.²⁴ And Seema Alavi draws on the “easy mingling” of seafaring cultures with the religious, economic, and political networks in Indian port cities as an expression of the cosmopolitanism of South Asian Islam in the nineteenth century.²⁵ What all these studies share is an understanding of Islam that is not predicated on an Arabian identity and that emphasizes the role of maritime networks in the formation of a variegated but interconnected Islamic world across monsoon Asia.

The concept of Monsoon Islam is, of course, only as useful as the explanatory work it helps to do. It is presented here not as a dichotomy of essentialized geographies – the harsh and forbidding desert versus the fluid and encompassing ocean – nor as a simple binary between orthodoxy and diversity. Instead, it is intended to capture the institutional and practical consequences of the interaction of Islamic beliefs and norms with other beliefs and norms in the absence of a dominant Islamic political or social order. Out of this type of interaction emerged over time a different and distinct historical trajectory of Islam, one that contrasts with the historical experiences of Arabia, Persia, and North India but that was commonplace all across the medieval trading world of the Indian Ocean: an Islam that was shaped by the priorities and preferences

²² E. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 97.

²³ Ricci, *Islam Translated*, 1–21, 245–272.

²⁴ N. Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

²⁵ S. Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 4.

of ordinary Muslim merchants as they traded and settled along the coastlines of monsoon Asia.

Placing trans-cultural interaction at the core of Monsoon Islam is not to say that this interaction was always perforce peaceful. The notion of the medieval Indian Ocean as a peaceful, cosmopolitan trading world unaffected by the kind of systematic violence that is a hallmark of Europe's maritime history has come under increasing scrutiny, and rightly so.²⁶ Just like the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean too was marked by piracy, privateering, and military contests over ports, routes, and maritime sovereignty. At some moments, as [Chapter 2](#) will show, actors explicitly conceived of such violence in terms of Islam, by imbuing it with religious meaning and authority; in many other instances, though, violence was simply part of the general milieu of maritime trade, an inescapable constituent of the commercial and political milieu in which Muslim merchants operated.²⁷ Monsoon Islam was not at odds with but a part of this interwoven history of rivalry, exploitation, and conflict.

The phenomenon that the concept of Monsoon Islam seeks to describe is well enough documented to allow for confidence in its fidelity: recent studies on specific aspects of trans-oceanic exchanges, such as pilgrimage for example, have created the impression of an interwoven network of commercial, familial, religious, and political ties among Muslim trading diasporas across maritime Asia.²⁸ On the foundation of its own comprehensive case study of the Malabar Coast, this book argues that understanding these various exchanges through the conceptual lens of Monsoon Islam makes these distinct network relationships legible as part of a broader, interrelated historical development. In doing so, this book responds to a call to move beyond static taxonomies by tracing alternative geographies demarcated by the mobilities of historical

²⁶ See for instance, P. Risso, "Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long Eighteenth Century", *Journal of World History* 12:2 (2001), 293–319; R.E. Margariti, "Mercantile Networks, Port Cities, and 'Pirate' States: Conflict and Competition in the Indian Ocean World of Trade before the Sixteenth Century", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51:4 (2008), 543–577; S.R. Prange, "The Contested Sea: Regimes of Maritime Violence in the Pre-Modern Indian Ocean", *Journal of Early Modern History* 17:1 (2013), 9–33.

²⁷ See S.R. Prange, "A Trade of No Dishonor: Piracy, Commerce, and Community in the Western Indian Ocean, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century", *American Historical Review* 116:5 (2011), 1269–1293.

²⁸ For discussions of Muslim pilgrimage networks in the Indian Ocean, see for instance, M.N. Pearson, *Pious Passengers: The Hajj in Earlier Times* (London: Hurst & Co., 1994); E. Tagliacozzo and S.M. Toorawa (eds.), *The Hajj: Pilgrimage in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

actors.²⁹ Akin to Sheldon Pollock's notion of a "Sanskrit cosmopolis" as a world of Indic literary and political culture that linked together South and Southeast Asia during the first millennium of the Common Era, the concept of Monsoon Islam can integrate different aspects of medieval Indian Ocean history into a broader narrative.³⁰ Be it the invocation of a Persian sultan in Friday prayers on the Indian coast, East African scholars giving lessons in Islamic law to South Asian students in Mecca, or mosques in Sumatra that look like South Indian temples, Monsoon Islam is the bigger picture that emerges from these finer brushstrokes.

Setting: The Land of Pepper

This book exemplifies the world of Monsoon Islam primarily through a case study of India's Malabar Coast, a historic region that largely coincides with the modern Indian state of Kerala. Much of the history of this region revolves around its role as the primary producer of black pepper (*Piper nigrum*, Linn.). Between the months of June and September, the southwest monsoon (Malayal., *Edavapathi*) discharges a seemingly inexhaustible amount of rainfall over Kerala's coastal plain and the slopes of the Western Ghats, which in the northern parts can easily exceed two metres in the span of just a few weeks. As a result, Kerala's landscape is luxuriantly lush, providing, especially in the uplands, ideal conditions for the cultivation not only of the "king of spices", pepper, but also of cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and other spices.

In this book, the Malabar Coast is defined in its original sense, as the narrow sliver of land between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats where pepper is grown. Geographically, this approximately encompasses the area between the ports of Barkur in the north and Kollam in the south.³¹ This usage recommends itself for three reasons. First, and most importantly, it largely conforms to how the term Malabar is used in the

²⁹ See F.B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 2.

³⁰ S. Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

³¹ That is, from approximately latitude 9° to 11° North, encompassing most of the modern state of Kerala and the southernmost part of coastal Karnataka. All the early Arab geographers are in consensus that Kollam was the southern extremity of the pepper-producing lands (and, therefore, of Malabar). The definition of Malabar's northern boundary is not as clear from these sources. Al-Dimishqī and Ibn Baṭṭūṭah agree that it begins south of Honavar, which corresponds to the limits of pepper production in the early Portuguese period. This definition also accords to that of the Portuguese; see for instance, W.d.G. Birch (trans.), *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque, Second Viceroy of India*, 4 vols. (London: Hakluyt, 1875), II, 77.

sources.³² Second, delineating the region by pepper cultivation reflects its defining characteristic in the eyes of the Muslim merchants who are the main protagonists of this book. And lastly, even though the word Malabar does not correspond to local Malayali usage it serves to encompass the region's different polities. From the early twelfth century, if not earlier, the Coast was politically divided among a number of small principalities. These states were tied to one another in shifting political configurations as well as through shared religious and economic bonds. This nexus has been somewhat obscured in the historiography, which is characterized by studies of individual port cities or kingdoms at the expense of a broader, regional perspective. These interconnections are vital, however, to understanding the shifting economic activities and political alliances of Muslim trading groups on the Coast.

Located at the southwesternmost limit of the Indian subcontinent and sheltered behind the towering mountain range of the Western Ghats, Malabar was peripheral to the rise and fall of India's great empires. The region's relative isolation from territorial India contrasts vividly with its orientation towards the sea. Due to its central location within the Indian Ocean, it was a natural transhipment point for long-range monsoon navigation. Crucially, Malabar was also the primary supplier of black pepper, the single most important commodity of the Indian Ocean spice trade. The Malabar Coast was absolutely pivotal to the maritime trading world of monsoon Asia since ancient times.

Situating Malabar firmly within an Indian Ocean context is not to detract from the region's role within Indian history: it was indisputably part of the nexus of South Indian history as is evident from its culture, religion, and political structure. Notwithstanding, during the period

³² The earliest Arabic geographical texts refer to the Malabar Coast not by name but metonymically as “the land of pepper” (*bilad al-filfil*). Two early Arabic texts that drew on direct experience of navigation and commerce in the Indian Ocean, the anonymous first book of *Akhbār al-Śin wa'l-Hind* from the ninth century and Buzurg ibn Shahriyār's *Kitāb 'Ajā'ib al-Hind* from the tenth, both speak of “the pepper country” and mention specific ports without using the term Malabar. With the expansion of Muslim sea trade in the eleventh century, the term *Malibār* (and variants thereof) came into regular use by Indian Ocean merchants to denote the coast and its waters. The name itself seems to be hybrid etymology. Its substantive part is derived from the Dravidian word for hill (*mala*), which also underlies the name Malayalam (lit., “the hill country”) that became the designation for the local strand of the Dravidian language and as well as its speakers (Malayalis). The affix appears to be derived either from Arabic *barr* (“land”) or the Persian *bār* (“country” or “coast”). Carried along the Muslim trade networks, the name Malabar was subsequently adopted by other outsiders such as the Chinese (the “*Ma-lipat*” of Zhao Rugua), European travellers (Marco Polo's “*Melibar*”), and the Portuguese (“*Malavar*”). The area designated by the name remained largely consistent until the British period, when the term was used more restrictively to refer only to those districts under direct British rule.

considered in this study, the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, the region developed idiosyncratically in a number of important aspects. From the twelfth century onwards, Malabar was no longer ruled by any of the ancient Tamil dynasties of South India. It was neither conquered by the expansionist Muslim dynasties that established themselves in North India and the Deccan, nor was it incorporated into the South Indian Hindu empires with which they stood in competition.³³ Rather, from the twelfth century onwards, Malabar was characterized by its political fragmentation into a number of competing states. In a direct reflection of the region's orientation towards the sea, the most powerful of these polities were not primarily based on agrarian holdings but centred on port cities.

Partly as a result of this political context, the region's dominant religion, Hinduism developed along an idiosyncratic path that diverged from other parts of India, for example in terms of the role of temple establishments, notions of sacred kingship, or social practices of caste. Islam, too, developed differently on the Malabar Coast than elsewhere on the subcontinent. In all likelihood, Islam in India began on the Malabar Coast.³⁴ The Muslim faith arrived there not in the course of conquest but as a consequence of trade. And it did not reach the region after a centuries-long process of mediation and acculturation that defines the Indo-Persian tradition, but in the form of beliefs, norms, and practices carried by Muslim merchants hailing from all different parts of the Indian Ocean trading world. Although maritime commerce was closely incorporated into the political structures of Malabar's coastal states, it was overwhelmingly dominated by expatriate mercantile groups; in the period under study, Muslims came to dominate the region's all-important spice trade. In addition to the difference in agency in the introduction of Islam, Malabar also differs from the main strand of Indo-Islamic history in terms of both language (with Arabic, rather than Persian, as the *lingua franca* of Muslim elites) and religious affiliation (with the Shāfi'i school of Islamic law most prominent, as opposed to the Hanafi orientation of India's Turkic dynasties).

While the Malabar Coast was an outlier from the vantage point of Indo-Islam, it was very much representative of the wider world of Monsoon Islam. Malabar was a central hub for Muslim maritime networks, and Malabari Muslims set important impulses for Muslim communities in

³³ The oft-repeated claim that Malik Kāfür conquered Malabar during his South Indian campaign in the early fourteenth century seems to stem from a confusion of *Ma'bar* (lit., "passage"), the medieval Arabic name for the Coromandel Coast, with Malabar.

³⁴ R. Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, rev. edn., 1992), 39.

port cities right across the Indian Ocean. The focus of studies of Malabar's Muslims, however, has been less on these trans-oceanic networks than on their conflict with the Portuguese. The arrival of Vasco da Gama on the Malabar Coast in 1498 marked the beginning of a century of confrontation between Europeans and Muslims in this region. A seminal study by Stephen Dale describes how this resulted in the development of an idiosyncratic Islamic community "whose most prominent cultural characteristic was religious militancy".³⁵ Studies by scholars such as Geneviève Bouchon, K.K.N. Kurup, Pius Malekandathil, or Binu John Mailaparambil have probed the European records to reconstruct Muslims' often conflictual, though at times also cooperative, relationship with Europeans on the Malabar Coast across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³⁶

This book offers a new context to that history by, first, offering an understanding of how Muslim networks were constituted, both on the Coast and within the wider Indian Ocean world, and, second, by tracing their continuities through the sixteenth century. This serves to qualify the impact of the Portuguese on Muslim networks and to highlight the continued, and in many cases even strengthened, bonds between Malabar and Muslim settlements in other parts of monsoon Asia. Muslims found themselves confronted by hostile European powers not only in South India but also in many other parts of the Indian Ocean, from East Africa to Southeast Asia.³⁷ Without question, the world of Monsoon Islam underwent profound shifts over the course of the sixteenth century; these shifts, however, played out in an interconnected way across the different regions. In other words, while the character and spatial configuration of Monsoon Islam changed, it did so as part of a recognizably interrelated, trans-oceanic process. In spite of Portuguese efforts to isolate and disperse Malabar's Muslim communities, even in the sixteenth century the history of Islam on the Malabar Coast remains part of a broader history of Islam in the Indian Ocean.

³⁵ S. Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Māppilas of Malabar, 1498–1922* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 1.

³⁶ G. Bouchon, "Musulmans du Kerala à l'époque de la découverte Portugaise", *Mare Luso-Indicum* 2 (1973), 3–59; K.K.N. Kurup, *The Ali Rajas of Cannanore* (Trivandrum: College Book House, 1975); P. Malekandathil, *Portuguese Cochin and the Maritime Trade of India, 1500–1663* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001); B.J. Mailaparambil, *Lords of the Sea: The Ali Rajas of Cannanore and the Political Economy of Malabar (1663–1723)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

³⁷ Dale emphasizes in particular the parallel development of Muslim communities in Malabar, Indonesia, and the Philippines, not only during the sixteenth century but also beyond; see Dale, *Islamic Society*, 8–9.

In examining the life of Muslims on the medieval Malabar Coast, this book focuses primarily on the port city of Calicut (Kozhikode). From the fourteenth century onwards, Calicut was the most important entrepôt in the region. By the time of Vasco da Gama's arrival, its rulers were on course towards achieving hegemony over all the rival pepper ports on the Coast. Over the following century, Calicut became the focal point of resistance against the Portuguese and a fulcrum of Muslim commercial, political, military, and religious activity. Despite this key role that Calicut played not only in South Indian but also wider Indian Ocean history, there is no general monograph on this port.³⁸ On the basis of European sources, the other two major ports on the Coast, Cochin and Cannanore, are both subject of book-length studies; because Calicut did not become a node of European rule, its history is less accessible.³⁹ By making Calicut its central focus, this book seeks to help redress this lacuna.

Period: Shifting Frontiers of Trade and Politics

This book encompasses the period from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries. It denotes this period by the term medieval, which is used as a heuristic device without any implied claim about the nature of that period. Although the term is derived from European historiography, its original sense of *medium aevum* also corresponds to the way in which Islamic history has come to be conceptualized.⁴⁰ Hodgson, for example, frames these centuries as part of Islamdom's "Middle Period".⁴¹ The term medieval also corresponds to conventional usage within the field of South Indian history.⁴² Given the long-standing controversies

³⁸ A dynastic history of Calicut's rulers by Krishna Ayyar has become rather dated and does not make use of any Arabic sources; V.K. Ayyar, *The Zamorins of Calicut (from the Earliest Times Down to A.D. 1806)* (Calicut: n.p., 1938).

³⁹ On Cochin, see Malekandathil, *Portuguese Cochin*. On Cannanore, see G. Bouchon, *'Regent of the Sea': Cannanore's Response to Portuguese Expansion, 1507–1528*, trans. L. Shackley (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988); Kurup, *Ali Rajas of Cannanore; Mailaparambili, Lords of the Sea*.

⁴⁰ For a take on current debates about the use of this term in scholarship on European history, see for instance, R. Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Kalamazoo, MI: Arc Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Hodgson's periodization comprises an Earlier Middle Period (c. 945 to 1250) as well as Later Middle Period (from then until about 1500); see Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 3. For critical reflections on this scheme, see N. Riecken, "Periodization and the Political: Abdallah Laroui's Analysis of Temporalities in a Postcolonial Context", Zentrum Moderner Orient Working Paper no. 6 (2012), 1–24; F. Donner, "Periodization as a Tool of the Historian with Special Reference to Islamic History", *Der Islam* 91:1 (2014), 20–36.

⁴² Kesavan Veluthat carefully weighs the historical basis for such usage in his address to the Indian History Congress; see K. Veluthat, "Into the Medieval – And Out Of It: Early South Indian in Transition", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 58 (1997), 168–205.

about periodization in South Asian historiography in general, it is worth restating that the term is used here as a chronological shorthand without advancing any particular claim about the nature of agrarian relations, “traditionality”, or the question of coevalness.⁴³

In terms of Islamic history, the period under study is often regarded as one of stagnation and decline. The violent sacking of Baghdad in 1258 marked not only the dissolution of the Abbasid caliphate but also the end of what is widely regarded as the formative period, or “golden age”, of Islamic civilization.⁴⁴ As Mona Hassan demonstrates in a recent study, the glorification of the Abbasid heritage developed into a powerful and enduring trope in Islamic historiography.⁴⁵ By contrast, the subsequent centuries, up until the rise of the great Islamic “gunpowder empires” in the sixteenth century, are usually depicted as a time of crisis and debility – it is to this period that scholars tend to look for explanations of how the Islamic world, despite its earlier advantages, came to lag so far behind Europe. By shifting the focus from Arabia to Asia, however, it becomes clear that this period was in many ways marked less by decline than by economic expansion, institutional innovation, and cultural creativity.

The formal end of the Abbasid caliphate called attention to a shift of the Muslim world’s centre of gravity towards Asia that had already been underway for some time. Hodgson speaks of a “new society” that was taking shape during this time, as “in the name of Islam a richly creative culture spread across the whole Eastern Hemisphere”.⁴⁶ This reorientation gave rise to new questions about political authority, social conduct, and religious legitimacy. These concerns were especially pressing because the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also mark the genesis of large-scale settlements of Muslims outside of the Middle East, setting in motion a long-term trend that has resulted in Asia being the demographic core of the Muslim world today. The ways in which Muslims across monsoon

⁴³ On the historiography, politics, and pitfalls of applying this term to South Asian history, see for instance H. Mukhia, “‘Medieval India’: An Alien Conceptual Hegemony?”, *Medieval History Journal* 1:1 (1998), 91–106; D. Ali, “The Idea of the Medieval in the Writing of South Asian History: Contexts, Methods and Politics”, *Social History* 39:3 (2004), 382–407; M. Torri, “For a New Periodization of Indian History: The History of India as Part of the History of the World”, *Studies in History* 30:1 (2014), 89–108. Also see K. Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

⁴⁴ See for instance, A.K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the ‘Abbasid Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁴⁵ M. Hassan, *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History* (Princeton, CT: Princeton University Press, 2016), 68, 259.

⁴⁶ Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 8–11.

Asia came to answer these questions characterize the world of Monsoon Islam to this day.

This book's temporal focus also corresponds to a long-standing gap in the historiography that is only beginning to be addressed. The overwhelming emphasis on epigraphy that characterizes studies of medieval South India has meant that the "sailors, merchants and pilgrims frequenting the Indian Ocean in the post-500 AD period became almost invisible in the historiography".⁴⁷ Because merchants are for the most part absent from inscriptions, which are concerned almost exclusively with royal edicts, dynastic matters, religious endowments, and agrarian relations, the role of maritime trade has been either dismissed as peripheral or ignored altogether. This study is part of an effort to correct this imbalance, not least by demonstrating the vital importance that maritime trade held for the societies of the medieval Malabar Coast.

From the perspective of South Indian history, the twelfth century recommends itself as the starting point for this study because it marked the end of centralized rule in Malabar, which was followed by the rise of a number of coastal states that vigorously competed with one another over the revenues of the pepper trade. Muslim merchants were able to take advantage of these rivalries to carve out a place for their trade and communities. The twelfth century was also a time of significant shifts within Indian Ocean trade. It saw a notable economic florescence, often referred to as the "Asian sea trade boom", that is observable across the entire span of monsoon Asia.⁴⁸ This notable increase in long-distance trade across the Indian Ocean created closely interconnected "borderless" zones of material, cultural, and knowledge transfers.⁴⁹ It was accompanied by a parallel growth of Muslim merchant networks, which came to dominate much of this commerce, especially the enormously profitable spice trade.

This study extends into the sixteenth century for two reasons. First, with the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean, a significant corpus of additional sources becomes available in the form of European-language sources. Many of these, especially those dating to

⁴⁷ R. Chakravarti, "An Enchanting Seascape: Through Epigraphic Lens", *Studies in History* n.s. 20:2 (2004), 307.

⁴⁸ J.W. Christie, "Javanese Markets and the Asian Sea Trade Boom of the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries A.D.", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40:4 (1998), 344–381. Also see D. Heng, "Trans-Regionalism and Economic Co-Dependency in the South China Sea: The Case of China and the Malay Region (Tenth to Fourteenth Centuries AD)", *International History Review* 35:3 (2013), 486–510.

⁴⁹ K.R. Hall, "Commodity Flows, Diaspora Networking, and Contested Agency in the Eastern Indian Ocean c.1000–1500", *Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* 4:2 (2016), 387.

the early years of the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean, reflect on the pre-existing conditions that they encountered there. Moreover, Portuguese writers in particular paid very close attention to Muslims, since these were the principal rivals to Portugal's attempt to monopolize the spice trade. The second reason for extending this study into the sixteenth century is that it challenges the misleading separation of Indian Ocean history into pre-European and European periods that continues to define much of the literature. This book treats the presence of the Portuguese on the Malabar Coast not as the first chapter in a narrative of European colonial domination but rather as a test-case for the competition between, and reorganization of, trade networks in response to changing commercial and political conditions. Without question, the arrival and aggression of the Portuguese represented an unprecedented shock to Muslim merchants across maritime Asia. Their responses to this upheaval, both at the level of individual communities as well as that of trans-oceanic networks, held profound implications for the long-term development of Monsoon Islam.

Note on Sources

This book, like any historical study, is primarily defined by its sources. The lack of datable, reliable evidence is a shared frustration among historians of medieval South India. Seeking to understand a long-term historical process – the development of Muslim communities and the practice of Islam on the Malabar Coast – that was shaped in large part by ordinary traders presents additional challenges. It is inordinately difficult to access the histories and mentalities of “ordinary people” in the premodern world, all the more so when dealing with South India, a region for which even some of the basic contours of its medieval political history – the chronology of dynasties, kings, and wars – remain debated and uncertain. More focused on the rewards available to them in this life, and generally unconcerned about their legacy, traders did not produce the kind of sources that historians use to study the lives of rulers and courtly elites. In many cases, even the language used by the intelligentsia and commoners were different, as illustrated by the histories of Sanskrit and Persian on the subcontinent. In the case of traders, there was an additional linguistic barrier in that many spoke languages different to those of the local population of the places they did business in, a situation only partially ameliorated by the increasing use of Arabic (and later Malay) as a *lingua franca* of Indian Ocean trade.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ See M. Pearson, “Communication in the Early Modern Indian Ocean World”, *Transforming Cultures* 4:2 (2009), 18–28.

As a result, much of what can be known about the ports of the premodern Indian Ocean and their inhabitants is the result of fortuitous contingencies. For South India, the nature of the local writing material combined with the region's subsequent history of invasions and upheavals means that only very few endogenous records have survived. Problematic as they are, the most important of these local sources are *granthavaris*. *Granthavaris* were the dominant genre of historical writing in the region, which usually took place in the context of temple establishments and royal households.⁵¹ They were etched with iron styli onto palm leaves by specially trained scribes. The region's climate caused these palm-leaf records to disintegrate unless they were regularly copied; dynastic change or periods of political upheaval could cause irreversible interruptions to these cycles of replication. Consequently, only a few such *granthavaris* from the medieval period have survived. Most of these are temple records, dealing with the land titles and legal rights of important Brahmin establishments; the few extant palace records are of uncertain chronology and provide almost no information for the period before the seventeenth century. An important exception to this is the so-called Wye manuscript, a nineteenth-century English translation of a palm-leaf *granthavari* prepared at the royal court of Calicut. This document, which has only recently come to wider scholarly attention, offers insights into the relationship of Muslims with this Hindu state.⁵²

This source situation means that most of the records from which the history of trade on the medieval Malabar Coast can be reconstructed are in languages other than Malayalam; in fact, most of them originate from outside the region altogether. Tracing the history of maritime merchants requires a certain degree of itinerancy of the historian. In addition to archival research on three continents, this book is rooted in extensive fieldwork in India and Yemen that has examined inscriptions in mosques and on tombstones and studied Arabic manuscripts in public repositories and private hands. Among other things, this effort has resulted in some significant corrections and reinterpretations of previously reported materials.

Further to Arabic sources, of special importance to the early period covered in this book are the Judeo-Arabic records of the Cairo Geniza, which contain the correspondence of predominantly Jewish traders

⁵¹ The term itself alludes either to the ancient Grantha script, on which Malayalam is based, or to the original Sanskrit meaning of *grantha*, “book”.

⁵² This source is introduced and transcribed in S.R. Prange, “The Pagan King Replies: An Indian Perspective on the Portuguese Arrival in India”, *Itinerario* 41:1 (2017), 151–173.



Figure I.1 A Malabar scribe with palm leaf and iron stylus, from a nineteenth-century engraving.

Image courtesy of the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library.

active in the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. A new critical edition of these letters, which are dispersed across archives all over the world, allows for a much more comprehensive picture of the commercial world of the Indian Ocean during this period than has been available to any previous generation

of scholars.⁵³ The Geniza documents describe a motley world of Indian Ocean trade, in which merchants of diverse origins, religions, and languages cooperated and competed in search of profits.⁵⁴ They show that at least in the western Indian Ocean, maritime trade was organized according to common standards and through shared institutions, many of which were based on Islamic laws and customs. For this reason, the letters of Jewish merchants help reconstruct a more general sense of the practices of Indian Ocean trade at the beginning of the second millennium, especially when combined with other textual and material evidence.

At the other end of the timeframe for this study, the sixteenth century, European sources afford vital insights into conditions on the Malabar Coast. Because of their contest over the pepper trade, the Portuguese in particular were keenly interested in the organization of Muslim trade networks. Their texts, and those written by other Europeans travelling to India in the early 1500s, reflect pre-existing patterns of trade and politics, even as they attempt to fit these into the framework of their own experiences, expectations, and desires.⁵⁵ In keeping with recent efforts to revise the perception that the arrival of the Portuguese represents a decisive watershed moment – encapsulated in the Whiggish notion of a “Vasco da Gama epoch” that supposedly marks the shift to modernity – this study extends deep into the sixteenth century to highlight continuities and to situate the Portuguese within the broader currents of Indian Ocean history.⁵⁶ European sources of the sixteenth century also offer

⁵³ S.D. Goitein and M.A. Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (“India Book”) (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

⁵⁴ The possibilities of this corpus of sources are only just beginning to be plumbed. An especially rich study of the material world of Jewish Indian Ocean traders is offered by E. Lambourn, *Abraham’s Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁵⁵ See J.-P. Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 5. On the pre-history of these categories of encounter, see K.M. Phillips, *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245–1510* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

⁵⁶ K.M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498–1945* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953). For examples of revisionist scholarship, see for instance, S. Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal, 1500–1700* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990); S. Subrahmanyam and L.F.F.R. Thomaz, “Evolution of Empire: The Portuguese in the Indian Ocean during the Sixteenth Century”, in J.D. Tracy (ed.), *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 298–331; T. Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age: China, Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West in World History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

an important counterpoint to Arabic accounts of the conflict with “the Franks”, which impelled the transformation of Malabar’s Muslims from a prosperous merchant community to a militarized frontier society.

Outline of the Book

This book tests the possibilities as well as limits of the concept of Monsoon Islam to bring together the economic, social, political, and trans-oceanic histories of Muslim trading communities on the medieval Malabar Coast. It argues that the development of Monsoon Islam was defined by the tension between the global and the local, between competing impulses and imperatives of severity and syncretism. This tension is traced through four different spaces that defined the existence of Malabar’s Muslim trading communities: the Port, the Mosque, the Palace, and the Sea. Each of these spaces is considered in both its concrete manifestations as well as symbolic signification.

The Port provides an economic history that is primarily concerned with the practical organization of long-distance trade in the medieval Indian Ocean. The port is where Muslim merchants conducted their business and serves as a useful lens through which to view the underlying relationships and institutional arrangements that made possible the regular exchange of goods across the vast distances of the ocean. The chapter is animated by the question of how trade functioned within this world, and specifically how merchants were able to trust one another in spite of the physical distances and cultural differences that separated them.

The Mosque examines the social organization of these Muslim trading communities. It parses the legend of Cheraman Perumal as evidence of the establishment of a Muslim religious elite on the Malabar Coast. The key sources for this chapter are Malabar’s historic mosques themselves, which are examined in terms of their history, architecture, and inscriptions to trace the integration of Islam into the region. These same mosques later became emblems of the Muslims’ struggle against the Portuguese, a conflict that engendered major changes not only in the composition of Muslim communities but also in the religious orientation of Monsoon Islam – not least in the emergence of a new understanding of *jihād*.

The Palace shifts the focus from the merchants to the states in which they operated. It details the politics of the multi-communal polities of Malabar, with a special focus on the growing dependence of South Indian sovereigns on the revenues and resources available from maritime trade. This chapter examines the political roles of Muslim merchants within

these Hindu states, as well as instances of conflict between Muslims and local elites that ultimately fed into attempts at autonomous state-building by Muslims on the Malabar Coast.

The Sea has its focus on the broader Indian Ocean networks in which these merchants participated. It traces three sets of network relationships: economic, religious, and political. It first follows on the trails of the pepper trade to map out the commercial connections of Muslim merchants, which highlights the particular importance of the eastern Indian Ocean to their networks. The second set of network relationships is religious in nature, revealing the circulation of Islamic scholars and mystics within the world of Monsoon Islam. The third set shows how political networks intersected with both trade and faith. It reveals the astonishingly persistent modus by which Islamic states drew autonomous Muslim trading communities into ties of affinity and allegiance, and vice versa. Together, these networks of trade, piety, and political allegiance demonstrate the different ties that produced and perpetuated the world of Monsoon Islam, and highlights how each of them was ultimately shaped by the opportunities and imperatives of Indian Ocean trade.

1 The Port

Traders came in large numbers from many different parts and these ports became thickly populated and prospered, all because of the Muslims and their commerce.

— Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-Mujāhidīn* (c. 1584)

Some six and a half centuries ago, in the year 1346, Ibn Baṭṭūṭah arrived in southern China. It would be an understatement to say that he was already a seasoned traveller: in all likelihood, he was the most widely travelled man of his age, having journeyed from his native Morocco across northern Africa and on to Arabia, Persia, East Africa, Anatolia, Afghanistan, India, and Southeast Asia. By the time he disembarked on the Chinese coast, his voyage had lasted for more than twenty years and covered a distance greater than that traversed by Marco Polo two generations earlier. Yet, after all this time, Ibn Baṭṭūṭah had not only retained his wanderlust but also his capacity to be amazed. Staying with fellow Muslims in a city on the South China coast that he calls *Qanjanfū* – likely Fuzhou, then as now an important port-of-trade – he was introduced to a man who seemed oddly familiar to him. In his book, he recalls the chance encounter with this man who, as it turned out, had grown up only a short distance from Ibn Baṭṭūṭah’s own hometown on the Moroccan coast, half a world away:

When we conversed after our formal greetings it occurred to me that I knew him. I looked at him for a long time. He said: “I see you looking at me as though you knew me.” I said: “Which country are you from?” He said: “I am from Ceuta.” I said: “I am from Tangier.” He greeted me again, and wept and I wept too. I said: “Have you been to India?” He said: “Yes, I have been to the capital Delhi [Dihlī].” When he said that to me I remembered him and said, “Are you al-Bushri!” He said: “Yes.”¹

¹ C. Defrémy and B.R. Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah, texte arabe, accompagné d’une traduction*, 4 vols. (Paris: Société Asiatique/Imprimerie Impériale, 1853–58), IV, 281–282; English translations adapted from H. Gibb and C. Beckingham

The narrative continues with the recollection of their original meeting in India some years earlier, when al-Bushrī was still young and beardless. By the time of this second encounter in China, al-Bushrī had not only acquired a beard but also great wealth as a merchant, which was expressed in his possession of no less than a hundred male and female slaves. He gave Ibn Battūṭah two of each as a present, and they once again went their separate ways. But remarkably, this is not the last we hear of al-Bushrī. Five years later, when Ibn Battūṭah was crossing the Sahara desert to explore “the land of the blacks” – Mali – he ran into al-Bushrī’s brother.² This man was not a trader but a Muslim judge, a *qādī*, in an oasis town on the northern fringe of the desert. Even a man as cosmopolitan as Ibn Battūṭah was astonished at the vast distance between the al-Bushrī brothers: “How far apart they are!”³

How far indeed. This anecdote of the al-Bushrīs is just one of many that illustrate the magnitude and complexity of the medieval Muslim trading world. Its extent is readily mapped in its span from Iberia and West Africa all the way to China, encompassing the entirety of monsoon Asia. Its complexity, on the other hand, is more difficult to describe, for it was not only goods that circulated within this commercial cosmopolis but also individuals, ideas, texts, allegiances, and reputations. This chapter examines port cities as the central nodes in these multi-faceted exchanges. It describes the relationship between ports and oceanic networks, the prominent role played by Muslims within them, and the composition of Muslim trading groups. The discussion then turns from the *where* and *who* of medieval Indian Ocean trade to the question of *how* it functioned. It is argued that the business practices, institutional preferences, and legal framework used by Indian Ocean merchants, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, were all directed towards overcoming the fundamental problem of trust. Looking at some of the great merchant princes of the Indian Ocean brings further into focus the internal organization of these trading groups. By examining first ports as the sites of trade, then institutions as the underpinnings of trade, and finally prominent merchants as exemplars of their communities, the chapter reveals the economic foundations upon which the world of Monsoon Islam was built.

(trans.), *The Travels of Ibn Battūṭa, A.D. 1325–1354*, 5 vols. (London: Hakluyt, 1956–2000), IV, 899–900.

² Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 376–377; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūṭa*, IV, 946.

³ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 282, 377; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūṭa*, IV, 900, 946.

Ports and Networks

Port cities were the fulcrums of maritime trade. They have been conceptualized in different ways, and through different terms, each of which points to specific functions they held within the overall trade system. One of the ways in which Indian Ocean ports have been defined is as entrepôts. This term, which emphasizes the role of port cities as transhipment hubs, draws attention to the organizing principle of the region's maritime trade: the monsoon wind system. These seasonally alternating winds made the Indian Ocean "the world's most benign environment for long-range voyaging", not only because of their predictability but also for the speed with which they allowed seafarers to traverse the ocean's immense distances.⁴ The monsoon wind system made the vast maritime expanse of the Indian Ocean navigable and, to some degree, predictable; it also favoured some routes and connections over others, shaping the very structure of communication, commerce, and cultural change between the coasts it buffets.

Arab navigators called journeys driven by the monsoon *dirāt al-matlaq*, meaning a route out of the sight of land between two known ports.⁵ The most detailed account of navigation in the medieval Indian Ocean is the fifteenth-century nautical manual by Ahmad ibn Mājid. Its chapter on the monsoon not only describes the ideal dates for sailing eastwards and westwards but also offers many minor details and adjustments that allow for a more comprehensive reconstruction of the period's navigational practices.⁶ The season for travelling to India from Arabia was the southwestern monsoon (Ar., *mawsim al-kaws*) that began in March on the East African coast and reached Malabar in late May. Navigation on India's west coast ceased altogether during the months of June and July due to the heavy monsoon rains, which brought with them high winds and enormous swells (described by Ibn Mājid as "evil waves").⁷ The other main sailing season was the northeastern monsoon (Ar., *rīḥ al-sabā*), a longer and calmer season during which a ship could travel all the way from Malacca to the Red Sea; on the Indian coast, it began

⁴ Fernández-Armesto, *Pathfinders*, 37–38.

⁵ See P. Lunde, "Sulaymān al-Mahri: Maritime Routes in the 'Umda and Manhāj", in A.R. Constable and W. Facey (eds.), *The Principles of Arab Navigation* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2013), 66.

⁶ The definitive study of this text is G.R. Tibbetts (ed. and trans.), *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese: Being a Translation of Kitāb al-Fawā'id fi usl al-bahr wa'l-qawā'id of Ahmad b. Mājid al-Najdī* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1971).

⁷ G.R. Tibbetts (ed. and trans.), *Arab Navigation*, 163, 366–367.

in late October and lasted until February or March.⁸ There were a few other, more limited sailing opportunities, as well as a number of regional variations, but altogether these seasons defined the rhythm and pattern of maritime life in the Indian Ocean, both facilitating and constraining human movement.

The defined sailing seasons of the monsoon predisposed the development of distinct trade circuits, a pattern that emerged around the turn of the first millennium and characterized Indian Ocean trade until the introduction of the steam ship.⁹ During this period, commodities were rarely shipped directly across the entire span of the ocean. Instead, they changed hands (and ships) multiple times between origin and destination, with entrepôts serving as the intermediary “warehouses” for transhipment. The most successful transhipment hubs were located at the junctions of trade routes, such as the Malabar Coast which is located at the intersection of the Arabian Sea and eastern Indian Ocean, or at natural choke points, such as Aden at the entry to the Red Sea.¹⁰

Expanding on the entrepôt model, the concept of port-of-trade focuses on the institutional rather than natural setting of transhipment trade. First developed by Karl Polanyi, the port-of-trade model describes places designed to facilitate commercial exchange between different cultures with differing economic institutions.¹¹ The characteristics ascribed to ports-of-trade – free access, commercial infrastructure (anchorage, warehousing, marketplaces), secure property rights of foreign traders, and impartial administration of justice – have become mainstays in the study of cross-cultural trade, even as some of Polanyi’s other claims about the role of states in administering trade have been refuted empirically.¹²

Kirti Chaudhuri builds on the port-of-trade model for his understanding of Indian Ocean emporia, which he regards as essential to the functioning of cross-cultural trade.¹³ In his vision, the economic success of trade emporia was predicated on their political neutrality,

⁸ G.R. Tibbatts (ed. and trans.), *Arab Navigation*, 368–370. Also see D.A. Agius, *Seafaring in the Arabian Gulf and Oman: People of the Dhow* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 193–199.

⁹ See K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 39.

¹⁰ See R.E. Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 177.

¹¹ K. Polanyi, “Ports of Trade in Early Societies”, *Journal of Economic History* 23:1 (1963), 30–45.

¹² For critique of Polanyi’s theory, see for instance, P.E. Lovejoy, “Polanyi’s ‘Ports of Trade’: Salaga and Kano in the Nineteenth Century”, *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 16:2 (1982), 245–277; L. Graslin and J. Maucourant, “Le port de commerce: un concept en débat”, *Topoi* 12–13:1 (2005), 215–257.

¹³ Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation*, 98, 224.

which may explain why the most prominent trade emporia were located within smaller polities rather than in more powerful territorial states.¹⁴ Further to their economic function, Chaudhuri also emphasizes the social dimension of trade emporia, in particular the social contacts between people of different cultures that resulted from the residence of foreign merchants.¹⁵ Together, these different ways in which port cities have been conceptualized – as entrepôts, ports-of-trade, or emporia – all draw attention to the imperative of studying them not in isolation but in the context of the broader patterns of commercial, cultural, and political exchanges. Ports functioned as hinges, conjoining the global and the local.

An “archipelago of cities” is an image used by Fernand Braudel to describe the uneven development of medieval Europe, where “a handful of extraordinary cities dazzled observers” against a general background of backwardness, archaism, and exploitation.¹⁶ In her study of the premodern world system, Janet Abu-Lughod describes an international trade economy that pivoted around such “core cities”, many of which were ports-of-trade located on the shores of the Indian Ocean.¹⁷ These cities served as cosmopolitan spaces *avant la lettre*, frequented by people with “fluency in multiple languages, familiarity with and acknowledgement of alternate modes of religiosity and social practices, and easy mobility between sites where one or another of these languages, modes, and practices are dominant”.¹⁸ As a result, port cities were not just sites of commercial intercourse but also of cultural change, in much the same way as the metropoles of today’s world economy serve as the laboratories of cultural trends and transitions.

An extensive literature documents that in spite of the vast distances that separated them, the major ports of monsoon Asia stood in intensive contact with one another. Some historians go as far as to argue that – in keeping with the Southeast Asian aphorism “the water unites and

¹⁴ Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation*, 27, 224.

¹⁵ Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation*, 99, 105.

¹⁶ F. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th to 18th Century*, 3 vols., trans. S. Reynolds (London: Collins, 1981–4), III, 30, 39; the term was first coined by Richard Häpke.

¹⁷ J. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World-System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 32.

¹⁸ M. Lambek, “Foreword”, in E. Simpson and K. Kresse (eds.), *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), xiv. Long-distance trade, of course, does not engender cosmopolitanism *per se*, nor does the concept of cosmopolitanism always readily map onto premodern history; on these issues, see H. Driessen, “Mediterranean Port Cities: Cosmopolitanism Reconsidered”, *History and Anthropology* 16:1 (2005), 129–141; F. Rosa, *The Portuguese in the Creole Indian Ocean: Essays in Historical Cosmopolitanism* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2015).

the land divides” – the bonds that tied together ports across the Indian Ocean were oftentimes stronger and more salient than their connections to their own immediate hinterlands.¹⁹ Michael Pearson has formalized this observation into the concept of “littoral society”, to describe the shared traits in the material and cultural lives of coastal communities along the shores of the Indian Ocean.²⁰ Port cities in maritime Asia, then, are seen as interconnected, cosmopolitan spaces defined more by their trans-oceanic linkages than by the inland societies they are formally part of and for which they act as economic multipliers, cultural beacons, or even as the “vanguards of globalization”.²¹

The actual connections that produced this trans-oceanic milieu of shared commercial and cultural ties between distant ports have come to be almost universally described in terms of networks. This terminology appears to be as much a product of a present-day *mentalité* as it is of the historical record: in the digital age, even premodern linkages have come to be conceived through the metaphors of networks, circuits, hubs, and nodes. (This supplants an older literature that, in keeping with Cold War-era worldviews, conceptualized the Indian Ocean as a “world-system”.²²) Over the past decades, network theory has emerged as the dominant paradigm for studies in Indian Ocean history. Phenomena as diverse as the commercial organization of South Indian merchant guilds, kinship ties between Buddhist scholars, the propagation of Islamic texts, or the bureaucracy of the Dutch East India Company have all been conceived in terms of network relations.²³

¹⁹ See for instance, G.W. Spencer, *The Politics of Expansion: The Chola Conquest of Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya* (Madras: New Era, 1983), 74. The aphorism is quoted in C.A. Lockard, “‘The Sea Common to All’: Maritime Frontiers, Port Cities, and Chinese Traders in the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce, ca.1400–1750”, *Journal of World History* 21:2 (2010), 219.

²⁰ For instance, in M. Pearson, “Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems”, *Journal of World History* 17:4 (2006), 353–373.

²¹ R. Mukherjee (ed.), *Vanguards of Globalization: Port Cities from the Classical to the Modern* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2014).

²² This approach informs P. Beaujard, *Les mondes de l’océan Indien*, 2 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

²³ See for instance, R. Lee, “Constructing Community: Tamil Merchant Temples in India and China, 850–1281”, unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University (2012); R. Chakravarti, “An Enchanting Seascapes: Through Epigraphic Lens”, *Studies in History* 20:2 (2004), 305–315; T. Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003); U. Freitag, “Islamische Netzwerke im Indischen Ozean”, in D. Rothermund and S. Weigelin-Schwendzlik (eds.), *Der Indische Ozean: Das afro-asiatische Mittelmeer als Kultur- und Wirtschaftsraum* (Wien: Promedia, 2004), 61–81; Ricci, *Islam Translated*; K. Ward, *The Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

The concept of networks does the important work of framing conceptually exchanges that are distinct in nature but nonetheless interrelated and persistent. For example, Engseng Ho conceptualizes the linkages of kinship, trade, and authority within a Sufi order that operated between Yemen and western India over the course of many generations as a network “that was simultaneously commercial, religious, legal, political, and mystical”.²⁴ Networks rarely served a single purpose, in much the same way that traders were not exclusively economic actors but also social and political beings. The analytical focus on networks can serve as an organizing principle for the multiple levels of material and intellectual connections across the ocean, without having to necessarily subsume them into claims of an overarching “system”.²⁵

Without question, the uncritical and untheorized use of network terminology risks reifying any kind of link, however ephemeral, into a network relationship. But as a rich body of scholarship attests, the prism of networks helps reveal important historical connections that were not apparent through the more conventional lenses of nation, empire, or “area”.²⁶ The tools of network theory have produced a host of new insights by focusing on “the middle-range, above isolated individuals yet below whole social formations”.²⁷ What this level of analysis highlights time and again is the pivotal role played by trade in the making and sustaining of long-distance connections, by rendering viable many different forms of contact and exchange that otherwise would not have occurred.

Across monsoon Asia, familial, religious, and scholarly networks were all closely interwoven with commercial exchanges: Buddhist temples

²⁴ Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, 164. Also see K. Hall, “Multi-Dimensional Networking: Fifteenth-Century Indian Ocean Maritime Diaspora in Southeast Asian Perspective”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49:4 (2006), 454–481.

²⁵ The network model has been particularly useful to scholars of empire, whom it has helped move away from views of empire as a single, cohesive framework towards the notion of an “imperial web” that was constituted of a multiplicity of (complementary as well as contradictory) network relationships. See for instance, A. Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth Century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001); T.R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); A. Games, *The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1560–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ward, *The Networks of Empire*.

²⁶ In a 1997 report, a group of distinguished scholars recommend that area studies be re-thought in terms of “processes” instead of cartographic or cultural constructions; this, they suggest, will lead to “space becoming more flexible and porous and time less sequential and cumulative”. While they do not use the term, a focus on networks answers to this very exhortation. See A. Appadurai, J. Bhabha, S. Collins, and A. Gunertane, “Area Studies, Regional Worlds: A White Paper for the Ford Foundation”, Center for International Studies, University of Chicago (1997), 23.

²⁷ P. Bearman, J. Moody, and R. Faris, “Networks and History”, *Complexity* 8:1 (2002), 61.

were situated on trade routes; scholarly prestige was established through association with a teacher on the other side of the ocean; pilgrimage was inseparable from economic activity; religious specialists often had an eye for profitable business; and intermarriage between traders and local women created ever more involute layers of relationship.²⁸ The al-Bushrī brothers perfectly illustrate this world of immense distances and intimate linkages, as they moved back and forth between Africa, India, and China, worked as merchants and served as jurists, extended hospitality and gathered intelligence. Like Ibn Baṭṭūṭah himself, they moved with ease around this “archipelago of cities” made up of the cosmopolitan enclaves of the port cities.²⁹

Brides of the Sea: Malabar Ports in Indian Ocean Trade

The Malabar Coast is naturally orientated towards sea trade. Until at least the fifteenth century, it enjoyed a near-monopoly on the production of black pepper, which was one of the most lucrative commodities of the entire Indian Ocean trade. Malabar’s pepper was in high demand all across Eurasia, sought after by elite consumers in the markets of Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and China alike.³⁰ The Malabar Coast forms part of the southernmost promontory of the Indian subcontinent. It is situated at the meeting point between the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, between East Africa and the Middle East to the west and Southeast Asia and China in the east. This position at the intersection of two major Indian Ocean trade circuits made the region a natural transhipment point.

It is no surprise then that port cities on the Malabar Coast were known as nodal points of Indian Ocean commerce from the very beginnings of

²⁸ See S.R. Prange, “Scholars and the Sea: A Historiography of the Indian Ocean”, *History Compass* 6:5 (2008), 1382–1393.

²⁹ For all his globetrotting, Ibn Baṭṭūṭah only relates two instances of genuine “culture shock” during his travels: in a Christian village on the Black Sea he was unnerved by the (to his ears) devilish sound of church bells, and in China he was repulsed by the (to his taste) uncouth cuisine. For the remainder of his voyage, he more or less remained within the cultural world – his comfort zone, so to speak – of the Muslim trading enclaves that could be found along all the major trade routes of monsoon Asia. For discussions of Ibn Battūṭah’s travels, see R.E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); D. Waines, *The Odyssey of Ibn Battuta: Uncommon Tales of a Medieval Adventurer* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010); T. Mackintosh-Smith, *Landfalls: On the Edge of Islam from Zanzibar to the Alhambra* (London: John Murray, 2011); E. Follath, *Jenseits aller Grenzen: Auf den Spuren des großen Abenteurers Ibn Battuta durch die Welt des Islam* (München: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2016).

³⁰ For the significance of pepper to overall Indian Ocean trade, see S.R. Prange, “‘Measuring by the Bushel’: Reweighting the Indian Ocean Pepper Trade”, *Historical Research* 84:224 (2011), 212–235.



Map 1.1 Indian Ocean trade around the fifteenth century.
Map drawn by Nat Case; copyright by Sebastian R. Prange.

its recorded history. The earliest detailed references to specific ports in the region date from the Graeco-Roman period. As the Roman empire acquired control over Egypt's Red Sea coast, its consumption of oriental spices soared and its denizens' knowledge about "the land of pepper" increased. A Malabari port mentioned with great regularity in contemporary sources is Muziris; after a number of false starts, this site is now being identified with growing confidence as the village of Pattanam at the mouth of the Periyar river, near the modern town of Kodungallur (angl., Cranganore).³¹ The *Periplus* of the first century reports that Muziris "abounds in ships sent there with cargoes from Arabia, and by the Greeks".³² The hoards of Roman coins as well as West Asian ceramics excavated in this locale substantiate the impression that Kodungallur was an important emporium in the western Indian Ocean.³³ This is also observable from Indian sources: a Tamil poem speaks of "the thriving town of Muchiri, where the beautiful large ships of the Yāvanas [Ionians, a term applied to all westerners], bringing gold, come splashing the foam on the waters of the Periyar [river] and return laden with pepper".³⁴

In keeping with Kodungallur's central role in the ancient pepper trade, the traditions of Malabar's Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities all depict this port as the epicentre for the introduction of their respective faiths to South India. In the Christian tradition, St Thomas alighted at Muziris during his apostolic voyage across maritime Asia and established a community of converts there.³⁵ The Jewish community at Cochin traces

³¹ Frequent geological shifts in Kerala's coastline mean that historic sites are often at some distance to the eponymous modern cities. Pattanam is today on the southern side of the bay, while the modern town of Kodungallur is on its northern side. Despite promising archaeological finds, the identification of this locale with ancient Muziris is not yet scholarly consensus. See K.P. Shajan et al., "Locating the Ancient Port of Muziris: Fresh Findings from Pattanam", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 17 (2004), 351–359; P.J. Cherian et al., *Interim Report of Pattanam Excavations 2012* (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Council for Historical Research, 2012); P. Malekandathil, "Muziris and the Trajectories of Maritime Trade in the Indian Ocean", in K.S. Mathew (ed.), *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean and Muziris: New Perspectives on Maritime Trade* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2015), 339–368.

³² W.H. Schoff (trans.), *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2001), 44.

³³ See P. Malekandathil, "Muziris and the Trajectories of Maritime Trade in the Indian Ocean in the First Millennium CE", in K.S. Mathew (ed.), *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris: New Perspectives on Maritime Trade* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2015), 339–368.

³⁴ Quoted in R.K. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping: A History of the Sea-borne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999), 135. Also see V. Kanakasabhai, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago* (New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 1989 [reprint of Madras, 1904]), 36–37; P. Meile, "Les Yavanais dans l'Inde Tamoule", *Journal Asiatique* 232 (1940–41), 85–123.

³⁵ See for instance, G.B. Howard, *The Christians of St. Thomas and Their Liturgies* (Oxford: John Henry, 1864), 9–10; P.J. Thoma, "The South Indian Tradition of the

its genesis to the arrival of Jews at Kodungallur – known in medieval Jewish geography as Shingly – in the first century, in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple at Jerusalem.³⁶ And to local Muslims, it was at his royal court at Kodungallur (then known as Mahodayapura or Makotai) that Cheraman Perumal received the Muslim pilgrims who would guide him to his embrace of Islam. In this Muslim tradition – which the [next chapter](#) parses in detail – Kodungallur also became the site of India's first mosque in the year 629. The port of Kodungallur thus features centrally in the origin myths of three communities who were all actively engaged in the overseas trade during the medieval period.

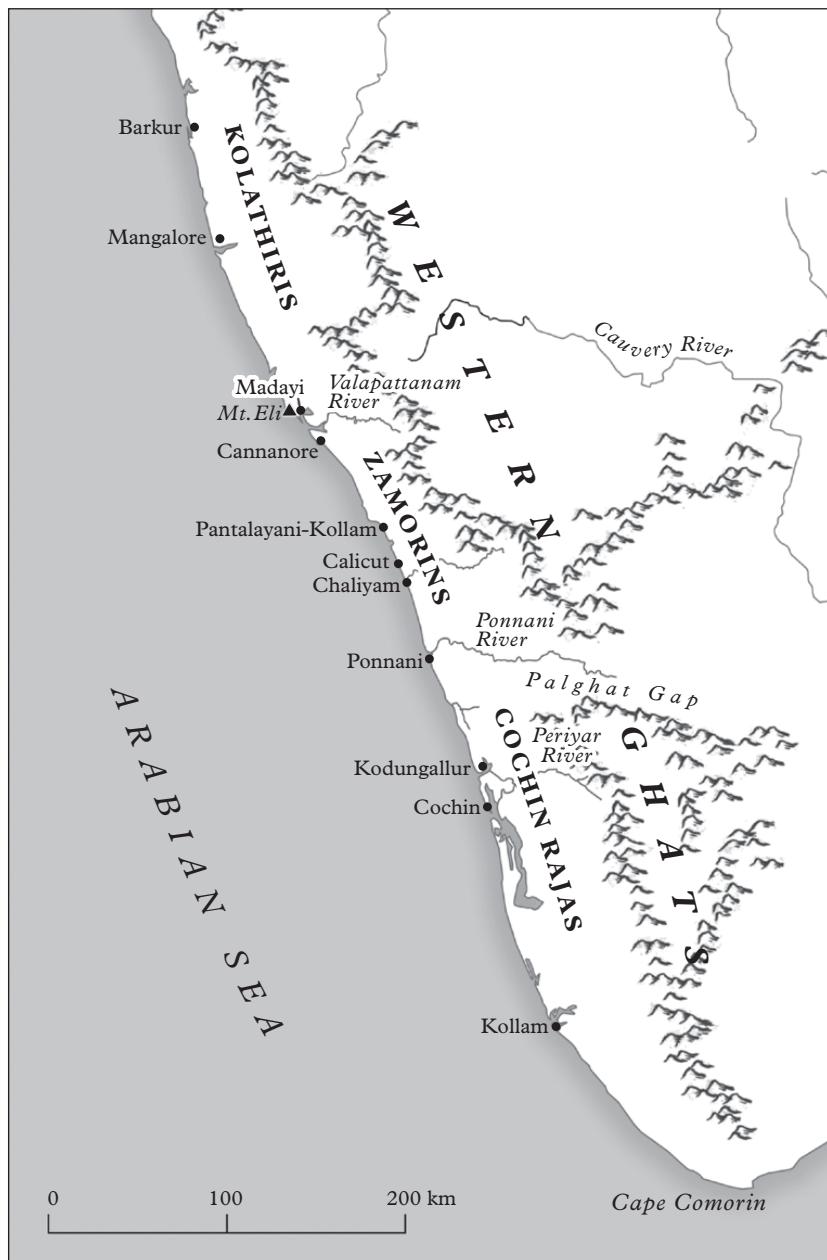
In contrast to these traditions, the earliest epigraphic evidence for the presence of these different religious communities does not come from Kodungallur. Instead, the oldest inscriptions that attest to the settlement of foreign merchant communities in Malabar relate to a different port city: Kollam (angl., Quilon).³⁷ Around the year 849, Kollam's ruler issued two grants that were recorded as copper-plate inscriptions, the traditional medium for royal edicts and other important deeds. These grants offer a remarkable window into the organization of trade on the ninth-century Malabar Coast. One of the grants, known to Church historians as the *Tabula Quilonensis*, records the endowment of a local Christian church known as Tharisapalli. It endows this church and its community with land and other privileges so as to, in its own words, “guarantee that the church is not lacking in anything”.³⁸

Apostle Thomas”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 56:1 (1924), 213–223; Leslie Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

³⁶ See for instance, N. Katz, “The Historical Traditions of the Jews of Kochi”, *Studies in History* n.s. 21:2 (2005), 127–128; N. Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 10–13.

³⁷ The ninth-century geographic account compiled by Abū Zayd al-Sirāfi Zayd refers to the port of Kollam as *Kūlam Mālī*; later Arabic sources render it variously as *mūlī*, *kūkam mālī*, *kūlū mālī*, and most often simply as *kūlam*; see T. Mackintosh-Smith (ed. and trans.), “Abū Zayd al-Sirāfi: Accounts of China and India”, in P.F. Kennedy and S.M. Toorawa (eds.), *Two Arabic Travel Books* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014), 33; S.M.H. Nainar, *Southern India as Known to the Arab Geographers* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2004), 44n.66.

³⁸ Translations of the grant are in W. Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 2 vols., ed. P. Cherian (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Gazetteers Department, 2000), II, cxix–cxxi and M.G.S. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972), 86–94. Also see C.G. Cereti, L.M. Olivieri, and J. Vazhuthanapally, “The Problem of the Saint Thomas Crosses and Related Questions: Epigraphical Survey and Preliminary Research”, *East and West* 52:1/4 (2002), 299–301. A much-anticipated new translation of the plates prepared by a consortium of experts is forthcoming in E. Lambourn, K. Veluthat, and R. Tomber (eds.), *The Kollam Plates in the World of the Ninth Century*



Map 1.2 Malabar's principal ports of trade in the fifteenth century.
Map drawn by Nat Case; copyright by Sebastian R. Prange.

The introduction of Christianity to the region has been variously dated to between the first and fourth centuries. It is likely that the Sassanid persecution of the fourth century caused a migration of Persian-speaking Nestorian Christians to western India. Cosmas Indicopleustes' *Topographia Christiana* of the sixth century describes the prominent role Christians played in the sea trade between southern India and the Persian Gulf. By the seventh century, Nestorian Christians on the Malabar Coast maintained episcopal links to the Assyrian Church of the East in Persia, which corresponds to the importance of the Persian Gulf in the maritime trade of the western Indian Ocean during that period.³⁹

Notably, the Tharisapalli copper-plate grant is not only evidence for the presence of a Christian community at Kollam: it also confirms the presence of Jewish and Muslim settlements there. While the royal deed itself is written in Old Malayalam in Vattezhuttu script, it is followed by a series of signatures of which ten are in Middle Persian (in Pahlavi script) attesting to both Christians and Zoroastrians, four in Judaeo-Persian relating to the Jewish community, and eleven in Kufic Arabic.⁴⁰ Overall, the impression of these signatures is “more like a graffiti than an inscription”, strengthening the sense of these names as actual autographs.⁴¹ The Arabic portion spells out eleven unmistakably Muslim names:

[And witness] to this Maymūn ibn Ibra[-]
 him and witness Muḥammad ibn Manīḥ
 and Ṣulḥ [?Ṣalīḥ] ibn ‘Ali and witness
 ‘Uthmān ibn al-Marzubān and witness
 Muḥammad ibn Yahyā
 and witness ‘Amr ibn
 Ibrāhīm and witness Ibrāhīm ibn
 al-Tayy and witness Bakr ibn Maṇṣūr
 and witness al-Qāsim ibn Ḥamīd

Indian Ocean (An Experiment in Large Micro-History) (New Delhi: Primus Books, forthcoming).

³⁹ To wit, the two letters of the East Syriac patriarch Ishoyab III (650–658), in W. Baum and R. Senoner (eds. and trans.), *Indien und Europa im Mittelalter: Die Eingliederung des Kontinents in das europäische Bewußtsein bis ins 15. Jahrhundert* (Klagenfurt: Kitab, 2000), 33–42. Also see A. Mingana, “The Early Spread of Christianity in India”, *Bulletin of John Ryland’s Library* 10:2 (1926), 3–82; T.P. Elias, “East Syrian Missions to Asia with Special Reference to Malabar Coast from Sixth Century to Sixteenth Century AD and its Influence on Indian Religion, Society and Culture”, unpublished PhD thesis, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam (2004).

⁴⁰ A survey of earlier readings, as well as a new interpretation of the Pahlavi signatures, is provided by C.G. Cereti, “The Pahlavi Signatures on the Quilon Copper Plates (*Tabula Quilonensis*)”, in W. Sundermann, A. Hintze, and F. de Blois (eds.), *Exegisti Monumenta: Festschrift in Honour of Nicholas Sims-Williams* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2009), 31–50. I am grateful to Elizabeth Lambourn for this reference.

⁴¹ Cereti, Olivieri, and Vazhuthanapally, “The Problem of the Saint Thomas Crosses”, 301.

and witness Mansūr ibn ‘Isā and
witness Isma‘il ibn Ya‘qūb⁴²

The significance of this copper-plate grant lies in the fact that members of other religious communities – Zoroastrians, Jews, and Muslims – were asked to acknowledge and participate in the granting of privileges to the Christian community. For them to be incorporated into the process of royal proclamation, all four religious communities must have formed permanent settlements at Kollam.

That these communities were of a mercantile character is confirmed by the second, complementary copper-plate grant, which bestows far-reaching commercial and political privileges to two merchant associations known as Manigraman (*māṇigramaṇ*) and Anjuvannam (*añjuvannam*).⁴³ While the former was a group of South Indian (predominantly Tamil) merchants who were especially active in the trade with Southeast Asia, the Anjuvannam was composed of a mixed demographic of merchants, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims.⁴⁴ It appears that

⁴² A facsimile of the signatures is provided in C.P.T. Winkworth, “Note on the Pahlavi Signatures to the Quilon Copper-Plates”, *Kerala Society Papers*, s. 6, 1 (1930), facing 322; high-quality photographs, together with a revised transliteration, are provided in Cereti, “The Pahlavi Signatures on the Quilon Copper Plates”, 35, 37–38. With three exceptions, these names do not include sufficient information to place them genealogically or geographically. The first exception is the term “al-Marzubān”, which is etymologically related to the Persian word *marzpān* and entered Arabic around the sixth century as *marzubān*; see J.H. Kramers, “Marzpān, Arabised form Marzubān”, in M.Th. Houtsma, T.W. Arnold, R. Bassett, and R. Hartmann (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1913–36), VI, 633. It was used as a title by late Sasanid military officials; the Sasanids entertained an active maritime trade with the Malabar Coast. The second exception is the word “al-Tayy”, a *nisbah* denoting that person’s affiliation with the powerful Tayyi tribe of central Arabia (the more common form of this *nisbah* is *Tā’i*). This tribe had important links with Persia as well as with sea trade; in fact, the Chinese referred to all Arabs as *Ta-shih*, from the Persian name for the Tayyi tribe. See G.F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, rev. edn., 1995), 65–66, and G. Ferrand, “L’élément persan dans les texts arabes des XV^e et XVI^e siècles”, *Journal Asiatique* 204 (1924), 193–257. The third, and most tentative, identification is that of “Muhammad ibn Manī”: could this “son of Manī” be the descendant of a follower of Manī? Manichaeism is strongly associated with Sasanid Persia and known to have spread along maritime trade routes as far as China. In sum, the only three names in this list of signatures from which any kind of inference can be drawn appear to have been Muslims from Arabia and Persia and all carry some redolence of maritime trade.

⁴³ See N. Karashima, “South Indian Merchant Guilds in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia”, in H. Kulke, K. Kesavapany, and V. Sakhua (eds.), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadweepa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 135–157; Y. Subbarayalu, “Anjuvannam: A Maritime Trade Guild of Medieval Times”, in Kulke et al. (eds.), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadweepa*, 158–167.

⁴⁴ See M. Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds of South India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1988); N. Karashima, “Medieval Commercial Activities in the Indian

Kollam's diverse merchant population was organized into two associations that reflected the main orientations of Kollam's seaborne trade. The Manigraman were engaged in the eastern trade with Southeast Asia and China, while the Anjuvannam represented the interests of the West Asian merchants who traded across the Arabian Sea.

The presence of merchant guilds at Kollam is something of an exception to the general picture of how maritime trade was organized on the early medieval Malabar Coast. Epigraphic evidence suggests that in the region's other ports, merchant guilds never attained the commercial pre-eminence that they enjoyed in other parts of South India, most notably in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. In fact, for the entire period under study, from the beginning of the twelfth to the end of the sixteenth century, there are only two merchant guild inscriptions recorded for all of Kerala; this compares to seventy-four listed for Tamil Nadu and 104 for Karnataka.⁴⁵ The regional anomaly of merchant guilds operating at Kollam can be attributed to political circumstances specific to that port. By the tenth century, the Chola kingdom was the dominant political power in South India. The Cholas were centred on the Coromandel Coast, in the eastern part of the South Indian peninsula, but their influence extended far beyond. The revenues of maritime trade were of central concern to the Cholas kings, as evident from their extensive patronage of merchant guilds during this period. The Chola dynasty supported the expansion of Tamil trading groups into Southeast Asia as well as on the Malabar Coast.⁴⁶ A hand in Malabar's trade promised above all access to black pepper, and Kollam was the southernmost port with access to the spice-producing hinterlands – that is, it was the closest pepper port that ships could reach after rounding Cape Comorin from the east coast. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's account claims that Kollam's trade was

Ocean as Revealed from Chinese Ceramic-sherds and South Indian and Sri Lankan Inscriptions”, in Kulke et al. (eds.), *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa*, 20–59; P. Selvi, “Merchant Guilds and Overseas Trade in the Medieval Tamil Country”, in S. Ganeshram and C. Bhavani (eds.), *History of People and Their Environ: Essays in Honour of Prof. B.S. Chandrababu* (Chennai: Indian Universities Press, 2011), 241–272; Y. Subbarayalu, *South India under the Cholas* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁵ See N. Karashima, “Maritime Trade and Merchant Activities”, in N. Karashima (ed.), *A Concise History of South India: Issues and Interpretations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), table 4.3., 136.

⁴⁶ N. Karashima, “South Indian Merchant Guilds in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia”, in H. Kulke, K. Kesavapany, and V. Sakhua, *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 135–157; Y. Subbarayalu, “Anjuvannam: A Maritime Trade Guild of Medieval Times”, in H. Kulke, K. Kesavapany, and V. Sakhua, *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 158–177.

under the control of immensely wealthy merchants known as *al-Ṣūlīyun*, an Arabic term for Tamil merchants, which suggests that South Indian merchant groups still played a key role in Kollam's sea trade in the fourteenth century.⁴⁷

In the interpretation of M.G.S. Narayanan, the immediate context of the Jewish copper-plate grant may have been an attempt to secure military assistance by foreign merchants. Maritime merchants possessed ships that typically included a contingent of warriors (usually archers) to defend against pirate attacks. The considerable privileges the grant bestows upon the Jewish merchants, which not only include tax exemptions but also more unusual social prerogatives, may thus have been as an exchange for the defence of Kollam (whether promised or already rendered) against a pressing external threat.⁴⁸ This danger materialized in the early years of the second millennium, when the Chola king Rajaraja I (r. 985–1014) led a major campaign into Kerala that included the sacking of Kollam.⁴⁹ Continued Chola expansionism on the west coast, motivated by a desire to secure a foothold in the pepper trade, brought about the end of the medieval Chera dynasty.⁵⁰ Kollam became the main foothold of Chola ambitions there, and its trade was structured around merchant guilds

⁴⁷ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 99–100; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūṭā*, IV, 816–817. The term *al-Ṣūlīyun* has long been misread as referring to Muslim merchants. This misidentification stems from a footnote in the English translation of Ibn Battūṭāh's text (Gibbs and Beckingham, trans., *Travels*, IV, 816n.47), which in turn relies on Yule and Burnell (eds.), *Hobson-Jobson* (s.v. "Choolia"): it claims that *Ṣūlī* is a rendering of *Chulia*, "a name given in Ceylon and Malabar and to a particular class of Mahomedans, and sometimes to Mahomedans generally". There are two reasons for supposing that this is wrong. First, Ibn Battūṭāh describes the wealth of the *Ṣūlīyan* before then adding that there is *also* a settlement of Muslim merchants. This addition does not make sense when *Ṣūlīyan* is taken as a reference to Muslims. Second, it is evident from other sources that *Ṣūlī* was in fact the Arabic rendering of *Chola*, used to refer to both the empire as well as Hindu Tamils in general. (A parallel to this is found in Chinese usage, which rendered South Indians as *zhulian* or *suli*.) Al-Dimishqī speaks of Kollam as the last city of the land of pepper before the country of *al-Ṣūlīyān* (*Nainar, Southern India*, 169). Even some twenty years after the end of Chola rule, Yemen's treasury still defined the Coromandel Coast (*al-Ma'bar*) by its former monarchs as *al-Ṣūlīyān* (M. 'abd al-Rahim Jāzim (ed.), *Nūr al-ma 'arif fī nuzūm wa-qawānīn waa 'rāf al-Yāman fī al-'ahd al-muẓaffari al-wārif. Lumière de la connaissance: Règles, lois et coutumes du Yémen sous la règle du sultan rasoulide al-Muẓaffar*, 2 vols. (Sanaa: Centre Français d'Archéologie et de Sciences Sociales de Sanaa, 2003–05) I, 518). It stands to reason that Ibn Battūṭāh's *Ṣūlīyan* follows this long-established convention and that his reference is thus to Hindu merchants from the east coast.

⁴⁸ Narayanan, "Further Studies in the Jewish Copper Plates", 69.

⁴⁹ See E.K. Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History* (Trivandrum: n.p., 1970), 236–237; N. Karashima, "The Balance of Two Powers", in Karashima (ed.), *Concise History of South India*, 122–123.

⁵⁰ See K.V.K. Ayyar, *A Short History of Kerala* (Ernakulam: Pai & Co., 1966), 50.

much as it was on the Coromandel Coast. For most other Malabari ports, though, the demise of centralized Chera rule resulted in a reduced role of South Indian trade guilds, as local potentates preferred to patronize foreign merchants, especially Jewish and Muslim traders, who were not accustomed to operate as guilds.

Kollam's position as the southernmost of the pepper ports also made it a frequent destination for merchants from Southeast Asia and China. The Arabic *Akhbār al-sin wa'l-hind*, which was written only two years after the copper-plate grants were issued at Kollam, speaks of the great amount of taxes that the China trade yielded to the local king.⁵¹ The Geniza records for the eleventh and twelfth centuries also mention Kollam in the context of Chinese and Southeast Asian trade goods.⁵² It is from this period that the region's oldest Arabic inscription dates, an otherwise illegible tombstone dated to 1232 (AH 629).⁵³ China's economic florescence under the Song dynasty (960–1127, Southern Song until 1279) gave further impulse to this trade route. But it is from the Yuan period (1271–1368) that the richest descriptions of China's trade with the Malabar Coast date. In the 1290s, Marco Polo saw at Kollam many merchants from southern China ("Mangi") who prospered by the trade they conducted there.⁵⁴ Fifty years later, Ibn Battūtah called Kollam one of the finest ports in Malabar and the one most frequented by Chinese traders.⁵⁵

As Chapter 4 will show, China was the primary market for Malabar's main export, black pepper, until at least the fifteenth century. But China's role in Malabar's sea trade, and in the western Indian Ocean in general, remains a problematic topic. Finds of Chinese ceramic sherds, especially bluish-green ware known as celadon, support the impression of intensive trade contacts, though these do not add up to a comprehensive picture of Chinese trade in the region.⁵⁶ In 1225, the supervisor of

⁵¹ S.M. Ahmad (trans.), *Arabic Classical Accounts of India and China* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1989), 38.

⁵² Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 382.

⁵³ Reported in G.S. Gai (ed.), *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy for 1965–1966* (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India/Government of India Press, 1970), no. D72; Z.A. Desai, *A Topographical List of Arabic, Persian and Urdu Inscriptions of South India* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1989), no. 1014.

⁵⁴ A.C. Moule and P. Pelliot (eds. and trans.), *Marco Polo: The Description of the World*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Sons, 1938), I, 418–419.

⁵⁵ Defrémeroy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 99–100.

⁵⁶ R. Ptak, *Die maritime Seidenstrasse: Küstenräume, Seefahrt und Handel in vorkolonialer Zeit* (München: C.H. Beck, 2007), 207–208; A. Rougeulle, "Medieval Trade Networks in the Western Indian Ocean (8–14th Centuries): Some Reflections from the Distribution Pattern of Chinese Imports in the Islamic World", in H. Ray and J.-F. Salles (eds.), *Tradition and Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012), 159–180.

maritime trade in Quanzhou, Zhao Rugua, wrote a systematic account of Chinese foreign trade that recorded Malabar as a destination for Chinese ceramics.⁵⁷ However, there have been surprisingly few archaeological finds of ceramic sherds in the region, especially when compared to the much more extensive material evidence on the Coromandel Coast and in Sri Lanka.⁵⁸ This uneven distribution may simply be the result of better archaeological identification, preservation, and exploration in those other regions.⁵⁹ Another possible explanation for the contrast between the literary evidence for Chinese trade on Malabar Coast and the relative lack of archaeological finds may also lie in the transition of Chinese exports from silk to porcelain during the Song period. Whereas silk was highly prized among South Indian elites, Chinese porcelain was less attractive due to Hindu religious regulations surrounding the notion of ritual pollution. These dictate that eating utensils made from earthenware must be discarded after each meal, as the material's porous nature precludes thorough cleaning. This proscription extended to porcelain, which of course was too expensive to be used only once, and was observed most conscientiously by high-caste elites who would have constituted the local market for these fine wares. As Brahminical codes and caste restrictions were enforced with particular vigour in medieval Kerala, this would have limited local porcelain consumption, and with it the likelihood of local archaeological deposits.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Hirth and Rockhill (eds. and trans.), *Chau Ju-Kua*, 89.

⁵⁸ See for instance, Y. Aoyagi and H. Ogawa, "Chinese Trade Ceramics of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries in the Malabar Coast", in N. Karashima (ed.), *Search of Ceramic Sherds in Southern India and Sri Lanka* (Tokyo: Taisho University Press, 2004), 47–54; N. Karashima (ed.), *Ancient and Medieval Commercial Activities in the Indian Ocean: Testimony of Inscriptions and Ceramic-Sherds* (Tokyo: Taisho University Press, 2002); Y. Subbarayalu, "Chinese Ceramics of Tamil Nadu and Kerala Coasts", in H. Ray and J.-F. Salles (eds.), *Tradition and Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012), 109–114. The same pattern holds for ceramics of an earlier period: Roman pottery is found in other parts of India's west coast as well as on the east coast (with more than a hundred find-spots of Mediterranean amphorae alone), but not in Kerala. See K. Krishnan and R. Balvally, "Assessing the Early Historic Indian Ocean Trade through Ceramics", in K.S. Mathew (ed.), *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris: New Perspectives on Maritime Trade* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2015), 231–267.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Lambourn raises the further issue of deep-seated historiographical biases and prejudices about "the medieval" as a possible source of error; see E. Lambourn, "'Describing a Lost Camel' – Clues for West Asian Mercantile Networks in South Asian Maritime Trade (Tenth–Twelfth Centuries AD)", in M.-F. Boussac, J.-F. Salles, and J.-B. Yon (eds.), *Ports of the Ancient Indian Ocean* (Delhi: Primus, 2016), 360.

⁶⁰ The re-export trade of porcelains would have been much less likely to result in such local deposits. See R. Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 239; Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade*, 189.

If Kollam served as Malabar's gateway to the eastern Indian Ocean, Calicut came to occupy an analogous position in the region's western trade. And it was at Calicut that the dominance Muslims came to hold over Malabar's sea trade was at its most apparent. The historical origins of Calicut (Malayal., Kozhikode; Ar., *Qāliqūt* or *Kālikūt*) are uncertain, both as a kingdom and port-of-trade. Some historians have dated the foundation of the city as early as the eleventh century, but different sources from the late thirteenth century make no mention of it even though they accurately describe all the other ports-of-trade on the Coast.⁶¹ By the early decades of the fourteenth century, however, visitors to the region routinely speak of Calicut as the major entrepôt on India's southwest coast. The Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan, who visited South India in the 1330s, notes that it served as the principal port "of all the foreigners in the Western Ocean", highlighting the special importance that trade across the Arabian Sea held to the port.⁶² A decade later, Ibn Battūtah describes Calicut as one of the largest ports in the world that was visited by merchants from China, Java, Ceylon, the Maldives, Yemen, and Persia. He witnessed no fewer than thirteen enormous Chinese junks at the port, the largest of which carried a crew of more than a thousand men, that were awaiting the northeastern monsoon for their return voyage.⁶³

Calicut's sudden rise from complete obscurity to being regarded as the paramount port in the land of pepper is all the more puzzling for its relatively disadvantageous situation. The port's lack of a natural harbour necessitated cumbersome lighterage and also posed a constant risk to ships at anchor. Ibn Battūtah himself fell victim to these conditions when the ship carrying all of his possessions (as well as the bountiful gifts that the Delhi sultan was sending to the Yuan emperor) was driven ashore and smashed by one of the regular storms.⁶⁴ The reasons for Calicut's success

⁶¹ A Sanskrit chronogram reputedly dates the foundation of the city to 1042. See Logan, *Malabar Manual*, I, 276; Ayyar, *Zamorins of Calicut*, 80–81; G. Bouchon, "A Microcosm: Calicut in the Sixteenth Century", in D. Lombard and J. Aubin (eds.), *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the Chinese Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41; M.G.S. Narayanan, *Calicut: The City of Truth Revisited* (Kozhikode: University of Calicut Press, 2006); V.V. Haridas, *Zamorins and the Political Culture of Medieval Kerala* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2016), 22.

⁶² R. Ptak, "Wang Dayuan", in G. Berkemer (ed.), *Explorations in the History of South Asia. Essays in Honour of Dietmar Rothermund* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 49.

⁶³ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 88–89; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 99–100.

⁶⁴ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 95–96; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 99–100, *Ibn Battūtah*, IV, 814–815.

in spite of its late start and unpropitious circumstances are examined in [Chapter 3](#).

Calicut is linked to the fortunes of Muslim trade like no other port on the Malabar Coast. The sources are unanimous in stating that Muslims dominated its commerce. Historians are in agreement that the political power of its rulers, known as the Zamorins, was to a large extent based on the revenues produced by Muslim commerce. The Portuguese were convinced that had it not been for their own timely intervention, this power would have continued to grow until the king of Calicut would have united the entire Malabar Coast under his rule.⁶⁵ In their view, Calicut's strength and Muslim commerce were two sides of the same coin. Portugal's design of seizing the pepper trade by reducing the influence of Muslims over Calicut's commerce, however, was never fully realized and throughout the sixteenth century – despite periods of uneasy treaty relations – Calicut remained the centre of indigenous resistance against Portugal's imperial ambitions in the region. The Zamorins' support of the Muslims during this period is celebrated in a number of texts written by local Muslims, the gist of which is typified by the title of an Arabic poem that translates as “The Complete Victory of the Zamorin who Loves the Muslims”.⁶⁶

Two other ports of the Zamorins' realm are also closely associated with the struggle against the Portuguese. The first is Chaliyam (Ar., *Shāliyāt*), situated to the immediate south of Calicut on an island formed by the Beypore and Kadalundi rivers. Chaliyam was an important site of Muslim trade but it is best known for the fortress the Portuguese erected there in 1531, which for the next forty years put a stranglehold on Calicut's sea trade. After a series of momentous battles, this fortress was finally destroyed in 1571 but its memory, which is enshrined in a number of Arabic texts from this period, continued to be seen as the epitome of Portuguese oppression. Further south, the town of Ponnani is not recorded as a trading port in the pre-Portuguese period, but emerged in the sixteenth century as the main arsenal of Calicut. As a port, it was handicapped by shoals and sandbanks and the annual floods of the Ponnani river that created dangerous currents. While this impeded its development as a port-of-trade, it favoured the light country craft that were used to harass Portuguese shipping, which could retreat to Ponnani and its bay without fear of being pursued by the larger European ships.

⁶⁵ M.A. da Veiga e Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa: Edição Crítica e Anotada*, 2 vols. (Lisbon: Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical, 1996–2000), II, 232.

⁶⁶ Muhammad al-Kalikūti's, *Al-fath al-mubīn li'l-sāmūrī alladhi juhibb al-muslimīn*, British Library, MS. IO Islamic 2807f.; this poem is discussed in [Chapter 2](#).

Together with a series of minor ports in its vicinity, Ponnani became a stronghold of Muslim naval warfare and corsairing in the latter half of the sixteenth century.

A final port of significance in the kingdom of Calicut is Pantalayani-Kollam (Ar., *Fandarīna*), one of the most historic ports on the Malabar Coast. It is situated to the north of Calicut, close to the Kotta river. Pantalayani-Kollam is mentioned by all the medieval Arab geographers and features prominently in local traditions about the introduction of Islam. Ibn Baṭṭūṭāh writes that three-quarters of the town's population were Muslims and that the Chinese ships passed the winter (that is, waited out the rainy season) there.⁶⁷ It is not clear at what time Pantalayani-Kollam came under the Zamorins' suzerainty, but by the early sixteenth century the town was universally acknowledged as part of their domain.

To the north of the kingdom of Calicut was the realm of one of the oldest and most prestigious dynasties on the Malabar Coast, the Kolathiris. They had their capital at Ezhimala (Ar., *Hili*) and later Baliapatanam (now Valapattanam), but its most important commercial centre was Cannanore (Malayal., *Kannur*).⁶⁸ Aside from their role in the pepper trade, Kolathiri ports also participated in the horse trade. Although of great importance to ports-of-trade across western India, the import of horses was generally not a prominent concern at ports in the southern and central parts of the Malabar Coast. This was likely due to the fact that, for reasons of climate, terrain, and an idiosyncratic military evolution, cavalry never became a dominant feature of warfare in medieval Kerala.⁶⁹ Horses were, however, a vital strategic concern to the kingdoms, sultanates, and empires to the north of Malabar. The diffusion of the technology and culture of horse-borne warfare from Central Asia and North India to principalities of the Deccan and the South created an unceasing demand for highly prized Arabian and Persian thoroughbreds. After the end of the Mongol rule, as the overland routes from Central Asia became less reliable, this trade shifted to the maritime route, with ports in the Persian Gulf, above all Hormuz, meeting the ever growing demand.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 88; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūṭa*, IV, 99–100, *Ibn Battūṭah*, IV, 812.

⁶⁸ The port's economic significance led most foreign visitors to refer to the entire realm as the kingdom of Cannanore.

⁶⁹ The development of highly ritualized forms of interneccine warfare on the Malabar Coast in the period between the demise of the Cholas and the Mysorean Invasion, which finds surprising parallels in the military history of Japan's Tokugawa shogunate, is a subject eagerly awaiting renewed scholarly attention.

⁷⁰ The horse trade between the Gulf and India is documented in the fourteenth-century Persian chronicles by Wāṣṣāf and Rashid al-Dīn; see S. Wentker (ed.), *Geschichte Wāṣṣāf's*,

Ports all along India's west coast participated in their import, with Cannanore, Bhatkal, Honavara, and Mangalore serving as the main conduits on the northern Malabar Coast.⁷¹ Mangalore is mentioned with great regularity in the Geniza documents, and may thus be considered a centre of Jewish trade in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries; however, this prominence could also be an artefact of the commercial and personal relationships with the port by those few merchants whose correspondence makes up the bulk of these sources. For its part, Cannanore entertained a close commercial relationship with the Vijayanagara empire during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Cannanore served as a key conduit for the horse trade, on which the empire's massive cavalry depended heavily for the steady influx of new animals. Persian sources in particular attest to the fact that Vijayanagara exercised an ever growing degree of political influence, culminating in *de facto* suzerainty, over ports on the northern Malabar Coast to safeguard this strategically critical route.⁷² In the sixteenth century, the profits of the horse trade were an important factor in the establishment of a Muslim state centred on the port of Cannanore. This thalassocracy, which was ruled by a dynasty of Mappila Muslims known as the Ali Rajas, is discussed in Chapter 3.

Next to the Zamorins and Kolathiris, the rajas of Cochin were another prominent dynasty on the post-Chera Malabar Coast. The port of Cochin (Malayal., *Kochi*; Ar., *Kushi*) that became the source of their power emerged, quite literally, only in the middle of the fourteenth century. A momentous flood of the Periyar river in 1341 silted up Kodungallur's harbour, spelling its ultimate end as an Indian Ocean emporium. However, this same flood also changed the configuration of its extensive southern backwaters, creating at the site that would become Cochin a new outlet to the sea as well as an offshore island (Vypin) that

trans. J. von Hammer-Purgstall, 4 vols. (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010–16), III, 104–118; K. Jahn (ed.), *Rashid al-Din's History of India* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1965), 63, 84, 108. Also see R. Chakravarti, "Horse Trade and Piracy at Tana (Thana, Maharashtra, India): Gleanings from Marco Polo", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 34:3 (1991), 169–171; R. Kauz, "Horse Exports from the Persian Gulf until the Arrival of the Portuguese", in B.G. Fragner et al. (eds.), *Pferde in Asien: Geschichte, Handel und Kultur* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 129–136.

⁷¹ East coast ports were also involved in the horse trade; at the end of the thirteenth century, Kayal (Ar., *Qā'il*) alone is said to have imported thousands of horses a year. See R. Ptak, "Yuan and Early Ming Notices on the Kayal Area in South India", *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 80:1 (1993), 137–138.

⁷² See for instance, Mailaparambil, *Lords of the Sea*, 41–44; K.N. Chitnis, *Socio-Economic History of Medieval India* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2002), 317–346; B. Stein, *Vijayanagara* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 31–71.

provided it with safe anchorage.⁷³ It appears that many of Kodungallur's traders moved to Cochin, with Jewish merchants in particular attaining some prominence there. The earliest notices of the port only date from the first decade of the fifteenth century, when the second expedition of the Chinese admiral Zheng He called at Cochin. Fei Xin, in his chronicle of Zheng He's subsequent voyage (1409–11), notes the kingdom's extensive pepper production.⁷⁴ The other notable chronicler of the Ming voyages, Ma Huan, first visited Cochin with the fourth expedition in 1414 and describes Muslims as one of the most conspicuous groups there.⁷⁵

Among all of Malabar's port cities, Cochin has received the most scholarly attention. This is because Cochin became the first European colonial settlement in India; as a result, it is especially well-represented in Portuguese sources. By the end of the fifteenth century, immediately prior to the arrival of the Portuguese, Cochin had come under the suzerainty of the Zamorin, who installed his own nominee as its king. According to later Portuguese sources, during that period, Calicut's Muslims pressed for the expulsion of Christian merchants from Cochin and generally succeeded in diverting much of Cochin's trade to Calicut.⁷⁶ After the outbreak of hostilities between Muslims and the Portuguese at Calicut in 1500, a confrontation that the Portuguese entered into with ready brutality, Cabral was invited by the ruler of Cochin to establish a fortified trading post, or factory, at his port. To the king of Cochin, the newly arrived Europeans offered an opportunity to claim back his independence from Calicut. The Zamorin, in turn, demanded that the Portuguese be evicted from Cochin and in 1502 invaded the port to reassert his authority. In subsequent years, the Portuguese established a fortress at Cochin, successfully defended the port against further attacks by Calicut, and in 1505 installed their own puppet king as its regent. Cochin thus developed into the main vehicle of Portugal's ambitions on the Malabar Coast and into a focal point of their conflict with the kingdom of Calicut. During the first two decades of *de facto* Portuguese rule in Cochin, native Muslims (rather than Arabs and Persians, who dominated the spice trade at Calicut) rose to great prominence there,

⁷³ See Malekandathil, *Portuguese Cochin*, 29–33; K.S. Mathew and A. Ahmad, *Emergence of Cochin in the Pre-Industrial Era: A Study of Portuguese Cochin* (Pondicherry: Pondicherry University, 1990), v.

⁷⁴ R. Ptak (ed.), *Fei Hsin: Hsing-ch'a Sheng-lan: The Overall Survey of the Star Raft* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1996), 67.

⁷⁵ J. Mills (trans.), *Ma Huan: Ying-yai Sheng-lan* ("The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores") (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997), 133.

⁷⁶ See Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 255–256; Ayyar, *Zamorins*, 131; Malekandathil, *Portuguese Cochin*, 35.

not least on account of their role in facilitating pepper purchases for the Europeans. However, this cooperation came under severe strain in 1524 when, incensed by the Portuguese capture of one of their ships, a number of leading Muslim merchants emigrated from Cochin to Calicut. As Chapter 2 will describe, they subsequently became Portugal's most inveterate foes in the region and developed into a major force in the struggle over maritime supremacy off India's west coast.

These contours of Malabar's maritime trade show that even though individual ports were of particular prominence at different times – Kodungallur in the earliest notices, Kollam during the early medieval period, Calicut in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and Cochin after the coming of the Portuguese – it is striking that no single port developed into a central hub through which all of Malabar's overseas trade was channelled. The Arabic sources in particular show that an ever-changing constellation of secondary ports also entertained direct trade links with overseas markets throughout this entire period. The persistence of this multi-polar structure of maritime trade on the Malabar Coast is in contrast to more centralized patterns elsewhere on the subcontinent, and in fact across many parts of the Indian Ocean, where a region's trade was concentrated onto a single great emporium. The atypical development of Malabar's overseas trade can be attributed to two factors: the unresolved rivalry between a number of coastal polities that were centred on the different port cities and ongoing competition between different merchant groups for the dominance of particular ports and routes.

Muslim Traders on the Malabar Coast

The common notion of the medieval Indian Ocean as a “Muslim lake” is usually illustrated by reference to the Malabar Coast, which serves as a clear example of Muslim control over the highly profitable spice trade.⁷⁷ To trace the emergence of Monsoon Islam, which it is argued was above all rooted in commerce, it is essential to understand how Muslims came to predominate the sea trade of the Indian Ocean. To answer this question, it is necessary to disaggregate the general category of “Muslims”, to ask who these traders were and how they conducted their business.

Expatriate merchants exercised a much greater hold over Malabar's sea trade than they did in other regions of India. While assertions of a

⁷⁷ See for instance, M. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), 95; A. Sheriff, “Globalization with a Difference: An Overview”, in A. Sheriff and E. Ho (eds.), *The Indian Ocean: Oceanic Connections and the Creation of New Societies* (London: Hurst & Co., 2014), 24–27.

people's supposed aversion to seafaring are generally best treated with circumspection (such claims have been made about both the Arabs and the Chinese), in the case of Malabar, social institutions did indeed foster "an increasingly obsessive thalassophobia of caste Hindus".⁷⁸ The Brahminization of Malabar's social and political order from the eighth century onwards brought with it an elaborate system of ritual purification and rigid taboos on social intercourse. Known locally as Nampūtiri Brahmins, they are regarded as having migrated to Kerala from the north, bringing with them the Sanskrit language as well as new models of social and political ordering. M.G.S. Narayanan regards the establishment of this Brahminical order as the single most important factor in the social organization of medieval Kerala.⁷⁹ It manifested itself in networks of Brahmin temples that sought to "standardize and fix clear boundaries of legal, religious, political, and social behaviour".⁸⁰ This development engendered not only a *de facto* prohibition of seafaring for high-caste Hindus (who could not observe the required purification rites aboard ships) but also the diversion of capital towards agrarian pursuits.⁸¹ Low-caste Hindus continued to be involved in maritime pursuits – including fishing, lighterage, coastal trade, and piracy – but did not develop into significant trading communities; in fact, the only Malayali caste specifically associated with commerce was involved in the overland trade.⁸²

The role of *custos morum* of this social order fell to the martial caste of the Nairs. Even though they were not directly involved in the sea trade, Chapter 3 will show that the Nairs nevertheless profited by it. The same can be said of Malabar's ruling class as a whole: their lack of direct involvement in maritime affairs was compensated by their patronage of expatriate merchant groups, whose taxes and dues formed a chief source of revenue – and, by extension, of political power. The absence of an indigenous merchant class, and the willingness of local elites to cooperate closely with foreign traders, allowed expatriate merchant groups to control the maritime commerce in all of Malabar's principal ports.⁸³

⁷⁸ Wink, *Al-Hind*, I, 72.

⁷⁹ M.G.S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala: Brahmin Oligarchy and Ritual Monarchy – Political and Social Conditions of Kerala under the Cera Perumals of Makotai (c. AD 800–AD 1124)* (Thrissur: Cosmo Books, 2013), 262. Also see K. Veluthat, *The Political Structure of Early Medieval South India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993).

⁸⁰ D.R. Davis, Jr., *The Boundaries of Hindu Law: Tradition, Custom and Politics in Medieval Kerala* (Turin: Corpus Iuris Sanscriticum, 2004), 72.

⁸¹ Donald Davis asserts that in medieval Kerala, every person's position within the social order was primarily related to his or her relationship to land ownership; Davis, Jr., *Boundaries of Hindu Law*, ch. 2, esp. 72–74.

⁸² See Dale, *Islamic Society*, 23.

⁸³ See Bouchon, "Musulmans du Kerala", 7–14.

Muslim traders were involved in Malabar's trade from early times, continuing the historic ties between South Arabia and southern India that pre-dated Islam. However, as seen for instance in the Kollam copper-plate grants, Muslims were only one among many different merchant groups. The Geniza records testify to continued participation of Jewish traders in Malabar's trade with Arabia (especially via the port of Aden) during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Under the Fatimid (909–1171) and Ayyubid dynasties (1173–1229), Jews and Muslims formed parts of a common trading community. By the thirteenth century, though, direct involvement in the Indian Ocean trade by Jewish merchants appears to have been in decline, even though the political stability and efficient administration provided by Yemen's Rasulid dynasty (1229–1454) otherwise fostered an intensification of commercial ties between Aden and ports in India.

It is from this period, beginning in the thirteenth century, that a Muslim dominance of Malabar's sea trade becomes clearly legible in the historical record. This dominance was far from absolute, but becomes progressively more observable for its most vital routes (to the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and increasingly East Asia) and for its most profitable exports: above all pepper, but also other spices (cardamom, cinnamon, ginger) as well as horses. In the historical context of the Malabar Coast, this period of Muslim ascendancy is significant for two reasons. First, it followed the end of unified rule over the region by the Chera dynasty (*c.* 800–1124). The subsequent political fragmentation into a number of competing polities led to a rise in the patronage of expatriate trading groups, as various coastal rulers vied to attract merchants to their ports. Second, likely as a result of this increase in political patronage, it is from this period that the earliest solid evidence for the widespread construction of mosques dates. In fact, the oldest mosque on the Malabar Coast that can be reliably dated, at Madayi, was founded in 1124, that is the very year in which Chera overrule formally ended.⁸⁴

Marco Polo, who was in the habit of paying close attention to all matters commercial, noted at the end of the thirteenth century that Malabar's thriving sea trade was divided between Muslim and Chinese merchants.⁸⁵ Ibn Battūtah's account leaves no doubt that Muslims dominated Malabar's pepper trade some fifty years later. This predominance was

⁸⁴ To speak of unified rule reflects Chera claims to sovereignty, recorded in royal epigraphs, rather than direct evidence of a strong, centralized monarchy during this period; it appears that for some time, Chera sovereignty had been more ritual than actual. See Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, chs. 5–8. The epigraphic evidence for mosque construction during this period is examined in Chapter 2.

⁸⁵ Moule and Pelliot (eds. and trans.), *Marco Polo*, I, 414, 417, 419.

also noted in contemporary Chinese sources, which show that traders arriving from the Malabar Coast in Southeast Asia and even in Chinese ports were identified as Muslims.⁸⁶ By the time the Portuguese arrived in South India, they were in no doubt as to who was in control of its maritime commerce: “All the merchants in Malabar who trade on the sea are Moors [Muslims], and they have the whole of the trade”.⁸⁷

The Portuguese naturally regarded this supremacy of Muslim merchants as the major obstacle to their own ambition to monopolize the spice trade. In describing their rivals, they were careful to distinguish between “Moors of the land” (*mouros da terra*), that is Indian Muslims, and “Moors of Mecca” (*mouros de Meca*), meaning Arabs.⁸⁸ The Portuguese factor Duarte Barbosa, who through his command of Malayalam had a more nuanced understanding of local affairs than most of his compatriots, was able to use the terms by which these two groups were known locally. In his account of the region, he speaks of “*mapula*”, a corruption of Mappila, the term given to Muslims who are native to the region, and “*pardesis*” (also *pardexis* or *pardesy* in manuscript variants), whom he identifies as “natives of diverse lands”.⁸⁹ This latter term refers to *paradesi*, a word used in Malayalam and other Indian languages to denote foreigners (from Skt., *para*, “other” and *desa*, “country”). Oftentimes, the Portuguese resorted to even cruder, racialized categories in making this distinction between native and foreign Muslims. For example, Barbosa describes to his readers *paradesi* Muslims as “white men, well bred, and proper dressed and adorned”, with an implied contrast to Mappilas in regard to their race, breeding, and status.⁹⁰

The term Mappila denotes not a single community but a great variety of Malayali Muslims of different origins, customs, and socio-economic profiles. The main origins of the community lie in the conversion of (especially low-caste) Malayali Hindus to Islam and in the liaisons of foreign Muslims with Malayali women. There are almost no indigenous sources that offer insights into the composition or practices of Mappila communities before the sixteenth century. This situation is further complicated by the fact that outside observers usually failed to

⁸⁶ Hirth and Rockhill (eds. and trans.), *Chau Ju-Kua*, 23–24, 89.

⁸⁷ A.N. Cortesão (ed. and trans.), *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires and the Book of Francisco Rodrigues*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt, 1944), I, 82.

⁸⁸ See for instance, F.L. de Castanheda, *Historia do descobrimento e conquista da India pelos Portugueses*, 8 vols. (Lisbon: Rolland, new edn., 1833), I, 110, 255.

⁸⁹ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 229, 231, 231n.1280; cf. M.L. Dames (ed. and trans.), *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt, 1918–21), II, 75, 75n.2, 76, 76n.1. The etymology of the term Mappila is discussed in Chapter 3.

⁹⁰ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 234–235; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt, 1918–21), II, 77–78.

distinguish between Mappilas from Malabar and Indian Muslims from other parts of the subcontinent, such as the Navayats of Kanara or the Marakkars of Coromandel and Sri Lanka. This conflation also afflicts sources from the sixteenth century and beyond, with the Portuguese classifying all these communities as native Muslims. Personal names only rarely offer any kind of clue to an individual's geographical origin, ethnic affiliation, or place within the different strata of the Mappila community. What is more, as recent anthropological studies on Muslim communities in western India highlight, a long history of syncretism and hybrid identities presents serious obstacles to any attempt at classifying this region's Muslim communities into discrete categories.⁹¹

That said, the differentiation between indigenous Mappilas and foreign *paradesi* Muslims was not something merely projected by outsiders but also a matter of communal self-identification. A number of sources note that the communities were distinguishable by both their language and dress. The *paradesi* Muslims spoke Arabic, dressed in Middle Eastern robes, and in many cases wore turbans. Mappilas by contrast spoke Malayalam and wore mundus (the local version of the dhoti, a length of cloth wrapped around the waist and legs), with only their round caps and beards serving as "a token of distinction" from the local Hindus.⁹² A sixteenth-century commentary on Islamic law written by a member of the local Arab elite appears to confirm the sartorial difference between *paradesi* and Mappila Muslims in its condemnation of male dress that does not properly cover the torso.⁹³

Before the sixteenth century, the Mappila community as a whole was of considerably lower economic standing than the *paradesi* Muslims. Although individual Mappilas attained great wealth from their involvement in regional trade with the Maldives, the Coromandel Coast, and Ceylon, it was the *paradesi* Muslim merchants who controlled the enormously profitable long-distance spice trade. Analogous to their economic

⁹¹ See E. Simpson and K. Kresse, "Cosmopolitanism Contested: Anthropology and History in the Western Indian Ocean", in Simpson and Kresse (eds.), *Struggling with History*, 1–41; F. Osella and C. Osella, "I am Gulf": The Production of Cosmopolitanism among the Koyas of Kozhikode, Kerala", in Simpson and Kresse (eds.), *Struggling with History*, 323–355; V.S. Kalra, R. Kaur, and J. Hutnyk, *Diaspora and Hybridity* (London: SAGE, 2005).

⁹² Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 229, 234; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 74, 77. Also see W.M. Thackston (trans.), "Kamaluddin Abdul-Razzaq Samarcandi: Mission to Calicut and Vijayanagar", in W.M. Thackston (ed.), *A Century of Princes: Sources on Timurid History and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1989), 305; A. Erhard and E. Ramminger (eds.), *Die Meerfahrt: Balthasar Springers Reise zur Pfefferküste, mit einem Faksimile des Buches von 1509* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1998), 50.

⁹³ Zayn al-Din, *Fath al-mu'in* (Tirurangadi: 'Amir ul-Islam Press, 1981–82), 31.



Figure 1.1 “The Muslims of Cannanore and enemies of the Portuguese”, from a 1638 Dutch edition of van Linschoten’s *Itinerario* (1596).

Image courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection (www.davidrumsey.com).

superiority, the social and religious affairs of Malabar's Muslims were likewise dominated by the *paradesi*. As the following chapter shows, this situation changed only in the course of the sixteenth century, when many of the Arab Muslims fled the Malabar Coast in the face of the particular hostility directed against them by the Portuguese. Their exodus created new economic opportunities for Mappila merchants, who also took on a greater role in the religious administration of Islam on the Malabar Coast.

Returning to Barbosa's account, in addition to his basic differentiation between Mappilas and *paradesis*, he further divides the latter class into five groups defined by their origins: Arabs ("arabios"), Persians ("persios"), Gujaratis ("guzarates"), Khurasanis ("coraçones"), and Deccanis ("decanis").⁹⁴ These merchants, he makes clear, were not itinerant traders visiting the region to purchase pepper but had settled in the land. A letter from Calicut's Muslims to the ruler of Yemen from 1393 confirms that the town's Muslims were indeed organized along these lines.⁹⁵ A similar pattern can be discerned from the account of Ludovico de Varthema, an Italian who reached South India in 1504 independently of the Portuguese by an overland route. His enquiry into the origin of Calicut's Muslims suggests an even more cosmopolitan composition of the town's *paradesi* Muslims:

Because I desired to know where such a diversity of persons came from, I was told that an infinite number of Muslim merchants hailed from Melaka, Bengal and Ternasseri, from Pegu, Coromandel and Ceylon, a great number from the island of Sumatra, and from Kollam and Kayankulam [a place on the southern Malabar Coast, near Kollam], and many from Bhatkal, Dhabol, Chaul, Cambay, Gujarat, Hormuz and Mecca; in addition, there were some from Persia and Arabia Felix [Yemen], a part from Syria and Turkey, and a few from Ethiopia and Vijayanagara: during my time in Calicut there were merchants from all these kingdoms.⁹⁶

Descriptions of this kind that testify to the great diversity among the *paradesi* Muslims are difficult to reconcile with the widely held belief that most of the Muslim traders in Malabar hailed from the Hadhramawt

⁹⁴ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 231, 231n.1281; cf. Longworth Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 76.

⁹⁵ This letter is preserved as part of a Rasulid dynastic chronicle; see 'Alī ibn al-Hasan al-Khazraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'līyya fi akhbār al-dawla al-rasūliyya*, ed. M. 'Asal as *The Pearl-Strings: A History of the Rasūliyya Dynasty of Yemen*, 5 vols., trans. J.W. Redhouse (Leiden and London: Brill and Luzac & Co., 1906–18), V, 244–247 (Arabic text); II, 216–220 (English translation).

⁹⁶ "Essendo pur desideroso di saper donde erano tante diverse persone, fummi detto che qui vi erano infiniti mercatanti mori e di Malacca, di Banghalla e di Tarnassari, di Pego, di Giormandel, di Zeilam, e gran quantità dell'isola di Sumatra, di Colon e di Caicolon, assaiissimi di Bathacala,

region of Yemen. The association of Malabar with the Hadhramawt is a mainstay of the historiography that seemingly has acquired through sheer force of repetition the status of a truth no longer in need of proof. To cite a recent example of this view, M.H. Ilias states that foreign Muslims on the Malabar Coast “were chiefly traders from Yemen and Hadramawt”.⁹⁷ This presumption matters because it underpins a broader claim that the development of Islam in South India was decisively shaped by Hadhramis, who are credited with introducing the faith, converting locals, and imprinting their own preferences of Islamic law, authority, and scholarship on the region.⁹⁸ According to this vision, Islam on the Malabar Coast is the direct offshoot of a fully formed South Arabian system of belief and practice that was transmitted to the region through the deliberate agency of ethnic Arabs.

The problem with this common view is that there is almost no evidence on which to build such broad claims. It is true, the Malabar Coast undoubtedly had trade links with Hadhrami ports such as al-Shihr and Zafar.⁹⁹ Yet, there is nothing in the epigraphic and literary sources to show that Hadhramis played a particularly prominent role in Malabar’s trade or in its religious affairs. It is only in the sixteenth century, by which time Islam was already firmly established in the region, that one family of religious scholars who traces its origins to the Hadhramawt came to

*di Dabuli, di Cevul, di Cambaia, di Guzerati, di Ormus e della Mecca; vi n’erano ancora della Persia e dell’Arabia Felice, parte della Soria e della Turchia, e alquanti dell’Etiopia e di Narsinga: di tutti questi reami mercantati al tempo mio in Calicut.” G.B. Ramusio, *Navigazioni e viaggi*, 5 vols., ed. M. Milanesi (reprint Turin: G. Einaudi, 1978), I, 826; cf. F. Reichert (trans.), *Ludovico de Varthema: Reisen im Orient* (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1996), 166n.27. On the author and his voyage, also see J. Aubin, “L’Itinerário de Ludovico di Varthema”, in F. Aubin (ed.), *Le Latin et l’Astrolabe*, vol. 2: *Recherches sur le Portugal de la Renaissance son expansion en Asie et les relations internationals* (Paris: Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian, 2000), 483–491.*

⁹⁷ M.H. Ilias, “Mappila Muslims and the Cultural Content of Trading Arab Diaspora on the Malabar Coast”, *Asian Journal of Social Science* 35:4–5 (2007), 442. For other proponents of this view, see for instance, A. Cherian, “The Genesis of Islam in Malabar”, *Indica* 6:1 (1969), 8; A.D.W. Forbes, “Southern Arabia and the Islamicisation of the Central Indian Ocean Archipelagoes”, *Archipel* 21 (1981), 80–85; Wink, *Al-Hind*, I, 70–71 and II, 276–277.

⁹⁸ Within the space of a single page, Ilias writes: “The trading diasporic population of Malabar consisted mostly of Arabs from Hadramawt”; “The main impetus of settlements on the Malabar Coast came from the activities of merchants of Oman and Hadramawt”; “Among them, the Arabs from Hadramawt in particular were known to have been more active in preaching Islam”; “The spread of Shafii School in Malabar can really be traced back to Hadramis”; see Ilias, “Mappila Muslims”, 444. No evidence is offered for any of these claims.

⁹⁹ See R.B. Serjeant, “Yemeni Merchants and Trade in Yemen: Thirteenth and Sixteenth Centuries”, in D. Lombard and J. Aubin (eds.), *Asian Merchants and Businessmen in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 53.

particular prominence in Malabar. However, even in this single case, a careful study of this family, known as the Makhdūm clan, as is offered in the [next chapter](#), shows that its genealogy and history are more illustrative of processes of localization than of the idea that Islam on the Malabar Coast has its roots in Hadhramawt.

Indeed, the entire notion that Islam was brought to the Malabar Coast by Hadhramis can be shown to be a product of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when it was concocted to legitimize the powerful position that ethnic Hadhramis had come to occupy within Malabar's Muslim community. In the eighteenth century, members of a Sufi order that originated in Yemen, the *tariqa al-'Alawiyya*, settled on India's west coast and established themselves there as a diasporic community. Possessed of a carefully crafted identity that included theological, juridical, and political elements, members of the 'Alawī order came to be recognized as scholars, respected as *sayyids*, and eventually revered as saints.¹⁰⁰ Descendants of these Hadhrami Sufi-*sayyids*, known locally as Thangals, continue to direct the affairs of Kerala's Muslim community today, serving as a kind of "aristocracy" among them.¹⁰¹ The thirty or so Thangal families in present-day Kerala maintain elaborate genealogies that trace back their pedigree to the family of the prophet Muhammad, establishing their status as *sayyids*.¹⁰² On the basis of this association, Thangals are revered as sacrosanct and attributed with special religious authority and spiritual power.¹⁰³

A study of Thangal genealogies, however, has not been able to substantiate any familial linkages between Malabar and the Hadhramawt

¹⁰⁰ See S. Dale, "The Hadrami Diaspora in South-Western India: The Role of the Sayyids of the Malabar Coast", in U. Freitag and W.G. Clarence-Smith (eds.), *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s to 1960s* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 175–184; M. Slama, "The Hadhrami Diaspora as Agent of Change: A Re-consideration of Socio-Political Developments", in R. Kauz (ed.), *Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road: From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2010), 28–30; Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, ch. 5; Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*, ch. 2.

¹⁰¹ P.K.Y. Arafath, "Malabar Muslims: History, Hangover and Silences (Review Article)", *Social Scientist* 41:3/4 (2013), 88. Also see H. Randathani, *Mappila Muslims: A Study on Society and Anti Colonial Struggles* (Calicut: Other Books, 2007), 44–48.

¹⁰² In a literal sense, *sayyid* (pl. *sādā*) only means "gentleman", but throughout the Islamic world it is understood as an honorific denoting patrilineal descent from Muhammad through his grandson Husayn. Genealogical claims to Arabian ancestry have also become increasingly prevalent among elite sections of the Mappila community; see P.P.A. Razak, "From Communitas to the Structure of Islam: The Mappilas of Malabar", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 68:1 (2007), 897.

¹⁰³ For example, Thangals often operate as healers; see for instance Dale, "The Hadrami Diaspora", 181; M.A. Sathar, "History of Bā-'Alawis in Kerala", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Calicut (1999); C. Lang, "Trick or Treat? Muslim Thangals, Psychologisation and Pragmatic Realism in Northern Kerala", *Transcultural Psychiatry* 51:6 (2014), 904–923.

that pre-date the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁴ What is more, counterparts to these genealogies held in archives in Yemen do not yield any concrete evidence for links between these two regions, either.¹⁰⁵ The same is true for published Hadhrami chronicles from the sixteenth century, which contain a reference to Malabari sailors but do not speak about Hadhramis living in (or even visiting) Malabar.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, the two great biographical compendia of the Hadhrami diaspora in the Indian Ocean – the *al-Nūr al-sāfir* by ‘Abd al-Qādir al-‘Aydarus (composed c. 1604 in Gujarat) and al-Shilli’s *al-Mashra’ al-rāwī* of the same period – make no mention of the Malabar Coast at all.¹⁰⁷

It appears, then, that the prestige that Hadhramis attained within Malabar’s Muslim communities from the eighteenth century onwards has simply been projected back onto the earlier centuries of Muslim presence on the Coast. (Very similar claims are made for Indonesia, another region in which the Hadhrami diaspora became prominent during the colonial period, but not before.¹⁰⁸) It is important to counter the myth of the Hadhrami origins of South Indian Islam because it wrongly promotes the vision of a unidirectional transmission of Islam from an Arabian heartland to an Asian periphery by a charismatic Arab religious elite. Interestingly, the Thangals are not the first Muslim elite in Malabar to project a retroactive continuity: Chapter 2 explores how in the thirteenth century another group of Arabs was invested in a very

¹⁰⁴ This effort was made possible by the good offices of Hamza and Muhsin Bahfaqy and S.M. Jiffri Thangal, who vouchsafed for the author and allowed him to study the genealogies maintained by a number of Thangal families in Kozhikode and surrounding villages. Some of the same material seems to have been consulted by Stephen Dale in the late 1970s; see Dale, “The Hadhrami Diaspora”, 181, 181n.18.

¹⁰⁵ The two archives that were consulted as part of this effort are the Maktabat al-Ahqāf and the Markaz al-Nūr (Dār al-Muṣṭafā), both of which are located in Tarim, the intellectual capital of the Hadhramawt.

¹⁰⁶ R.B. Serjeant, *The Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast: Hadhrami Chronicles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

¹⁰⁷ ‘Abd al-Qādir ibn Shaykh al-‘Aydarus al-Hindi, *al-Nūr al-sāfir ‘an ahbār al-qarn al-‘āshir*, ed. A. Hälü et al. (Beirut: Dār Sādr, 2001); Abū ‘Alawi Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr al-Shilli Bā ‘Alawi, *al-Mashra’ al-rāwī fi manāqib al-sāda al-kirām al-Abī ‘Alawi*, 2 vols. (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Āmira al-Sharafiyya, 1901–02). Also see A.M. al-Hibshi, *al-Sufiyah wa l-fiqahā’ fi l-Yaman* (Sana‘a: al-Jil al-Jadid, 1976) and A. Doux, *Index du Nūr as-Sāfir* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1971).

¹⁰⁸ “Hadhrami migration to the [Malay-Indonesian] archipelago began to grow towards the end of the eighteenth century, but there was apparently no comparable increase in the number of Hadhrami ‘ulamā’”; A. Azra, “A Hadhrami Religious Scholar in Indonesia: Sayyid ‘Uthmān”, in Freitag and Clarence-Smith (eds.), *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen*, 249. Intriguingly, there is much earlier evidence of a Muslim from Java in Yemen; see R.M. Feener and M.F. Laffan, “Sufi Scents Across the Indian Ocean: Yemeni Hagiography and the Earliest History of Southeast Asian Islam”, *Archipel* 70:1 (2005), 185–208.

much analogous discursive project, which was also designed to legitimize their own superior status vis-à-vis local Muslims.

Contrary to such claims, South India and the wider Indian Ocean world were not simply the passive recipients of a fully formed system of Islamic knowledge. As the following chapters will show, the transmission of Islam was an interactive process: Islamic practices and identities were negotiated, adapted, and contested in circular (and often haphazard) processes. Instead of being carried out by a small, elite group of Arab *sayyids*, these processes involved a multiplicity of actors, many of which were ordinary traders with backgrounds as diverse as the merchant communities so vividly described by visitors to the medieval Malabar Coast.

The Business of Trade

Merchants were the primary vectors of Monsoon Islam. In organizing their business, they faced the same tension between the global and the local that characterizes the world of Monsoon Islam as a whole. In the context of trade, this meant reconciling participation in trans-oceanic trade networks, and the general institutional framework provided by Islamic law, to the specific conditions of doing business on the Malabar Coast. The ways in which Muslim merchants sought to bridge this divide also holds important clues about their social and religious organization.

Most major Indian Ocean ports functioned as *de facto* commercial enclaves, in which merchants were allowed to conduct their business with a high degree of autonomy. Out of this freedom emerged a surprisingly consistent model of trade across the Indian Ocean. This model was made up of mercantile institutions designed to manage the formidable obstacles to commercial exchange that were posed by the immense distances involved in trans-oceanic trade as well as the disparities in language, religion, social conventions, and political affiliation between different port cities and trading communities. These institutions were enacted through laws as well as less formal rules of conduct; in the case of the Malabar Coast, the latter were of special importance.

Trade, Trust, and Commercial Culture

Premodern long-distance trade was built on trust. In his pioneering study of cross-cultural trade, Philip Curtin puts the issue of trust at the very heart of the long-term evolution of commerce.¹⁰⁹ Inspired by concepts

¹⁰⁹ P. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 3–4.

drawn from anthropology, sociology, economics, and psychology, the study of trust has become of central concern to historians working on themes as diverse as the pre-colonial market economies of southern Africa, the commercial culture of medieval Italy, the trans-Saharan slave trade, Spanish and British Atlantic trade, or the twentieth-century jewelry business.¹¹⁰ In keeping with this literature, the most persistent economic as well as social institutions of the medieval Indian Ocean trade had as their primary purpose to overcome the fundamental problem of trust.¹¹¹ Information, bargaining, and enforcement costs were extremely onerous for traders engaged in the trans-oceanic trade. Letters with instructions or information took a long time to reach recipients across the ocean, even during the right sailing season. Negotiations usually had to be conducted through middlemen due to barriers of distance and language. And due to unclear, uneven, or conflicting jurisdictions, not only the monitoring but also the enforcement of contracts and agreements across the vast distances of the Indian Ocean was highly problematic.

Under these conditions, establishing the trustworthiness of a prospective or existing business partner was absolutely essential to the conduct of trade. The oldest, and arguably most persistent, answer to the quandary of trust has been to organize it along kinship lines. Investors had most leverage over members of their own family and could expect to be able to hold them to account for any misbehaviour. The correspondence of Jewish traders in eleventh- and twelfth-century Aden – as well as a separate cache of letters written by Muslim merchants at the Red Sea port of Quseir (*Qusayr al-Qadim*) in the thirteenth century – show numerous instances of business organization based on kinship.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ For instance, A. von Oppen, *Terms of Trade and Terms of Trust: The History and Contexts of Pre-colonial Market Production around the Upper Zambezi and Kasai* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1993); G. Dahl, *Trade, Trust, and Networks: Commercial Culture in Late Medieval Italy* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 1998); G. Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); X. Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World: Spanish Merchants and their Overseas Networks* (London: Royal Historical Society, 2010); S. Haggerty, “Merely for Money?” *Business Culture in the British Atlantic, 1750–1815* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012); D. Gaggio, *In Gold We Trust: Social Capital and Economic Change in the Italian Jewelry Towns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹¹¹ This observation of course also applies to other premodern long-distance trade circuits; see for instance, S.R. Prange, “‘Trust in God, but Tie Your Camel First.’ The Economic Organization of the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade between the Fourteenth and Nineteenth Centuries”, *Journal of Global History* 1:2 (2006), 219–239. Personal bonds of trust remained critical to the building of commercial networks in the modern period; see for instance, C. Downs, “Networks, Trust, and Risk Mitigation during the American Revolutionary War: A Case Study”, *Economic History Review* 70:2 (2017), 509–528.

¹¹² For the genealogies of Jewish merchant dynasties engaged in the India trade, see Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 47, 89. For analogous data from a port

As significant as kinship was in the formation of trade networks across the Indian Ocean, it is clear that their natural limitations engendered the need for alternative organizational models. Abraham Udovitch, in his seminal study of commercial law and partnerships in medieval Islamic societies, suggests that as early as the eighth century, Islamic entrepreneurial activity had moved beyond purely family associations and formalized alternative forms of alliance: “As important as family associations continued to be throughout the Islamic Middle Ages, the earliest legal sources already recognized that traders were likely to place commercial success ahead of family ties.”¹¹³ In an extension of the basic kinship model, business partnerships were often organized on the basis of a shared geographic origin or adherence to the same social group. Comparative studies show such “moral groups” as a key locus of commercial cooperation across the globe.¹¹⁴ This was the basis of trade diasporas, which are defined as spatially dispersed yet socially interdependent mercantile groups.¹¹⁵ In Indian Ocean history, one of the most long-lived (and successful) instances of such a diaspora organization is the Armenian network centred on Julfa (and later New Julfa/Isfahan).¹¹⁶

In cosmopolitan trade emporia, however, greater economic benefits were accessible through the interaction with merchants, shipowners, and agents from outside such narrowly construed social groups. In response, merchant groups developed an institutional framework to facilitate

on the Red Sea coast, see L. Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community in a Red Sea Port in the Thirteenth Century: The Arabic Documents from Quseir* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 93; this volume is the most comprehensive edition of these documents. Also see G. Frantz-Murphy, “The Red Sea Port of Quseir: Arabic Documents and Narrative Sources”, in D. Whitcomb and J. Johnson (eds.), *Quseir al-Qadim 1980: Preliminary Report* (Malibu: Undena, 1982), 267–283; J. Thayer, “In Testimony to a Market Economy in Mamluk Egypt: The Qusayr Documents”, *al-Masāq* 8 (1995), 45–55.

¹¹³ A.L. Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 260.

¹¹⁴ See for instance, A. Greif and G. Tabellini, “The Clan and the Corporation: Sustaining Cooperation in China and Europe”, *Journal of Comparative Economics* 45:1 (2017), 1–35.

¹¹⁵ See for instance, A. Cohen, “Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas”, in C. Meillassoux (ed.), *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 266–267.

¹¹⁶ The most comprehensive study of the Armenian trade network in the Indian Ocean is S. Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011). Also see B. Bhattacharya, “The ‘Book of Will’ of Petrus Woskan (1680–1751): Some Insights into the Global Commercial Network of the Armenians in the Indian Ocean”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51:1 (2008), 67–98; B. Bhattacharya, “Making Money at the Blessed Place of Manila: Armenians in the Madras–Manila Trade in the Eighteenth Century”, *Journal of Global History* 3:1 (2008), 1–20.

inter-communal business dealings. These frameworks inevitably included legal norms, as expressed for instance in contractual commitments.¹¹⁷ In fact, it would appear that the frequency with which merchant communities coalesced around a common faith was less a function of a greater trust in co-religionists *per se* but rather by the advantages of a shared legal system.

The importance that merchants themselves attributed shared legal norms is apparent from their own writings. While no corpus of business documents written by Muslim merchants on the Malabar Coast has survived, the fact that the organization of commerce was highly consistent across much of the Indian Ocean makes it possible for other, cognate sources to stand in as proxies. The most valuable of these are the documents preserved as part of the Cairo Geniza.¹¹⁸ Shlomo Goitein, who pioneered the study of the Geniza's secular (and especially commercial) documents, regards them as not just a record of Jewish history but as evidence for an entire medieval trading world comprising merchants of all faiths. And based on this evidence, Goitein came to view the India trade in particular as "the backbone of medieval international economy".¹¹⁹ This commercial oecumene was significantly shaped by

¹¹⁷ For the case of the Maghribi traders, the role of formal legal mechanisms versus informal communal institutions has been subject to debate: see J. Edwards and S. Ogilvie, "Contract Enforcement, Institutions, and Social Capital: The Maghribi Traders Reappraised", *Economic History Review* 65:2 (2012), 421–444; also see Greif's rejoinder in A. Greif, "The Maghribi Traders: A Reappraisal?", *Economic History Review* 65:2 (2012), 445–469.

¹¹⁸ A *geniza* (pl. *genizot*, from the Hebrew for "storage") is the opposite of an archive: its function was not to preserve but to discard. The preservation of these papers resulted from the Judaic belief that any document containing the name of God must not be destroyed; *genizot* were designed to safely store such materials before their eventual burial. The Cairo Geniza, attached to the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, was discovered in the nineteenth century and its approximately 200,000 manuscripts – mostly written in Judeo-Arabic, a form of medieval Arabic rendered in the Hebrew script – were subsequently dispersed among numerous public and private collections.

¹¹⁹ S.D. Goitein, "Involvement in Geniza Research", in S.D. Goitein (ed.), *Religion in a Religious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974), 142. Much of the material dealing with India has been collected and translated in the excellent edition by Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*. For the Hebrew editions, which also contain full transcriptions of the original Judeo-Arabic texts, see the six volumes of S.D. Goitein and M.A. Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Book* [organized by authorship into volumes I, II, III, IVa, and IVb], 5 vols. (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008–13). Notable studies of the India documents include N.A. Stillman, "The Eleventh Century Merchant House of Ibn 'Awkal (A Geniza Study)", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 16:1 (1973), 15–88; S.D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), ch. 5; S.D. Goitein, "Portrait of a Medieval India Trader: Three Letters from the Cairo Geniza", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 50:3 (1987), 449–464; M. Gil, "The Jewish Merchants in the Light of Eleventh-century Geniza Documents", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 46:3 (2003), 273–319; Margariti, *Aden*.

the constant interaction with the commercially prominent and culturally dominant Muslim traders:

Both the letters of Jewish traders in the Geniza and the rabbinic response are filled with casual references to Muslim and Jewish merchants as part of the same, unified, non-sectarian economic community. The relatively relaxed ambience of interfaith relations in the Islamic marketplace created trust, which in turn encouraged partnerships for profit between members of the Jewish minority and their friends among the Muslim majority.¹²⁰

The Jewish merchants of the India trade, who by virtue of the Geniza records are the best-documented trade diaspora in the medieval Indian Ocean, formed part of the same, interwoven trading world as their Muslim counterparts on the Malabar Coast. Their sources, therefore, offer important insights into shared business practices and a common commercial culture in the western Indian Ocean.¹²¹ For the purposes of this study, only documents relating directly to the India trade (rather than to these merchants' dealings in the Mediterranean world, which account for the bulk of the Geniza materials) are drawn on.

Dating mainly from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, these often fragmentary documents show that Jewish and Muslim traders active in the western Indian Ocean ploughed the same routes (often in the same ships), bought and sold in the same markets, and regularly engaged in business dealings and partnerships with one another. Following the paper trail of these business deals leads to a striking revelation: Jewish traders routinely arranged their partnerships according to Islamic law, even if a transaction did not include any Muslims but was exclusively between Jewish traders. A good illustration of this practice is the case of a Jewish trader at Aden, who was in a business dispute with another Jewish merchant. To get the matter resolved, he threatened to appeal to a Muslim judge, and when a settlement was finally reached, it was deposited with both the Jewish and Muslim courts.¹²² In another case, a contract between two Jewish merchants specifies that legal depositions

¹²⁰ M.R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 95.

¹²¹ See R.E. Margariti, “*Ashâbuna l-Tujâr – Our Associates, the Merchants: Non-Jewish Business Partners of the Geniza’s India Traders*”, in A.E. Franklin et al. (eds.), *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern Times: A Festschrift in Honor of Mark R. Cohen* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 40. On the ways in which a careful reading of Indian loanwords within the Geniza documents can speak to the cultural exchanges that were animated by economic transactions, see E. Lambourn, “Borrowed Words in an Ocean of Objects: Geniza Sources and New Cultural Histories of the Indian Ocean”, in K. Veluthat and D.R. Davis, Jr. (eds.), *Irreverent History: Essays for M.G.S. Narayanan* (Delhi: Primus, 2014), 215–242.

¹²² Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 65, 346–347.

related to the fulfilment of contractual obligations could be made at either a Rabbinical or an Islamic court.

This continuity extended beyond commercial law to many other aspects of Islamic maritime law and practice, which also find direct reflection in the Geniza documents.¹²³ The stipulation that commercial disputes must be adjudicated in the port of destination, rather than at the port of origin or the place of residence of the principals, necessitated the establishment of Islamic law courts, or at the least the presence of qualified Muslim judges, in port cities across the Indian Ocean.¹²⁴ This legal tradition is explicit in that such disputes should be heard in front of a Muslim judge regardless of the litigants' ethnic or religious identity. Similarly, the judge's own affiliation with any particular school of Islamic law was not deemed material to such proceedings as long as he could be deemed "reasonably just".¹²⁵ The ninth-century account by al-Sīrāfi shows the existence of such a court at Guangzhou (*Khānфū*) that operated with the sanction of the ruler of China, which is confirmed by later sources.¹²⁶ As the [next chapter](#) shows, in the port cities of the Malabar Coast Muslim judges were likewise charged with adjudicating contractual disputes between foreign merchants, a role that extended beyond the Muslim community. Such a decentralized yet widely accepted institutional framework for doing business in the Indian Ocean made legal recourse both generally accessible and relatively predictable in an environment otherwise characterized by a mosaic of competing jurisdictions, diverse affiliations, and enormous distances.

These observations suggest a high degree of commonality and conformity in the application of commercial law, a shared "legal *mentalité*" among trading groups of different faiths operating in the western Indian Ocean.¹²⁷ The widespread usage of Islamic law, even by non-Muslim

¹²³ H.S. Khalileh, "Legal Aspects from a Cairo Geniza Responsum on the Islamic Law of the Sea: Practice and Theory", *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96:2 (2006), 191.

¹²⁴ Khalileh suggests that the requirement to litigate disputes between contracting parties at the destination has its roots in pre-Islamic custom; see Khalileh, "Legal Aspects", 193–196, 194n.41.

¹²⁵ Khalileh, "Legal Aspects", 194, 195.

¹²⁶ Mackintosh-Smith (ed. and trans.), "Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfi: Accounts of China and India", 31.

¹²⁷ P.I. Ackerman-Lieberman, *The Business of Identity: Jews, Muslims, and Economic Life in Medieval Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 218. In his erudite study of the voluminous court records of the Geniza, Ackerman-Lieberman proposes an alternative explanation for this commonality. Rather than finding its source in an embeddedness of Jews within Muslim society that led to conformity of practice, he argues that convergence was rooted in the similar ways in which each religious tradition responded to the tension between canonical law and everyday practice. The ways in which Jews structured their commercial relationships in medieval Egypt,

merchants, to structure and adjudicate commercial relationships is also evident in case studies of later periods, which tend to be much better documented. For example, Pedro Machado shows that in the late eighteenth century, Hindu Vaniya merchants operating between western India and Mozambique regularly appealed to Portuguese judges to mediate commercial disputes among themselves.¹²⁸ Similarly, Francesca Trivellato's work on the Sephardic diaspora that conducted trade in the Mediterranean as well as the Indian Ocean reveals that while internal arbitration was preferred for its lower cost, Jewish merchants also resorted to Christian courts to litigate their intra-communal disputes.¹²⁹ For merchants of the medieval period and beyond, jurisprudence furnished the underpinnings of a diverse, interactive commercial world by "providing a philosophy to the nature and shape of commercial obligations and practices that ran through it, and the institutions that governed it".¹³⁰

The Business of Friendship: Partners and Agents

The Islamic faith not only entails certain religious beliefs but also a comprehensive legal system that prescribes social, economic, and political norms for its adherents. The many commercial precepts included in Islamic law have given rise to Islam being characterized as the "religion of trade".¹³¹ In the medieval Indian Ocean, Islamic law served as a sort of *lex mercatoria* to structure deals and arbitrate disputes among and between different merchant groups.¹³² In the absence of a ruler able to impose one particular branch of the diverse corpus of legal interpretation and practice that makes up Islamic law, it is all the more surprising that Indian Ocean merchants seem to have been relatively

Ackerman-Lieberman contends, helped shape Jewish communal identity within that Islamic society. It remains to be seen how this interpretation will be received by Geniza scholars, and how far it can be extended beyond the context of Fatimid Egypt; his thesis that "embedded subgroups are affected by the *mentalité* of the world around them" (213) certainly accords well with the tenets of this study.

¹²⁸ P. Machado, *Ocean of Trade: South Asian Merchants, Africa and the Indian Ocean, c.1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 50–57.

¹²⁹ F. Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), e.g. 261.

¹³⁰ F.A. Bishara, "Paper Routes: Inscribing Islamic Law across the Nineteenth-Century Western Indian Ocean", *Law and History Review* 32:4 (2014), 798.

¹³¹ For instance, in W. Bernstein, *A Splendid Exchange: How Trade Shaped the World* (London: Atlantic, 2008), 16.

¹³² See A.A.H. Hassan, *Sales and Contracts in Early Islamic Commercial Law* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1994), 11; Udvotitch, *Partnership and Profit*, 258–259.

consistent in their adherence to the Shāfi‘ī school of Sunni Islam.¹³³ This school of Islamic law (Ar., *madhab*), which formed into a more or less structured set of scholars and scholarship about a century after the death of Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shāfi‘ī in 820, was prevalent among almost all Muslim trading communities across maritime Asia.¹³⁴ In short, the Shāfi‘ī *madhab* formed the primary basis of commercial law in the world of Monsoon Islam.

The two central instruments of medieval Islamic commercial cooperation were the proprietary partnership (Ar., *sharikat al-milk*), that is joint ownership in equal shares, and contractual partnerships, in which a joint investment is managed by an agent.¹³⁵ Perhaps to mitigate the problems of moral hazard, the Shāfi‘ī law advocates for the use of proprietary partnerships in which all parties are invested to the same degree.¹³⁶ This arrangement, although perhaps more conducive to social harmony, was ill suited to the complexities of long-distance trade, which was characterized by sharp disparities in capital, multi-party consignments, and above all the need for brokers and agents in distant ports. The limitations of the proprietary partnership were compensated by the institution of the Islamic *commenda* (Ar., *mudārabah* or *qirād*), which was recognized by all the Islamic legal schools including the Shāfi‘ī *madhab*.

The contractual arrangement of the *commenda* was as essential to Indian Ocean trade as it was to Mediterranean commerce.¹³⁷ Scholars

¹³³ See for instance, Thackston (trans.), “Abdul-Razzaq”, 304. The exception to this were Shi‘ah Muslims, who obviously did not subscribe to any of the Sunni schools of law. While there is no evidence of any distinction in worship between *paradesi* and Mappila Muslims, who frequented the same mosques, the Shi‘ah tended to reside in separate quarters where they maintained their own places of worship. See Defrémy and Sanginetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 100; A. Bausani (ed.), *Lettera di Giovanni da Empoli* (Rome: Istituto italiano per il medio ed estremo oriente, 1970), 154; X. de Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval aux Indes orientales* (1601–1611), 2 vols. (Paris: Chandeigne, 1998), I, 375.

¹³⁴ See K.S. Vikør, *Between God and Sultan: A History of Islamic Law* (London: Hurst & Co., 2005), 100–101; A. Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 8.

¹³⁵ The development of these legal institutions is discussed in Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit*, 17–39, 170–248, and Hassan, *Sales and Contracts*, 86–116.

¹³⁶ Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit*, 29–39.

¹³⁷ Udovitch suggests that the European *commenda*, the earliest record of which dates from 1072, was based on Islamic precepts: A.L. Udovitch, “At the Origins of the Western Commenda: Islam, Israel, Byzantium?”, *Speculum* 37 (1962), 198–207. A contrasting view holds that the European *commenda* derived from earlier Western models: J.H. Pryor, “The Origins of the ‘Commenda’ Contract”, *Speculum* 52 (1977), 5–37. For the *commenda* in Mediterranean trade, see S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967–93), I, 169–186; E.S. Hunt and J.M. Murray, *A History of Business in Medieval Europe, 1200–1550*

find it “one of the most widespread tools of commercial activity” in premodern Islamic trade; it has been identified in the Geniza records, the documents from Quseir, and other sources of Indian Ocean trade from India to Southeast Asia and even China.¹³⁸ In essence, it was an instrument that allowed a group of investors to appoint an agent to carry out specific transactions on their behalf. The agent received a minor share of the profits but was not usually liable for any losses, unless he was shown to have acted in bad faith. The significance of the *commenda* is that it allowed sedentary merchants to invest their capital into multiple trading ventures, thereby expanding the scope of possible investments and mitigating the economic consequences of loss of any single undertaking.

More common than the formalized *commenda* was the unwritten *suhba* arrangement, which is best described as a form of reciprocal agency. From the Arabic for “companionship” or “association”, *suhba* was an agency relation in which merchants acted as the unremunerated agents for one another in a reciprocal manner. In the Geniza records, this system of mutual aid is usually cloaked in an idiom of “friendship”, with specific requests further shrouded in terms of “master” and “servant”; for the most part, this *façon de parler* was not indicative of any hierarchical relationship between the parties.¹³⁹ *Suhba* arrangements were underpinned by mutual investments in consignments, which served not only to spread risk but also to ensure the alignment of interests. It is such complex ownership and agency relationships that necessitated the elaborate accounting that characterizes the Geniza and Quseir business documents. Being a “formal friend” meant that one would act as a business agent for another

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 60–63; O.R. Constable, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain: The Commercial Realignment of the Iberian Peninsula, 900–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 67–77; R. Harris, “The Institutional Dynamics of Early Modern Eurasian Trade: The *Commenda* and the Corporation”, *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 71:3 (2009), 606–622; J.L. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their BusinessWorld* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ackerman-Lieberman, *The Business of Identity*, ch. 2.

¹³⁸ Udvotitch, *Partnership and Profit*, 174; Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, *passim*; Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, 58–66, 94–97; Harris, “The Institutional Dynamics of Early Modern Eurasian Trade”, 611–612.

¹³⁹ See A. Greif, “Reputation and Coalitions in Medieval Trade: Evidence on the Maghribi Traders”, *Journal of Economic History* 49:4 (1989), 872. Greif draws on a general understanding of *suhba* first proposed in Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 164–169. Also see S.D. Goitein, “Formal Friendship in the Medieval Near East”, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 115:6 (1971), 484–489; Lieberman-Ackerman, *The Business of Identity*, 86–90; Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 123–143; M.R. Cohen, “A Partnership Gone Bad: Business Relationships and the Evolving Law of the Geniza Period”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53:2 (2013), 218–263; Margariti, “*Ashabuna l-Tujjar*”, 40–58.

merchant, in the expectation that the principal of that deal would in turn serve as one's own agent in another transaction. As Elizabeth Lambourn's study of the material world of the Geniza merchants highlights, the *suhba* framework was highly flexible, extending from the reciprocal provisioning of household necessities to large-scale business transactions.¹⁴⁰

This was obviously an advantageous arrangement for merchants located in different port cities: a trader on the Malabar Coast could send pepper to Aden, where his friend-agent would sell these goods on his behalf, without having a personal stake in the transaction or charging a fee. The trader on the Malabar Coast would then extend the same help whenever the Adenese merchant wanted to conduct business in India. Jessica Goldberg stresses that despite the language of friendship, *suhba* was a legal institution governed by specific rules, not least the expectation of "balanced reciprocity", meaning that the exchange of services was to be of equal value, with any service creating an equivalent obligation that was to be met within a finite period of time.¹⁴¹ Importantly, even though an individual *suhba* relationship lacked the basis of a formal contract, the principal was nonetheless protected through the broader legal recognition of agency that formed part of both Jewish and Islamic jurisprudence.¹⁴² Jewish and Muslim traders alike utilized the *suhba* framework, and in the Indian Ocean they also entered into such legally defined reciprocal relationships with one another across religious lines.¹⁴³

The Geniza records suggest that using agents was the "backbone of overseas trade" across the western Indian Ocean.¹⁴⁴ On the rare occasion that a merchant did *not* wish his merchandise to be entered into such arrangements, this was made explicit in his instructions, as for example in this twelfth-century letter sent to a Jewish trader based on the Malabar Coast:

Please do not send me anything (else), whether betel nuts or any other goods you acquire for me, in partnership with anyone, but specify what belongs to each person and (for) every item purchased. This is the greatest favour you can do for me.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Lambourn, *Abraham's Luggage*, ch. 3.

¹⁴¹ The agent, on the other hand, was not protected in his provision of labour in the form of commercial services; Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 128–129.

¹⁴² Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 134, 150–164.

¹⁴³ This practice of entering into *suhba* relationships across religious lines was a point of difference between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, where Jewish traders do not seem to have engaged in such arrangements with non-Jews. See Margariti, "Ashābuna l-Tujār", 56–57; M. Rustow, "Formal and Informal Patronage among Jews in the Islamic East: Evidence from the Cairo Geniza", *Al-Qanṭara* 29:2 (2008), 341–382.

¹⁴⁴ Goitein, "Portrait", 452.

¹⁴⁵ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 538.

As expedient as the use of agents was in the conduct of long-distance trade, it carried with it certain risks and obligations. The historical conditions of imperfect markets with asymmetric information, limited ability to enforce contracts, and high transaction costs inevitably gave rise to principal-agent problems, notwithstanding the rhetorical pronouncements of “friendship” between the parties. In the context of the Indian Ocean, the dilemma inherent to all agency relationships was exaggerated by the vast distances involved in trans-oceanic commerce and the resultantly slow communication, which rendered the monitoring of partners and agents difficult and costly. In addition, the external risks – ranging from shipwrecks and piracy to adverse market conditions and outright expropriation – meant that economic outcomes could not always be directly linked to an agent’s performance. The selection of a trustworthy agent was thus of paramount importance – it is perhaps telling that the Arabic word for agent, *wakil*, shares a common root with the word for trust (*tawakkul*).¹⁴⁶

The very structure of the *commenda* centred upon the notion of trust, as expressed in its legal classification as a “contract of fidelity” (*‘aqd al-amāna*).¹⁴⁷ At the level of language, the adjectives used in Arabic business correspondence to describe agents, such as “trustworthy” (*amīn*), likewise reflect the importance attached to a reputation for honesty in business dealings.¹⁴⁸ Islamic jurists set out in some detail the lawful conditions for commissioning an agent, the agent’s duties, as well as his discretion in carrying out his commission.¹⁴⁹ That this legal framework was of great concern to Muslim merchants on the Malabar Coast is evident from the extensive treatment of commercial law, and especially the topic of agency, in the *Fath al-mu‘īn*, a commentary on Islamic law written by a sixteenth-century Malabari scholar.¹⁵⁰ This text agrees with the famous Shāfi‘ī theologian Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1567) – under whom the author of the *Fath al-mu‘īn* is reputed to have studied – in classifying an agent’s breach of trust as an “enormity” (*kabirah*), an offence tantamount to such grievous sins as the failure to perform the prescribed prayers or engaging in sexual intercourse inside of a mosque.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Meanings of the root *w-k-l* (كـلـ) range from “entrust”, “commission”, and “appoint as representative” to “rely (on)” and “place one’s confidence (in)”.

¹⁴⁷ See Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit*, 203.

¹⁴⁸ For instance, in Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, 198–199.

¹⁴⁹ See for instance, A. ibn al-Naqib al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, ed. and trans. N.H.M. Keller (Beltsville, MD: Amana, rev. edn., 1994), k.17.0–k.17.13, 419–423.

¹⁵⁰ Zayn al-Dīn, *Fath al-mu‘īn*, *passim*.

¹⁵¹ al-Naqib, *Reliance of the Traveller*, w.52.1 (216), 979.

The fundamental problem of exchange, that is the principal's need to place trust in his agent, was not only addressed through such general moral admonishments but also in the more concrete terms of commercial jurisprudence. For instance, around the year 1140, a trader on the Malabar Coast failed to deliver a consignment of cardamom – after pepper, the second most important good in Malabar's spice trade – to its buyer, a Jewish trader by the name of Abraham Ben Yijū. Ben Yijū, who was based at Mangalore in the northern part of the Malabar Coast, had advanced the funds to the seller in order to secure a favourable price; he had done so using not only his own funds but also those of his business partners in Aden, most likely as part of a *subha* arrangement. After Ben Yijū had reported the seller's default to his partners, he received instructions to “threaten him that here in Aden we excommunicate anyone that owes us something and does not fulfil his commitments”:

Maybe, he will be afraid of the excommunication. If he does not pay, we shall issue an official letter of excommunication and send it to him, so that he will become aware of his crime.¹⁵²

This warning has been interpreted in two different ways. One position holds that it was issued against a fellow Jew, who was threatened with actual excommunication by a rabbinical court (hence the emphasis on the “official letter of excommunication”).¹⁵³ In contrast, other scholars have argued that the Judeo-Arabic word for “excommunicate” can also be translated as “ban” or “defame”, which would suggest that the threatened sanction was not religious banishment but rather the loss of reputation and exclusion from future dealings with other reputable merchants.¹⁵⁴ This position is strengthened by the fact that the tardy debtor is only referred to as *kārdār*, a Persian word that was used in Judeo-Arabic to denote a “manager”.¹⁵⁵ The fact that this duplicitous trader was not identified by name in the correspondence between Aden and Malabar strongly suggests that he was not part of the Jewish community at all but a local Hindu or Muslim.¹⁵⁶ In any event, it is apparent that the creditors felt that they could impel this *kārdār* – “may God curse him!” – to meet his obligations in spite of the vast physical distance between them.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 556–557.

¹⁵³ See Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 556n.17, 635n.17.

¹⁵⁴ Margariti, *Aden*, 204–205.

¹⁵⁵ Misspelled in the letter as *kārdāl*; see Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 556n.16.

¹⁵⁶ It has even been suggested that this *kārdār* was related to Ben Yiju through his marriage to a Malayali woman; Margariti, *Aden*, 205.

¹⁵⁷ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 636. Margariti argues that the curses showered on the *kārdār* show that he was not Jewish; Margariti, *Aden*, 340–341.

That such sanctions were indeed feared is evident from another letter from 1152. The vehemence with which a Jewish trader denies a charge of embezzlement in this document illustrates the serious consequences such an accusation could have on his reputation and, by extension, his future business dealings.¹⁵⁸ This is underscored by the outcome of Ben Yijū's abortive cardamom deal: in the end, he decided to indemnify his partners from his own funds, accepting a monetary loss in order to protect his reputation as a reliable agent and merchant.¹⁵⁹

Agents may be seen as the joints in the framework of oceanic trade networks. They crossed the sea, transferred goods, capital, and information, and established outposts in foreign lands. Though initially representatives of external interests, they often underwent processes of localization through intermarriage and integration into indigenous economic, social, and political orders. It is thus of particular interest to consider who these agents were and how they figured in the commercial exchange between the Malabar Coast and other regions.

Agents can be grouped into three categories. The first is that of regular traders who acted as agents in reciprocal arrangements, like Ben Yijū did for his colleague in Aden. Even though a *suhba* created a principal-agent relationship legally, in practice both merchants were of roughly equal status in this *quid pro quo* exchange. The second class of agents were subject to a more hierarchical relationship. They were professional agents who specialized in providing commercial services for sedentary merchants. Unlike the *suhba* system, this form of agency did not presume personal acquaintance: professional agents were happy to conduct transactions on behalf of “friends of business friends”.¹⁶⁰ In such cases, the agent would charge a fee of about 5 per cent.¹⁶¹ The Geniza records show that junior members of merchant families often served in this role. They accompanied consignments overseas

For Friedman's disagreement with this claim, see Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 617n.17.

¹⁵⁸ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 431–436. Work by Avner Greif on the Maghribi traders suggests reputation as a key mechanism in the cooperation of distant business agents who were often separated from their principals by great distances; see Greif, “Reputation and Coalitions”, 857–882; A. Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. 58–90. Greif's more specific claim about the existence of a coalition of merchants that policed its members is not applicable to the Indian Ocean context; the evidence for such a coalition mechanism among the Maghribi traders has been disputed in Edwards and Ogilvie, “Contract Enforcement”, 421–444; also see Greif's rejoinder in Greif, “The Maghribi Traders”.

¹⁵⁹ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 62–63, 635–636.

¹⁶⁰ Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 166.

¹⁶¹ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 62.

and also spent periods of residence in overseas ports to oversee the selling and buying of merchandise on behalf of their principals; from his reading of the Geniza records, Goitein found it “astonishing how many small fry participated in this overseas trade”.¹⁶² For the “small fry” of the Indian Ocean trade, acting as agents for wealthy merchants offered the opportunity to learn the business and access the networks of commercial contacts built up by their principals. This is evident, for example, from a Geniza letter from the 1130s, in which an Aden-based merchant asks his contact on the Malabar Coast to assist an inexperienced newcomer to the India trade:

And, my lord, I would like you to help him [Abū ‘Ali b. Tayyib al-Misrī, who is conveying goods to India on behalf of the author] in all he buys and sells, for he is a stranger, unfamiliar with the country. Whatever you do for him will reach me. May I never miss your favours!¹⁶³

Based on the request of his principal and mentor at Aden, when Abū ‘Ali arrived in India he was supervised in his business transactions by an experienced senior merchant, who could introduce him to his networks and practices. Moreover, the contacts and knowledge he gained by serving as an agent to experienced merchants also allowed him to establish his own personal reputation for trustworthiness. Over time, through his fees and peripheral transactions, he could also build up capital for his own trading ventures.

Some of these specialized agents acted as factors for a great number of different principals in large trading ventures. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah describes a Muslim from Syria who served as the agent of a Chinese junk (“*wakil al-junk*”) that was anchored at Calicut; he likened his role on the ship to that of “a great *amīr*”.¹⁶⁴ An extension of this role was the “trustee of the traders” (*wakil al-tujjār*) in port cities, a position typically held by a pre-eminent merchant. The *wakil al-tujjār* was in effect the agent for an entire community of foreign merchants, a role that could entail their political representation, the supervision of their dealings with the customs house, the storage of their goods, or acting as a clearing house for their transactions.¹⁶⁵ The function of the *wakil al-tujjār* in port cities on the Malabar Coast is examined in Chapter 3.

¹⁶² Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 22.

¹⁶³ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 577.

¹⁶⁴ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 93–94; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, IV, 814. The root of the word *amīr* means “to order” or “to instruct”.

¹⁶⁵ See Margariti, *Aden*, 178–205; Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 186–192; Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 37–46.

The third category of agents was characterized by an even steeper imbalance of power than that between wealthy sedentary merchants and itinerant agents: slaves. Slaves occupy a complex place in Islamic history. On the one hand, they were chattel to be traded and unfree labour to be exploited. On the other hand, Islamic societies had particular traditions and institutions that facilitated the assimilation of slaves and rendered race less of a factor in the maintenance of servile status.¹⁶⁶ Buzurg ibn Shariyār's collection of merchant tales *Kitāb ‘Ajā’ib al-Hind* ("Book of the Wonders of India") from the middle of the tenth century relates a story that encapsulates this. An African king was captured by Muslim merchants to be sold in the slave markets of Oman. Years later, he chances upon his erstwhile captors and recounts to them what had happened to him since their last encounter:

After you had sold me in Oman, my purchaser took me to a town called Basra [...]. There I learnt to pray and fast, and certain parts of the Quran. My master sold me to another man who took me to the country of the King of the Arabs, called Baghdad [...]. In this town, I learnt to speak correctly [i.e. the Arabic language]. I completed learning the Quran and prayed with the men in the mosques.¹⁶⁷

He later travelled to Mecca, where he performed the rituals of the pilgrimage, then joined a caravan to Cairo, and eventually found his way back to his native land on the Swahili Coast (Ar., *Zanj*), where he reclaimed his throne and propagated Islam among his subjects. Although clearly apocryphal, this story reflects several factors that made the use of slaves as business agents feasible within Islamic societies. The religious education of (especially young male) slaves, which centred on instruction in the Quran, offered them training in Arabic, the *lingua franca* of trade. The explicitly egalitarian precepts of Islam, expressed in the story by the slave praying alongside his master and other free men in the mosque, reduced the salience of racial boundaries between the enslaved and the free.¹⁶⁸ And the circuits of trade and pilgrimage allowed for a high degree of mobility across different parts of the Muslim world.

Muslim rulers in particular often surrounded themselves with slaves, who served them in key military and administrative roles; separated from

¹⁶⁶ See P.E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn., 2000), 15–18.

¹⁶⁷ G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville (ed. and trans.), *Captain Buzurg ibn Shariyar of Ramhormuz: The Book of the Wonders of India* (London: East-West, 1981), 33–34; cf. L.M. Devic (trans.), *Les Merveilles de l'Inde* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1878), 43–52.

¹⁶⁸ Historically, not only Africa but also Europe served as a significant source of slaves to the Muslim world; this may have also mitigated the development of a purely racial definition of slavery as it developed in the West.

ties of kinship, often at a young age, slaves were seen as the most loyal of servants, as their position and prospects were ineluctably tied to that of their master. Resultantly, the history of the Islamic world abounds with examples of slaves rising to positions of great power, even to the point of the “ultimate paradox” of slave kings ruling in Cairo, Delhi, and elsewhere.¹⁶⁹ This political practice may have served as a model that was emulated by the commercial classes in the medieval Near East and the Indian Ocean trading world. Goitein notes the frequent use of slave-agents, even among communities not directly involved in the slave trade:

The acquisition of a male slave was a great affair, on which a man was congratulated almost as if a son had been born to him. No wonder, for a slave fulfilled tasks similar to those of a son. He managed the affairs of his master, he traveled with him or for him, or he was in charge of his master's business, when the latter himself was out of town. The *ghulām*, or “young man”, of a businessman would be consulted in all affairs of his master, and his movements would be reported in the same way as those of other important merchants.¹⁷⁰

The extreme disparity in the status, both legal and economic, of master and slave prompts the question of how it was resolved as a principal-agent problem. In other words, on what basis could a master put sufficient faith in his slave to entrust him with capital and then send him away to distant places for the purpose of trade? Two explanations may be adduced. First, slaves were typically purchased at a young age, when bonds of allegiance to their native land and language were still precocious. Slaves destined to be used as agents occupied a privileged position within the spectrum of slave occupations and usually received a Quranic education. Moreover, they were also to a degree integrated into the family and tribe of their masters, as is reflected in their adoption of the relevant *nisbahs*. This structure may have promoted bonds of loyalty between master and slave. Second, an institutionalized system of manumission – described by one scholar as the “safety valve of the institution of slavery” in Islamic societies – meant that slave-agents had at least the prospect, and in many cases the reasonable expectation, of eventual freedom.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ B. Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 64. On the origins of the use of slave soldiers in Islamic societies, see D. Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

¹⁷⁰ Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 132. Also see S.D. Goitein, “Slaves and Slavegirls in the Cairo Geniza Records”, *Arabica* 11 (1962), 1–20.

¹⁷¹ M. Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York, NY: New Amsterdam, 1989), 39. An Arabic text from the Malabar Coast discusses the legalities of releasing slaves in some detail; see Zayn al-Din, *Fath al-mu'in*, 375.

The commercial expertise and, crucially, the reputation for trustworthiness a slave-agent was able to acquire during his years of servitude could help him to become a merchant in his own right after his emancipation – or even before. A prominent example of this trajectory is Yāqūt al-Rūmī (d. 1229): reduced to slavery at a young age, Yāqūt was sold to a merchant in Baghdad who educated him in commercial affairs. On behalf of his master he undertook several trade journeys to the Persian Gulf and Syria and after his manumission he became a trader in his own right and even entered into partnerships with his former owner.¹⁷² Even before their manumission, slaves were legally able to conduct business of their own, and there is evidence to show that some became enormously wealthy while still technically in captivity.¹⁷³

The best-documented instance of a slave-agent from the Malabar Coast is “The Slave of MS. H.6” of Amitav Ghosh’s celebrated subaltern study.¹⁷⁴ It relates to a slave identified in the Geniza records only by the three consonants *b-m-h*. Ghosh surmises that his name was Bomma and that he was a low-caste Hindu from Tulu Nadu, a region of Karnataka in the north of the historic Malabar Coast.¹⁷⁵ Bomma’s owner was the same Abraham Ben Yijū who had been cheated by the cardamom trader. Ben Yijū resided at Mangalore, on the northern Malabar Coast, from 1132 until 1149.¹⁷⁶ He likely acquired his slave soon after his arrival; around 1135, presumably after a basic education in the Arabic language and the conduct of trade, Ben Yijū sent Bomma as his agent to Aden on business. Ben Yijū’s principal business partner at Aden was less than impressed with this choice of agent, as he made abundantly clear in a letter sent back to Mangalore:

[Bomma] went and rented himself a place and said, “Provide me with sufficient living expenses.” So he took from me eight dinars for living expenses during four months. Most of the time he came to me under the influence of drink, not

¹⁷² C. Gilliot, “Yāqūt al-Rūmī”, in P. Bearman et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, 12 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005), XI, 264.

¹⁷³ Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 132.

¹⁷⁴ A. Ghosh, “The Slave of MS. H.6”, in P. Chatterjee and G. Pandey (eds.), *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 159–220. The story of Bomma is also thematized in the author’s ethnographic travelogue: A. Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (London: Granta, 1992). For the formidable status of Ghosh’s text in the field of cultural studies, see for instance, G. Desai, “Old World Orders: Amitav Ghosh and the Writing of Nostalgia”, *Representations* 85 (2004), 125–148.

¹⁷⁵ Ghosh, “The Slave”, 184.

¹⁷⁶ The earliest record relating to Ben Yijū in India is a deed of manumission for another slave, a woman named Ashū who is described as being of local (Tulu) origin and of the Nair caste; see Ghosh, “The Slave”, 199–202. Also see Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 73–79, 632–634.

hearing a word I said. I don't know what purpose you had, my lord, in sending him.¹⁷⁷

Bomma was evidently sent to Aden with a shipment of pepper (the arrival of which is confirmed in the same letter) and then had to await the southwestern monsoon for his return to India. It is striking to note that this slave-agent was not only free to move about Aden at will and make his own housing arrangements, but that he was even able to misbehave with apparent impunity. Like it or not, the merchant at Aden was required to take Bomma under his wing, just as merchants in India guided apprentices and newcomers like Abū 'Ali when they first arrived in India. Notwithstanding this arrangement, the Adenese merchant clearly felt obliged to inform Ben Yijū about the ostensible character flaws of his new agent: in the letter, his account of Bomma's misconduct takes precedence even over the dramatic description of a recent naval attack on Aden!

Such apparently social information was absolutely essential to these traders, as it related to the crucial issue of trust: being kept apprised about the activities and behaviour of the people one was doing business with was at least as important as information about prices and politics. That Bomma, despite his deportment at Aden, was able to recover his reputation is evident from later letters written to Ben Yijū, which often include respectful greetings to him. In this correspondence, the slave is addressed as a member of the family ("brother Bomma") and even by the honorific of a respected merchant ("shaykh Bomma").¹⁷⁸ When Ben Yijū finally departed the Malabar Coast to relocate to Cairo in 1150, he did so in the company of his (by then freed?) slave.¹⁷⁹

The reliance by Muslim traders on slave-agents is likewise attested by Geniza documents. One single letter contains reference to no fewer than three different slave-agents engaged in the Malabar trade, two of whom appear to have been Muslims.¹⁸⁰ The next chapter examines in detail the epigraphic evidence for the use of slave-agents by Muslim merchants on the Malabar Coast, which testifies to a similar pattern of apprenticeship and

¹⁷⁷ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 341.

¹⁷⁸ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 66; Goitein, *Letters*, 12, 191; Ghosh, "The Slave", 202–203.

¹⁷⁹ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 735; Ghosh, "The Slave", 213–214. Bomma was not the only South Indian slave owned by this Jewish trader: a deed of manumission shows that while on the Malabar Coast, Ben Yijū granted freedom to a local slave girl by the name of Ashū, who became a Jewish convert and may have even become his wife. See Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 632–634; Goitein, *Letters*, 202.

¹⁸⁰ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 594, 598, 603, 603n.53.

manumission as in practices by Jewish traders. What is more, it will be seen that these former slaves became enormously wealthy in their own right and served as some of the most prominent patrons of mosques on the medieval Malabar Coast.

Inter-Denominational Partnerships and the Use of Credit Notes

The treasure trove of the Cairo Geniza offers insights into two further aspects of how business was conducted on the Malabar Coast: inter-denominational partnerships and the use of credit notes. Around the year 1139, the Jewish merchant Khalaf ibn Isaac ibn Bundār at Aden sent a letter to Ben Yijū on the Malabar Coast. After the customary greetings, it acknowledges the arrival of various consignments that had been sent by Ben Yijū to Aden. It confirms that cargoes sent with two Muslim merchants arrived safely, but that another was outstanding because “Jawhar, the slave-agent of Dafir, [...] has not arrived this year”.¹⁸¹ The letter then reports a shipwreck: a consignment of pepper and iron Ben Yijū had despatched from Pantalayani-Kollam aboard the ship of a Hindu merchant (“*Fatan Swamī*”, from the Tamil for “lord of the town”) through the agency of a Muslim trader had been lost.¹⁸² After some other business, the letter requests that Ben Yijū intervene with a Muslim merchant on the Malabar Coast on behalf of Khalaf. The writer presents the situation thus:

Moreover, I inform you my master, last year I sent to the captain Mas‘ūd, the Abyssinian, 30 Egyptian *mithqāls*, with which to buy whatever God, the Exalted, would apportion. When however, he arrived at your place, the well-known misfortune befell him. He informed me that he had bought me two *bahārs* of pepper, which he carried with him, and that there remained for me $17\frac{1}{4}$ *mithqāls*, which were deposited with my master, the most illustrious Sheikh Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali ibn Ja'far. Therefore, I, the captain Mas‘ūd, and Bakhtiyār, the slave-agent of 'Ali ibn Ja'far, went to the most illustrious Sheikh 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Nili and he [Mas‘ūd] reported to him the matter, whereupon I received a notification from al-Nili to 'Ali ibn Ja'far about it. When you meet him, kindly greet him in my name and ask him to buy for me with this whatever God, the Exalted, apportions, and to send it in any ship [...]. I do not need to give you instructions, how to approach him; “*a hint is sufficient for a wise man.*”¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ The names of the Muslim shipowners are given as Ibn Abu'l-Katā'ib and Ibn al-Muqaddam; Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 597–598.

¹⁸² Intriguingly, the same document states that part of Ben Yijū's iron was salvaged by divers who had been brought in from Aden. Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 599, 599n.23; Goitein, *Letters*, 188n.8; R. Chakravarti, “Nakhudas and Nauvittakas: Ship-Owning Merchants in the West Coast of India (c.AD 1000–1500)”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43:1 (2000), 46.

¹⁸³ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 603–604; Goitein, *Letters*, 190–191; original emphasis to highlight Hebrew phrase.

To restate: on account of some unspecified misfortune, the Muslim merchant Mas‘ūd had been unable to purchase pepper for the full thirty *mithqāls* entrusted to him by Khalaf (in an implied *suhba* agency-relationship). Rather than transport the remaining bullion back to Aden, he deposited the balance in Khalaf’s name with a Muslim merchant on the Malabar Coast by the name of ‘Alī ibn Ja‘far. Back at Aden, Khalaf took Mas‘ūd and the local slave-agent of ‘Alī ibn Ja‘far to a Muslim notable to obtain written confirmation of this arrangement. He then asked Ben Yijū to remind ‘Alī ibn Ja‘far of this credit and to request that goods to its value be immediately sent to Aden.

This passage is exemplary of the abundant evidence of inter-denominational business dealings and partnerships that is found within the India materials of the Geniza documents. The “spirit of friendly cooperation” between Hindus, Muslims, and Jews (and presumably Christians, who are not explicitly mentioned) became possible only through the similarities in their commercial institutions and conduct of trade.¹⁸⁴ Even where potential disputes arose, such as between Khalaf and ‘Alī ibn Ja‘far, mediation mechanisms were in place to resolve them. These usually took the form of an appeal to an eminent person acceptable to both sides as a disinterested arbiter; in this case, the Jewish merchant Khalaf applied to an eminent Muslim to obtain written confirmation of the debt owed by a Muslim merchant in India. The resolution of disputes was aided by the fact that both Jews and Muslims designed their formal partnerships and contracts to a common standard based on Islamic law. This alignment in the commercial organization of trading groups active on the Malabar Coast, however, must not detract from the underlying economic competition and political rivalry between them, as subsequent chapters will highlight.

Khalaf’s letter also illustrates that the commercial interaction within and between trading groups operating on the Malabar Coast was to a large extent based on the exchange of credit notes. The commerce of the medieval Near East and western Indian Ocean was essentially a credit economy based on paper.¹⁸⁵ The widespread use of credit notes and money orders underlies the complex accounting that is so typical of

¹⁸⁴ Goitein, *Letters*, 186. Friedman notes “a certain denominational element in the organization of commerce” that he regards as representative of a broader “spirit of all-embracing brotherhood, which pervades the India papers of the Cairo Geniza”; Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 25. Ranabir Chakravarti speaks in similar terms of an “undoubted spirit of cooperation, trust and mutual friendship”; Chakravarti, “Nakhudas”, 60.

¹⁸⁵ See Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, 51–58; Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit*, 77–86; J. Bloom, *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 135–141; M. Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism*, trans. B. Pearce (London: Allen Lane, 1974), *passim*.

the Geniza and Quseir documentation.¹⁸⁶ In the face of the ever-present risks of maritime trade – ranging from shipwrecks to pirates and from delinquent agents to rapacious rulers – it was naturally preferable to send, whenever possible, credit pledges rather than actual bullion across the ocean. (That merchants took these risks seriously is evident from the practice of sending multiple copies of letters on different ships, to ensure that at least one of them reached its intended recipient.¹⁸⁷) The Quseir records provide particularly detailed information on a system of credit transfer centred on the *hawāla*, which can be described as a bill of exchange or credit note.¹⁸⁸ In effect, these were certificates for the transfer of debt (“*awwal hawāla*”) that could be used in buying and selling in lieu of hard currency.¹⁸⁹ The use of such promissory notes underlines the complexity of the trade networks that linked the Malabar Coast to other Indian Ocean emporia and again emphasizes the essential role trust played in their commercial institutions.

Merchant Princes of Malabar: *Nākhudās* and *Shāhbāndars*

In the medieval world, the prosperity of a port-of-trade could be most readily gauged by the number of ships in its harbour. The owners of these ships were among the wealthiest merchants of monsoon Asia. In the western Indian Ocean, these merchant-shipowners were generally known by the Persian word *nākhudā*, a term that came to stand as a byword for the magnates of the Indian Ocean trade, men of great wealth with business interests in many different ports and regions.

The *nakhudas* [...] were certainly pre-eminent in the coastal societies of the western sea-board [of India]. Their role as local administrators, donors to religious establishments, builders of mosques and patrons of *hajj* pilgrimage must have enhanced their status and prestige.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁶ This also explains why traders on the Malabar Coast were constantly ordering paper to be sent from Aden, which was not available on the coast where palm leaves were used for writing; see for instance, Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 650–651.

¹⁸⁷ See Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 9n.23.

¹⁸⁸ Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, 52–53.

¹⁸⁹ Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, 145–148. The Geniza records contain similar evidence for the use of promissory notes and detail how wealthy merchants, or a partnership of merchants, acted as financial clearing houses; see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 241–248.

¹⁹⁰ Chakravarti, “Nakhudas”, 59. Also see Chakravarti, “Seafarings, Ships and Ship Owners: India and the Indian Ocean (AD 700–1500)”, in R. Barnes and D. Parkin (eds.), *Ships and the Development of Maritime Technology in the Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2002), 28–61; R.E. Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of*

Roxani Margariti's study of medieval Aden confirms this sense of *nākhudās* as not just economic but also communal leaders. She takes as her "archetypical *nākhudā*" a singularly wealthy and influential Muslim merchant known as Rāmisht (d. 1140).¹⁹¹ Rāmisht is the *nākhudā* most frequently encountered in the Geniza documents; he is also known from other sources, not least for his benefactions to the holy city of Mecca. From his base at Aden, he ran a complex shipping and trading business that included the ownership of a great number of ships that plied the trade routes between Aden and the Malabar Coast. These ships carried his own merchandise and, for a fee, that of other merchants. Margariti uses Rāmisht to illustrate her argument that, in contrast to the Mediterranean, "many prominent Indian Ocean merchants had full control of the shipping component of their business".¹⁹²

More recently, this general view has been qualified in a prosopographical study by Mordechai Friedman. He shows that in the Geniza records, not all shipowners are identified as *nākhudās*, that some individuals described as *nākhudās* did not own ships, and that the term was sometimes used to denote captains and other officers aboard ships.¹⁹³ Table 1.1 draws on this study to list only those individuals who can be identified with certainty as shipowners (irrespective of whether they are described as *nākhudās* or not) and who were active in the trade with the Malabar Coast. Of the sixteen individuals who meet both these criteria, five were certainly Muslims, another two were probably Muslims, three or four were Indians, and a further three certainly Jewish (the remaining names cannot be identified).

In view of the selection bias inherent to the Geniza sources, Jewish shipowners are likely overrepresented. In this light, the aggregation suggests that ships plying the trade between Aden and the Malabar Coast were predominantly owned by Muslims. At the same time, it also highlights the active involvement of shipowners of Indian origins.

a Medieval Arabian Port (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 143–162; Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 121–156. While the term *nākhudā* is not used consistently in medieval Arabic and Persian sources (in some instances it refers to the captain of a ship), over time it came to acquire the general connotation of shipowner, irrespective of whether he was aboard the vessel or ashore.

¹⁹¹ Margariti, *Aden*, 145. Also see S.M. Stern, "Rāmisht of Sirāf, a Merchant Millionaire of the Twelfth Century", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2nd ser. (1967), 10–14.

¹⁹² Margariti, *Aden*, 146. It must be noted that the term *nākhudā* is not used in the Geniza records relating to Mediterranean trade, except in cases of merchants who had acquired this title as Indian Ocean traders. See Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 125; Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 479n.17; W. Diem and H.-P. Radenberg, *A Dictionary of the Arabic Material of S.D. Goitein's A Mediterranean Society* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1994), s.v. "*n'hd*", 207.

¹⁹³ Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 121–156.

Table 1.1 *Shipowners identified in Geniza documents as active in the Malabar trade**

Name	Implied Religion, Ethnicity, or Origin
‘Alī ibn Manṣūr al-Fawfali	Arab Jew or Muslim
Abu Mḥm [Muhammad or Māhmūd] al-Halabi	Arab Muslim (from Aleppo)
Abu’l-Hasan ibn Abu’l-Katā‘ib	Probably Muslim
Bdh [?Budah]	Indian
Bihzāt	Persian Muslim
Fatan Swami [likely from Tamil <i>pattana-svāmi</i> , “lord of the port”]	Indian
Fdy’r [also al-Fdy’r; probably not a personal name]	?Indian
Halfon ibn Maḍmūn	Arab (Yemeni) Jew
Ja’far	Arab (?Muslim)
Maḍmūn ibn Ḥasan	Jew
Mahrūz ibn Jacob	Jew
al-Muqaddam [also Ibn al-Muqaddam; probably not a personal name]	?
Nmby Rwy [same person denoted elsewhere as Nbrdwy/Nbyrwy?]	Probably South Indian
al-Qummi	Persian Muslim (from Qum)
Rāmisht	Persian Muslim
al-Sultān [ruler of Aden?]	Muslim

* Compiled from Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 142–148.

This is confirmed by Ibn Battūṭah, who speaks of Tamil merchants (“*al-Ṣūlīyun*”) buying ships at Kollam.¹⁹⁴ Although Muslims were involved in Malabar’s trade with the eastern Indian Ocean on various levels, it appears that on those routes they relied more heavily on Indian, Javanese, and Chinese shipping.

Given that Muslim *nākhudās* were so prominent in Malabar’s sea trade, the question is whether they also held positions of communal leadership, as was the case in Aden and elsewhere on the west coast of India. Surprisingly, this does not seem to have been the case. Sources that relate directly to the Malabar Coast – rather than reflecting “the view from Aden” characteristic of most Geniza documents – rarely mention *nākhudās*. There are no extant inscriptions in Malabar relating to *nākhudās* or *nauvittakas* like those found in Konkan and Gujarat.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 99–100; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūṭa*, IV, 816–817.

¹⁹⁵ See Chakravarti, “Nakhudas”, 41–43.

Literary sources other than those of the Cairo Geniza make reference to only two notable *nākhudās* from Malabar. The first is encountered in the administrative records of Yemen's Rasulid sultan al-Muzaffar Yūsuf (r. 1249–95). Among these records is a document prepared by Aden's treasury that details the expenditures of presenting notable merchants from India with robes of honour (*khil'a*, pl. *khilā'*). This list mentions three merchants from Malabar ("bi-Mulaibār"), one of whom was the *nākhudā* Bilāl al-Tānishī.¹⁹⁶ The fact that he was honoured in a *khil'a* ceremony alongside other important merchants strongly suggests that he was a shipowner rather than a captain, and one of some significance in the Malabar–Aden trade at that.

The second instance of a notable *nākhudā* from the Malabar Coast is a Muslim from Calicut known only as *nākhudā* Mithqāl. Accounts of his fleet of ships and immense wealth echo the descriptions of the "archetypical" *nākhudā* Rāmisht of twelfth-century Aden. Mithqāl appears to have been active in Calicut in the 1340s, when Ibn Baṭṭūṭah visited the port:

[In Calicut] resides the famous shipowner [*al-nākhudah*] Mithqāl who possesses great wealth and many ships for the trade with India, China, Yemen, and Persia.¹⁹⁷

A mosque in Calicut is known as the Nākhudā Mithqāl mosque, which according to a local history was constructed by the same "*al-nākhudh Mithqāl*".¹⁹⁸ This patronage of religious monuments is another echo of Rāmisht (whose acts of charity included supplying a new cloth-cover for the Ka'abah) and implies *nākhudā* Mithqāl's elevated social standing among Calicut's Muslims.¹⁹⁹ However, according to Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, the commercial leadership of Calicut's Muslim traders was not in the hands of a *nākhudā*, but of a person denoted by another title: *shāhbandar*.

The literal meaning of the term *shāhbandar* (which, like so much of the maritime terminology of the Indian Ocean, is derived from Persian) is "master of the port".²⁰⁰ It almost invariably describes a leading merchant

¹⁹⁶ Jāzim (ed.), *Nūr al-ma 'ārif*, I, 516.

¹⁹⁷ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 90; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, IV, 813.

¹⁹⁸ Zayn al-Din al-Malabari, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin fi ba'd akhbār al-purtukālin*, British Library, MS. IO Islamic 2807e, fol. 131a. This mosque and its inscriptions are examined in Chapter 2.

¹⁹⁹ According to the historian Ibn al-Athir (d. 1234), when the cover of the Ka'abah was torn, "Rāmisht, the Persian merchant, took it upon himself to provide a new cover. He went all out in this, using the most exquisite cloths, so that the price of the cover amounted to eighteen thousand dinars. He was one of the merchants who traveled to India and had great wealth"; cited in Margariti, *Aden*, 144.

²⁰⁰ The institution of *shāhbandar* appears to originate in Persia but little is known about its precise function there prior to the Safavid period. In a pioneering study, William Moreland suggests that the person referred to as *shāhbandar* in sixteenth-century

of an expatriate trading group who was responsible for representing the economic interests of his community. At times, this role could also involve serving in an official or semi-official capacity for the local ruler. According to Sulaymān the Merchant, in the ninth century the emperor of China appointed a Muslim to oversee the activities of other Muslim merchants at Guangzhou (“Khānfū”), so as “to settle cases arising between the Muslims who go to that region”.²⁰¹ By delegating the enforcement of contracts, the most likely source of “cases” or conflict between merchants, to one of their own, the emperor recognized the internal, communal legal standards of the foreign merchants, who were not adjudicated according to local laws.

The clearest example of what the role of *shāhbandar* entailed comes from Southeast Asia. The laws of Melaka (*Undang-Undang Melaka*) from the middle of the fifteenth century state that the *shāhbandar* (Malay, *syahbandar*) had absolute control over ships in the port and its estuary, and that all market regulations were vested exclusively in him.²⁰² According to Tomé Pires, Melaka’s *shāhbandar* (“*xabamdar*”) in the 1510s was a merchant from Gujarat, which reflects the dominant position traders from western India held there at the time. Pires also states that this *shāhbandar* collected fees from traders, which were separate from the regular taxes due to the local ruler.²⁰³ In return for this fee, which according to the Portuguese sources was around 1 per cent *ad valorem*, the *shāhbandar* provided lodging, storage, brokerage, and official representation.²⁰⁴ In other words, in addition to the official taxes, foreign merchants wanting to trade at Melaka paid the *shāhbandar* a fee for him to represent their interests and assist with the logistics of doing business at the port. Sanjay Subrahmanyam has made similar observations for the port of Masulipatnam on the Coromandel Coast. In the late sixteenth century, the position of *shāhbandar* was held there by a Persian trader, which conforms to the general impression that this post was typically held by a representative from among a port’s dominant merchant group.²⁰⁵

Hormuz was specifically its harbourmaster, whereas elsewhere in the Indian Ocean the term had a wide range of meanings. See W.H. Moreland, “The Shahbandar in Eastern Seas”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* n.s. 52 (1920), 417–433.

²⁰¹ Mackintosh-Smith (ed. and trans.), “Abū Zayd al-Sirāfi: Accounts of China and India”, 31.

²⁰² Fang (ed. and trans.), *Undang-Undang Melaka*, 79, 135.

²⁰³ Cortesão (ed. and trans.), *Tomé Pires*, II, 499.

²⁰⁴ See Hall, “Multi-Dimensional Networking”, 466–467.

²⁰⁵ S. Subrahmanyam, “Persians, Pilgrims and Portuguese: The Travails of Masulipatnam Shipping in the Western Indian Ocean, 1590–1665”, *Modern Asian Studies* 22:3 (1988), 504–505.

The earliest tradition of Malabar's Muslims, the Cheraman Perumal legend which is examined in detail in the next chapter, makes repeated mention of *shāhbandars*. Based on the *nisbahs* attributed to these *shāhbandars*, they were all linked to Arabia or Persia. In Arabic, the *nisbah* adjective ("*-ī*") connotes relation or belonging; onomastically, it is a common part of Muslim personal names that indicates a person's ancestry, geographical origin, or kinship affiliation. As such, they are usually a good indication of a person's background; it is important to note, however, that a *nisbah* does not necessarily reveal the origin at birth, but rather the dominant (or preferred) affiliation of that person. For example, the *nisbah al-Hindi* could variously mean someone who is ethnically South Asian, someone who hails from India, or someone who spent significant time in India (perhaps to study with a renowned scholar there). Although some *nisbahs* were used continuously across several generations of a family, these typically relate to Arab tribes, notable occupations, or a famous ancestor; geographical *nisbahs*, on the other hand, tended to be adopted and dropped within a generation or two, and therefore reflect a much more proximate relationship to a place.²⁰⁶ In the case of the *shāhbandars*, then, their *nisbahs* emphasize their association with either Arabia or Persia. While it is doubtful that the tradition relates the identities of actual individuals, it is worthy of note that the earliest mention of *shāhbandars* on the Malabar Coast associates the position with foreign, *paradesi* Muslims. This identification corresponds to the overall pattern of Muslim trade in the region, which was dominated by Arab and Persian merchants.

More reliable evidence of the role of *shāhbandars* on the Malabar Coast is found in the travelogue of Ibn Battūṭah. In his account of Calicut, he speaks of a Muslim from Bahrain who is called Ibrāhīm *shāhbandar*. This Ibrāhīm is described as the governor (or ruler) of the merchants ("amīr *al-tujjār*"), which clearly shows that it was not the famous and wealthy *nākhudā* Mithqāl who was in charge of the commercial affairs of the port's Muslim merchants, but rather the *shāhbandar*.²⁰⁷ Another reference to the role of *shāhbandar* in a Malabari port city is found in Ibn Battūṭah's account of Kollam. Here, he writes, Muḥammad *shāhbandar* was the head of the Muslims ("kabir *al-muslimīn*").²⁰⁸ The phrasing in these two descriptions is of some interest. Although the literal meaning of the word *shāhbandar* must have been obvious to Ibn Battūṭah, it was not

²⁰⁶ See R.W. Bulliet, "A Quantitative Approach to Medieval Muslim Biographical Dictionaries", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 13:2 (1970), 198–200.

²⁰⁷ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 89.

²⁰⁸ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 100.

a term used in his North African homeland. Perhaps as a result of this, he apparently did not understand it as an office. This is suggested by his omission of the definite article: he treats *shāhbandar* as a personal name (Ibrāhim Shāhbandar, Muḥammad Shāhbandar). His further description of these individuals, however, which clarifies their status as leader of the local Muslim trading community, strongly suggests that these two men did indeed occupy the exalted position of *shāhbandar*.

Further evidence for the local, Malabari understanding of the position of *shāhbandar* comes in the form of two inscriptions, both of which are found in the above-mentioned mosque at Calicut, the Nakhudā Mithqāl Masjid (or Mithqālpalli) named after the eponymous shipowner. Its elaborately carved pulpit (Ar., *minbar*) bears a number of inscriptions, two of which are of particular interest. The first records its renovation in either 1607/8 or 1618/19 (AH 1018 or 1028 in the two possible readings) on the order of “*tāj al-muslimin shāh-bandar khwājah Jamāl al-Dīn ‘Antābi*”.²⁰⁹ The second inscription refers to another renovation of this *minbar* in 1677/8 (AH 1088) by “*ra‘is al-muslimin al-shāh-bandar al-khwājah Umar al-‘Antābi*”.²¹⁰ While the *nisbahs* of these two patrons does not reveal their place of origin (Mehrdad Shokoohy, in his careful study of the mosque, speculates that ‘Antābi may refer to Entebbe in modern Uganda), the very fact that this *nisbah* is so rare makes it likely that both men were related.²¹¹ That both patrons were involved in commerce is suggested by their appellative *khwājah* (lit., “master”), a title commonly applied to prominent merchants.²¹²

As in Ibn Battūtah’s account, these inscriptions again directly associate the position of *shāhbandar* with the leadership of the Muslim community: in the case of Jamāl in the form of *tāj al-muslimin*, meaning “crown of the Muslims”, and for ‘Umar as *ra‘is al-muslimin*, “chief of the Muslims”. These phrases correspond closely to those used by Ibn Battūtah when

²⁰⁹ The author is grateful to the mosque’s custodians for their permission to examine and photograph its inscriptions. Reported in Gai (ed.), *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy for 1965–1966*, no. D54; Desai, *Topographical List*, no. 1064. Published in M. Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture of South India: The Sultanate of Ma’bar and the Traditions of Maritime Settlers on the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts (Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Goa)* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2003), 166. Also see Shokoohy, “Sources for Malabar Muslim Inscriptions”, 18–24.

²¹⁰ Reported in Gai (ed.), *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy for 1965–1966*, no. D53; Desai, *Topographical List*, no. 1062. Published in Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 168.

²¹¹ Shokoohy suggests that the later patron might have been the grandson of the earlier al-‘Antābi; see Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 168, 168n.40.

²¹² “In medieval Islam *khwāja* is a title usually given to men of distinction not necessarily associated with a court or religious establishment, and in general it was regarded as a suitable title for affluent merchants, scholars, and doctors”; Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 168.



Figure 1.2 The ornately carved and inscribed *minbar* (pulpit) of Calicut's Mithqālpalli.

Image copyright by Sebastian R. Prange.

he sought to clarify the role of the *shāhbandars* in Calicut and Kollam (“*amīr al-tujjār*” and “*kabīr al-muslimīn*”, respectively).²¹³ Thus, in the traditional, literary, and epigraphic sources alike, *shāhbandars* are consistently linked to a position of leadership among the Muslim trading communities on the Malabar Coast.

What functions did this leadership role actually entail? Before examining the sources for the Malabar Coast, it is useful to circumscribe a model against which this evidence can be tested. For this purpose, the view is again directed towards Aden. The Geniza sources do not speak of a *shāhbandar* at Aden but describe an analogous institution in the office of the *wākil al-tujjār*, which translates as the representative (or agent) of the traders.²¹⁴ The institution of the *wākil al-tujjār* was first described in any detail by Goitein in the context of Mediterranean trade. He identified three distinct, though interconnected tasks that defined it: legal representation of foreign merchants; the storage of their goods; and service as a depositary and neutral arbiter in business disputes.²¹⁵ In maritime cities, additional roles such as superintendent of the port or tax-farmer of customs dues could be included.²¹⁶ As to the type of person holding this office, Goitein concludes:

[The] wakil tujjār, as we know him from the Geniza, was not the head of a merchants' guild [...] but a representative of foreigners and others who, for one reason or another, were unable to attend to their business in person. The ideal man for such a vocation was a successful merchant of means who himself had come from a foreign country or was the son of such a person, but who had lived long enough in his new domicile to become well entrenched there and influential.²¹⁷

Intriguingly, Goitein also speculates that the institution of *shāhbandar* may represent a more developed stage of the *wakil al-tujjār*.²¹⁸ Margariti has examined the role of the *wakil al-tujjār* in the specific context of Aden's Indian Ocean trade. She argues that it was not an official or semi-official position but rather founded in “an organic relationship between

²¹³ The synonymous use of these terms was not unusual the Arab world: in the Mamluk period, this office was mainly referred to as *ra'is* or *kabīr al-tujjār*, while after the Ottoman conquest the term *shāhbandar* was used throughout their empire; see A. Raymond and M.B. Hooker, “Shāh Bandar”, in Bearman et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, IX, 193.

²¹⁴ The Hebrew equivalent is *peqid ha-sōharim*; see Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 197.

²¹⁵ Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 187–188.

²¹⁶ Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 189. This is further confirmed by the thirteenth-century Arabic documents from Quseir; see Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, 97.

²¹⁷ Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 192.

²¹⁸ Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 192.

foreign merchants and sedentary businessmen who represented their interests in the entrepôt city".²¹⁹ However, while Margariti suggests these *wakils* rendered their services "for no visible remuneration", the Geniza records show that at least occasionally they charged a fee of between 1.3 and 2 per cent, which in the accounts was politely designated as a "reduction".²²⁰ This corresponds to the practice noted by Tomé Pires at Melaka, where the *shāhbandar* also imposed a fee for his service. Margariti further observes that a number of the Jewish merchant-representatives were also known as *nagidim* or "heads of the Jews" – a remarkable symmetry to the literary and epigraphic evidence from the Malabar Coast with its equation between the title *shāhbandar* and the position of "head (or chief) of the Muslims".²²¹ Outside the Geniza records, the institution of the *wakil al-tujjār* is also widely noted in the sources for medieval Islamic trade, for instance in the thirteenth-century documents from the Rasulid archives and in the roughly contemporary records for the port of Quseir.²²²

Evidence for the duties of the "head of the Muslims" in Malabari ports is more limited. The earliest detailed description of the conduct of trade on the Malabar Coast is provided by Ma Huan's account of Calicut ("Ku-li") from the middle of the fifteenth century:

If a treasure-ship goes there, it is left entirely to the two men [identified earlier as Muslim chiefs] to superintend the buying and selling; the king sends a [Muslim] chief and a Che-ti Wei-no-chi [a Chetti merchant] to examine the account books in the official bureau; a broker comes and joins them; [and] a high officer who commands the ships discusses the choice of a certain day for fixing prices. When the day arrives, they first of all take the silk embroideries and the open-works silks, and other such goods which have been brought there, and discuss the price of them one by one; [and] when [the price] has been fixed, they write out an agreement stating the amount of the price; [this agreement] is retained by these persons.²²³

Ma Huan describes an institutionalized system of dealing with imports, which must have been of particular significance to the Chinese treasure-ships with their immense cargoes. Rather than allow Chinese goods to flood the local market, representatives of the port's two main trading groups, the Muslims and Tamil Chettis, negotiated fixed prices. Because taxes at Calicut were charged *ad valorem*, this practice was essential to

²¹⁹ Margariti, *Aden*, 181.

²²⁰ Margariti, *Aden*, 178; Goitein and Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders*, 322, 322n.5, 445, 445n.34.

²²¹ Margariti, *Aden*, 182–183.

²²² Jāzīm (ed.), *Nūr al-ma'rif*, I, passim; Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, 97.

²²³ Mills (trans.), *Ma Huan*, 140.

the efficient administration of customs dues before goods entered the town's bazaars. The Muslim chief in particular is described as having been invested with official authority: just prior to this passage, Ma Huan writes that the local ruler had “two great chiefs who administer the affairs of the country; both are Muslims”.²²⁴

Thus the head of the Muslim traders, a position that in the sources is associated with the title *shāhbandar*, negotiated on behalf of the entire Muslim trading community, just as the leading Chetti merchant did for his own community. (Perhaps it was such a Chetti merchant-representative who is referred to as Fatan Swami (*pattana-svāmi*), or “lord of the port”, in the Geniza letter cited above.) Brokerage, however, was not included in this role. Ma Huan relates that after agreeing on prices, the Muslim, the Chetti, and the representative of the treasure-ship (“his excellency the eunuch”; was this Zheng He himself?) were joined by a broker to enter into a formal oath that served as a contract between them. This ritualized system is described in strikingly similar terms some fifty years later by the Italian traveller Ludovico de Varthema, who specifies that this practice applied only to wholesale transactions.²²⁵ A later account by the Frenchman François Pyrard de Laval provides further detail by indicating that these brokers received a fee from both the vendor and the buyer; from his text, it also appears that these brokers were local Hindus.²²⁶ That the role of *shāhbandar* on the Malabar Coast did not entail brokerage corresponds to the institution of *wakil al-tujjār* at Aden and elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, where the broker (*dallāl*) is likewise noted as a separate function.²²⁷

Even though official brokerage was done independently of them, *shāhbandars* still fulfilled functions that fit the broader understanding of cross-cultural brokers found in the literature, in the sense that they facilitated prolonged business cooperation between distinct groups.²²⁸ This is most clear from their multiple roles in assisting itinerant traders. It has been seen that merchants often sent consignments through middlemen, shipowners, and agents. Unless the trader, or one of his partners, maintained their own establishment in the port-of-trade, upon arrival the goods and capital would be entrusted to a

²²⁴ Mills (trans.), *Ma Huan*, 140.

²²⁵ Reichert (trans.), *Ludovico de Varthema*, 181.

²²⁶ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 338.

²²⁷ See Margariti, *Aden*, 180.

²²⁸ See F. Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 1–2; Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, 1–14.

prominent merchant such as the *shāhbandar*.²²⁹ In his study of the Quseir documents, Li Guo describes the warehouse of the local merchant-representative as “a brokerage reaching out to both ends – inbound and outbound”.²³⁰ Ibn Baṭṭūṭah’s travels along the Malabar Coast vividly illustrate the analogous role of the “chief of the traders” and “governor of the merchants” in providing shelter and lodging to peripatetic Muslim traders. This was of great importance especially in the smaller pepper ports that did not maintain an extensive commercial infrastructure. In the major entrepôts, which were host to a large number of foreign traders for the duration of the sailing season, more formal systems were in place. Pyrard de Laval describes this for Calicut, where the king had established a warehouse: it contained numerous vaults to store the goods of individual merchants, whose names would be written above the door. Access required two keys, one in the hands of an official, who ensured that all dues were paid before releasing the goods, and the other with the merchant himself – as with a modern safety-deposit box, neither party could enter without the other’s keys.²³¹ At Cochin (“*Ko-Chih*”), Ma Huan describes a similar system of storehouses for different types of goods.²³²

The itinerant traveller, of course, needed to find safe shelter not only for his goods but also for himself. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah draws attention to the particular issues around lodging on the Malabar Coast.²³³ The strict caste restrictions on commensality observed by Kerala Hindus, which were enforced more stringently there than in any other part of medieval India, caused visitors many complications when it came to obtaining food and shelter. The leaders of the Muslim community of the different towns on the Malabar Coast could be called upon to provide these essential necessities to foreign traders. At times, this service was even extended to non-Muslims: Pyrard de Laval was initially lodged with the *shāhbandar* of Calicut’s Muslim community, though he soon moved to the “*alfândega*” for fear of a Portuguese plot to assassinate him.²³⁴ The term Pyrard seeks to transcribe is *funduq* (or *fondaco*), a dedicated residence for foreign

²²⁹ In the Arabic sources, the warehouse associated with the *wakil al tujjār* is known as the *dār al-wakāla* (“house of agency”); see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 186; Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, 97.

²³⁰ Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, 47.

²³¹ Evocatively, Pyrard likens the galleries and arcades of this building to the architecture of the Place des Vosges in Paris (referring to it by its old name, Place Royale); de Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 335.

²³² Mills (trans.), *Ma Huan*, 132.

²³³ For example Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 88.

²³⁴ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 338.

merchants that is well known from Mediterranean history for its role in facilitating trade and travel.²³⁵ As with warehousing, it seems that the principal emporia such as Calicut and Cochin maintained a dedicated infrastructure that catered to the needs of visiting traders, whereas in secondary ports access to a community of resident merchants, usually organized along denominational lines, was essential to doing business on the Malabar Coast.

The evidence for the conduct of trade on the Malabar Coast suggests that *shāhbandars* represented the commercial interests of their community in negotiating large wholesale transactions and that they also played a role in facilitating trade and travel by providing storage and lodging. The latter role was most significant in places outside of the major ports, which were unable to develop their own infrastructure to accommodate the needs of itinerant traders. At the same time, the sources for the Malabar Coast mention the institution of merchant-representative nowhere near as frequently as do the records for other Indian Ocean ports, such as Aden or Melaka. What is more, *shāhbandars* do not seem to have played a central role in Malabar's commercial affairs. This impression could well be a function of the available sources, which for the case of Malabar do not offer a corpus of merchant correspondence as is extant for Aden, nor an official legal code like that of Melaka. However, this discrepancy may also reflect the difference between regional hubs like Aden and Melaka and the constellation on the Malabar Coast, which was marked by a great number of competing ports, each of which maintained its own overseas trade links. Malabar's decentralized pattern of trade may have led to a greater reliance on informal commercial organization, based on reciprocal assistance between business partners and the use of agents. It is perhaps no accident that the role of *nākhudās* and *shāhbandars* appears most developed in Malabar's principal port, Calicut. It is only for Calicut that the evidence suggests a more formal role for the *shāhbandars*. Here, as Ma Huan's account shows, the chief of the Muslim traders was invested with official authority by the ruler, which corresponds to Goitein's notion of the *wakil al-tujjār* as a political representative for expatriate merchants. This relationship between Muslim trading communities and Malabari states is the subject of [Chapter 3](#).

The fact that each port had its own "head of the Muslims" reflects the general political context of medieval Malabar. With the end of unified Chera ruler in the early twelfth century, the region was politically

²³⁵ See O.R. Constable, *Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World: Lodging, Trade, and Travel in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

fragmented, with rival kingdoms competing to draw foreign merchants to their ports-of-trade. It was not only the coastal polities that stood in rivalry with one another, but also the different expatriate trading communities: different ports came to be associated with particular groups who sought to monopolize its commerce. And despite cooperation at the individual level, as is amply testified to by the Geniza letters, overall commercial organization within these port cities remained structured along communal lines, with each group maintaining its own internal institutions and hierarchy. For the Muslim communities of the Malabar Coast, merchant princes such as *nākhudā* Mithqāl and merchant-representatives such as Ibrāhīm *shāhbandar* were at the heart of their economic life. The [next chapter](#) asks if the same was true of their social organization.

2 The Mosque

Calicut... is a city of infidels and therefore in the land of war. However, there is a Muslim population resident, with two congregational mosques, and on Fridays they pray with peace of mind.

— ‘Abd-al-Razzāq Samarqandī, *Matla‘-e sa‘dayn va majma‘-e bahrayn* (1469/70)

On a visit in 2005 to what is regarded as India’s oldest mosque, the Cheraman Masjid in Kerala, Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam evoked the building as a symbol of harmonious coexistence across religious lines.¹ As accompanying newspaper reporters noted, the mosque is said to have been established in the year 629 (which corresponds to the ninth year of the Islamic calendar) on the order of Cheraman Perumal, the Kerala king who converted to Islam and became the first Indian Muslim. Kalam’s tour of the mosque took place against a recent background of vicious riots in Gujarat, in which more than a thousand people were killed. This violence was part of an ongoing controversy revolving around a different mosque, one not on the South Indian coast but deep in the interior of northern India, far from the world of maritime trade and Monsoon Islam.

That other mosque, the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, had allegedly been built in the sixteenth century by a Muslim general following his conquest of the region. Because some Hindus believe the site to be of special religious significance, it became a focus of bitter conflict that culminated in its demolition by a mob of Hindu nationalists in 1992. The Babri Masjid has come to symbolize a version of history in which Hinduism and Islam are locked in an ongoing antagonistic struggle, a history marked by conquest, subjugation, and the need for (at least symbolic) redemption.

Ultimately, what Kalam was addressing in his visit to the Cheraman mosque was the place of Islam in India, which at the time was being vigorously contested in public discourse and national politics, a dispute that

¹ “President Visits Oldest Mosque in Sub-continent”, *The Hindu* (30 July 2005).

above all centred on competing visions of the historical development of Islam in India. The presidential evocation of the Cheraman mosque as part of India's national heritage, as a symbol of gradual and pacific acculturation, was to posit and promote a different historical trajectory of Islam on the subcontinent: an Islam that was shaped by the experiences and imperatives of ordinary Muslim merchants as they traded and settled along the coastlines of monsoon Asia. By visiting the Cheraman Masjid in the aftermath of the Gujarat riots, Kalam posited it as the physical embodiment of a counter-narrative to a discourse of permanent antagonism, one in which Muslims had arrived on India's shores peacefully as merchants and had found their place as part of, rather than in opposition to, Indic culture. The "monsoon mosque" came to embody this vision of Monsoon Islam.

This chapter takes mosques as both symbol and manifestation of Monsoon Islam in South India. It first examines the Cheraman Perumal legend in the light of new evidence to reveal its central role in the creation of an Islamic religious class on the Malabar Coast. In the absence of a Muslim ruler or an established Islamic elite, Muslims needed to develop their own standards for what constitutes rightful religious authority for the highly diverse Muslim communities of Malabar's port towns. The mosque was an essential symbol within this discursive project. In a second step, the actual spaces of Malabar's oldest surviving mosques are read as primary sources for the development of Islam on the Malabar Coast. Quite literally, mosques established a place of Islam in South India, and their form and function are testament to the negotiations and contestations behind this place-making. And finally, the story is traced into the sixteenth century when the mosque became an emblem of the Muslims' struggle against the Portuguese, a fulcrum in the development of novel conceptions of religious warfare and martyrdom, and home to a new religious elite.

The Convert King and the Making of a Religious Class

The story of Cheraman Perumal's conversion to Islam, as recounted in the introduction to this book, has been known to historians mainly from two texts, both of which date from the sixteenth century. The first was written by Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese factor on the Malabar Coast during the early years of the Portuguese presence there. Barbosa's account offers only the most general outline of the story, adumbrating that at some time in the past, a ruler called Cheraman Perumal ("Cirimay Pirencal") had discussions with Muslim traders, who eventually managed to convert him "to the sect of Muhammad [seita de Mafomedes]", and he went

in their company to the House of Mecca [*Casa de Meca*]². Barbosa's rendering contains the basic elements of the tradition as current among local Hindus, which he was able to pick up through his command of their language, Malayalam.

As an agent of the Portuguese king, he had less opportunity to learn about the fuller version that was maintained by Malabar's Muslims. This more elaborate rendering was fixed in writing in the 1580s in the *Tuhfat al-Mujāhidīn* by Zayn al-Dīn al-Malabārī, who was himself a Muslim from the Malabar Coast. It is Zayn al-Dīn's version that has formed the cornerstone for the historical study of the Cheraman Perumal tradition. The scholarly engagement with the legend can even be said to have begun with Zayn al-Dīn himself, for he appended to his recounting of the tale the *caveat lector* that there could be but little truth in the claim that those events took place during the prophet's lifetime. Notwithstanding his incredulity about the story's supposed chronology, Zayn al-Dīn did not doubt the historicity of its main elements: that a powerful South Indian king had converted to Islam and commissioned a group of Arabs to propagate the faith on the Malabar Coast. In order to reconcile his conviction that the tradition was rooted in actual events with his scepticism about its dating, Zayn al-Dīn proposed that they occurred at a later time, which he haphazardly specifies as two centuries after the *hijrah*.

Many modern scholars have followed Zayn al-Dīn's lead in regarding the tradition as rooted in genuine historical events. What is more, they have also adopted his methodology of "sorting out the wheat from the chaff", by attempting to sift the narrative of Cheraman Perumal's conversion for a more authentic account and reliable timeline.³ These empiricist endeavours have been invariably frustrated by the available evidence. Over the past decades, the understanding of Kerala's ancient and medieval political history has been transformed by discovery of new inscriptions as well as the re-interpretation of previously known ones. It is now clear that the medieval Chera dynasty (as distinct from the ancient Cheras, who ruled this part of India in the early centuries of the Common Era, during the so-called Sangam era) came to prominence only in the ninth century and remained in power until the early twelfth century.⁴

² Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 104; Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 2–3.

³ K.K. Kusumann, *Issues in Kerala Historiography* (Thiruvananthapuram: International Centre for Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, 2003), 206.

⁴ See M.G.S. Narayanan, *Perumāls of Kerala: Brahmin Oligarchy and Ritual Monarchy. Political and Social Conditions of Kerala under the Cēra Perumāls of Makōtai (c. AD 800–AD 1124)* (Thrissur: Cosmo Books, 2013), 63–146.

In other words, there was no Chera king during the time of Muhammad who could have relinquished his throne to meet the prophet, and the end of unified Chera rule – stylized in the tradition as the king’s division of his realm prior to his departure for Mecca – only occurred in the twelfth century. Moreover, critical epigraphical studies by scholars such as M.G.S. Narayanan and Elam Kunjan Pillai have shown that “Cheraman Perumal” was not the name of a specific king but a generic title meaning “great lord of the Cheras”.⁵ In short, the critical study of inscriptions, without doubt the most valuable sources for the political history of premodern South India, has bereaved the tradition of both its chronology and eponymous protagonist.

More productive than the question of the tradition’s historicity is to ask about its purpose: in what context, by whose agency, and to what end did the legend of the convert king come to be conceived and propagated? The answer to this question hinges upon the examination of a manuscript that previously has not been subject to sustained scholarly scrutiny. Entitled *Qissat shakarwati farmād*, this Arabic text of anonymous authorship makes it possible to unlock several key aspects of the Cheraman Perumal story.⁶ *Shakarwati Farmād* is an Arabic rendering of the Sanskritic royal title “Chakravarti Cheraman Perumal”, while the word *qissah* means narrative or tale (in modern usage it denotes a literary novel); the title of this manuscript therefore promises the “Tale of the Great Ruler Cheraman Perumal”.⁷ It is argued here that *Qissat shakarwati farmād* is not only the oldest but also the most comprehensive recorded version of the tradition; the additional detail it provides reveals the legend of the convert king as a complex and astonishingly resonant attempt to legitimize the creation of a new Islamic religious elite within the context of an overwhelmingly non-Muslim social order and political structure. As such, it is evidence for an early instance of the formation of a localized Islamic identity outside the borders of the medieval Islamic world, a process that was essential to the formation of Monsoon Islam.

Two features contradict the Cheraman Perumal legend as found in *Qissat shakarwati farmād* from its other, more widely known variants. The first is simply the level of specific detail it provides. In fact, many of the particularities in other versions, such as the one given by

⁵ Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*; Pillai, *Studies*.

⁶ This discussion relies on the manuscript British Library, MS. IO Islamic 2807d, fols. 81a–104a. This copy’s original title is “قصة شكروتى فرماسن” (fol. 81a); it is listed as “Qissat Shakruti Firmad”, in O. Loth, *Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office* (London: Secretary of State for India, 1877), no. 1044.

⁷ In an amalgam of Arabic and Indic royal titles, the Chera king is also referred to within the text as “*al-sulṭān Shakrawati*”; Anon., “*Qisṣat shakarwati farmāq*”, fol. 88b.

Zayn al-Dīn in his famous *Tuhfat al-Mujāhidin*, or of the seventeenth-century Persian history *Ta’rīkh-i Firishta*, only become meaningful against the background of this fuller narrative.⁸ The second feature that differentiates the *Qissah* from other versions is that most of its narrative takes place *after* the king’s death on the Arabian coast, which elsewhere is sketched only in the most cursory manner. It is worthwhile, therefore, to begin by examining these additional details and events the *Qissah* relates about the introduction and propagation of Islam on the Malabar Coast.

The tradition attributes the Perumal’s conversion to the agency of Muslim pilgrims who reported to him their prophet’s miracle of splitting the moon. The *Qissah* provides us with their names and assigns the *shaykh* who led them to their fateful meeting with the king the *nisbah* al-Madānī (“of Medina”), a reference to the city Muhammad made his home after his flight from Mecca.⁹ As this part of the legend is explicitly set several years prior to the *hijrah*, this constitutes an anachronism since Medina was then still known as Yathrib.¹⁰ The earliest use of the *nisbah* al-Madānī appears to date from the eighth century, and it was thenceforth commonly applied to families claiming *sayyid* status, that is descent from the Prophet’s lineage. The inclusion of this *nisbah* thus seems designed to accentuate that the original proselytizers were high-status Arabs. An analogous purpose may be discerned from the subsequent narrative regarding the propagation of the faith by those Arabs sent to Malabar by the dying king with a mandate to spread the new faith. The *Qissah* agrees with other versions of the legend in stating their names as Sharaf ibn Mālik, his brother Mālik ibn Dīnār, and Ibn Mālik ibn Ḥabib with his wife Qamariyah, who were accompanied by their children, slaves (*al-mamālik*), soldiers, and other associates.¹¹

⁸ In a pioneering study, Yohanan Friedmann makes the argument that Zayn al-Dīn’s account of the Cheraman Perumal tradition was directly derived from the anonymous “*Qiṣṣat shakarwati farmād*”; see Y. Friedmann, “*Qiṣṣat Shakarwati Farmād*: A Tradition Concerning the Introduction of Islām to Malabar”, *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975), 239–241.

⁹ Anon., “*Qiṣṣat shakarwati farmād*”, fol. 88a.

¹⁰ The oasis town is generally referred to as Yathrib in the Quran (33:13). The word *madīnah* appears several times in the Quran as a common noun (“city”), while the definite form *al-madīnah* (“the city”, short for “the city of the prophet”) is used only in three relatively late *sūras* (9; 33; 63) in specific reference to the oasis. In the document known as the Constitution (or Charter) of Medina, generally believed to have been drafted shortly after the *hijrah*, the town is still referred to as Yathrib. See W.M. Watt and R.B. Winder, “*al-Madīna*”, in P. Bearman et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, 12 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005); R.B. Serjeant, “The Constitution of Medina”, *Islamic Quarterly* 8:1–2 (1964), 3–16.

¹¹ Anon., “*Qiṣṣat shakarwati farmāq*”, fol. 97a.

As was the case for the pilgrims, the names of these royally sanctioned missionaries again call attention to their Arab ethnicity and noblesse. The titles *mālik* and *sharaf* both denote nobility of birth. In Islamic usage, the latter also alludes specifically to nobility acquired through relation to the Prophet (*sharaf bayt al-nabī*); it is worn in this sense by the Sharifs of Mecca. The anachronistic *nisbah* al-Madani is not applied to any of these men themselves, but later on in the tradition reappears in reference to their sons and grandsons. The two groups, pilgrims and missionaries, therefore become conflated into a shared nexus of Arab ethnicity, secular rank, and religious prestige. These emphases on the families' Arab ethnicity, nobility, and *sayyid* status seem designed to differentiate them both from non-Arab Muslims, such as Indian Muslims, as well as from less illustrious Arabs, such as ordinary traders.

It is these Arab noblemen who are credited with introducing Islam to the Malabar Coast by building the first mosques as per Cheraman Perumal's final command. Of all the versions of the tradition, the *Qissah* is most specific about the sequence and locations of the mosques ostensibly founded by them; other versions appear to have merely summarized this account. According to the *Qissah*, the first mosque was founded at Kodungallur (angl., Cranganore) by Mālik ibn Dīnār, while a further nine mosques were subsequently established by Mālik ibn Ḥabīb in different towns along the Coast. The *Qissah* devotes a lengthy section to the foundation of each of these mosques, detailing their respective endowment (*waqf*) and naming the first Muslim judge (Ar., *qādī*, pl. *quḍāt*) appointed in each locale. This enumeration is compiled in [Table 2.1](#) and plotted on [Map 2.1](#).

Considerable scholarly and quasi-scholarly effort has been expended on identifying mosques in these locales as having been founded during the early years of the Islamic era. The mosque at Kodungallur visited by President Kalam is styled as the “Cheraman Perumal Juma Masjid” and is promoted variously as Kerala’s earliest, India’s first, or even the world’s second-oldest mosque!¹² Such claims cannot be substantiated and are in fact contradicted by the available evidence. But this is not to say that the tradition bears no relation to Malabar’s oldest Muslim monuments: while the tradition may not be of any use in dating mosques at these locations, reversely the locations themselves can serve to date the tradition.

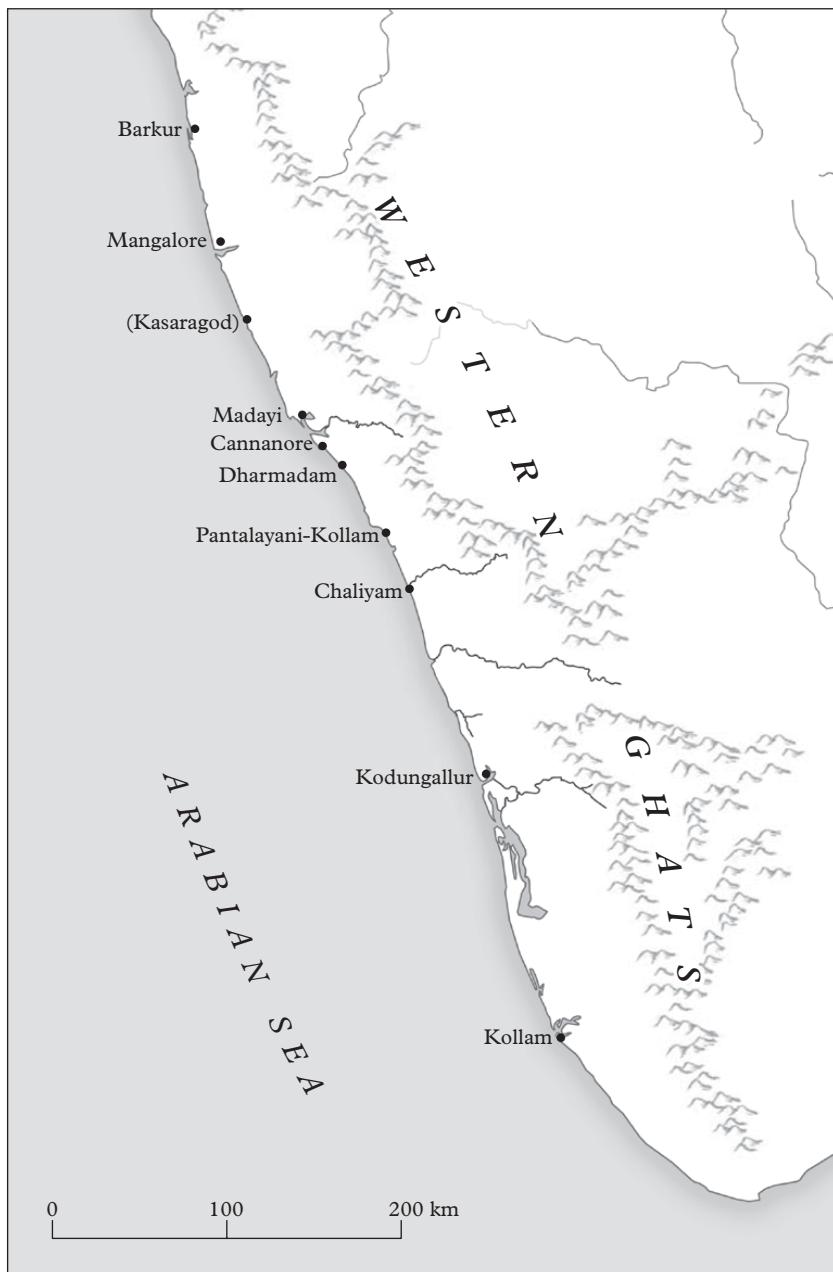
¹² See for instance, V.A. Haseena, “Historical Aspects of the Legend of Cheraman Perumal of Kodungallur in Kerala”, *Historical Research Letters* 17 (2015), 47–51; Anon. (Staff Reporter), “1400-year-old Mosque to Be Restored to Its Original Form”, *The Hindu*, 29 June 2011.

Table 2.1 *Malabar's first mosques according to Qiṣṣat shakarwati farmād**²

Location in text	Identification	Qādī appointed	Comments
Kalankallūr	Kodungallur	Muhammad ibn Mālik	Only mosque built by Mālik ibn Dīnār, others by Mālik ibn Hābib
Kūlam	Kollam	Ḥasan ibn Mālik	Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Zayn al-Dīn al-Samnānī appointed <i>shāhbandar</i>
Hili	Madayi	‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Mālik	‘Afif al-Dīn ibn Majd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī appointed <i>shāhbandar</i>
Fākanūr (Mākanūr)	Barkur	Ibrāhīm ibn Mālik	
Manjalūr	Mangalore	Mūsa ibn Mālik	Nūr al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Nāṣir al-Misri appointed <i>shāhbandar</i>
Kānjarkūt	?Kasaragod	Mālik ibn Muḥammad	Alternative identification: Kottayam (Kanjikuzhy district)
Jurfatan (Jirfatan)	Cannanore	Shahāb al-Dīn ibn ‘Umar ibn Muhammād ibn Mālik	
Darmaftan	Dharmadam	Hussayn ibn Muhammād ibn Mālik al-Madani	Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Samnānī appointed <i>shāhbandar</i>
Fandarinah	Pantalyani-Kollam	Sa’d al-Dīn ibn Mālik al-Madani	
Shāliyāt	Chaliyam	Zayn al-Dīn ibn Muhammād ibn Mālik al-Madani	Uthmān ibn Ḥussayn al-Anṣārī appointed <i>shāhbandar</i>

* Anon., “Qiṣṣat shakarwati farmād”, fols. 97a–104a.

Relating the places mentioned in the tradition as the original sites of Malabar's first mosques to the pattern of Muslim trade on the Malabar Coast reveals a clear correlation. These ten locales correspond to the main centres of Muslim commerce on the Coast in the period from the twelfth century onwards, that is, after the end of unified Chera rule when Malabar fragmented into a number of competing polities centred on different port cities. Muslim maritime trade expanded dramatically during this period, in what has been described as the “Asian sea trade



Map 2.1 Malabar's first mosques according to *Qissat shakarwati farmād*.
Map drawn by Nat Case; copyright by Sebastian R. Prange.

boom”.¹³ It was only during this time that most of the locales mentioned in the tradition became noteworthy ports-of-trade, regularly frequented by Muslim merchants who were in need of mosques and, crucially, able to underwrite their construction. Whereas mosques in territories under Muslim rule were typically patronized by sovereigns or other political and religious elites, in Hindu-ruled Malabar, the construction of Muslim places of worship was invariably a private venture. Since the region’s mosques were built, endowed, and renovated at the expense of merchants, therefore, to find that the places described in the legend as Malabar’s first sites of Islam closely correspond to the region’s pattern of commerce in the post-Chera period strongly suggests that the tradition was conceived no earlier than the mid-twelfth century, at a time when the pattern of trade directly corresponded to the sites mentioned in the legend.

What is more, this hypothesis also explains the two notable omissions in the legend’s catalogue of the supposed birthplaces of Islam on the Malabar Coast: Calicut and Cochin, both of which were renowned across the Indian Ocean for the size and prosperity of their Muslim communities. Calicut, however, did not develop into an important emporium until the early fourteenth century, while at Cochin a navigable harbour formed only in the aftermath of a massive flooding of the Periyar river in 1341.¹⁴ That towns which emerged as centres of Muslim commerce in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are included among the tradition’s “original” sites of Islam, while those that rose to prominence only in the fourteenth century are not, recommends these two periods as the chronological termini for dating the legend of the convert king. This proposition is supported by additional evidence. The only mosque among those allegedly founded by Mālik ibn Ḥabīb that can be confidently dated was constructed in 1124/5 (AH 518) at Madayi.¹⁵

¹³ Christie, “Javanese Markets”.

¹⁴ See P. Malekandathil, “Coastal Polity and the Changing Port-Hierarchy of Kerala”, in Y. Sharma (ed.), *Coastal Histories: Society and Ecology in Pre-Modern India* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010), 79–83.

¹⁵ The mosque itself was razed in 2006 and replaced by a modern structure. A stone marker from the old mosque that was preserved is claimed to show the date of AH 518, but it is no longer legible. Although no longer extant, either, a reliable report of a wooden inscription at the same mosque attests to its construction in the twelfth century. See R. Sewell, *The Historical Inscriptions of Southern India (Collected till 1923) and Outlines of Political History*, ed. K. Aiyangar (Madras: Diocesan, 1932), 242; Logan, *Malabar Manual*, II, app. XXI, cclxv; Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea*, 8; R.E. Miller, *Mappila Muslim Culture: How a Historic Muslim Community in India has Blended Tradition and Modernity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), 293.

Another key piece of evidence for delimiting the temporal boundaries of the legend's inception can be found not in India but across the Arabian Sea. Among the administrative records of the Rasulid sultanate during the reign of al-Muzaffar Yūsuf (r. 1249–95) is a remarkable document produced for the use of Aden's treasury.¹⁶ It details the annual payment of stipends by the Rasulid state to Muslim preachers and judges all along the Indian coast. Datable to the 1290s, this list – which is examined in Chapter 4 – provides a snapshot of Malabar's main centres of Muslim settlement in the late thirteenth century. What is striking is that the list of places to which the Rasulids extended patronage at the end of the thirteenth century corresponds almost perfectly to the enumeration of Malabar's first mosques according to *Qissat shakarwati farmād*. Out of the nine places at which Mālik ibn Ḥabīb allegedly founded mosques, eight are noted in the Rasulid document as the location of sizeable Muslim communities. Since many of these places only became ports-of-trade after the end of unified Chera rule, when local rulers promoted their ports to attract Muslim traders, the evidence from Yemen shows that the list of Malabar's "original" mosques in fact reflects the realities of Muslim trade and settlement in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Why, then, did the legend of the convert king come into being between the early twelfth and early fourteenth centuries, at a time when the Islamic faith was already firmly established, and prospering, on the Malabar Coast? One answer to this question may be found in the tradition's account of the endowments that each of the original ten mosques received at the time of its foundation, which are described in terms of Islamic law as *waqf*. Their descriptions make specific references to local landmarks such as rivers and marketplaces, and provide detailed dimensions that are given in the units of both the Hindus ("al-*kuffār*") and the traders ("al-*tujjār*"), presumably meaning Muslim merchants.¹⁷ The inclusion of this kind of locally specific detail in the tradition was most likely designed to enshrine the concrete entitlements of the Muslim community in Malabar, perhaps vis-à-vis competing claims. Islam was, after all, a minority faith on the Malabar Coast, and while Muslim settlements and even Islamic conversion was tolerated by the region's temporal rulers out of economic expediency, these processes were at times vehemently resisted by the Brahmin elite. It is certainly remarkable that this Arabic text goes to the length of not only recording the endowments but of converting their measurements into local units, presumably to preclude ambiguities and potential disputes that could otherwise arise. The

¹⁶ Jāzim (ed.), *Nūr al-ma‘ārif*, I, 516–518.

¹⁷ Anon., "Qisṣat shakarwati farmād", fols. 99a–102a.

Cheraman Perumal tradition must have been thought of as particularly significant and resonant for there to be an expectation that embedding such details within it could possibly serve to prevent or resolve a potential (or, perhaps, an already existing) conflict between Muslim claims and local assertions on these lands. The convert king, then, was regarded as a safeguard for the political standing of Islam on the Malabar Coast.

The purpose of naming the first *qādī* in each location, on the other hand, cannot be attributed to the intention of securing the position of Islam against any external challenge: it can only relate to the social organization of the Muslim community itself. Three aims may be attributed to listing the first *qādīs* in such a detailed manner. First, it establishes a special status for the *qādīs* of those ten mosques as the original champions of Islam on the Malabar Coast. Second, it invests ethnic Arabs, and especially *sayyids*, with holding these prestigious and influential offices. And third, it establishes the principle of hereditary succession: all ten *qādīs* listed in the *Qissah* were either Mālik ibn Habib's sons or grandsons.

The tradition's key elements – the Perumal's mandate to Mālik ibn Dīnār and Mālik ibn Ḥabīb, their pivotal role in establishing the foundations of Islamic life by building mosques along the coast, and their service as leaders of the faithful by holding the office of *qādī* – all seem designed to underline their special status among and above local Muslims. In his seminal study of the *Qissah*, Yohanan Friedman argues that “one of the purposes of the tradition was to establish the ancient rights of the Muslim families who held the judicial positions in Malabar”.¹⁸ In fact, the text directly links the introduction of Islam with the establishment of a religious class: it states that Mālik ibn Ḥabib brought “the edifice [or structure] of Islam” (*'imāra al-Islām*) to Kollam not only by building mosques but also by bringing religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) from overseas on ships.¹⁹ The tradition thus expressly ties the symbolism of the building of a mosque that signifies the arrival of Islam to the arrival of a class of religious specialists of foreign – *viz.* Arabian – origin.

This interpretation is supported by a prayer recorded in the text, attributed therein to Mālik ibn Ḥabib and his wife Qamariyah: they “prayed to Allāh for the sake of their children, asking Him to preserve them as pious, learned Muslims and as *qādīs* until the Day of Judgment, and to strengthen Islam in the land of India”.²⁰ The significance of this supplication is further underlined by the statement that the prayer was

¹⁸ Friedmann, “*Qissat*”, 244.

¹⁹ More specifically, the passage states that these *'ulamā'* arrived with “the ships of the foreigners [*marākib al-ghurabā'*]”; Anon., “*Qissat shakarwati farmāq*”, fol. 99a.

²⁰ Anon., “*Qissat shakarwati farmāq*”, fol. 102a; cf. Friedmann, “*Qissat*”, 239.

made during *laylat al-Qadr*, the holiest night of the Islamic calendar.²¹ The tradition therefore associates the family not only with the foundation of Islam in Malabar, but also with the faith's *future* prospects in the region. The projection of an Arab '*ulamā'* steering the religious affairs of Malabar's Muslims onto a legendary past can thus be read as a complex, and astonishingly resonant, attempt at *ex post* legitimization.

It is remarkable that this narrative of the convert king is reproduced in great detail in the *Kerālōlpatti*, the collection of the Brahminical legends of Kerala's history. It corresponds to the Muslim tradition by listing the sequence of mosque foundations and even includes the name of the first *qādī* in each locale.²² While this text faithfully reproduces the Muslim tradition in regard to the king's conversion, his journey to Arabia, and the propagation of Islam by the families of Mālik ibn Dīnār and Mālik ibn Ḥabīb, it puts a rather different spin on the motives for the Perumal's conversion. According to the *Kerālōlpatti*, the Chera king, "under the influence of his women-folk", had unjustly sentenced his bodyguard to death. After his execution, this guard ascended to heaven in a chariot, causing the Perumal to realize his error. As there was no possible expiation for this sin in Hinduism, he was advised to seek atonement in Islam. Against the background of Brahmin migration to Kerala around the eighth century, and their own efforts to legitimize their status at the apex of the socio-political order by appeal to a mythical past, it seems particularly apt that the Nampūtiri Brahmins took such close notice of a not dissimilar process occurring within another, more recent group of arrivistes.

A chronicle (*granthavari*) originating from the royal house of Calicut that can be tentatively dated to the sixteenth century likewise incorporates the Cheraman Perumal tradition in a form much like the *Kerālōlpatti*, but to slightly different ends. Its emphasis is on the Chera king's division of his empire prior to his departure for Mecca. This version puts special emphasis on the singular role that the abdicating king bestowed on the person who was to rule the territory of Calicut, that is the progenitor of the dynasty of the Zamorins. Presenting him with his ceremonial sword, in this re-telling the Chera king issued the Zamorins with a mandate to expand their territory through

²¹ *Laylat al-Qadr* falls in the month of Ramaḍān; the Quran (97:1–3) states that worship on this night is better than that of a thousand months.

²² T.M. Menon (trans.), *Keralolpatti by Gundert: Translation into English* (Thiruvananthapuram: International School of Dravidian Linguistics, 2003), 69. This version of the *Kerālōlpatti* reproduces the sequence, locations, and names of the family members exactly as in "Qissat shakarwati farmād" (save some slight variations in the transliteration of Arabic names into Malayalam), but adds that the family also founded a mosque across the Western Ghats, at Madurai in present-day Tamil Nadu.

conquest – which is, of course, exactly the trajectory of Calicut’s political history between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.²³ In fact, most of Malabar’s ruling houses incorporate a similar mandate at the moment of the Perumal’s abdication as the core of their claim to be legitimate heirs of royal authority. A Malayalam palm-leaf document from the year 1792 (25 Karkidakam 967 of the Kollam Era) largely corresponds to this account.²⁴

The legend of Cheraman Perumal was not only current among Hindus on the Malabar Coast but also in other parts of South India. Across the Western Ghats, in Tamil Nadu, he figures in Hindu hagiography in the form of a Shaiva saint (Tamil, *nāyanār*). In two key texts of the medieval Shaivite tradition, the *Tiruttonṭar Tiruvantāti* from the tenth or eleventh century and the twelfth-century *Periyapurānam*, Cheraman Perumal features as a faithful devotee of Shiva and as a loyal companion to an important Chola saint. Daud Ali argues that this textual development coincided with the rise of Chola dominance on the Malabar Coast, as described in the [previous chapter](#). This story cycle of a deep friendship between a Chola and Chera lord was continually reiterated at the Chola court in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, seemingly “to signal the dynastic filiations between houses from these regions”; in the context of Chola imperialism, it may even be viewed as an implied ideological underpinning of Chola claims on traditional Chera territories.²⁵ In this reading, the Cholas were, just like Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Nampūtiri Brahmins, another group that established claims on the Malabar Coast through recasting the legend of Cheraman Perumal.

As important as the political and social inferences of the Cheraman Perumal tradition as maintained by Malabar’s Muslims is its clear commercial dimension. For five of the ten locations at which mosques were ostensibly founded, the *Qissah* states that Mālik ibn Ḥabīb appointed the *shāḥbandar*. As described in the [previous chapter](#), the office of *shāḥbandar* was of great importance to the administration and economic life of Malabar’s ports. The legend provides the names of these first *shāḥbandars*: their *nisbahs* suggest that three of them were linked to places in Iran (al-Simnāni to Semnan and al-Kirmāni to Kerman), one

²³ J. Wye (trans.), “Translation of a History of the Portuguese Landing in India, Written on the Leaves of the Brab Tree (called Ola) in the Malabar Language”, British Library, India Office Records, MSS. Eur.K.194 and K.195, fol. 21b.

²⁴ See K.K.N. Kurup (ed.), *India’s Naval Traditions (The Role of Kunhali Marakkars)* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1997), app. IV, 96–103.

²⁵ See D. Ali, “The Death of a Friend: Companionship, Loyalty and Affiliation in Chola South India”, *Studies in History* 33:1 (2017), 57.

to Egypt (al-Misri), and one to Medina (al-Anṣārī).²⁶ Moreover, in each instance, it is specified that these *shāhbandars* were related to Mālik ibn Habib through marriage to one of his daughters. The inclusion of the *shāhbandars* situates the tradition in the commercial context of maritime trade and points towards the intersection of the religious and economic spheres.

That three of the five *shāhbandars* were Persian rather than Arab seems to correspond to the general composition of Muslim trade in Malabar during this period. As was the case with the locations of the ten “original” mosques, the Cheraman Perumal legend can once again be seen to reflect the economic realities of the time, rather than begetting them. In fact, although the text is not explicit on this point, the “naming” is perhaps best read as confirming those *shāhbandars* in their office rather than appointing them. In any event, the tradition’s repetitive insistence on these *shāhbandars* having been named by Mālik ibn Ḥabib may indicate that the ‘*ulamā*’ harboured the aspiration to exercise control over important commercial-cum-political appointments and sought to extend their influence beyond the purely religious sphere.

Historians have treated the story of Cheraman Perumal in very different ways. The nineteenth-century Orientalist scholar William Logan found “good reason for thinking that this account of the introduction of Muhammadanism into Malabar is reliable”.²⁷ In the early twentieth century, the pioneering Malayali historian Padmanabha Menon, concluded by contrast that there was “very little to show” for it.²⁸ While Menon’s critique did not mark an end to attempts to empirically verify the conversion of a Chera king, and to date the introduction of Islam to the region accordingly, most historians since have tended to dismiss the tradition as Muslim folklore, as a “legend of no historical value”.²⁹ Myths, legends, and traditions occupy an ambiguous place in historical scholarship and pose a number of methodological problems. A modern, post-Enlightenment emphasis on change and progress resulted in a general rejection of tradition in historical scholarship during the institutionalization of the discipline. Positivistic approaches have either rejected traditions outright or endeavoured to sift out verifiable historical facts. In the historiography of India, this latter approach

²⁶ For the use of the cognomen “al-Anṣārī” in the Quran, see 9:100, 9:117.

²⁷ Logan, *Malabar Manual*, I, 195.

²⁸ Menon’s conclusion was in line with his general stalwart commitment to establishing historical veracity. K.P.P. Menon, *History of Kerala, Written in the Form of Notes on Visscher’s Letters from Malabar*, 4 vols. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982–86 [reprint of Madras, 1924]), I, 466.

²⁹ Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures*, 283.

has informed colonial scholarship and many subsequent political and economic histories.³⁰

Anthropology and social history, on the other hand, have been strongly influenced by ethnographical studies in examining legends as part of religious identities. Anthropological “thick descriptions” and subaltern histories alike typically treat traditions as intrinsically valid forms of communal self-identification, abjuring the need to probe their historicity.³¹ In the context of South Asian historiography, the very attempt of scrutinizing the historical foundation of myths and legends has come under grave suspicion as an act of hegemonic aggression, bent on imposing the secular, Western historical mode on traditional, indigenous constructions (and consciousnesses) of the past.³²

Perhaps there was, at some point, an influential Malayali ruler who embraced Islam; without doubt, the story itself has played an important role in claiming a place for Islam in this part of India, as reaffirmed during Kalam’s visit to the eponymous mosque. The historians Scott Kugle and Roxani Margariti even suggest that it was part of a comprehensive set of local origin-legends that also includes Kerala’s Brahmin, Christian, and Jewish communities, which, in their combination, “amount to informal charter for a system of co-existence that in modern times might be termed ‘secular’”.³³ This claim echoes a pamphlet presented to visitors of the Cheraman Masjid – President Kalam likely left with one in his hands – that proclaims the building to form part of India’s “secular heritage”; on the face of it, a bold claim to make about a mosque.³⁴

³⁰ See M. Robinson Waldman, “Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples”, *History of Religions* 25:4 (1986), 318–340. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this reference.

³¹ See for instance, T.R. Tangherlini, “It Happened Not Too Far From Here...’: A Survey of Legend Theory and Characterization”, *Western Folklore* 49:4 (1990), 371–390. Also see G. Canove, “La Leggenda Islamica: Introduzione”, *Oriente Moderno* n.s. 89:2 (2009), i–iv.

³² In the words of one critic, “once exported to the nonmodern world, historical consciousness has not only tended to absolutize the past in cultures that have lived with open-ended concepts of the past or depended on myths, legends, and epics to define their cultural selves, it has also made the historical worldview complicit with many new forms of violence, exploitation, and satanism in our time and helped rigidify civilizational, cultural, and national boundaries”. A. Nandy, “History’s Forgotten Doubles”, *History and Theory* 34:2 (1995), 44. For less polemical discussions of these issues, see J. Friedman, “Myth, History, and Political Identity”, *Cultural Anthropology* 7:2 (1992), 194–210; and V.N. Rao, D. Shulman, and S. Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

³³ S. Kugle and R.E. Margariti, “Narrating Community: the *Qissat Shakarwati Farmād* and Accounts of Origin in Kerala and Around the Indian Ocean”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 60:4 (2017), 377.

³⁴ Anon., “Chereman Juma Masjid Kodungallur: The First Mosque in India” (Kodungallur: Cheraman Juma Masjid Mahallu, n.d.), 3. This same sentiment is

By dating and contextualizing the Cheraman Perumal tradition in its most comprehensive form, it can be brought from the story-world of myth into the realm of history. Questioning its purpose at a specific historical moment – around the turn of the thirteenth century, during a massive expansion of Muslim trade across the Indian Ocean – and reading critically its embedded signifiers and discursive strategies shows that the tradition does not, in fact, relate to its declared subject matter, the introduction *ab origine* of Islam to India. Instead, it reflects the increased patronage and institutionalization of Islam within the political context of the post-Chera Malabar Coast. Most of all, though, it represents an attempt by an inchoate Malabari ‘*ulamā*’ to legitimize their religious pre-eminence by projecting it back onto a legendary past.

In their recent study of the *Qissah*, Kugle and Margariti propose a different, much later date for the text. The authors agree that the story of Cheraman Perumal recounted in Zayn al-Din’s *Tuhfat al-Mujāhidīn* must be derived from the *Qissah*, which means that it must pre-date the 1580s. They go on to suggest that the text must have been written in the context of Muslim state-building, that the advent of a Muslim state on the Malabar Coast “would provide the local and theological context for a text of this Islamic origin legend to be written”.³⁵ The specific Muslim state they identify is the Arakkal kingdom of Cannanore, which was established in the middle of the sixteenth century and ruled by a dynasty known as the Ali Rajas.³⁶ Following that line of reasoning, the composition of the *Qissah* would date from the decades between the 1540s and 1580s. However, this dating does not take account of the particular constellation in both space and time of the sites of the first mosques detailed in the manuscript. Nor does it properly account for the two main discursive projects of the text: to establish, on the one hand, a space for Islam on the Coast vis-à-vis competing local claims and, on the other, to legitimize the authority of a religious elite for the heterogeneous communities of Muslim merchants. Neither of these projects would be necessary in the context of a state ruled by a Muslim dynasty, as a Muslim ruler could be expected to protect the political status of Islam and be able to appoint a royally sanctioned *ulamā*.

expressed in an online article written by a former president of the mosque committee; P.A. Mohammed, “Cheraman Juma Masjid: A Secular Heritage”, *Islamic Voice* 17:210 (June 2004): www.islamicvoice.com/june.2004/miscellany.htm (accessed 15 June 2017).

³⁵ Kugle and Margariti, “Narrating Community”, 376.

³⁶ The Ali Rajas’ thalassocracy is discussed in the [next chapter](#); much of what is known about the dynasty is based on later Dutch sources. See K.K.N. Kurup, “Ali Rajas of Cannanore, English East India Company and Laccadive Islands”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 32 (1970), II, 44–53; Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea; Mailaparambil, Lords of the Sea*.

The legend of the convert king, then, is not an amalgamation of ahistoric myths and half-remembered traditions, nor the fanciful outcrop of communal pride in an illustrious forefather: it is the product of a particular time, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, shaped by its specific historical context, the rapid growth of Muslim trade and settlement on the Malabar Coast, and evidence of a concrete discursive project, to sanction (or even, sanctify) the legitimacy of an Arab-dominated ‘*ulamā*’. In this light, even preposterous aspects such as the Perumal’s alleged meeting with the Prophet, which have caused many historians to dismiss the tradition out of hand, make sense as part of its wider aim of emphasizing the singular role that Arabs of noble descent played in establishing and regulating Islam on the Malabar Coast. Previous studies have failed to arrive at this interpretation because of their reliance on the truncated and corrupted versions of the tradition in Zayn al-Din’s *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, the Hindu *Kerālōlpathi*, or Portuguese sources such as that of Duarte Barbosa. It is only from the tradition’s most complete version as contained in the anonymous *Qissat shakarwati farmād* – with its detail on the instalment of *qāḍīs*, endowment of mosques, and appointment of *shāhbandars* – that its actual rationale comes into view.

The building of new Muslim communities in Malabar concomitant to the expansion of Muslim trade on the Coast during the Asian sea trade boom of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries engendered not only the development of a physical infrastructure of Islam through the building of mosques, but also the instauration of an institutional underpinning to regulate the socio-religious life of these new Islamic communities. The absence of a Muslim ruler who could appoint an ‘*ulamā*’ meant that there was no proximate exogenous source of legitimacy. Likewise, the inordinately variegated, multi-ethnic nature of Muslim trading communities in Malabar’s port cities meant that there were no intrinsic intra-communal standards on the necessary filiation, affiliation, or qualification of religious specialists, either. The Cheraman Perumal legend in its valorization of a particular group of *qāḍīs* may therefore be seen as an endogenous discursive strategy to fill this void by investing an incipient socio-religious hierarchy with an irrefragable authority.

Crucially, this was not just an elaborate deceit performed by a self-seeking elite for its own ends. The legend of the convert king fell on fertile ground not least because Malabar’s proliferating Muslim communities were in real need of an indigenous and plausible ‘*ulamā*’ to address concrete theological as well as mundane problems that they faced as Muslims living among Hindus. For one thing, the tumultuous political situation after the end of Chera rule meant that individual Muslim congregations needed to repeatedly (re-)negotiate their communal

privileges, including perhaps the endowment of their mosques (hence the tradition's detailed description of *waqfs*, reinforced by the premise of a royal charter by the Perumal that had established the right to establish them in the first place). Speaking with one voice, through religious leaders acceptable to all the different Muslim factions, strengthened their position in such politicking.

At least as important was the Muslims' internal need for the regulation of social interactions in the context of a Hindu social order. Much of the received Islamic jurisprudence was based on the presumption of a majority Muslim society living under Islamic rule. As evident from commentaries on canonical legal texts composed by members of Malabar's '*ulamā'*, Muslims living in India under Hindu rule requested all manner of clarification on *sharia'ah*.³⁷ Unsurprisingly, the majority of these commentaries deal with matters of commercial law, reflecting the communities' *raison d'être* as traders. However, substantial space is devoted to questions of intermarriage between Muslim men and Hindu women (including ancillary issues such as inheritance or the upbringing of children), issues of commensality (on account of stringent caste proscriptions promulgated by Brahmins), and other aspects of everyday life.

The demand ordinary Muslims felt for this kind of guidance is apparent from the fact that these texts written by Malabari jurists soon appeared in other parts of the Indian Ocean trading world, where Muslims faced similar circumstances.³⁸ The legend thus reveals itself not as mere capricious fancy furthering the ambitions of a particular social class, but as a central, even necessary buttress to the bridging of Islamic standards with the realities of life outside of the *dār al-Islām*. It helped to anchor legal authority at a time when Muslim communities of the Indian Ocean were lacking political and religious leadership. Driven by the concrete needs of ordinary merchants seeking to navigate business and everyday life in foreign societies, a plausible '*ulamā*' could provide pragmatic legal guidance and a sense of determinacy in law.³⁹ Inflected by space and time, it aided

³⁷ The most prominent example of this literature is the *Fath al-mu'in*, a commentary on Shāfi'i law by Zayn al-Din al-Malabari.

³⁸ Envisioning the interaction between the '*ulamā*' and ordinary Muslims as an exchange that was shaped as much by a demand for legitimate religious authority as it was by its supply is based on Nile Green's model of a religious economy: "The transactions between religious producers and consumers [...] help us understand the generation and attribution of social power, as followers ('religious consumers') offer their support to leaders ('religious suppliers') in return for value, salvation, material support, solidarity, community, healing and a host of other services". N. Green, *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

³⁹ See F.A. Halim, *Legal Authority in Premodern Islam: Yahā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī in the Shāfi'i School of Law* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), xiv, 5.

in the production of religious authority necessary to normalize the communities' social and political interactions. In fashioning a communal identity for cosmopolitan Muslims on the Malabar Coast, the narrative of the convert king, like the trajectory of its protagonist, may be said to have reached across the ocean, encompassing Arabia and India in its projection of a shared past that heralded their interconnected presence.

Malabar's 'Ulamā' in the Making of Monsoon Islam

The Cheraman Perumal legend played an important role in providing a source of legitimacy for the authority of a class of religious specialists on the Malabar Coast. It served as a normative discourse benefitting Arab Muslims who had established themselves as the leaders of these diverse and somewhat transient Muslim trading communities. This dynamic can be illustrated by the case study of one family, known as the Makhdūms, who within five generations became a dominant force in the religious affairs of Malabar's Muslims. The existing literature on this family is largely based on records preserved at the family shrines at Cochin and Ponnani, despite the fact that these are not contemporary and clearly of a hagiographical character. However, by comparing these accounts to the extant Arabic texts that were written by members of this family, their role within Malabar's Muslim communities can be captured.

According to the records at his shrine in Cochin, Zayn al-Dīn Makhdūm al-Ma'bārī was of Yemeni origins and came to Malabar in the early fifteenth century. He had previously spent some years on the Coromandel Coast, which explains why he was initially known by the *nisbah* al-Ma'bārī, from the Arabic name for India's southeast coast.⁴⁰ Makhdūm (lit., "master") is an Arabic title that was widely used in India and Southeast Asia as an honorific for religious leaders and scholars.⁴¹ Zayn al-Dīn Makhdūm is credited with the conversion of local people at Cochin, the construction of a mosque there, and with serving as the local

⁴⁰ The Arabic term *ma'bār*, literally "passage" or "crossing point", was used to denote the eastern coast of the Deccan; cf. Nainar, *Southern India*, 53–56. I am grateful to the late Mohammad Abdul Latheef, caretaker of the Makhdūm *dargāh* at Cochin, for allowing his history of the family to be reproduced, and to Kesavan Veluthat of Mangalore University for his translations from the Malayalam text. Parts of the same records are discussed in Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 241–242.

⁴¹ The historical record attests to various instances of the use of *makhdūm* as an honorific for religious leaders from Arabia, and especially Yemen, for example, Makhdūm Shāh Jalāl in Sylhet and Karim al-Makhdūm in Sulu. See M. Haq, *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975) and C.A. Majul, "An Analysis of the 'Genealogy of Sulu'", in A. Ibrahim, S. Siddique, and Y. Hussain (eds.), *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), 51.

qādī until his death some time in the late fifteenth century.⁴² His first son, 'Ali, succeeded his father as *qādī* at Cochin, while his second son, Ibrāhim, moved up the coast to serve as *qādī* at Ponnani. 'Ali's daughter Zaynaba Bibī also remained at Cochin, where she is buried in her grandfather's shrine. Her brother was named Zayn al-Din (ibn 'Ali) after his grandfather, but was also known as Abū Yahyā, a *kunyah* presumably referring to his first-born son about whom nothing else is recorded. This Zayn al-Din (ibn 'Ali) was born around 1467/8 and apparently travelled to Arabia for the purpose of religious training. Such periods of study at the Islamic religious centres like Mecca, Medina, or Cairo were typically combined with the *hajj* and may have lasted from a single sailing season to several years. Zayn al-Din ibn 'Ali is considered the author of several religious texts, including an anthology of legends about the pre-Islamic prophets (*Qisas al-Anbiyā'*) and a mystical poem that is examined below. He is also regarded as the founder of Ponnani's Jāmi‘ mosque.⁴³ It is not entirely clear whether he succeeded his paternal uncle as Ponnani's *qādī*; the practice of attributing the construction of mosques to *qādis*, as seen in the context of the Cheraman Perumal legend, makes this likely. His son 'Abd al-'Aziz, on the other hand, is unambiguously referred to as holding this position, while his other son, Muhammad al-Ghazālī, is said to have served as *qādī* at nearby Chombal. The latter is the father of Zayn al-Din, the author of the famous *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*.⁴⁴

Judging from the evolution in their use of *nisbahs*, a central signifier of social identity among Arabs and Muslims more generally, the Makhđūm clan underwent two subsequent processes of indigenization.⁴⁵ One was

⁴² See Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 241. This mosque allegedly stood on the site of the current Shāfi'i Jāmi‘ Masjid (Malayal., Chembattapallil), which according to an inscription was constructed in 1519/20 (AH 926); see *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* 1965–66, B 61 and D 101.

⁴³ Shokoohy (*Muslim Architecture*, 241) suggests that he reconstructed the mosque after its destruction by the Portuguese. However, the Ponnani Jāmi‘ mosque was only destroyed in 1550, some three decades after Zayn al-Din ibn 'Ali's death, and according to an *in situ* inscription, rebuilt the same year; see *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* 1965–66, D 105. Due to its total destruction by fire in 1550, no inscriptions relating to its original foundation are extant.

⁴⁴ His full name is recorded as Ahmād Zayn al-Dīn ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī al-Malibārī. There are numerous studies of the Makhđūm family, many of which border on the hagiographical. For general overviews, see for instance A.P.I. Kunju, "Tuhfat ul-Mujahidin: A Historiographical Study", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 41 (1980), 317–325; H. Randathani, *Mappila Muslims: A Study on Society and Anti Colonial Struggles* (Calicut: Other Books, 2007); M. Ottappilakkool, "Role of Ulamā in the Anti-Colonial Struggle of India: A Case Study of Malabar", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Calicut (2007); A. Kunnath, "The Rise and Growth of Ponnani from 1498 A.D. to 1792 A.D.", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Calicut (2015).

⁴⁵ On the use of Islamic names as markers of evolving social identities, see J. Sublet, *Le voile du nom. Essai sur le nom propre arabe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991);

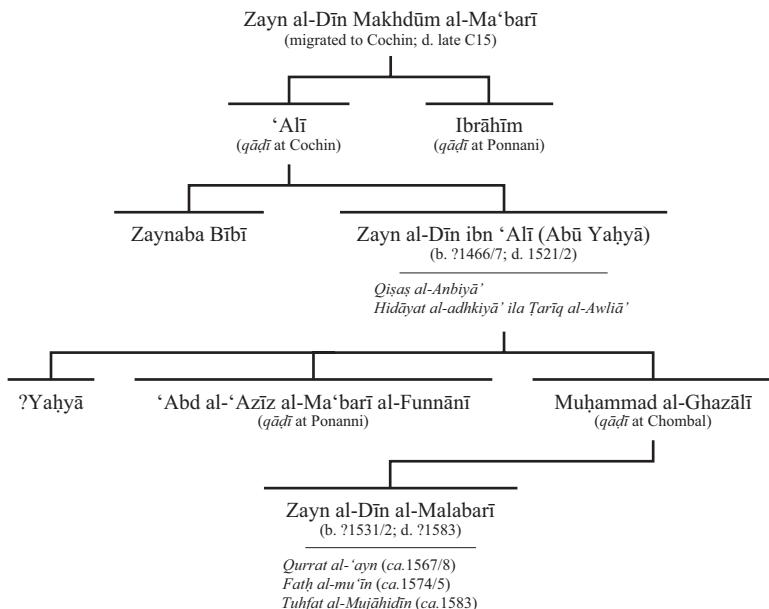


Figure 2.1 Selective genealogy of the Makhdūm family.

Figure copyright by Sebastian R. Prange.

their becoming identified with Malabar as a region when they adopted the *nisbah* al-Malibārī. This onomastic attribution was first applied to Zayn al-Dīn's grandfather, the author of the Sufi text.⁴⁶ Within three generations, the family had become identified with Malabar, while still also maintaining the previous *nisbah* relating to Coromandel, al-Ma‘barī.

The second step in this process of localization is the family's identification with Ponnani. Zayn al-Dīn's uncle is referred to in the contemporary *al-Fath al-mubīn* as ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Ma‘barī al-Funnānī.⁴⁷ This *nisbah* almost certainly relates to Ponnani (the Arabic alphabet having neither the letter “p” nor “o”), where ‘Abd al-‘Azīz served as *qādī*. This new *nisbah* was not only applied to ‘Abd al-‘Azīz but also to all subsequent generations. Thus the identification became more specific, linking the family not just to the region as a whole but specifically to the town

E. Ho, “Names beyond Nations: The Making of Local Cosmopolitans”, *Études Rurales* 163/164 (2002), 215–231.

⁴⁶ See C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur*, 7 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1898–1949), supplement II, 311–312.

⁴⁷ *Al-Fath al-mubīn*, fol. 168a. Elsewhere, this same *nisbah* is rendered as al-Fanānī.

of Ponnani. In fact, Ponnani came to be much more closely associated with the Makhdūms than Cochin, even though the dynasty's founder is enshrined there. Although there is some contention about the actual location of his grave, at Ponnani's Friday mosque is a shrine to "Shaykh Zayn al-Din al-Malībārī al-Funnānī known as Makhdūm Thangal".⁴⁸

This link with Ponnani is of special interest because of that town's history in the sixteenth century, when it became the chief arsenal for the kingdom of Calicut and the main centre of Mappila resistance against the Portuguese.⁴⁹ The town also became well known for its many madrassas, which has given rise to its moniker as the "Mecca of India".⁵⁰ That the Makhdūms were present in this fulcrum and held the position of *qādī* in what was an overwhelmingly Mappila town is testament to their continued religious authority. At the same time, their increasing attempts to identify themselves as a family first of Malabar and then of Ponnani in particular may in fact suggest a weakening in the importance of the Arab credentials that had been the hallmark of Malabar's religious elite in earlier centuries, as participation in the struggle against the Portuguese became a key signifier of Islamic piety – all the more so in a place like Ponnani, which came to be a byword for Muslim resistance and Mappila militancy.

Over five generations, the Makhdūm family held important religious offices in different Malabari port cities and established themselves as the apotheosis of hereditary religious prestige and authority. The Makhdūms perfectly exemplify the main discursive projects identified in the Cheraman Perumal legend: the family proudly emphasized its Arab (in this case, Yemeni) origins, an association strengthened by periods of study in the religious centres of the Hijaz as well as the fact that their writings were composed in Arabic. And, as in the legend, the genealogy of the Makhdūms associates a family of *qādīs* with the founding of mosques. In the course of the sixteenth century, though, the family shifted its primary identification away from Arabia towards more local affiliations, culminating in the close association with Ponnani, a hotbed of anti-Portuguese resistance.

In the Islamic tradition, serving as a judge is regarded as one of the highest duties, above even the duty of *jihād*. And like *jihād*, it is classed as a communal obligation (*fard al-kifayah*) that needs to be discharged

⁴⁸ He is often referred to locally as "Makhdum II".

⁴⁹ See C. Innes, *Malabar Gazetteer*, 2 vols., ed. F. Evans (Madras: Government Press, 1951), I, 483–484.

⁵⁰ See J. Abdelhalim, "Spaces for Jihād: Indian Muslims and Conceptions of Citizenship", unpublished PhD thesis, Ruprecht-Karls Universität Heidelberg (2012), 240.



Figure 2.2 Early photograph of Ponnani's Juma Masjid.

Image courtesy of Basel Mission Archives (ref. no. C 30.84.138: "Moschee i. Ponnani, Mekka v. Malabar" by Gotthilf Dengler, 1938).

by the community as a whole. Traditionally, judges were appointed by the ruler, his deputy, or authorized officials. Legal commentaries from the Malabar Coast expand on this paradigm to also consider a scenario in which there is no (Muslim) ruler; that is, the very situation faced by Muslim merchant communities in many Indian Ocean port cities. The proposed solution is that in such circumstances, the local elites (lit., "the influential people"; Ar., *ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd*) should assign a judge.⁵¹ Seeing as the *qādī* would have ultimate authority over all local legal cases, including, crucially, commercial disputes, it is clear why the local merchant elites were invested in his selection. However, the text adds a further provision stipulating that the rest of the people must agree to this appointment, and that this appointment would then only be valid for that region but not any other.⁵² In the world of Monsoon Islam, therefore, a *qādī* was first nominated by the local Muslim elite and then in some form confirmed by the other members of the community. And unlike a *qādī* appointed by a ruler, his authority was spatially bound to this place and not transferable to any other congregation and region.

The Malabari text does not go into detail about what kind of person should be chosen for this vitally important office. The wider body of Shāfi'i law, the predominant legal school of Malabar's traditional 'ulamā' (including the Makhdūm family), however stipulates certain indispensable conditions for the appointment of a *qādī*. The most essential of these is *ijtihād* (lit., "struggling with oneself"), a technical term in Islamic law that denotes the ability of individual reasoning on the basis of Quranic and *hadīth* knowledge.⁵³ The *qādī* was not merely expected to rely on the rulings of earlier authorities, but to understand how they were derived and to apply them by method of analogy (*qiyās*). This skill was of particular importance outside the *dār al-Islām*, where Muslims could not rely on the same social conventions that governed communal life in Islamic countries. It may be for this reason that the *qādī* was seen as the pre-eminent religious figure among these Muslim communities, and that this special status came to be conflated with the mosque itself.

An example of the interpretation of Islamic religious law (*sharī'ah*) for the local conditions faced by Muslim traders on the Malabar Coast is a text written by a member of the Makhdūm family in the second half of

⁵¹ This term is commonly used in Islamic law to denote religious and political elites; see M.Q. Zaman, "Ahl al-hall wa-l-'aqd", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2007–), consulted online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_0027.

⁵² Zayn al-Din, *Fath al-mu'in*, 339.

⁵³ See al-Shāfi'i, *The Epistle on Legal Theory*, trans. J.E. Lowry (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015), 205–248; al-Naqib, *Reliance of the Traveller*, o.22.10, 631.

the sixteenth century. Zayn al-Dīn's *Fath al-mu‘in* ("The Victory of the Helper", composed about 1575) is a commentary on the same author's legal compendium *Qurrat al-‘ayn* ("The Solace of the Eye", c. 1567/8), which it selectively interprets through concrete examples.⁵⁴ Zayn al-Dīn is well known to historians for his history of the Muslim struggle against the Portuguese, known as the *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*. His legal writings, by contrast, have received only limited attention. But it is in such texts, written to help Muslims navigate life within the non-Muslim or newly-Muslim societies of the Indian Ocean rim, that the concrete tenets of Monsoon Islam were shaped and expounded.

Legal compendia such as *Qurrat al-‘ayn* and commentaries such as *Fath al-mu‘in* would have been of special importance to smaller Muslim communities in ports far from established centres of Islamic learning. In those places, these works, with their pragmatic focus on matters of trade and everyday social conduct, could stand in for a larger body of Shāfi‘ī scholarship that was often inaccessible to local *qādīs*. This inaccessibility could be on account of the simple lack of physical specimens – in fact, from what can be ascertained, very few such communities maintained comprehensive manuscript collections – or deficiencies in the local *qādī*'s textual training that made it difficult for him to locate legal rulings and references within massive codices.⁵⁵ Relatively short and simple texts such as *Qurrat* and *Fath* therefore served a practical, as well as socio-religious, need.

Fath al-mu‘in has been introduced in Chapter 1 in the context of commercial law – in fact, matters related to trade make up a large part the work, a proportion much higher than in comparable legal commentaries of that period. This clearly reflects the needs of the predominantly mercantile community that Malabar's *qādīs* served, and in particular the complications arising out of regular commercial dealings with non-Muslims. But the text also deals with more mundane matters, offering a

⁵⁴ Shokoohy (*Muslim Architecture*, 241) mistakenly regards *Fath al-mu‘in* as an alternative title for *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*. Brockelmann (*Geschichte*, II, 417) describes *Fath al-mu‘in* as authored by "Zainaddin al Malibāri", whom he rightly identifies as the grandson of the Sufi of the same name (i.e. Zayn al-Dīn ibn ‘Ali, author of *Hidāyat al-adhkiyā*; see Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, II, 221). However, he does not link him to the author of the *Tuhfat*, whom he lists as a separate person under the *nisbah* al-Ma‘bari, seemingly unaware of the dual form al-Ma‘bari al-Malibāri that the family adopted in Malabar. Brockelmann also misidentifies the *Fath al-mu‘in* as a Hanafi text – perhaps based on the general prevalence of the Hanafi school in North India – whereas it unquestionably belongs to the Shāfi‘ī *madhhab*.

⁵⁵ This suggestion is made by M. Kooriadathodi, "Cosmopolis of Law: Islamic Legal Ideas and Texts across the Indian Ocean and Eastern Mediterranean World", unpublished PhD thesis, Leiden University (2016), 194–195.

glimpse into the everyday concerns of Muslims in the setting of a cosmopolitan, multi-cultural society outside the *dār al-Islām*.

The text provides detailed legal opinions about unions between Muslim men and “infidel” women, a topic that will be taken up in Chapter 3. But *Fath al-mu‘in* also deals with inter-communal social interactions in much broader terms. For example, a detailed section deals with the question of when and how to return the greetings of Hindus, and especially of Hindu women.⁵⁶ (The text advises that a Muslim man may return the greeting of an elderly Hindu woman but not that of a younger one, and under no circumstances should he salute a group of women since gossip would inevitably ensue.) Another section counsels on the proper behaviour when visiting the houses of Hindus, which was a complicated issue for both sides of the encounter due to the strict rules constraining commensality among Kerala Brahmins. Elsewhere, the text deals with more specific social situations that arise only after Muslims had become more fully integrated into local society, such as the conditions under which a Muslim could accept (or would have to refuse) an invitation to a Hindu wedding.

These elaborations on all manner of different scenarios may appear somewhat hackneyed, but they addressed the latent social instability posed by the absence of shared social conventions between the different religious groups living together in the cosmopolitan trading ports of the Indian Ocean. Because Islamic law is essentially a body of guidance on human conduct and interaction (*mu‘āmalāt*) based on juridico-moral tenets, it was within the proper remit of the *qādī* to advise on such secular, day-to-day issues.⁵⁷ *Fath al-mu‘in* is organized in a question-and-answer format; it is not difficult to imagine that these questions reflected the concrete issues that Muslim traders found themselves confronted with in the port cities of the Malabar Coast and other parts of the Indian Ocean.

This desire to have *shari‘ah* interpreted for the context of a complex, non-Muslim society explains the need to have a plausible, legitimized *ulamā’* that exists within that cosmopolitan world. Islamic scholars and legists in the traditional centres of Islamic learning – in places like Mecca, Cairo, Baghdad, or Fez – did not address the type of concerns that appear as queries in texts such as *Fath al-mu‘in*. Having local

⁵⁶ Zayn al-Din, *Fath al-mu‘in*, 330.

⁵⁷ See R. Brunschwig, *Études d’islamologie*, 2 vols. (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1976), II, passim. Similar concerns arising out of the social interaction between Muslims and Hindus are reflected in Islamic texts written under the Delhi sultanate, for instance, *Fatāwā-i Firuzshāhi*. The difference, of course, is that those texts were composed in the context of Muslim rule. See Z. Islam, *The Fatāwā Literature of the Sultanate Period* (New Delhi: Kanishka, 2005), 73–87.

qādīs able to understand and respond to local conditions and specific conundrums addressed a pressing need among these Muslim communities. Families of prestige and accepted religious authority, an authority that was at times crafted upon legendary foundations, were necessary to help Muslim merchants deal with the challenging and ambiguous social worlds in which they found themselves.

That this need was not limited to the Malabar Coast but was of key importance to the formation of Monsoon Islam in general is evident from the eager adoption of such texts by Muslim trading communities in other parts of maritime Asia. Southeast Asia in particular was not only closely connected to the same maritime trade networks that South India was part of but also shared in a similar trajectory of Islamization.⁵⁸ And although by the time Zayn al-Dīn penned *Fath al-mu‘in* Muslim states were already well established in the trading centres of Sumatra and Java, Muslims there continued to be faced with the same kind of challenges of how to reconcile Islamic norms with divergent local customs.⁵⁹

Just as the Arabic language reached Southeast Asia via South India – as is suggested by the fact that many Arabic loanwords in Javanese and Malay are inflected not only by Persian but also Dravidian languages – so Islamic legal texts often arrived in the form of South Indian interpretations.⁶⁰ In general terms, the rise of the Shāfi‘ī *madhhab* as the dominant school of Islamic law in the Indian Ocean may be said to be as much a product of South Indian scholarship as of its Meccan and Yemeni progenitors. Zayn al-Dīn’s *Fath al-mu‘in* in particular is widely attested across the Archipelago and remains in use as a standard legal text in the world’s most populous Muslim country, Indonesia. It also continues to feature on the curriculum of populist Islamic movements in Southeast Asia, such as Tablighi Jam’at.⁶¹

The trans-oceanic influence of Zayn al-Dīn’s legal texts is attested not only by the circulation of his texts but also by the number of commentaries, super-commentaries, translations, and abridgement it stimulated.

⁵⁸ See for instance, S.R. Prange, “Like Banners on the Sea: Muslim Trade Networks and Islamization in Malabar and Maritime Southeast Asia”, in R.M. Feener and T. Sevea (eds.), *Islamic Connections: Muslim Societies in South and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 25–47.

⁵⁹ See for instance, M.C. Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization in from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries* (White Plains, NY: East Bridge, 2006).

⁶⁰ Ricci, *Islam Translated*, 154–155.

⁶¹ M. van Bruinessen, “Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning”, in W. Marschall (ed.), *Texts from the Islands: Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World* (Bern: University of Bern Institute of Ethnology, 1994), 121–145; F.A. Noor, *Islam on the Move: The Tablighi Jama’at in Southeast Asia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 80, 216n.58.

Mahmood Kooria, in his incisive study of the development of Islamic legal traditions in maritime Asia, considers these manifold textual progenies of *Qurrat al-'ayn* and especially *Fath al-mu'in* as a key part of a “Shāfi‘īte legacy of Malabar”.⁶² In the same vein, Fachrizal Halim, a scholar of premodern Islamic jurisprudence, credits Zayn al-Dīn with a significant influence on the doctrinal orientation of Shāfi‘ī jurists across the Malay-Indonesian world.⁶³ And, in a remarkable completion of the circle, after a sojourn in Southeast Asia, this South Indian commentary on al-Shāfi‘ī’s legal compendium found its way to Arabia, where Indonesian editions of the *Fath al-mu'in* remain in use today.⁶⁴

The circulation of religious legal texts was accompanied by an intensification of contacts between Muslim scholars from across the ocean. Zayn al-Dīn is said to have followed in his uncle’s footsteps and spent a period of study at Mecca. However, it appears that Muslims from the Indian Ocean world not only came to Arabia as students, but also as teachers in their own right. In the late nineteenth century, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje became one of the few European orientalists to visit Mecca in person. There, he found in the courtyard of the Great Mosque (*al-Masjid al-Harām*) not only Javanese, Malay, and Malabari students listening to lectures but also “Professors from Malabar” who, he notes, were there in fewer numbers than in earlier times.⁶⁵ Travelling aboard merchant vessels, Muslim scholars made visits not only to traditional Middle Eastern centres of learning such as Mecca but also moved between different parts of the Indian Ocean world. A number of such itineraries are detailed in Chapter 4, which traces trans-oceanic religious networks. In fact, undoubtedly due to the renown that Zayn al-Dīn’s work acquired across the Indian Ocean, Ponnani became an important centre of Islamic education – it was known as the “little Mecca of Malabar” – that attracted students from the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and as far away as Java and Sumatra.⁶⁶ As was the case in the transmission of texts, these scholarly trajectories likewise reveal Arabia not so much as the sole source of Islamic knowledge but

⁶² Koriadathodi, “Cosmopolis of Law”, 204–205.

⁶³ Halim, *Legal Authority in Premodern Islam*, 50n.64.

⁶⁴ See E. Ho, “Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46.2 (2004), 222n.21.

⁶⁵ C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century: Daily Life, Customs and Learning*, trans. J.H. Monahan (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 202–203.

⁶⁶ Randathani, *Mappila Muslims*, 37; A.T. Sham-ud-Din, “Note on the ‘Mi’ra’ Kantiri’ Festival of the Muhammadans”, *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 7.1 (1881), 128; Kunnath, “Rise and Growth of Ponnani”; 102; Kooria, “Cosmopolis of Law”, 212.

rather as a participant in circulatory exchanges involving South Arabia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Rather than a diffusion of Islamic norms and practices from an Arabian heartland to its Asian peripheries, the evidence suggests instead that Muslims from South India and Southeast Asia played a persistent and continuous role in the making and remaking of Islamic doctrine and ideology. Muslim merchant communities of the Indian Ocean were not passive recipients of Islamic law but squarely within the “community of interpretation” that sought to explicate and apply al-Shāfi‘ī’s ideas.⁶⁷ The *Fath al-mu‘in* exemplifies how understandings of Islamic law in particular were negotiated within the supposed periphery, and how these new understandings underpinned the development of distinct strands of Islamic thought across monsoon Asia. Such multi-polar exchanges challenge conventional notions of the dissemination of Islamic law and instead reveal its development as diverse, interactive, and global.

Monsoon Mosques

Mosques not only figured in the mythical place-making of Muslims in monsoon Asia but were also the literal manifestations of the presence of Islam across the region. The physical presence of mosques can serve as an index for the existence and status of Muslim communities in a given locale. What is more, mosques not only speak to the presence of a Muslim community in that place, but also of their expectation of a future there, in the sense that the literal investment of Muslims in the construction of a mosque is also an expression of their symbolic and imaginative stake in that place. In the world of Monsoon Islam, outside the purview of Muslim rule, mosques also signify the relationship of Muslims to local power structures, since the construction of religious edifices required the consent of the local sovereign. Once permission was granted, land, materials, and labour needed to be obtained, necessitating further interactions between Muslims and local societies. Historic mosques can thus serve as primary sources for processes of negotiation, accommodation, as well as contestation on the coasts of the premodern Indian Ocean.

The primary function of mosques was to provide a space for communal prayer. In the setting of a majority-non-Muslim society, however, they served a number of additional purposes, the most important of which were their logistical utility to itinerant traders, their function as

⁶⁷ See A. El Shamsy, *The Canonization of Islamic Law: A Social and Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 167–193.

centres of Islamic education, and their role in intra-communal politics. According to Ibn Mājid's nautical manual, on approaching the Malabar Coast, ships orientated themselves by sighting Mount Eli.⁶⁸ Near this conspicuous landmark were a number of mosques.⁶⁹ Ibn Battūṭah describes a splendid congregational mosque there at which seafarers make their votive offerings and receive food from its kitchen.

The provision of food to travellers was an issue of particular salience in Malabar. Because of the region's especially stringent caste restrictions on social interaction, high-caste Hindus observed strict taboos on commensality. Anxieties around food provenance, purity, and contamination, although observed throughout India, were especially pronounced in Kerala.⁷⁰ That these extended not only to low-caste Hindus but also to Muslims is clear from Athanasius Nikitin's account from the fifteenth century. He noted that high-caste Hindus "take care that Muslims do not look into their pot, nor see their food, and should this happen they will not eat it".⁷¹ Ibn Battūṭah similarly observed that "it is the custom of these infidels in the Mulaibār lands that no Muslim may enter their houses or eat from their vessels".⁷² These mores presented a major challenge to the traveller, to whom the ability to obtain food was, of course, of vital importance.

Ibn Battūṭah also relates the way in which itinerant Muslim merchants sought to address this problem. He describes a parallel infrastructure of Muslim residences and rest houses along the west coast that would have allowed Muslims to circumvent local caste restrictions:

At all the halting-places on this road [from Goa to Kollam] there are houses belonging to Muslims, at which Muslim travellers alight, and where they buy all that they need, and food is cooked for them. Were it not for these Muslims, no Muslim would travel by this road.⁷³

The ability of Muslim traders to travel by road was essential during the stormy months of June and July, when even coastal navigation was

⁶⁸ Tibbets (ed. and trans.), *Arab Navigation*, 202.

⁶⁹ The hill is now located within the perimeter of the Ezhimala Naval Academy; the author's request to examine the mosque that is reportedly still extant at this site was refused by the Directorate of Naval Training.

⁷⁰ See for instance, Lambourn, *Abraham's Luggage*, 52–57; C. Osella and F. Osella, "Food, Memory, Community: Kerala as both 'Indian Ocean' Zone and as Agricultural Homeland", *South Asia* 31:1 (2008), 170–198.

⁷¹ Wielhorsky (trans.), "The Travels of Athanasius Nikitin", in R.H. Major (ed.), *India in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Hakluyt, 1857), 17. (In Wielhorsky's translation, Muslims are parsed as "Mahomedans".)

⁷² Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 72; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūṭa*, IV, 805.

⁷³ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 72; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūṭa*, IV, 805.

perilous. In the sixteenth century, overland travel became important year-round as a way of evading Portuguese surveillance and attacks.

That mosques formed an important part of this infrastructure that facilitated the movement of traders is made clear in Ibn Battūtah's description of Valapattanam. Outside the town, he writes, "there is a mosque to which Muslim strangers repair, for there is no Muslim in this city".⁷⁴ The function of mosques as shelter is made most vivid in Pyrard de Laval's account:

[On] the evening of my arrival in Badagara [Vatakara, a town halfway between Calicut and Cannanore] having no place to spend the night, I retired to a mosque for the sake of company, and because these places are fresher and more comfortable to rest and sleep, by day as well as by night [...]. In the evening, there were a large number of foreign travellers and wayfarers resting there as well; but because they still had a ways to go, they set off at midnight to take advantage of the cool air and the bright moonlight.⁷⁵

While in the major port cities Muslim traders could avail themselves of *funduqs* or residences of sedentary merchants, in smaller ports and roadside halting places mosques provided food, shelter, and safety for the trader and his goods. The critical importance merchants attached to the question of their lodging and provisioning is also clearly evident from the Geniza records.⁷⁶

Throughout the Islamic world, mosques have served as centres of learning. The mosque provided a natural forum for the intensely personal process of Islamic education, which revolves around the transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil.⁷⁷ On the Malabar Coast, this function was of particular importance as Muslim preachers or judges served as gatekeepers to the Arabic language for local converts. Ibn Battūtah speaks of students of religious science studying at Malabari mosques and receiving stipends from its revenue. Although generally critical of non-Arab Muslims, in the case of Malabar Ibn Battūtah commends the thorough knowledge of the Quran displayed by boys – and, to his even greater surprise, also by girls – in different towns he visited on the coast.⁷⁸ The

⁷⁴ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 87; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 811.

⁷⁵ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 364–365; for an alternative English translation, see A. Gray and H. Bell (trans.), *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives and Brazil*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt, 1887), I, 397.

⁷⁶ See Lambourn, *Abraham's Luggage*, 43–45.

⁷⁷ See F. Robinson, "Education", in R. Irwin (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 4: *Islamic Cultures and Societies to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 505–511.

⁷⁸ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 67, 81–82; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 803, 809.

extensive, multi-tiered superstructure of traditional monsoon mosques provide for the easy passage of coastal breezes that keep these spaces pleasantly cool even in summer and make them a clement setting for teaching and learning. It is in this milieu that the Arabi-Malayalam system of writing developed, which remains in use among Kerala Muslims today.⁷⁹ Mosques thus also functioned as bridges, connecting Malabari Muslims to the Arabic language and thereby to the wider Islamic world.

A last function of mosques to be considered here is their role as venues of intra-communal politics. A religious judge was usually the highest instance of legal recourse for Malabar's Muslims. *Qādīs* interpreted Islamic law, set normative guidelines of social interaction with the Hindu population, and resolved disputes. Although Islamic law advised against deciding legal cases in a mosque (lest one of the litigants raise his voice in anger), the *qādī* was nonetheless attached to the mosque; his office was often situated in the upper levels or an annexe.⁸⁰ The mosque also served as the venue for political debate in times of crisis. For example, in 1524 the Muslims of different towns gathered in Chaliyam's mosque to agree to their resolution to set themselves against the Zamorin by fighting the Portuguese.⁸¹ The mosque, then, was the natural focus of the community's political life, where its male members would congregate, where business both communal and personal was conducted, and where disputes could be addressed.

It is often noted that Malabar's traditional mosques do not look like mosques: they do not feature any of the iconic stylistic elements we associate with Islamic architecture, such as minarets, domes, *mugarnas* vaulting, or any of the other visual signifiers of Islamic design. This is because their architectural vocabulary is derived neither from Arabian models of mosque architecture nor the Indo-Islamic style found in North India and the Deccan.⁸² Instead, Malabar's mosques look much like the region's Hindu temples, both in their design and use of materials.

Many of the architectural features and design choices that typify historic mosques on the Malabar Coast are shared by the region's Hindu

⁷⁹ See V.S. Nair, "A Sociolinguistic Evaluation of Arabi-Malayalam", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Mysore (2013).

⁸⁰ Another reason why a judge should not sit in a mosque is that children, menstruating women, non-Muslims, or the insane may need to be brought before him; see al-Naqib, *Reliance of the Traveller*, o.22.10, 631.

⁸¹ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 135a.

⁸² See for instance, M. Frishman and Hasan-Uddin Khan (eds.), *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development & Regional Diversity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994); J. Bloom, *Minaret: Symbol of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); S. Kavuri-Bauer, *Monumental Matters: The Power, Subjectivity, and Space of India's Mughal Architecture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).



Figure 2.3 Early photograph of a traditional Malabar mosque (at Thalassery).

Image courtesy of Basel Mission Archives (ref. no. QC-30.111.0010: “A Malabar mosque”, by unknown, 1901–20).

temples, so much so that it is often believed that these mosques are converted temples. That this is not the case will become evident from an examination of their epigraphic records. A pioneering study of the continuities between Gujarat's mosques and Hindu temples points out that “the material record of the presence of Muslim communities in South Asia has been studied as part of the history of Islam without the necessary examination of its localization within the region itself”.⁸³

The same holds true for South India. While there are numerous studies on the region's temples – Kerala proudly touts itself as the “land of temples” – and a handful on its mosques, there has been little attempt to explore and interpret the continuities between their architectural forms.⁸⁴ The cataloguing of India's architectural heritage was originally a project of the British colonial state, which subjected all monuments to a mutually exclusive taxonomy of either “Hindu”, “Buddhist”, or “Muslim”. These classifications obscure the fact that “in reality monuments and sites of worship often had syncretic heritages in terms of their locations, materials, styles, and workmanship, as well as the people who frequented them”.⁸⁵ Architecture manifests not just about the presence of a faith community in a given place, but can also illuminate its relationship to the prevailing social order.

Malabar's mosques are so different to the dominant modes of Islamicate architecture that they must be regarded as a discrete subset of Indo-Islamic architecture.

You cannot find these Kerala types of mosques anywhere else in India [...] because they resemble Hindu temples though they were built as mosques. They are neither entirely Muslim nor entirely Hindu in character. It can only be described as “Medieval Kerala” style, as it is common to Hindu, Muslim, and Christian places of worship and residence.⁸⁶

While clearly distinct from Arabian, Persian, and North Indian paradigms, they do have affinities with mosques elsewhere: very similar looking structures can be found in insular Southeast Asia.⁸⁷ Traditional mosques on Sumatra and Java share the same stylistic continuities to

⁸³ A. Patel, *Building Communities in Gujārāt: Architecture and Society during the Twelfth through Fourteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 8f.

⁸⁴ Notable exceptions are S.F. Dale, “Islamic Architecture in Kerala: A Preface to Future Study”, in A.L. Dallapiccola and S. Zingel-Avé Lallement (eds.), *Islam and Indian Regions*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993), I: 491–495, and Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 137–266.

⁸⁵ F. Zaman, “Colonizing the Sacred: Allahabad and the Company State, 1797–1857”, *Journal of Asian Studies* 74:2 (2015), 349.

⁸⁶ Narayanan, *Calicut*, 115.

⁸⁷ On the typical architectural features associated with historic mosques in the regions, see for instance, J. Pereira, *Islamic Sacred Architecture: A Stylistic History* (New Delhi: Books

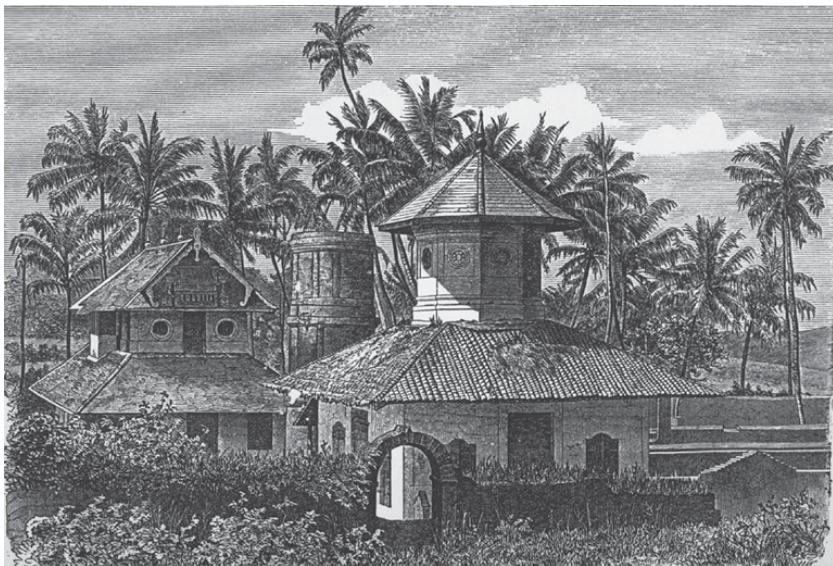


Figure 2.4 Sketch of mosque with tower at Chirakkal.

Image courtesy of Basel Mission Archives (ref. no. QC-30.001.0436: “Chirakal Moschee”, by unknown, undated).

South Indian Hindu temple architecture as those of Malabar.⁸⁸ These parallels extend to many architectural details but are most visible in the design of multi-tiered roofs and the distinct round towers found in both South India and maritime Southeast Asia.

Stephen Dale identifies in these shared traits a “commercial monsoon style” of mosque architecture that linked these two regions.⁸⁹ In his path-breaking study of South Indian Muslim architecture, Mehrdad Shokoohy makes a similar argument, emphasizing both the incorporation of some architectural elements from the western Indian Ocean (especially Yemen) and the similarities to mosques in Southeast

and Books, 1994); M. Frischman and H.-U. Khan (eds.), *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development and Regional Diversity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

⁸⁸ See “Java” and “Sumatra”, in A. Petersen (ed.), *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 131–134, 270–271; Y. Saliya Hariadi and G. Tjahjono, “Expressions of Islam in Building: The Indonesian Experience”, in H. Salam (ed.), *Expressions of Islam in Buildings* (Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 1990), 188–196; B. Setia Budi, “A Study on the History and Development of the Javanese Mosque, Part 1: A Review of Theories on the Origin of the Javanese Mosque”, *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering* 3:1 (2003), 189–195.

⁸⁹ Dale, “Islamic Architecture”, 492.



Figure 2.5 Masjid Agung (Great Mosque) at Demak, one of the oldest mosques in Java.

Image courtesy of B. O’Kane (Alamy Stock Photos).

Asia.⁹⁰ Khoo Salma Nasution, in her study of a historic South Indian community in Malaysia, draws this same connection, attributing early mosque architecture in Penang to “a fusion of Dravidian vernacular architecture and considerable eclectic borrowing from further afield”.⁹¹ In light of these continuities, Sunil Amrith thinks that a South Indian Muslim would have been “instantly familiar” with the style of Southeast Asian mosques and concludes that South Indian Islam shaped the sacred landscape of that region.⁹²

⁹⁰ Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 247–252. It must be noted that the concept of “architectural transmission” often conceals an imprecise understanding of actual historical processes. Jonathan Bloom distinguishes between two main forms of transmission, either by example (i.e. a model) or through more formal systems based on visual or verbal notation. In the absence of any evidence for the latter, in regard to Malabar it might be more apt to speak of influences rather than transmissions. See J.M. Bloom, “On the Transmission of Designs in Early Islamic Architecture”, *Mugarnas* 10 (1993), 21.

⁹¹ Khoo Salma Nasution, *The Chulia in Penang: Patronage and Place-Making around the Kapitan Kling Mosque 1786–1957* (Penang: Areca Books, 2014), 289.

⁹² S.S. Amrith, “Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal”, *American Historical Review* 114:3 (2009), 550–554.

Similar borrowings between mosques and local architecture (both sacred and vernacular) can be identified in other parts of maritime Asia. Traditional Chinese mosques, for example, with their sweeping roofs and symmetrical courtyards often resembled Confucian temples, while from the thirteenth century onwards East African mosques became more seaward-oriented in terms of both their placement and architectural features.⁹³ All along the Indian Ocean littoral, Islamic architecture developed syncretic idioms that were reflective of the underlying negotiations that defined the development of Muslim communities in those places: the monsoon mosque instantiates the reach and nature of the world of Monsoon Islam.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's descriptions of the numerous small mosques dotted along Malabar's shoreline and landing places, combined with the visual evidence from a few surviving mosques that date back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, indicate the heavy reliance on indigenous architectural modes. The continuities between Malabar's mosques and temples go beyond those imposed by ecological circumstance and point to a deliberate amalgamation driven by the desire to find a place for Islam in the prevailing ritual landscape. The use of local sacred structures as models for the design of mosques may be interpreted as an expression of the Muslims' desire to integrate their religious monuments into the existing ritual landscape. Such a process of cultural negotiation would not only have accommodated the social and political context of a Hindu society regulated by Brahmins, but also met the expectations of converts who "would have been accustomed to accept prevailing Malayali temples as the 'natural' forms for ritual centers or the outward symbols of sacred space".⁹⁴

Most of the early converts to Islam came from the lower castes of the highly stratified Hindu society, especially from occupations associated with seafaring. Prior to converting, as members of the "polluting" orders, they were unable to gain access to the inner sanctums of these temples. Their primary experience of these sacred buildings, therefore, would have been of their exterior form. The continuum between Hindu and

⁹³ On China, see D.C. Gladney, "Central Asia and China: Transnationalization, Islamization, and Ethnicization", in J.L. Esposito (ed.), *The Oxford History of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 459. On East Africa, see P. Garlake, *The Early Islamic Architecture of the East African Coast* (Nairobi and London: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1966); T. Insoll, "Mosque Architecture in Buganda, Uganda", *Mugarnas* 14 (1997), 179–187; J. Fleisher et al., "When Did the Swahili Become Maritime?", *American Anthropologist* 117:1 (2015), 100–115. On China, see Gladney, "Central Asia and China", 459; S. Dazhang, "The Qing Dynasty", in N.S. Steinhardt (ed.), *Chinese Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 336.

⁹⁴ Dale, "Islamic Architecture", 493.

Muslim ritual architecture may thus be understood as an extension of the broader negotiations of new identities between traditional paradigms and a new faith.

As Islam was initially represented in Malabar only by small, scattered enclaves of expatriate merchants and local converts dependent on the goodwill of Hindu rulers, the impetus to accommodate or even fit into existing socio-religious frameworks would have been strong – as would have been a preference for signalling this coherence visually. Illustrations of this are the ornate floral carvings used in exterior and interior decorations as well as the elaborate gables found on some mosques. In some cases these gables even culminate in a three-pronged motif that bears a more than slight resemblance to the symbol of Shiva's trident commonly found on local Hindu temples.⁹⁵ Writing at a time when many more of Malabar's mosques still retained their original features, British colonial observers remarked on the absence of minarets but also noted the mosques' turret-like edifices, which among the Hindu temples was peculiar to those devoted to Shiva.⁹⁶

While the structures and exterior architectural features of Malabar's temples and mosques display some remarkable similarities, their interiors are more clearly marked by differences. Many of the temples are built on a square ground plan, usually with an ante-chamber, while the mosques are generally rectangular. This reflects the main difference in the ritual functions of temples and mosques: while the former are mainly used as processional spaces, the latter are designed for congregational use. Since *jum‘ah* (or Friday) mosques were intended for the communal prayer of a town's entire Muslim community, their successive extensions can serve as indicators for the growth of congregations in those places over time. The provision of a tank or ante-chamber with water for the purpose of ablution is another distinguishing feature of mosques. The most prominent interior difference between a Kerala mosque and temple is in terms of decoration. Temples are richly adorned by sculptures, friezes, and

⁹⁵ The most striking example is at Ponnani's Jāmi‘ Masjid, which according to an inscription on the facade was constructed in 1549/50 (AH 956); *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* 1965–66, D 105.

⁹⁶ F. Fawcett, “War Songs of the Mâppilas of Malabar”, *Indian Antiquary* 30 (1901), 502. An illustration of a (unidentified) traditional mosque with a circular tower is given in F. Fawcett, “The Moplas of Malabar”, *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review* 8 (Oct. 1897), 300. A good example of a turreted Shiva temple in Kerala is the Vadakkunnathan temple at Thrissur. It was likely a construction of this style that Ludovico de Varthema was referring to when he wrote that the call to prayer (*adhān*) at Calicut was made from the tower of a mosque; see Reichert (trans.), *Ludovico de Varthema*, 248.

paintings.⁹⁷ By contrast, on account of the Islamic proscription on the representation of the form, artistic efforts within mosques were more limited and directed mainly towards elaborately carved inscriptions (usually Quranic verses) as well as finely wrought wooden minbars.

Muslims were, of course, not the only group of expatriate merchants active on the Malabar Coast. As seen in the [previous chapter](#), literary sources from the medieval period attest to the presence there of Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Javanese, Chinese, Africans, as well as groups from various other parts of the Indian subcontinent itself. In terms of their religious architecture, preserved copper-plate grants relating to the Christian and Jewish communities contain, amidst other rights, provisions for the construction and maintenance of churches and synagogues. No copper-plate grants comparable to those of the Christian and Jewish communities are extant for Malabar's Muslims. This absence of direct evidence, however, can be mitigated by showing that they enjoyed the same type of privileges that are typically contained in such grants.

One of the most symbolic rights in Malabar was the perquisite of tiling a roof, as opposed to the common thatching. Only certain, special structures were allowed the privilege of displaying roof tiles, which in the region were typically made from a clay that baked into a rich red colour. The copper-plate grant to the Jewish community from around the year 1000 specifically mentions the right to construct roofs.⁹⁸ When, in the late fifteenth century, the ruler of Calicut acquired suzerainty over the rival port of Cochin, he deprived its kings of the right to roof their palaces with tiles.⁹⁹ A number of sources elaborate on the special symbolism of tiled roofs in Malabar, of which Tomé Pires' account is the most poignant:

No one in the whole of Malabar is allowed to roof his house with tiles, unless it be a *turicol* [temple] or mosque or, by special privilege, the house of some great Kaimal [chieftain]; and this is to prevent them from becoming too powerful in the land.¹⁰⁰

Interestingly, in Pires' rendering, causation runs counter to the expected direction: it is not, as we might expect, the power of an individual that is

⁹⁷ This contrast is highlighted in A. Wink, "The Idols of Hind", in F.B. Flood (ed.), *Piety and Politics in the Early Indian Mosque* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 43–44.

⁹⁸ Translated in Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis*, 81. The earlier *Tharisapalli* grant to the Christian community at Kollam suggests that the eponymous church was already built (the deed confirms its endowment and other privileges), which may account for the absence of any reference to the right to tile its roof.

⁹⁹ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 255; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 95.

¹⁰⁰ Cortesão (ed. and trans.), *Tomé Pires*, I, 81.

reflected in his ability to tile his roof, but rather it is the roof that imparts power onto its owner. In this understanding, depriving the king of Cochin of his tiled roof is not merely an illustration of a changed power dynamic, but actually serves to (further) reduce his power. Thus, by granting the right for a church, synagogue, or mosque to have a tiled roof is more than mere recognition of their status: it bestows, in a highly visible fashion, a boon to these communities, ensuring their prosperity and progress. By the time of Pires' visit to Malabar in 1511, mosques were the only structures other than Hindu temples and certain (but not all) palaces that were permitted to have tiled roofs. The elaborate multi-tiered roof structures typical of Malabar's traditional mosques may thus even be interpreted as accentuating, even flaunting, this special privilege.¹⁰¹

It is in this context of the particular symbolic significance of roofs that Ibn Battūtah's account of a confrontation between Brahmins ("brāhmaṇah") and Muslims at Valapattanam must be read. Valapattanam was the capital of the Kolathiri dynasty and an important centre of Brahmin education.¹⁰² Ibn Battūtah states that the Muslims lived outside the town because they were hated by its Brahmins. He relates that at some point in the past, a Brahmin of the town demolished the roof of the mosque. What is remarkable is that rather than destroy the mosque outright, in this place of Hindu–Muslim conflict, the Brahmin removed its roof, thereby contesting its privileged status in the sacred and political landscape of that area.¹⁰³

Having considered the general architectural features of traditional monsoon mosques, attention is now turned to some specific examples. These examples serve to illuminate the socio-political context in which mosques were built and used on the Malabar Coast. The focus is on Calicut, the most important centre of Muslim trade in the region and

¹⁰¹ The practice of roofing particularly important structures with copper sheets, as seen in a number of temples as well as some of Malabar's oldest mosques, may be understood in the same way; an example is the Jāmi' Masjid at Pantalayani-Kollam with its copper-plated roof, which, according to Logan, "Arab vessels passing down the coast never failed in former days to salute". Logan, *Malabar Manual*, II, cccxv.

¹⁰² The town is also the site of one of the region's oldest extant Arabic inscriptions on a tombstone, which records the death of one 'Ali ibn Kasnūrī (or Kusnūrī; كُسْنُرِي) in AH 471 (1078/9). See *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* 1990–91, C54; facsimile reproduced in M.I. Quddusi, *Islamic India: Studies in History, Epigraphy, Onomastics and Numismatics* (New Delhi: Islamic Wonders Bureau, 2006), 134.

¹⁰³ According to the local Muslims who recounted the story to Ibn Battūtah, this Brahmin's house was subsequently destroyed in a fire; since that event, the Hindus did not again interfere with the mosque. This suggests that the belief in the special power of roofs that was held by the local Hindu society had come to be shared by the local Muslims, whose narrative attributes the violent destruction of the Brahmin's house to his earlier desecration of the roof. Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 87–88.



Figure 2.6 The elaborate superstructure of the fifteenth-century Mithqālpalli at Calicut.

Image copyright by Sebastian R. Prange.

home to some of its oldest surviving mosques. Writing at the beginning of the fifteenth century, Ma Huan noted that Calicut contained twenty or thirty mosques.¹⁰⁴ The town's historic mosques are all located in close proximity to one another, in the town's old Muslim quarter known as Kuttichira, immediately adjacent to the sea.

The quarter's oldest mosque is the Muchundipalli.¹⁰⁵ Architecturally, this mosque has undergone significant restoration and expansion work, mainly dating from the seventeenth century.¹⁰⁶ It contains two historically significant inscriptions, including one of the oldest extant Arabic epigraphs in Malabar. The epigraph in question is highly unusual: not only is it embossed rather than engraved, which is atypical for stone

¹⁰⁴ Mills (trans.), *Ma Huan*, 140.

¹⁰⁵ The Malayalam term *palli* denotes any type of religious building, including temples, mosques, churches, and synagogues, but is also used for palaces and other royal properties.

¹⁰⁶ For a detailed study, see Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 193–200; also see Narayanan, *Calicut*, 122–123. I am grateful to the mosque committee for allowing me to examine and photograph the mosque and its epigraphs.

inscriptions in the region, but it is also bilingual. It is not *in situ* but set into cement in the exterior wall of the inner prayer hall; previous exposure to the elements and repeated whitewashing have rendered the inscription in many parts illegible. On the left side, it is inscribed in Tamil rendered in Vatteluttu script. Although damaged, it is clear that this portion records that the local ruler endowed the mosque with an assignment of rice (“daily expenses of one *nali* shall be granted”) as well as a further stipend (“in future also [...] twelve *para* [...]”).¹⁰⁷

The Tamil section of this bilingual epigraph is the only instance on the Malabar Coast of a mosque endowment recorded in a language other than Arabic. It stands as a public confirmation of the patronage and protection of Calicut’s Muslims by the ruling class in its own language and idiom. Narayanan equates this grant to the earlier examples of copper-plate grants to the Christian and Jewish communities and regards it as “one more link in the golden chain of grants expressing the ideal of religious tolerance in Kerala”.¹⁰⁸ A more mundane interpretation would emphasize a different aspect to this pattern: the chronology and location of these grants reflect the historical pattern of commerce on the Coast, with the pre-eminence of Christians in the maritime trade of Kollam, of the Jews in Cochin, and of Muslims in Calicut. In this view, the “golden chain” of religious tolerance was above all determined by efforts to attract and retain foreign trading communities in order to tax their trade.

The Arabic portion on the right side of this inscription is likewise badly damaged. It is rendered in *naskhī* script, a cursive style of writing Arabic that is also often found in business correspondence of the period. The legible content records that a freed slave (“‘*aṭiq*”) by the name of Shihāb (or Shahāb) al-Dīn Rayhān, who had been owned by the deceased (“*al-marḥūm*”) Mas‘ūd, purchased (?) out of his own wealth land and constructed thereon a mosque and a well (?).¹⁰⁹ As has been noted in the preceding chapter, Indian Ocean merchants frequently used slaves as their business agents; this seems the likely background of Shihāb

¹⁰⁷ Malayalam transliteration and English translation in Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis*, 95–96. “*Nali*” is a dry or grain measure that was in common use in Malabar; see H.H. Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms, and of Useful Words Occurring in Official Documents Relating to the Administration of the Government of British India, from the Arabic, Persian, Hindustáni, Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengáli, Uriya, Maráthi, Guzaráthi, Telugu, Karnáta, Tamil, Malayálam, and other Languages*, 2 vols. (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1855), s.v. “*nári*” and “*eddangalli*”.

¹⁰⁸ Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis*, 42.

¹⁰⁹ *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* 1947–48, B 94; *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* 1965–66, D 137; Desai, *Topographical List*, no. 1059, 101–102; M. Shokoohy, “Sources for Malabar Muslim Inscriptions”, in M. Kooria and M.N. Pearson (eds.), *Malabar in the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism in a Maritime Historical Region* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 9–10.

al-Dīn, whose involvement in trade (first for his master, then for himself) would have allowed him to accumulate the funds necessary to purchase land and underwrite the building of a mosque. Due to the extensive damage, it is not possible to date this inscription from its contents. The epigraphic reports provisionally attribute it to the thirteenth century on account of its Vatteluttu script; based on his assessment of its language (rather than script), Narayanan tentatively supports this dating.¹¹⁰

However, as noted above, there is no evidence that during the thirteenth century Calicut existed as a prominent port-of-trade that would attract resident foreign merchants. A further indication of the period of the original construction is provided by the mosque's second historical inscription. It is carved in relief on a wooden beam running above the entrance from the ante-chamber to the prayer hall. Its historical portion is badly damaged; it records that a certain Hasan ordered the renovation of the mosque in AH 8?5 (“*sanah kham[s] [waj [...] wa thamān[mi’ah]*”)¹¹¹. With the first day of AH 805 and the last day of AH 895 as limits, this would put the date of the renovation of the Muchundipalli between 1402 and 1490.¹¹² This suggests that by the fifteenth century, the mosque was already in need of renovation which supports the notion that its original construction was significantly earlier, likely sometime in the fourteenth century.

The second historic mosque in the Kuttichira area of Calicut is the Jāmī Masjid, which as its name implies is a congregational mosque for the communal Friday prayers. The date of its construction is unknown, but is suggested by the fact that it was already in need of substantial restoration by the late fifteenth century. This renovation is commemorated in a substantial *in situ* Arabic inscription that is relief-carved on a wooden beam across the entrance to the prayer hall.¹¹³ Mehrdad Shokoohy regards the calligraphy of this inscription as one of the finest examples of fifteenth-century *naskhī* script anywhere in India, which “must have been written by a professional calligrapher, with a good knowledge of Arabic – perhaps an Arab himself”.¹¹⁴ Its historical section reveals that the mosque was renovated in 1480/1 (AH 885) by “al-Sharif al-Khwājah the venerable [“*al-muhtaram*”] Badr al-Dīn Hasan son of the late

¹¹⁰ Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis*, 40, 42.

¹¹¹ This follows the reading proposed in Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 195.

¹¹² Based on similarities in style and execution to another inscription at the nearby Jāmī Masjid, which will be discussed presently, Shokoohy (*Muslim Architecture*, 195) suggests that this date may in fact be AH 885 (1480/1).

¹¹³ *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* 1965–66, D.56; Desai, *Topographical List*, no. 1060, 102.

¹¹⁴ Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 179.

(“*al-marḥūm*”) Abī Bakr al-Si‘rdī known as al-Kayfi [or al-Kanafi]”.¹¹⁵ The title *khwājah* has already been encountered several times as an honorific used for important merchants. While *sharif* has the generic meaning of “noble”, it also carries the specific Islamic connotation of “descendant of the Prophet”; it is used in this sense in the Cheraman Perumal tradition. This latter usage seems more likely to have been intended here, in order to put emphasis on the religious status of the mosque’s patron alongside his obvious economic clout that enabled him to underwrite its renovation. It is tempting to speculate, as Shokoohy does, that it was this same Hasan who is recorded as having financed the restoration of the Muchundipalli, perhaps even in the same year.¹¹⁶

The third, and grandest, Calicut mosque to be considered is the Nākhudā Mithqāl Masjid (also known as Mithqālpalli), which is likewise situated in the Kuttichira neighbourhood. It is the most imposing of Calicut’s mosques and largely retains its original architectural features. Although not recorded epigraphically, its original construction can be confidently dated to the mid-fourteenth century.¹¹⁷ It was destroyed by the Portuguese in 1510 and rebuilt in 1578/9.¹¹⁸ The date of its original construction can be inferred from its eponymous patron, the *nākhudā* Mithqāl, whom Ibn Baṭṭūtah encountered in the 1340s on his visit to Calicut:

And in this town [Calicut] lives the widely known *nākhudā* Mithqāl, who possesses vast wealth and many ships for his trade with India, China, Yemen, and Persia.¹¹⁹

The name Mithqāl is clearly a sobriquet, presumably derived from the standard Arabic measurement for precious metals; Egyptian dinars were

¹¹⁵ The reading of the pseudonym is not clear. *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* (1965–6, D.56) reports it as “Kaifi”, while Shokoohy (*Muslim Architecture*, 179) reads “al-Kanafi”. The latter translates as “of the coasts”, which would stress the family’s connection to maritime commerce. Tempting as this link is, after *in situ* examination of the inscription I propose “al-Kayfi” as the proper reading, an Arabic particle that was used in *nisbahs* to support relative adjectives and abstract nouns. Through abbreviation, this person may have become known simply by this particle. See J. Sublet, “Nisba”, in P. Bearman et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, 12 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005).

¹¹⁶ Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 195.

¹¹⁷ Locally, two other mosques, known as Tadrūspalli and Parriapalli, are regarded as older than the Mithqāl Masjid. However, both mosques have been substantially modernized and do not contain historical inscriptions. See Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 154n.30, 205.

¹¹⁸ See J.W. Wye, “Translation of a History of the Portuguese Landing in India, Written on the Leaves of the Brab Tree (Called Ola) in the Malabar Language”, British Library, MSS. IO Eur.K.194 and K.195, fol. 28b., where the mosque is referred to as “Miskala Pally”. For a discussion of this source, see S.R. Prange, “The Pagan King Replies: An Indian Perspective on the Portuguese Arrival in India”, *Itinerario* 41:1 (2017), 151–173.

¹¹⁹ Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 90; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūta*, IV, 813.

also often referred to as *mithqāls*, and the term became a byword for gold coins in general. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's description of Mithqāl's wealth, combined with the fact that he was the eponymous patron of the finest mosque in Malabar's most prosperous port, suggests that his name was a playful reference to his plentiful store of *mīhqāls*, similar to the English metonym "moneybags". This merchant was so renowned that more than two centuries later he is still mentioned in the history of the Muslims of Malabar written by Zayn al-Dīn.

It is intriguing to note that no additional anthroponym is given either by Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, by Zayn al-Dīn, or in the name of the mosque itself; even though he was by Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's account "widely known" ("al-shāhīr"), no other information is provided either on Mithqāl's ancestry by way of patronymics (*nasab*) or about his kinship, tribal, or geographic origins through a *nisbah*.¹²⁰ This lack of proper Arabic or Islamic names could indicate that the ancestors of the shipowner Mithqāl had reached the Malabar Coast as slaves. Slaves sold in Middle Eastern markets, especially those of African origins, were often given florid names such as Lu'lu' ("pearl") or Jawhar (from *jawharah*, "jewel"), which were otherwise not used as personal names in Arab society.¹²¹ There is evidence that this practice was also current on the Malabar Coast: Ibn Baṭṭūṭah himself was given a slave-boy at Calicut who bore the name Hilāl ("new moon").¹²² It is plausible that the ancestors of Nākhudā Mithqāl, if not the man himself, were manumitted slaves – just like Shihāb al-Dīn Rayḥān, who had financed the construction of the nearby Muchundipalli. The loss of ancestral references entailed in slavery and conversion may have led this merchant to adopt a nickname, which encapsulated the basis for his economic standing that enabled him to function as a patron of Calicut's Muslim community.

It can be speculated that whereas merchants with stable kinship affiliations hedged the desire to one day return to their ancestral home, and perhaps endow a mosque there with the profits they had made as Indian Ocean traders, for former slaves returns were more difficult to envision and effect, making them more likely to invest into their new communities. In this reading, the project of building the physical spaces of Islam in Calicut was, on an individual level, also a project of place-making for its patrons, separated by the violence of slavery from their ancestral homes and communal affiliations, but now laying highly visible

¹²⁰ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 90; Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 131a.

¹²¹ See A. Schimmel, *Islamic Names: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), 5; Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 113n.5.

¹²² Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 95.

claims to prestige and authority in a place in which they had redeemed their agency and found prosperity.

Collectively, Calicut's three oldest mosques show that building mosques was a private venture, from the purchase of land to the construction and upkeep of the edifice. The same was true for other port cities. At Kollam, for example, the main mosque was constructed by “the merchant Khwājah Muḥadhdhab”, while Barkur’s congregational mosque was built by “the chief of the Muslims” (*ra’is al-Muslimīn*), a position that was typically held by a leading merchant.¹²³ So contrary to the Cheraman Perumal legend – in which noble Arabs and pious *qādīs* are the founding fathers of Malabar’s mosques – the epigraphic evidence shows ordinary merchants (and in a surprising number of cases, former slaves) as the true progenitors of the physical infrastructure of Islam on the South Indian coast.

The private nature of mosque construction on the Malabar Coast stood in clear contrast to territories under Muslim rule, where the building of mosques was usually sponsored by sultans or high government officials. In fact, any private effort to construct a central mosque could be seen as a challenge to the sovereign. An anonymous Arabic history from the Swahili Coast that dates to the 1520s offers a vivid illustration of this: a prominent merchant asked the ruler of Kilwa for permission to rebuild the Friday mosque, which had collapsed, with his own funds. The sultan refused but gave him 1,000 *mithqāls* of gold to use in the construction. The merchant recognized that unless he accepted these funds, he would not be permitted to build the mosque.¹²⁴

By contrast, in a South Indian port city such as Calicut, there was no Muslim ruler to build mosques for the local Muslim community; what is more, having a foreign Muslim ruler serve as patron would likely have caused problems with the local potentate, who would likely have

¹²³ Could this merchant be yet another former slave? The name Muḥadhdhab is most likely a corruption of *muhadhdhab* (“well-mannered”), that is from the Arabic letter “ḥā” (ح) to “ḥa” (ه). (The same word can also be vocalized as *muhadhdhib*, “a teacher”, but this meaning seems unlikely in the absence of a definite article.) Again, this somewhat florid name combined with the failure of Ibn Battūtah – who usually paid close attention to establishing a person’s kinship and geographic background – to provide patronymics may indicate that this person, or one of his direct ancestors, had at some point been enslaved. For Kollam, see Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 100. For Barkur, see Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.). *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 78. The position of the “chief of the Muslims” (*ra’is al-Muslimīn*) was not a religious position but a role that was typically occupied by a leading merchant.

¹²⁴ Anon., “An Arabic History of Kilwa Kisiwani c. 1520”, in G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville (ed.), *The East African Coast: Select Documents from the First to the earlier Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 40.

perceived this as a challenge to his own sovereignty. And Hindu rulers did at times act as patrons, by granting special privileges (such as the highly symbolic right to tiled roofs) and by endowing mosques with stipends of food, which was especially important in light of the extra-religious functions that mosques served in the context of a caste-based society. Mosques, then, draw attention once again to the inherently commercial character of Monsoon Islam: they formed an essential part of the infrastructure necessary for Muslim trade across the Indian Ocean, and were financed from its profits.

Monsoon *Jihād*

In the course of the sixteenth century, the mosque acquired additional significance that rendered it even more central to the political life of Malabar's Muslim communities. The mosque became the key emblem of their struggle against the Portuguese; this struggle then gave rise to a new conception of religious warfare. This conflict was not primarily caused by religion – it was above all rooted in competition over the pepper trade – but it was made meaningful by its actors in terms of Islam.¹²⁵ This novel understanding of religious warfare that developed on the Malabar Coast stood in marked contrast to traditional notions of what constituted a legitimate *jihād*, but subsequently acquired currency in other parts of the Muslim world.

Mosques as Emblems of Religious Conflict

To the Portuguese, the presence of mosques all along the coastlines of the Indian Ocean signalled not only the presence of established Muslim communities but also symbolized their dominance in the maritime spice trade. It was for reasons of both commercial rivalry as well as religious animosity that the Portuguese king instructed his commanders to “make war upon them and do them as much damage as possible as a people with whom we have so great and so ancient an enmity”.¹²⁶ The Portuguese writer Duarte Barbosa sought to illustrate to his countrymen just how deeply the Muslims were “rooted in the land” by drawing attention to the great number of mosques on the Malabar Coast.¹²⁷ It is not surprising, then, that the Portuguese made mosques a frequent target of their

¹²⁵ On this distinction, see Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 452.

¹²⁶ “Additional Instructions Given to Cabral”, in W. Greenlee (trans.), *The Voyage of Pedro Álvares Cabral to Brazil and India* (London: Hakluyt, 1938), 180.

¹²⁷ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 229–230; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 74.

“prophylactic terror” against Muslims on the Indian coast.¹²⁸ As a result, many of the oldest mosques still standing today were in fact restored or rebuilt later in the sixteenth century in the wake of this destruction. A prominent example of this is the renowned Mithqālpalli at Calicut discussed above: the original structure described by Ibn Baṭṭūṭah was set ablaze during the abortive Portuguese invasion of the town in 1510.¹²⁹

Portuguese expansion on the coast and the destruction of mosques thus went hand-in-hand. In an Arabic poem of the early sixteenth century, this is described in despairing tones:

We feel aggrieved by the hardships meted out by
 the Franks [*al-Franj*], who worship the Cross and images.
 They transgressed in God’s country [*bilād Allah*] in multiple ways,
 spreading everywhere trouble’s tentacles.
 They unleashed in Malabar [*Malibār*] a sequence of violence,
 mischief and troubles of varying hues,
 By incarcerating, looting, and burning mosques,
 desecrating the Holy Book and terrorizing the women.¹³⁰

In this poem, one of the first Arabic-language responses to the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean, the destruction of mosques is listed alongside such other grave violations as the desecration of the Quran and the violation of Muslim women. Just as the construction of mosques on the Malabar Coast had symbolized not just the presence of Islam in the region but also an expectation of its future there, their destruction signalled graphically that this future was now under threat.

Quick as they were to bombard Indian coastal towns from the sea, as soon as the Portuguese set foot on land, they became highly vulnerable; and if they ventured farther afield, beyond the reach of their ships’ cannons, they were virtually defenceless. To impose their military strength on port cities and facilitate the procurement of provisions and the all-important pepper, they set about building fortified outposts and factories (*feitorias*). The first Portuguese factory on the Malabar Coast was established at Cochin in December 1501, but the retaliatory attacks by the Zamorin against Cochin soon highlighted the need for proper fortifications. Known as Fort Don Manuel in honour of the Portuguese king, its construction began in 1504 and included the church of St Bartholomeo. However, according to Alburquerque’s chronicler, at that

¹²⁸ P. Feldbauer, *Die Portugiesen in Asien, 1498–1620* (Essen: Magnus, 2005), 57.

¹²⁹ See Wye, “Translation of a History”, fol. 28b.

¹³⁰ Based on the Arabic transcription, and emended from the English translation, provided in K.M. Mohamed (trans.), *Tahrid Ahlil Iman ‘ala Ǧihadi ‘Abdati Sulban* (Calicut: Other Books, 2012), 51, 61 (verses 7–10).

time the Portuguese did not have the means to work stone and mortar and were thus forced to use wooden palisades to fortify their stronghold.¹³¹ In the following year, Francisco de Almeida sought to make Cochin the capital of the *Estado da India* and desired to strengthen the fort by building a structure of fireproof stone. The king of Cochin initially resisted this, until Almeida demonstrated the fort's vulnerability by deliberately setting fire to it, whereupon the king conceded to the erection of masonry walls and bastions.¹³² The development of the Cochin fort is of particular interest because to the local Muslims it not only signified the Portuguese ambitions in the region – in much the same way as the presence of mosques signalled the prominence of Muslims to the Portuguese – but was also associated with the demolition of a mosque.

Across the sixteenth century, the construction of Portuguese forts was closely associated with the destruction of mosques. In the minds of Muslims, this connection illustrated the religious dimension to their commercial rivalry with the Portuguese and gave rise to a new ideology of religiously motivated confrontation with the European interlopers. The Calicut *granthavaris* suggest that the very first “Fringy fort” in the kingdom was constructed following the tearing down of a mosque in that location.¹³³ Zayn al-Din also makes a connection between the establishment of the Cochin factory and the razing of a mosque, but specifies that a church was built in its place, using local people as labourers.¹³⁴ However, the destruction of a Cochin mosque is not mentioned in the Portuguese sources, which otherwise tend to celebrate such doings. This omission, combined with the political context at Cochin and generally good relations between the Portuguese and local Muslims there, suggests that in the Indian and Muslim sources, widespread mosque destruction by the Portuguese later on may have become transposed onto the construction of the Cochin fort, which developed into a key symbol of Portuguese power on the Indian coast.¹³⁵

In other instances, the sources are more clear-cut in linking the construction of Portuguese fortresses to the destruction of mosques. A particularly well-documented example is the construction of the fort at

¹³¹ Birch (trans.), *Commentaries of Dalboquerque*, I, 5–8.

¹³² See Malekandathil, *Portuguese Cochin*, 73; K.S. Mathew, *History of the Portuguese Navigation in India, 1497–1600* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), 169–170.

¹³³ Wye, “Translation of a History”, fol. 26b. The use of the term “Fringy” (Persian, *Farangi*, Arabic, *Firanji*), derived from Frank, to denote Europeans is of ancient usage in Asia and in South India; see Yule and Burnell (eds.), *Hobson-Jobson*, s.v. “Firinghee”.

¹³⁴ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 129a.

¹³⁵ Even after the headquarters of the *Estado da India* were moved to Goa in 1510, Fort Don Manuel retained its strategic significance to the Portuguese pepper trade until it was lost to the Dutch in 1663.

Chaliyam at the mouth of the Beypore river, a short distance south of Calicut. It was erected in 1531 under the conditions of a peace treaty with the Zamorin. The Chaliyam fortress was of unrivalled strategic value to the Portuguese because it allowed for the near-total control of Calicut's sea trade: in the estimate of one historian, it was a "dagger directed into the throat of the Zamorin".¹³⁶ The deleterious effect of this fortress on the Muslim trade is clearly reflected in Zayn al-Din's narrative, which devotes separate chapters to its establishment and eventual destruction. These relate how the Zamorin – allegedly weakened by old age and alcoholism and deceived by the cunning of the Portuguese negotiator – agreed to the construction of a fortress at Chaliyam.¹³⁷ To obtain building materials, the Portuguese demolished the ancient Jāmi' mosque (Puzhakkarpalli), which is one of the mosques mentioned in the Cheraman Perumal tradition as one of the original sites of Islam in India. Initially, a single block was removed from this mosque, whereupon the local Muslims complained to the Portuguese viceroy, who ordered for the stone to be replaced and promised that no further materials would be taken. Yet, on the following day, the Portuguese returned in large numbers and tore down the entire mosque, even taking the tombstones from its graveyard, claiming that the local ruler had sold them the mosque and its land.¹³⁸ The fortress, solidly built of ancient stone, remained a thorn in the side of Muslim commerce until its eventual surrender in 1571 after a prolonged siege.¹³⁹

The struggle for the Chaliyam mosque is also the subject of an Arabic poem of about 500 *radjaz* verses. Entitled *al-Fath al-mubin li'l-sāmūrī alladhī juhibb al-muslimin* ("The complete victory of the Zamorin who loves the Muslims"), this work was composed by Muhammad al-Kalikūtī and is extant in a unique manuscript. This epic poem, on which Zayn

¹³⁶ Mathew, *History of Portuguese Navigation*, 168.

¹³⁷ Also see O. Nambiar, *The Kunjalis: Admirals of Calicut* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1963), ix.

¹³⁸ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fols. 137b–138a. This claim by the Portuguese may have been true: as soon as the old Zamorin died, his successor immediately campaigned against his feudatory at Chaliyam to punish him for the transgression of selling land to the Portuguese on his own initiative. Remarkably, an almost identical account of these events is given in the Calicut *granthavari* as preserved in the Wye manuscript; Wye, "Translation of a History", fols. 34b–36b.

¹³⁹ Logan writes that in the intervening years, the fort exercised a most important influence on the development of Portuguese power in Malabar and that this period "might be summed up in a few words as fruitless attempts on the part of the Moors to break the chains that bound them in this respect"; Logan, *Malabar Manual*, I, 329. A mound of the fort's foundations remains visible at the shore. Zayn al-Din writes that after the fort was completely demolished, the Zamorin returned the stones to the local Muslims for rebuilding the mosque.

al-Dīn's account of the struggle for Chaliyam fort may be based, was written *circa* 1578, that is in the immediate aftermath of the battle.¹⁴⁰ Alongside outright destruction as in the case of Chaliyam, it also lists incidences in which the Portuguese defiled mosques, emphasizing that such actions were motivated by their desire to eliminate "the basic principles of Islamic traditions".¹⁴¹

The Portuguese scoffed at the Muslims and held them up to scorn. They ordered them about insolently, employed them to draw water, bespattered them and spat upon their face and body. They prevented the Muslims from making their journeys, especially the *hajj*. They plundered their properties, set fire to their cities and mosques, seized their ships and trampled under their feet the Book of God and other books and burnt them. They defiled the mosques [...] and publicly reviled the Prophet of God.¹⁴²

Another expression of this design is identified in the forced conversion of Muslims; interestingly, the poem adds that the individuals forced to become Christians included "even *sayyids*", echoing the special significance for the establishment and prosperity of Islam in India that is attributed to *sayyids* in the Cheraman Perumal legend.¹⁴³ In this portrayal, Malabar's Arab-dominated '*ulamā'* is synonymous with Islam in the region as a whole, and attacks on its members were representative of the threat to the religion's very existence in the region. Portuguese attacks on mosques, then, were read not just as attacks on the Muslim communities but on Islam itself; the destruction of mosques – especially ancient mosques identified with the Cheraman Perumal story – inhibited not only the religious and social functions that they served but were perceived as part of a broader effort to eradicate their communal history and identity.

Malabar's Muslims were, incidentally, not wrong in reading the attacks in this register. In the Portuguese sources, the destruction of mosques is likewise related with heavy religious overtones.¹⁴⁴ In one instance,

¹⁴⁰ See M. Khan, "Indo-Portuguese Struggle for Maritime Supremacy (as Gleaned from an Arabic Urjuza: *Fathul-Mubiyn*)", in P. Joshi and M. Nayeem, *Studies in the Foreign Relations of India (From the Earliest Times to 1947): Professor H.K. Sherwani Felicitation Volume* (Hyderabad: Government of Andhra Pradesh State Archives, 1975), 167–169.

¹⁴¹ *Al-Fath al-mubin*, fol. 155a.

¹⁴² Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fols. 112a–112b; translation follows, with minor changes, S. Nainar, "Tuhfat-al-Mujāhidin, An Historical Work in the Arabic Language", *Annals of Oriental Research* 6:1/2 (1941–42), 60. Even this list pales in comparison to the brutalities against Muslims recorded by the Portuguese themselves.

¹⁴³ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 155a.

¹⁴⁴ For a comparison of Islamic and Christian conceptions of holy warfare, see for instance, A. Noth, *Heiliger Krieg und Heiliger Kampf in Islam und Christentum: Beiträge zur Vorgeschichte und Geschichte der Kreuzzüge* (Bonn: Rörscheid Verlag, 1966).

Portuguese builders were inadvertently buried by the rubble but “miraculously” escaped, while in another they are said to have discovered an ancient crucifix in the foundations: “they believed that our Lord had sent down that sign from Heaven, in order to show [...] that their mosques should become houses of prayer, wherein his name should be worshipped”.¹⁴⁵ In the *Tuhfah*, the numerous descriptions of Portuguese attacks on mosques, including several of the ancient *jum’ah* mosques associated with the Mālik ibn Habib family, are similarly steeped in religious sentiments. The demolition of the Chaliyam mosque was somewhat of an exception, as it was achieved by politics rather than brute force and did not involve the loss of life. In most of the other incidents, mosques were burnt in attacks that also resulted in the death of large numbers of Muslims.¹⁴⁶ Zayn al-Dīn describes those slain Muslims without exception as martyrs (*shahīd*, pl. *shuhadā*’, lit., “witness”) in the *jihād* against the Franks. It is out of this sense of religiously motivated oppression, signified by the destruction of their places of worship, that the concept of *jihād* acquired a new dimension in Malabar during the sixteenth century to become a cornerstone of Muslim communal identity.

*Inspiring the Faithful to Defend a City of Infidels: Malabar and the Struggle for *Ǧihād**

The very title of Zayn al-Dīn’s history, which translates as “A gift to the holy warriors in respect of the deeds of the Portuguese”, evokes the religious dimension of the conflict. The aim of the text is made explicit: “I have compiled this account to inspire the faithful to undertake a *jihād* against the worshippers of the cross”.¹⁴⁷ The opening chapter of the work is devoted exclusively to a treatise on the imperative for, and spiritual rewards of, waging holy war. Zayn al-Dīn makes full use of his scholarly training to develop a discourse in a classical idiom, with numerous citations from the Quran and prophetic traditions (*al-hadīth*). However, he faced a major obstacle in this endeavour: although Muslims were being attacked by unbelievers, in the conventional legal understanding, their situation did not meet the conditions for a lawful *jihād*. Religiously, *jihād* has a range of meanings, of which physical struggle is only one.¹⁴⁸ Historically, *jihād* in a military sense has been extensively regulated in all the major

¹⁴⁵ Birch (trans.), *Commentaries of Dalboquerque*, I, 82 and III, 17–18.

¹⁴⁶ For instance, in the Portuguese attack on Calicut in January 1510; see de Gray Birch (trans.), *Commentaries of Dalboquerque*, II, 67, 72.

¹⁴⁷ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfah al-mujāhidin*, fol. 113b.

¹⁴⁸ The term *jihād* derives from the root *j-h-d* (جـهـد), which in classical Arabic denotes effort, exhaustion, or strain. In the Quran, *jihād* is a concept much broader than warfare but

Islamic schools of law, with these restrictions having their ultimate source of authority in Quranic prescriptions and *hadith* examples. The legal development of the concept of holy war in Islam was above all concerned with the privileges of authority, “with reserving the jihad’s military function for the properly constituted authority of a state”.¹⁴⁹ In the case of Indian Ocean port cities coming under attack of the Portuguese, however, there was no properly constituted Islamic state authority that could declare a legal *jihād*. It was against this conventional and exclusive definition of holy war that Zayn al-Din needed to make his case.

Muslim jurists have traditionally defined *jihād* against a vision of a world divided into the *dār al-Islām* and the *dār al-harb*, the realms of Islam and of war.¹⁵⁰ The *dār al-Islām* was clearly defined as a community organized under Islamic law and governed by a Muslim caliph; it was not the same as the community of Muslims (the *ummah*), as it also included Jews and Christians living under Muslim rule. A legitimate *jihād*, according to the consensus view of canonical Islamic law, is conducted either to defend the *dār al-Islām* against outside aggression, or to expand it militarily into the *dār al-harb* to bring new territories under Muslim rule.¹⁵¹ (In Shi‘i Islam, additional qualifications need to be met for a *jihād* to be lawful; in some minority strands of Sunni thinking, a *jihād* can also be directed against an insufficiently pious Muslim ruler.) The challenge for Zayn al-Dīn was how to convince his readers that the conflict in which Muslims on the Indian coast found themselves constituted a proper *jihād*, despite the fact that Malabar had never been part of the *dār al-Islām*, and that these Muslims were not fighting to bring it under Muslim rule but rather to safeguard their trade routes and communal interests. The Timurid chronicler ‘Abd-al-Razzāq Samarcandī, who visited Calicut in the middle of the fifteenth century, left his readers in no doubt about its position vis-à-vis the Islamic world: “it is a city of infidels and therefore in the land of war”.¹⁵²

has subsequently often been reduced to this more limited meaning; see E. Landau-Tasseron, “Jihād”, in J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur‘ān*, 6 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001–06), III, 35–43.

¹⁴⁹ F. Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihād: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 33.

¹⁵⁰ The concepts of *dār al-sulh* (“house of treaty) and *dār al-‘ahd* (“house of peace”) were developed to accommodate the post-caliphate reality of permanent non-Muslim states with tributary (or otherwise friendly) relationships; they appear to have been first formalized in the Ottoman Empire.

¹⁵¹ Voyages to the frontiers of the Islamic world to take part in the latter form of *jihād* formed a distinct genre in medieval Islamic travel writing; see H. Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages*, trans. L.G. Cochrane (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), ch. 6.

¹⁵² Thackston (trans.), “Abdul-Razzaq”, 303; also see M. Alam and S. Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (New Delhi: Cambridge

Zayn al-Dīn himself reiterates this standard framework that ‘Abd-al-Razzāq so confidently drew on. Putting his scholarly expertise on display, he quotes from the Quran, *hadith*, and well-known legal authorities to show the difference between the two different types of legally sanctioned religious warfare: between a *jihād* against infidels who dwell in their own countries (that is, in *dār al-harb*), and one against those who invade Muslim territories (*dār al-Islām*). To reconcile this paradigm with the situation in Malabar, the author resorts to a sleight-of-hand. He suggests that Muslims had lived in Malabar for such a long period of time and in such complete freedom that for all intents and purposes it might as well be considered as part of the *dār al-Islām*.¹⁵³

This is of course a remarkable claim, seeing as the region had not been subject to the Islamic conquests and remained entirely under Hindu rule. Zayn al-Dīn acknowledges the basic condition of Malabar’s Muslims community as being without a political or military leader of their own faith, that is, outside the *dār al-Islām*: “The Muslims in all the parts of Malabar did not have a powerful prince [*amīr*] governing them but the infidels were ruling them and organizing their affairs.”¹⁵⁴ He seeks to resolve this tension by describing the degree to which these infidel rulers had served as the proponents of their Muslim subjects. He highlights that Muslims lived free from oppression, citing as examples their ability to congregate for prayer, observe their religious holidays and burial rites, and administer their own religious rules and regulations (which would have been of added significance to someone like Zayn al-Dīn who hailed from a long line of *qāḍīs*).¹⁵⁵ Special attention is drawn to the freedom of local Hindus to convert to Islam as the epitome of religious tolerance:

They would not harm or hinder anyone from them who had submitted [i.e. converted to Islam]; rather, they would respect him as they respect all the Muslims, even if he was of their very lowest [*asāfilahum*] [caste/rank].¹⁵⁶

In this manner, Zayn al-Dīn depicts their “love for the Muslims, especially the foreigners [*al-ghurabā’*]”, implying that Malabar’s Muslims might as well be living under Muslim rule – for the purposes of his argument, the Hindu *raja* becomes transformed into a sort of honorary sultan.

University Press, 2007), 64. On the construction of the related concept of the “realm of Islam” (*mamlakat al-Islām*) in medieval Arabic geographies, see Z. Antrim, *Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Early Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 110–125.

¹⁵³ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fols. 115b, 127b.

¹⁵⁴ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 127b.

¹⁵⁵ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fols. 127b–128a.

¹⁵⁶ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 128a.

The same theme is found repeated in other Arabic texts from this period, which have titles such as “Inciting Believers into the Holy War against the Worshippers of the Cross” or the “The Complete Victory of the Zamorin who loves the Muslims”.¹⁵⁷ The implication of conceiving Malabar as a *de facto* part of the Islamic world is that its defence then becomes a legal *jihād*, which makes fighting the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean a sacred duty for the entire Muslim community.¹⁵⁸ Here, then, for the first time, the world of Monsoon Islam is expressly posited as a proper and legitimate part of the Muslim world. By divorcing the understanding of *dār al-Islām* from the precondition of Muslim rule, suddenly the far-flung port towns of the Indian Ocean world – all home to numerous, prosperous, and by and large free Muslim trading communities – become conceptualized as part of the Islamic world, to the extent that their defence is now a legal requirement for every Muslim anywhere.

Zayn al-Din, though, was not truly interested in the assistance of every Muslim anywhere: his work was directed at Muslim rulers, who in his view had failed in their religious duty of defending their Malabari brethren.¹⁵⁹ Throughout his text, a number of well-informed references are made to the wider confrontation between Muslim rulers and the Portuguese across the Indian Ocean. The historical personages referred to include a Mamluk sultan, an Ottoman admiral, a Mughal emperor, a Sumatran king, as well as a number of Deccani rulers. Zayn al-Din assesses these Muslim rulers in terms of their willingness and ardour in waging *jihād* in support of their Malabari co-religionists.

The Portuguese aggressed against the people of the land [...] and they carried on for more than eighty years until the condition of the Muslims had turned pathetic and they had become impoverished and weak and powerless. [...] And the Muslim sultans and *amirs* and their supporters in spite of the abundance of their military and their wealth did not come forward to assist the Muslims [of Malabar]. This was because they had grown careless of the matters of their

¹⁵⁷ The victory alluded to in the title of the latter work is of course over the Portuguese. Mohamed (trans.), *Tahrid Ahlil Iman ‘ala Jihadi ‘Abdati Sulban*; Muḥammad al-Kalikūti, “al-Fath al-mubin li'l-sāmuri alladhi juhibb al-muslimin”, British Library, MS. IO Islamic 2807n, fols. 274–278. To this list may possibly be added an Arabic text composed in the form of a sermon, though its dating to the sixteenth century must remain highly tentative; see M. Kooria, “Khutbat al-Jihādiyya: A Sixteenth-Century Anti-Portuguese Sermon”, in M. Kooria and M.N. Pearson (eds.), *Malabar in the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism in a Maritime Historical Region* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 60–71.

¹⁵⁸ On the individual legal duty of *jihād*, see for instance, al-Shāfi‘i, *Epistle on Legal Theory*, 153–156.

¹⁵⁹ For the concept of brotherhood in the metaphorical sense of co-religionists in Islam, see R.P. Mottahedeh, “Brother and Brotherhood”, in J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, 6 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001–06), I, 259–263.

religion and they preferred this passing world [*al-dunyā al-fāniya*] more than the next.¹⁶⁰

And elsewhere:

The Muslim sultans and *amīrs* – may Allah heighten the glory of the helpful among them – did not take any interest in the affairs of the Muslims of Malabar, although *jihād* is an obligatory duty upon them.¹⁶¹

A recurring theme of the book is how the jealousies, secular ambitions, and feuds among Muslim rulers prevented a joint effort to assist Malabar's Muslims in a concerted *jihād* against the European oppressors.¹⁶² This draws on a prominent theme in Islamic historiography: both the Crusades and the Mongol devastation had been portrayed by Arab historians (not entirely without reason) as the result of discord within the Muslim community.¹⁶³ Interestingly, even though the aim of his treatise is to make the case for religious warfare, Zayn al-Din does not use the term “infidel” (*kuffār*) to describe the Portuguese; instead, he refers to them as *al-franj*, “the Franks”, echoing a terminology his readers would very directly associate with the Crusades. Strife among Muslim leaders is contrasted with the Portuguese themselves, who are portrayed as united in sentiment and conduct:

Their word is one, they do not fear the orders of their seniors despite the distance between them and their rulers, and it is very rare that they quarrel among themselves. No one has ever heard of them killing their seniors to assume power. And for this reason, despite them being few in numbers, the rulers of Malabar and other places submitted to them. By contrast, the soldiers of the Muslims and their *amīrs* had disagreements and were also seeking to rise above each other even by means of killing [one another].¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 112b.

¹⁶¹ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 115b.

¹⁶² The exception is ‘Ali ‘Adil Shāh, “the noblest and the most respected of all rulers, one who takes delight in the struggle against disbelievers and regards fighting to uphold the divine word as a great honour”, to whom the *Tuhfah* is dedicated. As the main narrative makes clear, Ali Adil Shah’s failure to rout the Portuguese from Goa was caused by a betrayal by the nobles of Nizam Shah, with whom he had launched a joint attack in 1570.

¹⁶³ For instance by Ibn al-Athir’s in his famous *al-Kamil fi al-tarikh* (“The Complete History”, composed c. 1231).

¹⁶⁴ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 134a. Obviously, Zayn al-Din had no way of knowing the profound internal jealousies, intrigues, and power struggles that characterized the *Estado da India*; one needs to look no further than the *Commentaries* of Alburquerque for a vivid impression of their magnitude. Nonetheless, the Portuguese viceroys and commanders were consistent in their policy of suppressing the Muslims’ sea trade and uprooting them from Malabar, and it was this uniformity of purpose that Zayn al-Din experienced and described.

Zayn al-Dīn further stresses the negligence of Muslim rulers by holding up the Hindu ruler of Calicut as a paragon. He stresses that the Zamorin [“*al-sāmīrī*”], who is again described as “the lover [*muhib*] of the Muslims” expended great wealth opposing the Europeans.¹⁶⁵ Faced with the prospect of defeat, he had dispatched letters to Muslim sultans seeking their assistance but they had not come to his assistance. This reproach could not be starker: here an infidel king had exhausted his treasury on behalf of his beloved Muslims, while the mighty Muslim sultans from Egypt to Sumatra prevaricated, quarrelled, and neglected their religious duty of *jihād*. However, Zayn al-Dīn balances his censure with an enticement: he writes that whoever of the sultans came forward to confront the Portuguese and expel them from the Indian Ocean would not only earn spiritual rewards but also “the beautiful praise of all the people of east and west”.¹⁶⁶ Interestingly, after having opened his treatise on *jihād* with an exposition on the proper division of the spoils of war according to Islamic law, he makes no further mention of the more profane rewards that would also be available to a Muslim ruler who could establish his power over Malabar’s pepper ports.

In his important study of Mappila militancy, Stephen Dale argues that the conflict with the Portuguese instilled Malabar’s Muslims with a frontier mentality to which the paradigm of *jihād* was essential. He suggests that this particular form of religious militancy was distinct from Islamic idioms found in North India but was present in other parts of maritime Asia, especially Aceh and the Muslim Philippines, “even to the point of fashioning a tradition of suicidal *jihāds*”.¹⁶⁷ It is likely, though impossible to trace, that the case for religious warfare propagated by Zayn al-Dīn also travelled along these same routes and provided a legal underpinning for the transformation of armed resistance to European expansionism into a fully fledged *jihād* ideology. (The author himself was certainly a known entity and well-respected authority within the world of Monsoon Islam, as is evident from the popularity of his Shāfi‘ī legal texts that were adopted by Southeast Asian Muslims.)

However, any attempt to grasp developments in the history of Islam – in this case, the changing definition of *jihād* – through the language of law alone must fail if it does not also take into account its local character.¹⁶⁸ The religious fervour exhibited by the Mappillas in their struggle against

¹⁶⁵ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 115a.

¹⁶⁶ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 115b.

¹⁶⁷ Dale, *Islamic Society*, 56.

¹⁶⁸ Faisal Devji makes this argument in regard to British attempts at grasping jihad in colonial India; Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad*, 36–40.

the Portuguese – which Dale sees as a direct antecedent of later Muslim militancy directed against British rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – clearly revolved around more than the carefully constructed legal case for *jihād* promulgated by intellectuals like Zayn al-Dīn. Hands-on Mappila resistance took its inspiration above all from the paradigm of the martyr for the faith, from historic and contemporary figures who exemplified unjust oppression but also modelled resolve in the face of overwhelming odds.

Martyrdom as Cultural Ideal of Malabar's Muslims

On the sixteenth-century Malabar Coast, Muslims re-defined *jihād* not only to posit the region as part of the *dār al-Islām*, and therefore make its defence mandatory for Muslims everywhere, but also to make individual resistance its keystone. As with many of components of Monsoon Islam, this development too had its roots in the condition of Muslims living under non-Muslim rule. The absence of a sultan made it problematic to declare a lawful *jihād*, an obstacle that Zayn al-Dīn's legal sophistry was meant to circumvent, but the even greater challenge it presented was in terms of actually waging such a campaign. Without a central political authority able to direct a campaign, resistance to Portugal's imperial project was always going to be diffuse, sporadic, and haphazard. On the Malabar Coast, where Muslims had no history of cooperating across different port cities, and where local kingdoms varied in their responses to the Portuguese, this challenge was greatly exacerbated. As a result, it was dogged localized resistance that became the main obstacle to Portuguese expansionism in the region, and it was the individual fighting against overwhelming odds that became a cultural ideal among its Muslim communities.

In Islam, the highest spiritual benefits are available to those who are martyred in the cause of a just *jihād*. Zayn al-Dīn's *Tuhfah al-mujāhidīn* – the very title of which is a valorization of the holy warrior, or *mujāhid* – cites dozens of *hadiths* to this effect. But it goes further, by seeking to practically apply the concept of martyrdom to the ongoing struggle against the Portuguese. The text abounds with idiomatic references to martyrdom in the description of Muslims killed during Portuguese attacks on trade ships or villages, even when it is not made clear whether these individuals actively engaged in confrontation or were its passive victims. But the greatest praise is clearly reserved for the *mujāhidūn* who actively fought against the enemy and died as martyrs (*shahid*, pl. *shuhadā'*), especially when they did not surrender in the face of overwhelming force. The most vivid example in the *Tuhfah* is that of an elderly *qādī* and a pious woman,

both ignorant of the use of weapons, who defended their village mosque with their bare hands until they were slain.¹⁶⁹ According to Islamic law, however, such an extreme and ultimately pointless act of self-sacrifice was improper. The standard manual of *fiqh* for the Shāfi‘i school of Islamic jurisprudence, for example, in which Zayn al-Din himself was trained, is quite clear on this point:

There is no disagreement among scholars that it is permissible for a single Muslim to attack battle-lines of unbelievers headlong and fight them even if he knows he will be killed. But if one knows it will not hurt them at all, such as if a blind man were to hurl himself against them, then it is unlawful.¹⁷⁰

Zayn al-Din, himself the author of a textbook on Shāfi‘i jurisprudence, by contrast glorifies this kind of action as an example of true piety. There was some precedent for him to draw on. Quranic exegesis supports an understanding of *jihād* applicable to fighting in self-defence, in retaliation for aggression, or in defence of oppressed Muslims. The latter sense can be inferred from sūrah *al-Nisā’* (“The Women”) that enjoins Muslims to fight for the weak and subjugated. The historical context of the sūrah’s Meccan setting further expands this duty to aid Muslims under infidel rule.¹⁷¹ Zayn al-Din appeals to this rather arcane sense of *jihād* in his description of the struggle of local Muslims against the unbelievers: he even directly cites the pertinent verse from sūrah *al-Nisā’* in his description of the grievous famine in Muslim villages that resulted from a Portuguese naval blockade of rice shipments.¹⁷²

This ethos of martyrdom became highly influential among Malabar’s Muslims. The sources show this most clearly in the numerous audacious – not to say, suicidal – attacks by Mappila seamen. A single description may stand in for many such references:

¹⁶⁹ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 143a. Although martyrdom in Islam has become strongly associated with men, a tradition holds that the first martyr was the former slave Sumayyah, mother of ‘Ammār ibn Yāsir and an early convert to Islam, who was killed by a Meccan noble for her refusal to denounce her faith. Zayn al-Din does not discuss the *jihād* with reference to women, but here clearly describes the pious woman as a martyr.

¹⁷⁰ al-Naqib, *Reliance of the Traveller*, q2.5(4), 718.

¹⁷¹ “Why should you not fight in God’s cause and for those oppressed men, women, and children who cry out, ‘Lord, rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors! By Your grace, give us a protector and give us a helper!’?”; Quran 4:75, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 57.

¹⁷² Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 128b. Incidentally, in this intellectual endeavour, Zayn al-Din is remarkably close to the views promulgated by modern-day extreme Islamist movements, who seek to “wrest the jihad away from the juridical language of the state and make it a strictly individual duty that is more ethical than political in nature”; see Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad*, 34.

The war between them is very cruel and merciless, for the Malabars are so courageous that they never surrender, and prefer death. I have seen them, when in battle with the Portuguese, upon recognizing that they have lost the advantage, and could not avoid being taken, all gather at one side of their boat [galiote] and submerge themselves in the sea with their booty and their boat; they even wait sometimes until some Portuguese have boarded their vessel, so that they would perish with them.¹⁷³

The audacity of Malabari Muslims was even noted in Arabia, for example in a Hadrami chronicle that records the “great courage and zeal for Islam” of these Mappila seamen in their resistance against the Portuguese.¹⁷⁴

Over time, this ethos and its cultural representation served to create a specifically Mappila notion of the *mujāhid* as a courageous individual acting out of desperation, which was distinct from the traditional view of the holy warrior as a conqueror fighting to expand the *dār al-Islām*. Dale writes that while the specific role of the ‘*ulamā*’ in this process is uncertain, it “would inevitably have been those religious specialists who disseminated the idea of *jihād* and *shahīd* to sanction assaults and then sanctify those Muslims who were killed”.¹⁷⁵ Elsewhere, he argues that the *Tuhfah* itself was instrumental in elevating the martyr to a cultural ideal among Malabar’s Muslims.¹⁷⁶

The *Tuhfah* is certainly a sustained effort by an individual whose family were leading exponents of Malabar’s ‘*ulamā*’ to emphasize the duty of holy war. In its introductory treatise on the necessity of *jihād*, the book poses a distinction between two sets of circumstances. If unbelievers are in their own countries, then warfare against them is a communal obligation (*fard al-kifāya*), meaning that as long as a sufficient number of Muslims take up arms, the rest of the community is released from this duty. On the other hand, if the unbelievers invade the *dār al-Islām*, then *jihād* becomes an individual duty (*fard al-‘ayn*) that has to be discharged by every able-bodied male Muslim. However, the *Tuhfah*’s central aim was to impel Muslim rulers to raise fleets and armies against

¹⁷³ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 410–411; cf. Gray and Bell (trans.), *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 446. Fanaticism was of course not exclusive to the Muslims but also exhibited by the Portuguese fighters, whose “at times seemingly deranged audacity” (“*bisweilen wahnwitzig anmutende Verwegenheit*”) was underpinned by their technological advantage; W. Reinhard, *Geschichte der europäischen Expansion, Band 1: Die Alte Welt bis 1818* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1983), 60.

¹⁷⁴ Serjeant, *The Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast*, 117.

¹⁷⁵ Dale, *Islamic Society*, 55.

¹⁷⁶ S. Dale, “The Islamic Frontier in Southwest India: The Shahid as a Cultural Ideal among the Mappillas of Malabar”, *Modern Asian Studies* 11:1 (1977), 41–55. Also see S.F. Dale, “Religious Suicide in Islamic Asia: Anticolonial Terrorism in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 32:1 (1988), 37–59.

the Portuguese. Aside from its preamble, the book does not again discuss the individual duty of *jihād*. Rather than convincing the Mappilas of their duty of holy warfare, it devotes many pages *recording* their zeal for it in an apparent effort to shame Muslim rulers for failing to assist them in their pious and desperate struggle.

The argument that the *Tuhfah* elevated *jihād* to a cultural ideal among the Mappilas would need to show that its argument reached those Muslims who fought most recklessly against the Portuguese; it would also need to explain their enthusiasm for *jihād* during the eight decades of warfare before the book was written. The *Fath al-mu‘in*, the exegesis of Islamic law written by Zayn al-Din in *circa* 1574/5, pays remarkably little attention to *jihād*. A single passage is devoted to this theme, which is a fraction of the amount of ink spent on matters of commercial law. In this one passage, the same distinction between *fard al-kifāya* and *fard al-‘ayn* is set out, complemented by a list of conditions under which a Muslim is *exempt* from the duty of *jihād*.¹⁷⁷ No mention is made of martyrdom, and no authorities are cited to emphasize the spiritual rewards of holy warfare. It is thus far from certain that the ‘*ulamā*’ were in fact instrumental in inspiring *jihād* and martyrdom among the Mappilas.¹⁷⁸

The most important form of cultural expression of the Mappilas’ religious reverence for their martyrs was in the form of songs, known in Malayalam as *Māppila pāṭtu*. This genre of Muslim folk songs in the hybrid Arabi-Malayalam language is an almost completely neglected field of Islamic literature. In her pioneering study, Maude Keely Sutton attributes this exclusion from the canon of Islamic studies to location (with Kerala geographically and conceptually on the margins of Indo-Islam), the privileging of particular languages and literary traditions (especially Arabic and Persian), and lastly persistent questions about the Muslim identity of the Mappila community (on account of its hybrid customs as well as supposed ignorance and fanaticism).¹⁷⁹ Although much work remains to be done, it is clear that these songs can serve as an important source for the politicization of the Malabar community in response to its confrontation with the Portuguese.

¹⁷⁷ Zayn al-Din, *Fath al-mu‘in*, 329–330.

¹⁷⁸ In a critique of Dale’s book, David Arnold makes a similar point in regard to the Mappila revolt of 1921, arguing that the *sayyids*, “far from setting out to inspire revolt, were pressed into preaching it by the intensity of the Mappilas’ own sense of injustice”. D. Arnold, “Review Article: Islam, the Mappilas and Peasant Revolt in Malabar”, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 9:4 (1982), 264.

¹⁷⁹ M.K. Sutton, “In the Forest of Sand: History, Devotion, and Memory in South Asian Muslim Poetry”, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Texas at Austin (2015), 8–17.

The format and performance of these songs at festivals, known as *nerchas*, seem to derive from non-Islamic and non-Brahminical indigenous traditions; the word *nercca* itself is derived not from Arabic or Sanskrit but a Dravidian root.¹⁸⁰ There are clear parallels to the martial songs and temple festivals of the Nairs, Kerala's traditional warrior caste.¹⁸¹ Malabar's mosques and shrines are the fora for these *nerchas*, in which the community commemorates the martyrs of a *jihād* that was originally inspired by the threat to these very same institutions. Some of the songs performed at these events incorporate elements of Mappila traditions, such as the Cheraman Perumal legend, or relate the battles of early Islamic history. There are also *nerchas* devoted to the memory of sixteenth-century Sufis, to Mālik ibn Dīnār, and even to Zayn al-Din at his shrine at Ponnani.¹⁸² Most, however, celebrate the Mappila *shahids* who lost their lives fighting against the Europeans. A famous example is the *Kottuppalli Mala*, a hagiographical composition of unknown authorship. It narrates the story of a Mappila man who left during his own wedding in order to save a Muslim girl from the Portuguese. In the story, he manages to rescue the girl but in the course of events is himself killed and mutilated; the song records various later miracles that are associated with his buried limbs.¹⁸³ The war against the Portuguese is a common theme of these songs, as is the later conflict with the British and their feudatories. In fact, the two are often portrayed as part of the same, continuous struggle.¹⁸⁴

War songs (*pāṭa pāṭtu*) constitute a major part of the corpus of Mappila literature. These works "gaze outward from the community to larger relationships that came to the forefront of Māppila consciousness as clashes and interactions with 'others', epitomized by colonialism, made defining the Māppila community a necessity".¹⁸⁵ Composed in Malayalam or Arabi-Malayalam, they deal with the historical struggles

¹⁸⁰ S. Dale and M.G. Menon, "'Nerccas': Saint-Martyr Worship among the Muslims of Kerala", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41:3 (1978), 525. Also see S. Dale, "Trade, Conversion and the Growth of the Islamic Community of Kerala, South India", *Studia Islamica* 71 (1990), 155–175; Razak, "From *Communitas* to the Structure of Islam", 899–901.

¹⁸¹ For a study of the Hindu temple festivals in Kerala, see G. Tarabout, *Sacrifier et donner à voir en pays Malabar: les fêtes de Temple au Kerala (Inde du Sud)* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1986).

¹⁸² See Miller, *Mappila Muslims*, 245.

¹⁸³ See Ottappilakkool, "Role of Ulamā", 91; V. Kunhalil, "The Marakkar Legacy and Mappila Community", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 64 (2003), 370.

¹⁸⁴ See Randathani, *Mappila Muslims*, 128–137; Fawcett, "War Songs", 505–508, 528–537; Sathar, "History of Bā-'Alawis in Kerala", ix–x; Sutton, "In the Forest of Sand", 117–122.

¹⁸⁵ Sutton, "In the Forest of Sand", 115.

the community faced, in the process instilling a sense of a shared past that lives on into the present time.

The Mappilas' generally limited knowledge of Arabic, as noted by Pyrard de Laval and others, was a key factor in the prestige and authority enjoyed by the Arabophone '*ulamā'*. It stands to reason that the war songs – composed in the vernacular language, drawing on culturally resonant art forms, and performed at public events – were more likely to instil the community with a religious fervour for *jihād* than legalistic injunctions composed in Arabic by members of Malabar's traditional '*ulamā'*. In more recent times, the *nerchas* have been convened by the local '*ulamā*', but little is known about their organization in earlier times and more research in this field is called for.

Despite the clearly articulated Islamic connotation of the Mappila martyrdom (Ar., *istishhād*), its cultural idealization nonetheless suggests a continuity to the role of suicide squads in the political history of the kingdom of Calicut. Known as *cāvērs* (or *chavers*, likely from South Dravidian *cāvu*, “death”), they are noted in a number of foreign notices as well as local palace chronicles (*granthavaris*). *Cāvērs* were usually Nairs who fought until the death in their cause, which oftentimes was revenge. Whether sent on suicide missions by their lord, or fighting as part of a blood feud, their willingness to sacrifice themselves in their cause “gradually became ritualistic”.¹⁸⁶ Their exploits and ultimate martyrdom were recorded and celebrated in sung ballads, similar to the way in which the heroic narratives of Mappila martyrs were remembered and perpetuated within the Muslim community.¹⁸⁷ It is nowhere near definitive, but not altogether unlikely, that this tradition of reverence for the martyr among sections of the local Hindu society also informed the development of an equivalent cultural idiom among Kerala's Muslims.

Emergence of an Indigenized Malabari 'Ulamā'

The argument that the development of a new understanding of *jihād* on the Malabar Coast was primarily rooted in the Mappila communities, rather than the traditionally Arab-dominated '*ulamā*', corresponds to the increasingly prominent role Mappilas came to play in the region's commerce and politics over the course of the sixteenth century. The central claim of this book is that the history of Islam on the Malabar Coast – and, by extension, across much of monsoon Asia – is defined

¹⁸⁶ Haridas, *Zamorins*, 295. Also see Logan, *Malabar Manual*, I, 165–169; Ayyar, *Zamorins*, 118–120.

¹⁸⁷ Haridas, *Zamorins*, 297.

by the need to bridge the global with the local. For many centuries, a key role in this project fell to the members of an ‘*ulamā*’ that drew on non-local identifiers (Arab ethnicity, command of the Arabic language, participation in trans-oceanic networks of scholarship and affiliation) to buttress its role in reconciling the universal claims of Islam with the local circumstances and imperatives that conditioned the lives of Muslims on the Indian coast. The emigration of many *paradesi* Muslims in the face of Portuguese aggression not only changed the make-up of Malabar’s trading communities but also the composition of its religious class. Importantly, this shift was about more than just the emigration of Arabs: it was rooted in new, local forms of identity and legitimacy, as well as in new forms of communal organization that reshaped the pattern of Muslim political life on the sixteenth-century Malabar Coast.

Calicut’s Muslims maintain a genealogy of the town’s *qādīs*, reaching back into the fourteenth century. For the early sixteenth century, it mentions *qādīs* described as “Shāliyātī”, implying an association with Chaliyam (Ar., *Shāliyāt*), the very site of the famous battle over the Portuguese fort.¹⁸⁸ The historicity of this record, however, is highly doubtful. First, it is not extant in any contemporary manuscript. Second, it is contradicted by the *al-Fath al-mubīn*, written around 1578 by Muḥammad ibn al-Qādī ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Kalikūtī al-Shāfi‘ī. In the literature, this Muḥammad has been wrongly identified as the brother of Zayn al-Din.¹⁸⁹ This misidentification appears to be rooted in the fact that the fathers of both Zayn al-Din and this Muḥammad were called ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and were contemporaries. However, the *al-Fath al-mubīn* makes it unambiguously clear that these were two different men: in successive lines, it first refers to Makhdūm ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Ma‘barī al-Funnānī and then to ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Kalikūtī.¹⁹⁰ The author of *al-Fath al-mubīn* was the son of the latter man.

Intriguingly, this ‘Abd al-‘Azīz is described as “*qādī qudāt al-Muslimīn*”, meaning “judge of the judges of the Muslims”.¹⁹¹ The institution of *qadāt* *al-qudāt* is of great importance in Islamic history, where it denotes the apex of judicial organization and religious authority. Under the caliphate, the “judge of judges” was the state’s highest official role save that of caliph itself. The title cannot imply anything other than that its holder

¹⁸⁸ M.P. Koya, *Kozhikote Muslingalute Charithram* (Kozhikode: Focus, 1994), 122. I am grateful to Abhilash Malayil for his translation.

¹⁸⁹ M.G.Z. Ahmad, *The Contribution of Indo-Pakistan to Arabic Literature: From Ancient Times to 1857* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1946), 243; Khan, “Indo-Portuguese Struggle”, 166–167.

¹⁹⁰ *al-Fath al-mubīn*, fol. 168a.

¹⁹¹ *al-Fath al-mubīn*, fol. 168a.

was the highest religious authority in the land. It might be suspected that this choice of title was a son's aggrandizing of his father, or an attempt to inflate the importance of an office he hoped to inherit. On the other hand, it could also be seen as evidence that military and political leadership of certain Muslim communities in the struggle against the Portuguese was reflected in a greater role of their religious leaders. If this is the case, the *qādī* of Calicut would have had a good claim to becoming the supreme arbitrator of Islamic law on the Malabar Coast. Notably, this man is identified only by the town in which he served as judge, with no additional signifiers of ancestry or origin. Was the man portrayed as the highest religious authority of Malabar's Muslims a Mappila?

Until more extensive and reliable documentation for the composition of Malabar's '*ulamā'* in the sixteenth century comes to light, this argument must remain speculative. The sources discussed in the [previous chapter](#) clearly show that the Portuguese specifically targeted *paradesi* Muslims, which caused the displacement of foreign Muslims. In places like Cochin that were most directly exposed to Portuguese influence, the records indicate the increasing prominence of Muslims with identifiably Mappila names, even where not explicitly described as "*mouros da terra*". This discussion suggests that similar processes occurred in other areas of Malabar, although in a different constellation: in Calicut and the smaller ports in its vicinity, the greater role of Mappilas resulted from the economic opportunities opened up by the exodus of foreign merchants, their participation in new coastal trading networks outside of Portuguese control, and the wealth and military power that came from their involvement in maritime warfare and corsairing.¹⁹² The hypothesis of an emergent Mappila '*ulamā*' in the later sixteenth century thus suggests a hitherto unnoticed Mappila "interregnum" between the emigration of the traditionally Arab-dominated religious class that is celebrated in the Cheraman Perumal story and the arrival of a new religious elite of Sufi-*sayyids* from the Hadhramawt in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The monsoon mosque encapsulates the processes underlying the development of a distinct historical trajectory that this book describes as Monsoon Islam. In the legend of Cheraman Perumal, the mosque is the harbinger of Islam in India: the king did not instruct Sharaf ibn Mālik and his family to spread Islam by making converts but by building mosques. The ten mosques identified in the tradition as the original sites of the new faith on the subcontinent then became a cornerstone in the project of proclaiming and perpetuating the prestige of a class

¹⁹² For a history of Mappila corsairing, see Prange, "A Trade of No Dishonor".

of high-status Arabs who functioned as the region's religious authority. Access to a local *ulamā'* seen as legitimate was of great importance to Muslims across the Indian Ocean world as they negotiated the complexities of economic as well as social interaction with non-Muslims.

Outside the *dār al-Islām*, absent of a Muslim ruler who could appoint and sanction legal scholars, this legitimacy had to be constructed, and the traditional association between the mosque and the *qādī* was an essential part of this project. Examining the actual mosques, though, shows that the individuals found in their historical records are not *qādīs* but merchants. In contrast to the legendary account of the introduction of Islam, which stresses the role of noble Arabs, epigraphy points towards individuals of diverse and often humble origins, including a number of former slaves. The mosques themselves are testament to the processes of accommodation and syncretism that were the hallmarks of Monsoon Islam, as Muslims negotiated a place for their faith within the political and social worlds of their host communities. The legend of Cheraman Perumal has recently been described as "a lovely specimen of hybridity, with elements combined seamlessly and creatively", and the same may be said for the actual mosques that were built upon its narrative substrate.¹⁹³

In the sixteenth century, as the Muslims' place on the Malabar Coast was being aggressively challenged by the Portuguese, the monsoon mosque became an emblem of religious conflict, inspiring the development of a new understanding of *jihād*. During that period, the mosque became a site of resistance, both symbolically and in practice, as Mappila communities increasingly took control of the political and religious leadership of their communities, replacing the traditional Arab '*ulamā'*, who had either fled or abandoned their traditional markers of identity in favour of more localized associations. The militarization and politicization of the Mappila community brought them into conflict not just with the Portuguese, but at times also with Hindu rulers. This conflict culminated in an outright confrontation between Mappillas and the erstwhile "lover of the Muslims", the ruler of Calicut, as Muslims sought to establish, for the first time, their own autonomous states on the Malabar Coast.

¹⁹³ Kugle and Margariti, "Narrating Community", 369.

3 The Palace

The king [of Calicut] permits the exercise of every kind of religion, and yet it is strictly forbidden to talk, dispute, or quarrel on that subject; so there has never been any contention on that score, every one living in great liberty of conscience under the favour and authority of the king, who holds that to be a cardinal maxim of the state, with the intention of making his kingdom richer and more frequented.

— François Pyrard de Laval, *Discours du voyage des François aux Indes orientales* (1611)

Monsoon Islam emerged in the context of Muslims living in non-Muslim polities. Although Muslims eventually attained political power in a number of key regions, notably on the Swahili Coast and in parts of archipelagic Southeast Asia, Islam took hold in these regions in the context of the settlement of small numbers of foreign merchants who had to arrange themselves with local societies and potentates. This chapter examines this context more closely from the perspective of these states.

To rulers on the Indian Ocean coast, expatriate merchant communities presented both opportunities and threats. Most of all, they formed an economic resource as the conduits for the export of surpluses and the import of what was needed or desired. The wealth these merchants accumulated through their enterprise could be tapped through taxation, borrowing, or expropriation. Traders could also be a political resource, for example by facilitating diplomatic exchanges, as well as a military one, by providing ships, crews, and capital in times of war. At the same time, the presence of communities of wealthy foreigners posed potential threats to the status quo: they could upset the social order, for instance by introducing new cultural practices or religious ideas, and undermine political stability if they became too powerful within the kingdom. As a result of this inherent duality, foreign merchant communities often inhabited an ambivalent place within the body politic of their hosts.

This chapter examines the relationship between Muslim trading groups and states on the Malabar Coast, with a focus on the kingdom of Calicut. Calicut is of special interest for two reasons. First, from the

fourteenth century onwards it was the principal hub of trade not only on the Coast but across the entire western Indian Ocean. Even before the Portuguese reached the Indian Ocean, Calicut was not only known to them but was the stated destination of Vasco da Gama's first voyage to Asia: "We made for a city called Calicut [*Qualecut*], on which the king had information, and headed east in search of it".¹ Calicut's rise as an Indian Ocean entrepôt was closely tied to the city's Muslim community, which dominated its sea trade and was at the heart of a far-reaching maritime network. Calicut therefore offers a good setting to ask questions about the political role played by Muslim merchants within a non-Muslim state.

The second reason that makes Calicut a particularly useful case study is the subsequent history after Vasco da Gama had found his way to the Malabar Coast. Throughout the sixteenth century, the kingdom of Calicut was a focal point of resistance against Portugal's imperial project in the western Indian Ocean. This struggle not only changed the internal composition of Muslim communities there, as described in the previous chapter, but also fundamentally redefined their relationship to the state. Calicut's history in the sixteenth century, then, offers a special opportunity to study social and political changes brought about by the Portuguese intervention in the Indian Ocean trading world.

The first part of this chapter asks how, within the span of a single generation, Calicut rose from complete obscurity to become the pre-eminent port in the land of pepper. This development has generally been credited to the role of Muslim traders, but without asking what drew them there in the first place, and why they prospered there so appreciably. It is argued that the true source of Calicut's rise was a particular regime of property rights instituted by the Zamorins that differentiated it from its rival ports. The second part looks at the place of Islam within the political world of a medieval Hindu kingdom. By tracing the different paths by which South Indians became Muslims, it asks how religious conversion in particular was integrated into the political and historical imagination of South Indian states. The third part asks what roles Muslims played within the state. It challenges two long-held beliefs about the role of Muslims within the kingdom of Calicut. It shows that other than in the administration of trade, Muslims did not hold significant political positions at court, and that contrary to outward appearances, the Muslim merchant community enjoyed only a limited degree of autonomy from the state. The final part examines instances in which Muslims acted against the state. It argues

¹ G.J. Ames (ed. and trans.), *Em nome de Deus: The Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama to India, 1497–1499* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 69. Also see S. Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 120.

that the sixteenth century marks a qualitative shift in the political profile of Muslims, which culminated in their attempts to establish sovereign states on the Malabar Coast.

Together, these four sets of questions highlight an essential dimension to the history of Monsoon Islam: that the processes of accommodation and negotiation that are at its heart required space, in both a practical and ideological sense. It was only where rulers saw it in their own interest to provide and safeguard these spaces that Monsoon Islam could take hold – and it was only rulers with a clear stake in the fortunes of maritime trade who made this calculation.

Muslims and the Rise of Calicut

As with so much of the political history of medieval Kerala, the origins of the kingdom of Calicut are obscured by a lack of reliable sources and a thicket of historiographical myth-making.² The mythical origins of Calicut are closely tied to the figure of Cheraman Perumal. According to the tradition, just before the Chera king departed for Mecca on his quest to meet the prophet of Islam, he divided his kingdom into a number of smaller polities. This same story is also recounted in the Brahminical version of Kerala's history as captured in the *Kerālōlpatti* – though with the key difference that the Perumal departed for Mecca not because he had seen the truth of Islam but because he had committed a sin so grave that no expiation was available to him in the Vedic beliefs, so he set out to pursue the limited blessings available to him from a more forgiving faith. In this narrative, after the different territories had been allocated to various relatives and nobles and as the Perumal was about to set sail for Mecca, he realized that he had left out the Zamorin. By that time, all that remained was a territory so small that the crowing of a single cock could be heard right across its entire span. The Zamorin received this measly territory together with the Perumal's sword, a gift that the legend portrays as a mandate to expand his new-found kingdom through conquest.³

The origins of the kingdom of Calicut may indeed lie in the post-Chera fragmentation of Kerala, when the rulers of Eranad took advantage of the political upheaval to secure an outlet to the sea for their small,

² Ongoing work on unpublished palm-leaf manuscripts containing palace records promises to address some of the most pressing lacunae in establishing the contours of Calicut's political history; see Haridas, *Zamorins*, 7–12.

³ Logan, *Malabar Manual*, I, 238–240. It has been suggested that the Malayalam name for the city, Kozhikode, is derived from the words for “cock-fortress”.

land-locked principality. The emergence of a powerful kingdom centred on the port city of Calicut, and the refashioning of the Eradi lords as Zamorins, however, can only be dated to the fourteenth century.⁴ The circumstances of this precipitous ascent are something of a puzzle, but they are clearly linked to the role of Muslim merchants: from the earliest notices of Calicut, the sources are unanimous in attributing the kingdom's prosperity to Muslim trade. The *granthavari* of Calicut's ruling dynasty itself explicitly connects the rise of Calicut to its Muslims: "the tribe of Islam came from several places, and assembled together by which the *Tamuri* [Zamorin] became the most powerful, and the principal among the Rajahs of Malabar".⁵

Historians have been similarly assertive in crediting the rise of Calicut to its Muslim merchants: "There is no doubt that the Muslims of Calicut made the city's fortune".⁶ Notably, it is not only the economic prosperity of the kingdom that is attributed to the presence of Muslim traders, but also its political power and military might. Clearly, then, the rulers of Calicut were wise to attract Muslim traders to their kingdom – but the literature does not address the question of how they did so, and why more than any other port Calicut prospered through their activities.

There is no evidence to show that Muslims enjoyed a preferential tax regime at Calicut nor that they were singled out for political patronage by its rulers. Instead, the best explanation for the concentration and prosperity of Muslim traders at Calicut lies in a particular regime of property rights there, which was different to that of other coastal states in the region. This argument was anticipated, though not fully developed, by Krishna Ayyar in his pioneering study of the kingdom: "The rapid rise of Calicut was due not so much to its geographical advantages, nor even to the coming of the Moors and the Chinese, as to the character and policy of the Zamorins, which induced them to flock to this port in such large numbers".⁷ The key to Calicut's success can be found in policies by which its rulers sought to address a basic problem facing maritime merchants: trust.

Trust has already been highlighted in Chapter 1 as an inherent difficulty in conducting long-distance trade. This was not only true of traders wanting to do business with one another, but also of the relationship between merchants and states. The basic tension underlying

⁴ See Bouchon, "Les Musulmans du Kerala"; Narayanan, *Calicut*.

⁵ Wye, "Translation of a History", fol. 22a.

⁶ Bouchon, "Microcosm", 42.

⁷ Ayyar, *Zamorins*, 85. Also see Dale, *Islamic Society*, 14.



Figure 3.1 Panorama of sixteenth-century Calicut (“Calechut”), from the 1640 Dutch edition of Braun and Hogenberg’s *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1572).

Image courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection (www.davidrumsey.com).

the relationship of expatriate merchant groups and their hosts was the potential threat to the merchants’ property rights through expropriation. To a sovereign, the at times enormous capital at the disposal of merchants always constituted a temptation, particularly in the case of foreign merchants who did not possess a local power base that could oppose any arrogation. The basic dilemma is familiar enough: rulers powerful enough to protect property rights are also able to violate them with impunity. Within the discipline of economic history, the resurgence of institutional economics has put a spotlight on the institutions that allowed (or forced) states to credibly commit to the protection of property rights.⁸ In medieval Europe, merchant guilds served as conduits in managing the relationship between mercantile interests and the state, a role that was based on their ability to coordinate collective action, for example in the form of trade embargoes against predatory lords.⁹

The history and folklore of the Indian Ocean abound with stories of avaricious princes dispossessing foreign merchants, but also contain examples of merchants retaliating by acting in concert against rulers who had violated their property rights. The ninth-century account of Abū

⁸ See for instance, D.C. North and B.R. Weingast, “Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth-Century England”, *Journal of Economic History* 49:4 (1989), 803–832.

⁹ See A. Greif, P. Milgrom, and B.R. Weingast, “Coordination, Commitment, and Enforcement: The Case of the Merchant Guild”, *Journal of Political Economy* 102:4 (1994), 745–776.

Zayd al-Sīrāfi, for example, narrates the injustices committed against merchants, captains, and shipowners (*nākhudās*). These ranged from restrictions placed on their customary activities to the outright seizure of their merchandise. On one occasion, God himself interceded on behalf of these merchants by withdrawing his blessings from avaricious officials.¹⁰

At other times, more worldly responses to the abuse of power were found. Buzurg ibn Shariyār's tenth-century compendium of merchant folklore relates one such story. It concerns Ishaq ibn al-Yahūdī (meaning "Ishaq son of the Jew"), who returned to his native Oman from a trading venture to China a very rich man. He paid the local governor the required customs dues, but when the caliph heard about Ishaq's wealth, he ordered him to be arrested and sent to Baghdad. Upon learning of this capricious arrest, the local and foreign merchants of Oman closed the markets, advised others not to frequent the coasts of Oman and Iraq, and even threatened to emigrate:

We shall be deprived of our living when ships no longer come here, because Oman is a town where men get everything from the sea. If small men like us are treated like this, it will be worse for the great. Sultans are like a fire that devours everything it touches. We cannot resist it, and it is much better to go away.¹¹

Through the actions of the Omani merchants, Ishaq was freed and he hastily departed for China. However, *en route* he found himself confronted by another rapacious king in Sumatra, who ended up taking Ishaq's ship, property, and life.¹² The image of the ruler as a fire – unpredictable, hungry, minacious – evoked by Buzurg, himself captain of a trading ship, would have been recognizable to merchants not just in the Indian Ocean but all over the premodern world.

Accounts of Calicut, by contrast, abound with references to the great security merchants enjoyed there. The historical narratives of Kerala's Brahmin elite commend the Zamorin for his honesty in dealing with foreign merchants. One of their stories relates how a Chetti merchant, who had grown rich by trading in Mecca, called at Calicut on his way back to the Coromandel Coast. Because his ship was overloaded with gold, he requested to deposit some of it in the Zamorin's palace for safekeeping. When he later returned to collect it, not only was his deposit intact but the king refused to accept a share of it for his service. The merchant

¹⁰ Mackintosh-Smith (ed. and trans.), "Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfi: Accounts of China and India", 71.

¹¹ Freeman-Grenville (ed. and trans.), *Book of Wonders*, 64. Also see G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, "Some Thoughts on Buzurg Ibn Shariyar al-Ramhormuzi: The Book of the Wonders of India", *Paideuma* (1982), 63–70.

¹² Freeman-Grenville (ed. and trans.), *Book of Wonders*, 64.

exclaimed that he had never seen so truthful a king and immediately settled at Calicut to conduct his business from there.¹³

The evidence suggests that actual traders agreed with the apocryphal Chetti merchant. Ma Huan, who visited Calicut several times in the 1420s and 1430s as part of the Chinese voyages led by Zheng He, praised the efficient administration of justice there, noting in particular the severe punishments for theft.¹⁴ The Timurid envoy ‘Abd al-Razzāq Samarqandī, who visited the port a decade later and who otherwise rarely commented on matters commercial, took special note of the safety of merchandise at Calicut:

In that city security and justice are such that wealthy merchants who sail the seas bring many goods there [...]. They unload them from the ships and store them in lanes and the bazaar as long as they wish without having to worry about guarding them. The divan watchmen keep guard and patrol them day and night.¹⁵

Writing at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Frenchman Pyrard de Laval gives a strikingly similar account:

There are three large spaces in these enclosures, where the market is held every day of the week. This market is surrounded by gates and walls, and the gatekeepers do not permit anyone to spend the night in their stores where their merchandise and money is housed; and nothing is ever lost, so excellent is their justice and police.¹⁶

These descriptions of very diverse provenance all emphasize that foreign merchants could trust in the safety of their merchandise at Calicut because of the policies enacted and enforced by a dynasty that over generations carefully honed its reputation for honesty.

The most evocative account of the scrupulousness with which property rights were guarded at Calicut comes from one of the earliest descriptions of the port. On the night before Ibn Baṭṭūṭah was set to depart from Calicut on a Chinese junk that was laden with gifts from the Delhi sultan Muḥammad Tughluq to the Yuan emperor, the ship was wrecked in a fierce storm. The next morning, with great trepidation, the Moroccan surveyed the scene of the calamity:

¹³ Menon (trans.), *Keralolpatti*, 76. Another story in the same vein turns on a Muslim from Muscat, who tested various sovereigns by entrusting to them a box that supposedly contained pickles but was really filled with gold. Only the Zamorin returned the box with the gold in it, whereupon the traveller decided to settle down there.

¹⁴ Mills (trans.), *Ma Huan*, 145–146. On the punishment of theft, also see Davis, Jr., *Boundaries of Hindu Law*, 92.

¹⁵ Thackston (trans.), “Abdul-Razzaq”, 304.

¹⁶ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 371; cf. Gray and Bell (trans.), *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 403.

That night the sea struck the junk which carried the Sultan's present, and all on board died. In the morning we went to the scene of their disaster. [...] I saw the infidel, the Sultan of Calicut [...]; his officers were beating the people to prevent them from plundering what the sea cast up. In all the lands of Malabar, except in this land alone, it is the custom that whenever a ship is wrecked all that is taken from it belongs to the treasury. At Calicut however, it is retained by its owners, and for that reason Calicut has become a flourishing and much frequented city.¹⁷

The custom that shipwrecks were fair game for plunder was indeed commonplace in India, as is attested for example by a thirteenth-century inscription from the Deccan. Issued by a king of the Kakatiya dynasty that ruled in present-day Andhra Pradesh, it constitutes a guarantee of safety to all traders irrespective of their origin or destination. As part of this covenant, it make reference to the previous practice: "Formerly kings used to take away by force the whole cargo [...] carried by ships and vessels, which [...] were attacked by storms, wrecked, and thrown on the shore."¹⁸ Thus, in order to attract maritime traders, a Deccani king publicly abrogated the established custom of seizing wrecked ships. The policy of the Zamorins clearly served the same purpose. This may have been of particular importance at Calicut, which was notorious for its poor anchorage — unlike some other ports on the Malabar Coast, it did not have a natural harbour, leaving ocean-going ships dependent on lightering and vulnerable to storms.¹⁹ Although none of his own goods, nor any of his personal slaves, were recovered from the wreck, Ibn Battūtah was clearly impressed with the enforcement of property rights by the Zamorin and his officers, expressly crediting it with Calicut's prosperity as a port-of-trade.

That property rights were observed more rigorously at Calicut than at other Malabari ports is also evident in regard to another customary practice. Not only did rulers habitually seize the cargoes of shipwrecks, but even those of ships that remained intact but had been driven to a port inadvertently by winds, currents, or other circumstances. 'Abd al-Razzāq describes this practice:

It is the custom of other ports to seize as a windfall and plunder any ship headed for one port but driven by God's destiny to take refuge in another. However, in

¹⁷ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 97–98; translation adopted with minor emendations from Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 815–816.

¹⁸ Cited in R. Chakravarti, "Economic Policy of Kākatiya Gaṇapati", *Journal of Ancient Indian History* 11 (1977–78), 89.

¹⁹ That Calicut had a poor harbour and resultantly was a dangerous port for ships to anchor in is noted by a number of sources, for instance, Ames (ed. and trans.), *Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*, 73, and Cortesão (ed. and trans.), *Tomé Pires*, I, 78.

Calicut, no matter where a ship is headed, if it docks there they treat it like any other ship and subject it to no more or no less duty.²⁰

At Honavar, just north of the Malabar Coast, Ibn Batṭūṭah was informed that this practice of seizing the cargo of ships that, for whatever reason, were forced to call at a port other than the one they were bound for had a name: “this they call the right of the port [*haqq al-bandar*]”.²¹ The policies of Calicut’s rulers thus contrasted with those of other coastal potentates in safeguarding the property rights of merchants, irrespective of whether they were foreign or local, wealthy or humble, brought there by their own volition or by happenstance, and whether intact or in pieces.

It was an institutional regime designed to safeguard property rights that set Calicut apart from other ports in the region. Against a general background of avaricious rulers and the many other hazards of maritime trade, Calicut was a true haven for Indian Ocean merchants. Circumstances there were different enough for visitors of every ilk to comment upon them, and even at the time identifying them as the very source of the kingdom’s prosperity. Calicut was made by and for trade.

Conversion

The view that Calicut was an especially favourable location for Muslim traders was held not just by expatriates but also by local residents. In his history of Malabar’s Muslims, Zayn al-Din stresses that Calicut’s rulers practised little oppression (“*zulm*”) and respected the Muslims’ inviolability (“*hurmah*”) and honour (“‘azah”).²² The *Kerālōlpatti* and Wye manuscript, two texts that both reflect the perspective of the Hindu elite, likewise show that Muslims were afforded a distinct, even honoured place within Malabar’s Brahmin-centric social order.²³

The true test of the religious autonomy Muslims enjoyed within the kingdom of Calicut was conversion. The notion that religion is an inherently private property, an expression of individual and personal piety, is a thoroughly modern idea. In the premodern world, religious belief and identity were social categories, and as such always also political. In other

²⁰ Thackston (trans.), “Abdul-Razzaq”, 304.

²¹ Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 79. This custom was an expression of a particular construction of maritime sovereignty; see S.R. Prange, “The Contested Sea: Regimes of Maritime Violence in the Pre-Modern Indian Ocean”, *Journal of Early Modern History* 17:1 (2013), 24–26.

²² Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 127b.

²³ Menon (trans.), *Keralolpatti*, 64–69, 78–80; Wye, “Translation of a History”, fols. 21a.–23a.

words, while people may or may not have been drawn to the message of Islam as individuals, conversion was necessarily prefigured on a process of political negotiation. As a result, the question of whether members of Malayali society were able to convert to Islam carried with it an enormous potential for conflict.

Medieval Kerala has been characterized as a Brahmin oligarchy, and there is no question of Brahmin dominance over the region's social and political life. As the custodians of temples and their subsidiary villages, Nampūtiri Brahmins were in effect large landowners, which put them at the apex of the agrarian hierarchy as well as the religious one.²⁴ What is more, they also held sway over the ruling class through an institution known as *sambandham*. In an arrangement unique to this region of India, some Brahmin men (usually younger brothers) married Kshatriya women of the Nair caste (typically from the higher-status ranks within this caste). Nairs formed the traditional military elite and ruling class of Kerala society; this caste group is especially well known in the anthropological literature because of their matrilineal practices. Neither the wives nor children of these hypergamous unions were accorded the rights of Brahmins and remained within the Nair household in a matrilocal setup. In this manner, almost all Kerala kings were the offspring of Nampūtiri Brahmins (though technically Nairs), who benefitted from the legitimacy and authority this connection afforded them. For the Brahmins, this practice meant that they functioned as the fount of political power, in addition to their dominance in the religious and economic spheres.²⁵

The high position and influence of Brahmins at the royal court of Calicut is evident from numerous sources, including the chronicle of Vasco da Gama's first voyage: "When we reached the final door [at the palace], behind which was the king, a short old man came out, whose position was like that of a bishop, and who governs for the king in religious matters".²⁶ One of the ways in which Nampūtiri Brahmins exercised their power was by instituting a system of caste restrictions that was the most severe in all of medieval India. It had its most pernicious expression

²⁴ J.P. Mencher, "Namboodiri Brahmins: An Analysis of a Traditional Elite in Kerala", *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 1:3 (1966), 183–196; M.T. Narayanan, *Agrarian Relations in Late Medieval Malabar* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2003), 188.

²⁵ See K. Veluthat, *Brahman Settlements in Kerala: Historical Studies* ([Calicut:] Sandhya Publications, Calicut University, 1978); Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, ch. 10; Mencher, "Namboodiri Brahmins", 188; K. Gough, *Dravidian Kinship and Modes of Production* ([New Delhi:] Indian Council of Social Science Research, 1978); C.J. Fuller, "The Internal Structure of the Nayar Caste", *Journal of Anthropological Research* 31:4 (1975), 283–312.

²⁶ Ames (ed. and trans.), *Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*, 77.



Figure 3.2 The king of Cochin with his Nair retinue, from a 1638 Dutch edition of van Linschoten's *Itinerario* (1596).

Image courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection (www.davidrumsey.com).

in the notion that contact with (or even the sight of) low-caste and out-caste “untouchables” constituted a form of ritual pollution.²⁷

It is against this background of a society controlled by an exceedingly powerful Brahmin elite that enforced the principles of caste more stringently than anywhere else in India that the issue of Islamic conversion in Kerala must be situated. On the one hand, it is remarkable that within such a context religious conversion to another faith was possible at all. On the other hand, it is all too easy to imagine why for people in the lower

²⁷ See for instance, K.K.N. Kurup, *Aspects of Kerala History and Culture* (Trivandrum: College Book House, 1977), 42–44; B.B. Chaudhuri, *Peasant History of Late Pre-Colonial and Colonial India* (New Delhi: Centres for Studies in Civilization, 2008), 701; E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *History, Society, and Land Relations: Selected Essays* (New Delhi: Left Word Press, 2010), 88–91. For Dutch accounts of caste practices in Kerala, see R. Barendse, *Arabian Seas 1700–1763*, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), I, 640–644; for a modern description, see Innes, *Malabar Gazetteer*, I, 102.

strata of this social order, entering another religion, and thereby leaving behind the strictures of caste, might have been an attractive proposition.

Studies of how Islam was introduced and propagated in South Asia have shifted away from the earlier view of Islamization as an acceptance of a coherent and stable set of Islamic doctrines towards a new vision of a gradual and syncretic acceptance of Islamic practices into local belief systems. This scholarship has highlighted processes of acculturation, negotiation with indigenous religious idioms, and the gradual nature of religious realignments, all of which are closely related to conversion. To understand the nature of this alternative vision of Islamization, it is thus imperative to understand how and why people became Muslims.

Sons and Daughters: Intermarriage and Conversion

The first Indian Muslims, it is said, were the issue of temporary marriages between Arab sea traders and Malayali women.²⁸ In fact, the very term Mappila may speak to this dynamic: in Tamil, which was a common language in medieval Kerala, the word is used to denote a bridegroom. It could have been applied in this sense to newcomers who married into local families, leading to an identification of them and their offspring as Mappilas.²⁹

The legality of Muslim men taking non-Muslim wives was a topic of scholarly debate in medieval Islam. Al-Shāfi‘ī’s standard treatise, the *Risālah*, places few restrictions on marriage.³⁰ Commentaries on al-Shāfi‘ī’s work from the Malabar Coast also condone marriage to infidel women, subject to certain requirements.³¹ In practical terms, the exact nature of these marriages remains largely speculative. Much has been written in this respect on the subject of temporary marriages (Ar., *mut‘ah*, lit., “enjoyment”) in Islam: *mut‘ah* describes the contracting of marriage for a stipulated period of time, usually involving an agreed-upon payment to the bride. Muslim theologians have expressed (and continue to express) considerable unease about *mut‘ah*, which has its roots in a pre-Islamic institution. While some regard it as a legalized form

²⁸ See S. Koya, *Mappilas of Malabar: Studies in Social and Cultural History* (Calicut: Sandhya, 1983), 12.

²⁹ The etymology of the word “Mappila” is disputed. Various attempts at assigning an Arabic origin are not convincing, not least because the word Mappila was at times also applied to other, non-Muslim communities. The potential Tamil etymology is suggested by Ronald Miller and supported by M.G.S. Narayanan. See Miller, *Mappila Muslims*, 30–33; Narayanan, *Calicut*, 114. Also see Logan, *Manual*, I, 191n.1; F. Day, *The Land of the Perumals, or Cochin, Its Past and Present* (Madras: Gantz Bros., 1863), 364.

³⁰ Al-Shāfi‘ī, *Epistle on Legal Theory*, 87–89.

³¹ Zayn al-Din, *Fath al-mu‘in*, 249–253.

of prostitution, others defend it as a legitimate and necessary custom.³² The Shāfi‘i school of Islamic law, which most of Malabar’s Muslims traditionally adhere to, proscribes *mut‘ah*.³³ Some legists, however, accommodated the widespread use of *mut‘ah* by offering a legal loophole: if the period of marriage was not explicitly stipulated in the marriage contract, the union was lawful. Thus the parties could rely on verbal agreements to decide upon a period after which the marriage would be dissolved. This form of temporary marriage was practised not only in the port cities of the Indian Ocean but even in Mecca, where local scholars vigorously defended the practice, perhaps with a view towards the thousands of pilgrims who annually arrived in the city.³⁴ Islamic commentaries from the Malabar Coast, on the other hand, firmly oppose *mut‘ah*, specifying explicitly that such temporary unions are unlawful whether an end date is specified or not.³⁵ Malabar’s ‘*ulamā’* were very much engaged with this broader debate within Islamic law and took a view contrary to established practice by many Indian Ocean traders.

Despite this legal discourse, *mut‘ah* continued to be widely practised among Muslim merchant communities. Long periods of travel seem to have been an important factor in the contracting of temporary marriages; seafarers reaching the Malabar Coast could wait as long as six months before the return sailing season, and many merchants spent several years there before returning to their homeland. The particular vigour with which South Arabian tribes involved in seafaring practised this institutionalized form of temporary marriage is a likely explanation for its prevalence across the world of Monsoon Islam, including the Malabar Coast, despite the qualms of many ‘*ulamā’*.³⁶

A system of temporary marriage intersected with the practice of polygyny. Unlike *mut‘ah*, the alliance of Muslim men with multiple women was expressly allowed by Islamic law on the basis of both Qur‘anic

³² See W. Heffening, “Mut‘a”, in P. Bearman et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005), VII, 757; I.K.A. Howard, “Mut‘a Marriage Reconsidered in the Context of the Formal Procedures for Islamic Marriage”, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 20:1 (1975), 82–92.

³³ M. Khadduri (trans.), *Al-Shāfi‘i’s Risāla: Treatise on the Foundations of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2nd edn., 1987), s.346, 175; al-Naqib, *Reliance of the Traveller*, m.6.12, 530.

³⁴ See Heffening, “Mut‘a Marriage”, 757; W. Ende, “Ehe auf Zeit (mut‘a) in der innerislamischen Diskussion der Gegenwart”, *Welt des Islam* 20 (1980), 5.

³⁵ Zayn al-Din, *Faṣḥ al-mu‘in*, 249–253.

³⁶ V. D’Souza, “Kinship Organization and Marriage Customs among the Moplahs on the South-West Coast of India”, in I. Ahmad (ed.), *Family, Kinship and Marriage among the Muslims in India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1976), 141–167.

precept and the prophet's example.³⁷ Polygamy was also practised by certain caste groups on the Malabar Coast.³⁸ Islamic and local custom therefore coincided in sanctioning relationships between Muslim traders and Malayali women.

Such alliances inexorably resulted in children born of these unions. In the case of the Malabar Coast, it is reported that the children born of these unions, both boys and girls, were oftentimes brought up as Muslims. Duarte Barbosa gives this account:

These [foreign Muslims] marry two, three, four, five, or as many wives as they can support. They have all over the land native concubines and young women of low rank [caste]. And if these women have a son or a daughter that looks like the men, they make them Moors, and often the mother as well, and so this awful generation is multiplied and the people of the land call them *mapulures* [Mappilas].³⁹

It is not clear from Barbosa's account how Muslim merchants initiated their children into the Islamic faith and a Muslim identity. As will be seen below, there were certain markers, such as the wearing of beards and round caps, that distinguished Muslims visually, but those would not have been applicable to children.

Education, it seems, was a key part of "making" Muslims on the Malabar Coast. Ibn Battūtah, who otherwise tended to be rather critical of non-Arab Muslims, was full of praise for the religious education Muslim children received in various Malabari towns. At Honavar, he noted approvingly that all the Muslims know the Quran by heart because the town had twenty-three schools for boys and thirteen for girls, "a thing which I have never seen elsewhere".⁴⁰ The importance that was attached

³⁷ The Quran (esp. sūrah *al-Nisā'*) provides a detailed basis for marriage as a legal institution; however, opinions on the exact character of polygyny within Islam have differed greatly between different schools and over time. Some Shāfi'i legists held that there was no scriptural basis for taking multiple wives outside of very specific contexts (such as in times of war, when it allowed for the succour of widows), while others argued that as long as a husband was able to care and provide for all of his wives in equal measure, he should be allowed to take up to four women in marriage. See for instance, N.R. Keddie, "The Past and Present of Women in the Muslim World", *Journal of World History* 1:1 (1990), 77–108; L. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 39–123.

³⁸ See for instance, L. Moore, *Malabar Law and Custom* (Madras: Higginbotham and Co., 3rd edn., 1905), 68–69; K. Gough, "Female Initiation Rites on the Malabar Coast", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 85:1/2 (1955), 45–80; P. Kodoth, "Courting Legitimacy or Delegitimizing Custom? Sexuality, Sambandham, and Marriage Reform in Late Nineteenth-Century Malabar", *Modern Asian Studies* 35:2 (2001), 349–384.

³⁹ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 230, 230n.1277; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 74–75. Also see Koya, *Mappilas*, 20.

⁴⁰ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 67; Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 803.

to mastering Quran recitation in particular is also stressed by Zayn al-Din, who writes that the Muslims of Cannanore and neighbouring places “read the Quran and recite it very well and study religious knowledge”.⁴¹ Such a training, which in its focus on memorization and recitation was typical of an Islamic education, necessarily entailed learning the Arabic script and basic rules of grammar.

Together with the ability to speak Malayalam acquired from their mother’s side, an at least basic command of Arabic made this offspring ideally suited to act as brokers for Arab traders and many others for whom Arabic served as the *lingua franca* of Indian Ocean trade. These same qualifications made them equally useful as intermediaries in the propagation of Islam among the local population of the port cities. It is this propagation of Islamic ideas and practices that over time led to the conversion of people not born to a Muslim parent, which forms another key vector in the growth of Muslim communities across monsoon Asia.

Caste and Conversion

Until well into the colonial period, Muslim communities were almost exclusively concentrated in the port cities of the Malabar Coast, and it is therefore in this milieu that evidence for people converting to Islam must be sought. In most other Indian Ocean port-polities, whether in East Africa or Southeast Asia, members of the political and mercantile elite were among the first converts to Islam.⁴² In those places, members of lower classes and populations outside the port cities had less contact with Muslims and fewer incentives to embrace the “religion of trade”. Only after a considerable lag did Islam filter from coastal elites to these groups.⁴³ This was not true for the Malabar Coast, where there is no evidence of the higher ranks of society, which in the Indian context means members of the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes, accepting Islam. Despite

⁴¹ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 125a.

⁴² See for instance, V. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003–09), II, 808.

⁴³ See for instance, K.R. Hall, “Upstream and Downstream Unification in Southeast Asia’s First Islamic Polity: The Changing Sense of Community in the Fifteenth Century *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* Court Chronicle”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42:2 (2001), 198–229; L.Y. Anadaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008); G. Wade, “Early Muslim Expansion in South-East Asia, Eighth to Fifteenth Centuries”, in D.O. Morgan and A. Reid (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, vol. 3: The Eastern Islamic World, Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 366–408.

the prominent paradigm of the convert king of the Cheraman Perumal legend, Islamic conversion on the Malabar Coast was very much confined to the lower orders of the social hierarchy.

The most comprehensive evidence for South Indian Hindus embracing Islam in the medieval period related to a sub-caste group (*jati*) known as Mukkuvas. It is no coincidence that the occupation traditionally associated with this caste is seafaring. Since many Malabari ports had no natural harbours and only poor anchorage, merchants had to rely on lighterage at those places. This function was often fulfilled by Mukkuvas, whose traditional occupation was as sea fishermen (as opposed to groups fishing in the rivers and backwaters). During the trading seasons as dictated by the monsoons, Mukkuva sailors used their small country craft to load and unload the ships of the merchant fleets, a role that brought them into regular and close contact with foreign traders of all ilk.⁴⁴ For example, the Mukkuvas are the only one of the lower castes to be mentioned in the Chinese chronicles of Zheng He's voyages.⁴⁵ Their settlements, like those of the traders, were usually by the shore. The traditions of Malabar's Christian communities contain narratives about the conversion of Mukkuva women to Christianity.⁴⁶ Mukkuva women also appear to have interacted with Muslim men by way of marriage, or otherwise conceived relationships. According to a description from the early seventeenth century,

Mukkuva [*moucois*] women make no issue of offering themselves for money to any man, regardless of his race, nation, or religion, without any worries from their husbands, who dare not say anything and suffer patiently. There are no other concubines or whores [*garces*] than these [...], as the others only give themselves to those of their own race [i.e. caste].⁴⁷

Due to the professional proximity of Mukkuva men to Muslim traders, and perhaps of their women too, there seems to have been substantial conversion from among this caste group. Parallels in their traditions, occupations, and social customs point towards historic continuities between the Mukkuva and Mappila communities.⁴⁸ Two explanations have been put forward to explain the conversion of Mukkuvas to Islam. The first emphasizes pull factors. As Muslim trade on the Malabar

⁴⁴ See Cortesão (ed. and trans.), *Tomé Pires*, I, 81; de Gray Birch (trans.), *Commentaries of Dalboquerque*, II, 64.

⁴⁵ Ptak (ed.), *Fei Hsin*, 67; Mills (trans.), *Ma Huan*, 133.

⁴⁶ R.M. Swiderski, "Northists and Southists: A Folklore of Kerala Christians", *Asian Folklore Studies* 47 (1988), 76–80.

⁴⁷ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 356.

⁴⁸ E. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 7 vols. (Madras: Government Press, 1909), V, 107–108.

Coast prospered, servicing these traders promised greater economic rewards than traditional occupations such as fishing. Conversion to Islam facilitated such interaction, especially in business transactions that were now governed by a shared legal code. *Paradesi* Muslims also offered incentives to converts: Zayn al-Din mentions that in times past, Muslim merchants used to collect money for converts, while Pyrard de Laval writes that the Muslims “compete with one another to donate to those who have converted to their faith”.⁴⁹

A second explanation focuses on push factors. Within the hierarchy of Kerala Hinduism, Mukkuvas were a low caste on whom stringent restrictions on social interaction were imposed. Duarte Barbosa describes the severe penalties, including capital punishment, meted out by Nairs to members of lower castes who stood accused of ritual pollution.⁵⁰ Zayn al-Din describes these as “ignorant and stupid religious obligations [*taklifat*]” and explicitly identifies the caste system as driving conversion to Islam.⁵¹ Caste restrictions also hindered Mukkuvas from acting as business agents for Muslim traders since they could not move freely in the countryside. Gaspar Corrêa explicitly links these difficulties to their conversion:

The Moors, understanding that it was a good way to increase their sect, said to the King, and to the rulers of the places in which they traded, that they met with great difficulties with their merchandise because they had not got labourers to cart it from one point to another, because the labourers, being low people, could not go amongst other people, as the Nairs would kill them whenever they met them, and therefore they would esteem it a favour if those of the low people who might turn Moors should be able to go freely wherever they pleased; since, being Moors, they would then be outside of the Malabar religion and usages, and that they might be able to touch all sorts of people.⁵²

In what is a rare case of concord between the two, the most famous historian of Malabar’s Muslims and the most famous historian of the

⁴⁹ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 128a; de Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 359.

⁵⁰ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 179–180, 195; Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 7, 49–50. On the complex issue of punishment in Hindu law as practised in medieval Kerala, see Davis, Jr., *Boundaries of Hindu Law*, 90–94.

⁵¹ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 127a. A newly revised edition based on the English translation of S.M.H. Nainar adds two additional sentences that describe how these restrictions attracted Hindus to Islam; these are not part of the original manuscript. See S.M.H. Nainar (trans.), *Shaykh Zainuddin Makhdum’s Tuhfat al-Mujāhidīn: A Historical Epic of the Sixteenth Century* (Kuala Lumpur and Calicut: Islamic Book Trust/Other Books, 2006), 44.

⁵² H.E.J. Stanley (trans.), *The Three Voyages of Vasco da Gama, and His Viceroyalty, from the Lendas de India of Gaspar Correa* (London: Hakluyt, 1869), 155–156.

Portuguese empire in India are both in agreement that caste restriction drove Mukkuva sailors to accept Islam.

Corrêa makes it explicit that this proselytization occurred with the knowledge and consent of the king, a point that Zayn al-Dīn also makes. The artifice of the instant removal of a person's polluting qualities upon their conversion to Islam – as Corrêa says, once they become Muslims they are free to go wherever they please without risking punishment – is of course no more contrived than the very idea of ritual pollution is in the first place. Still, it could only work if the higher castes, the Nairs but especially the Brahmins, acquiesced in it and indeed felt as though the person now passing them on the road was no longer a threat to their purity by virtue of having embraced a new faith. Remarkably, by all accounts, they did. The *Kerālōlpatti* shows that Islam was recognized and even held in some esteem by the Brahmins; this is most evident in their describing it as the “fourth Veda”.⁵³ Zayn al-Dīn relates their reaction to the conversion of low-caste Hindus:

They would not harm or hinder anyone from them who had submitted [converted to Islam]; rather, they would respect him as they respect all the Muslims, even if he was of their very lowest [*asāfilahum*] [caste].⁵⁴

According to Pyrard de Laval, in Calicut this spirit of religious tolerance was even codified in law:

The king [of Calicut] permits the exercise of every kind of religion, and yet it is strictly forbidden to talk, dispute, or quarrel on that subject; so there has never been any contention on that score, every one living in great liberty of conscience under the favour and authority of the king, who holds that to be a cardinal maxim of the state, with the intention of making his kingdom richer and more frequented. If by chance there should arise any discord or disturbance on that subject, he who began it would receive corporal punishment, as being guilty of treason [*lèse-majesté*], without hope of pardon or remission of sentence. This is why everyone lives there in great peace and concord, notwithstanding the great diversity of nationalities and religions of the inhabitants, and of strangers and sojourners.⁵⁵

This policy of enlightened self-interest, perhaps somewhat exaggerated by a Frenchman who had grown up in a country divided by a series of bitter wars of religion, goes some way towards explaining the social status Muslim converts were able to claim. The compact between Brahmins and Muslims is also evident in other aspects of everyday life, as for example

⁵³ Menon (trans.), *Keralolpatti*, 64.

⁵⁴ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 128a.

⁵⁵ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 372–373; cf. Gray and Bell (trans.), *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 404–405.

in a report by a Chinese visitor who noted that Hindus and Muslims respected each other's dietary anathemas by reciprocally abstaining from both beef and pork.⁵⁶ It has even been claimed that Calicut's rulers not only tolerated conversion to Islam, but actively enjoined it. The estimable orientalist William Logan states that in order to man their navy, the Zamorins enjoined Mukkuva families to bring up at least one son as a Muslim, a practice that reputedly persisted into modern times.⁵⁷

Servants of God: Slavery and Conversion

After intermarriage and the conversion of low-caste Hindus, a third vector in the dissemination of Islam on the Malabar Coast was slavery. This topic is conspicuously absent from historical studies of Islam in the region, a lacuna all the more striking in view of the many references made to it in the sources. The notion that Malabar's Muslims were all the progeny of intermarriages or of willing converts who came to Islam for the prosperity and egalitarianism it offered has, perhaps unsurprisingly, proven more appealing than the idea that Muslims bought or otherwise received unfree men and women and subsequently converted them. It is hoped that by giving this topic at least the limited attention that it can be afforded here will serve as an impetus to its further study.

Slavery existed in medieval Kerala in the forms of hereditary agrestic slavery as well as debt slavery.⁵⁸ In addition, Zayn al-Dīn records in his history of the region that Hindus who violated caste restrictions, irrespective of their sex or caste, could also be sold as slaves.⁵⁹ However, slaves within Hindu society were by all accounts of South Indian origin. Foreign traders, too, possessed local slaves. One of the privileges recorded in the ninth-century *Tharisapalli* copper-plate grant to the Christian community at Kollam is a tax exemption for the purchase of slaves.⁶⁰ The twelfth-century Jewish trader Abraham Ben Yijū owned at least two slaves of local origin at Mangalore, and both Ibn Battūṭah and Ludovico de Varthema testify to the use of domestic slaves by Muslim merchants on the Malabar Coast.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Mills (trans.), *Ma Huan*, 138.

⁵⁷ Logan, *Manual*, I, 197.

⁵⁸ See for instance, Logan, *Manual*, I, 147–152; A.K.K.R. Nair, *Slavery in Kerala* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1986).

⁵⁹ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 126b.

⁶⁰ Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis*, 93.

⁶¹ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 69, 95; Reichert (trans.), *Ludovico de Varthema*, 155–156.

Zayn al-Din's compendium of Islamic law, which was intended for the use of Muslim merchant communities on the Malabar Coast but was quickly taken up by other Muslim trading diasporas in other parts of the Indian Ocean, also deals with issues related to the purchase, keeping, and manumission of slaves.⁶² His concise explications of Shāfi'i law focused on themes of immediate, practical relevance to these merchant diasporas, so their discussion of slavery and the slave trade must be seen as reflecting communal practices. There is even the suggestion that the enslavement of South Indians to the benefit of foreign merchants was promoted by the state. Barbosa reports that under the Zamorin's writ, vagrant youth at Calicut could be sold as slaves to Muslim merchants:

And if the governor [of the city of Calicut] finds any young men who are lazy, without employ, without master or father or mother, for him they are lost, therefore he takes them and sells them to the Moors [...] without hesitation and without any shame, for a very low price of three or four or five *cruzados* a piece, [irrespective of] whether it is a male or a female slave.⁶³

Muslims were thus able to purchase slaves locally, be it for commercial purposes or related to the running of the household.

Muslims on the Malabar Coast participated in the slave trade not only as consumers but also as suppliers. Ibn Battūtah attests to an active slave trade in the medieval Indian Ocean: he regularly engaged in the purchase, trade, or gifting of slaves in many of the port cities he visited, including on the Malabar Coast.⁶⁴ According to his testimony, slaves were a commonplace commodity across the Indian Ocean, from East Africa to the Persian Gulf and from India to southern China. The Indian Ocean slave trade has received less attention than the so-called "Arab slave trade" of the Maghreb and the Middle East. This is largely a function of the sources, which are relatively sparse until the nineteenth century, when the abolition of the Muslim slave trade became a cover for British expansionism in East Africa and the Persian Gulf. The dearth of clear evidence has allowed historians to come to very different conclusions about the nature and scale of the maritime slave trade on the East African coast. While some portray it as intensive enough to have resulted in regional depopulation, others question whether this trade existed at all prior to the Omani settlement of the Swahili Coast in the eighteenth century.⁶⁵

⁶² Zayn al-Din, *Fath al-mu‘in*, 375.

⁶³ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 151, 151n.802; Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 30.

⁶⁴ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, passim.

⁶⁵ For these two extreme positions, see R. Coupland, *East Africa and Its Invaders: From the Earliest Times to the Death of Seyyid Said in 1856* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1938), 17–35; H.N. Chittick, "The East Coast, Madagascar and the Indian Ocean", in R. Oliver (ed.),

Despite the lack of quantitative data, scholarship on different Indian Ocean regions has managed to amass enough anecdotal evidence, such as that of Ibn Battūtah's travelogue, to allow historians to reconstruct the typical origins, routes, and occupations of slaves in the Indian Ocean world with a good degree of confidence. Leaving aside various refinements for region and period, the general picture is one of East African slaves (initially from the Horn of Africa but later overwhelmingly from the Swahili Coast and Madagascar) being shipped towards the Middle East (especially southern Iraq and the Gulf), India (especially Gujarat and the Deccan), and China. While the origins of the trade remain disputed, there is general agreement that it intensified with the rise of the Abbasid caliphate in the eighth century and then again after the turn of the millennium alongside the general expansion of Indian Ocean commerce.⁶⁶

The agents of this trade were foreign, usually Arab and Persian, though there is some evidence for the early involvement of Indian merchants.⁶⁷ From the beginning of the sixteenth century, Swahili traders centred on the coastal city-states became widely involved in this trade.⁶⁸ Though only a small part of the overall Muslim slave trade, and diminutive compared to the volume and intensity of the Middle Passage, slavery was a persistent feature of the medieval Indian Ocean world.

It is therefore likely that Muslim merchants brought to the Malabar Coast limited numbers of African slaves for both domestic (including sexual) and commercial use. Chapter 1 described how some of these slaves came to be used, a practice confirmed by the epigraphic evidence examined in Chapter 2 that shows how former slaves served as the patrons of Malabari mosques. In keeping with Islamic precedent and general practice, any slaves acquired by Muslims in this manner would usually be converted to Islam, and typically manumitted as free Muslims after a certain period of service.

The Cambridge History of Africa, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975–86), III, 184–185.

⁶⁶ See for instance, U. Bissoondoyal and S.B.C. Servansing (eds.), *Slavery in South West Indian Ocean* (Moka: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1989); D. Scarr, *Slaving and Slavery in the Indian Ocean* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1998); G. Campbell (ed.), *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia. Studies in Slave and Post-Slave Societies and Cultures* (Abingdon: Frank Cass, 2004); J.C. Hawley (ed.), *India in Africa, Africa in India* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).

⁶⁷ See G. Campbell, “East Africa in the Early Indian Ocean World Slave Trade: The Zanj Revolt Reconsidered”, in G. Campbell (ed.), *Early Exchange between Africa and the Wider Indian Ocean World* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 275–304.

⁶⁸ T. Vernet, “Slave Trade and Slavery on the Swahili Coast (1500–1750)”, in B.A. Mirzai, I.M. Montana and P. Lovejoy (eds.), *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora* (Asmara: Africa World Press, 2009), 39.

Another reason why Muslims brought African slaves to the Malabar Coast and other Indian Ocean ports was for military purposes. On account of their height and perceived soldiering ability, there was a distinct preference for slaves from the area of the modern-day states of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Known in Arabic as Habshis and in European sources as Abyssinians, enslaved men from this region commanded high prices in the slave markets of the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Military slavery was a prominent feature of the Muslim sultanates of North India and the Deccan. The most famous Habshi in the context of Indian history is Malik Ambar, a military slave who by way of slave markets in Mocha, Baghdad, and Mecca ended up in central India. He served the chief minister of the Ahmadnagar sultanate (who was himself a former military slave) and upon the death of his master became a freelancer. Possessed of great intelligence and leadership ability, Ambar amassed a sizeable force, became a thorn in the side of the Mughal empire, and eventually became the *de facto* ruler of the sultanate.⁶⁹

A lesser known dimension of Habshi military slaves is their use on Indian Ocean vessels. Military slaves were used both aboard merchant ships, as a defence against the ubiquitous threat of piracy, as well on state-owned armed galleys.⁷⁰ Ibn Battūtah, in his description of galleys on India's west coast, mentions Habshi slaves ("al-habshah") as men-at-arms; himself no stranger to pirate attacks, the Moroccan saw them as "the protectors on this sea".⁷¹ Similarly, in his report of the Chinese junks in Calicut's harbour, he states that when the shipowner's agent went ashore, he was accompanied by archers and Habshis armed with javelins and swords.⁷² The martial prowess ascribed to East Africans in particular fuelled their enslavement in the Horn of Africa. Habshi slaves served not only in land-based armies all over the Muslim world but also aboard Indian Ocean ships.

The continuities between military and maritime slavery can even be observed in the trajectories of individual slave biographies. At the port of Barkur, on the northern Malabar Coast, Ibn Battūtah met a Habshi by the name of Lūlā (like Ambar, a generic name Arabs often gave to

⁶⁹ See R. Eaton, "Malik Ambar and Elite Slavery in the Deccan, 1400–1650)", in K.X. Robbins and J. McLeod (eds.), *African Elites in India: Habshi Amarat* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 2006), 45–67; O.H. Ali, *Malik Ambar: Power and Slavery across the Indian Ocean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷⁰ On the intermittent use of galleys for the protection of maritime trade routes in the medieval Arabian Sea, see S.R. Prange, "The Contested Sea", 20–24.

⁷¹ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 59–60.

⁷² Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 93.

slaves).⁷³ He served as the commander of the local ruler's warships and was engaged in a maritime protection racket, in which ships were forced in the port and made to present a "gift".⁷⁴ It is tempting to speculate that, in a parallel to Malik Ambar's career, Lūlā and his men had come to South India as slaves (most likely as part of a ship's crew or protection detail), attained their freedom, and then became maritime mercenaries in the service of a Hindu king.

Due to their dominance of shipping on many routes, Muslims were also involved in the supply of slaves from regions other than East Africa and Arabia.⁷⁵ Duarte Barbosa writes that during the rare years in which the Coromandel Coast experienced drought and famine, families there resorted to selling their children.⁷⁶ In such years, he continues, Muslims from Malabar brought them rice and coconuts; they then returned "with ship-loads of slaves", made up of children who had been purchased at steeply discounted prices during a time of crisis.⁷⁷

Although Islamic theologians at times wrestled with the issue of slave conversion, both in regard to whether it could be enforced and whether it could be trusted as sincere, a general view held that enslavement should be seen as "a golden opportunity to learn about the true faith".⁷⁸ In keeping with the legal opinion – explicitly reaffirmed by Zayn al-Dīn for the local Muslim community – that the unforced (but incentivized) conversion of slaves was permissible and desirable, a retinue of pious slaves could serve as a sign of prestige for Muslim magnates. Although impossible to quantify, slavery must be acknowledged as having contributed to Islamic proselytization in the world of Monsoon Islam.

The three main vectors of conversion – intermarriage, conversion of (especially low-caste) Hindus, and slavery – engendered the growth of

⁷³ Lūlā is likely derived from the Arabic word for "pearl", while Ambar stems from the word for "ambergris". On the naming of slaves in the Arabic language, see for instance, Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 113n.5.

⁷⁴ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 78–79, 101; discussed in Prange, "A Trade of No Dishonor", 1277–1279.

⁷⁵ The study of the Indian Ocean slave trade has its greatest champion in the work of Gwyn Campbell, who has written and edited numerous works on this topic; see for instance, G. Campbell (ed.), *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (Abingdon: Frank Cass, 2004).

⁷⁶ For the tragic parallel of debt bondage in present-day Tamil Nadu, see I. Guérin, "The Political Economy of Debt Bondage in Contemporary South India", in G. Campbell and A. Stanziani (eds.), *Bonded Labour and Debt in the Indian Ocean World* (London: Routledge, 2016), 119–134.

⁷⁷ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 302–303; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 125.

⁷⁸ W.G. Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 41.

Malabar's Mappila communities. Each of these paths was characterized by a process of acculturation, with new Muslim communities retaining many indigenous customs. The Mappilas' forms of cultural expression also remained localized, as is evident for example in their ballads which, although concerned with archetypically Islamic themes such as the Battle of Badr or *jihād*, were composed and recited in Malayalam. The creation of the Arabi-Malayalam language may be regarded as an extension of this cultural negotiation between Arabic and Malayalam idioms. As a result of the syncretic character of Mappila communities, there existed a noticeable difference between foreign (mainly Arab) Muslims and local Muslim communities. This distinction between *paradesi* Muslims and Mappilas was immediately obvious even to Europeans, who so often were rather indiscriminate in their understanding of the "other".⁷⁹ Duarte Barbosa writes that the Mappilas speak the same language as the Nairs, and go about naked like them, "but as a token of distinction they wear round caps on their heads and [have] long beards".⁸⁰ The foreign Muslims, on the other hand, are described as "well dressed in silk cloths, cotton cloths, and twisted hats [turbans] around their heads".⁸¹ It is interesting to note that aside from the racial distinction Barbosa draws (to his eyes, in contrast to South Indian Muslims, Arabs are "white, well-bred and proper to behold"), the main differences he points to are linguistic (the Mappilas speak the local language) and especially sartorial (the Mappilas go naked while the Arabs are dressed in fine textiles). These markers of difference may seem the most permeable, yet have proven remarkably resilient; while Mappilas today certainly do not go about naked, specific forms of dress are still associated with the *sayyid* Thangals of Hadhrami lineages.⁸²

It was not only outsiders who commented on the differences between *paradesis* and Mappilas, but also other Muslims. At times, this was expressed in terms of sharp disdain for some of the syncretic Mappila practices. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah was annoyed by a Malabari Muslim he had hired as a porter, the only other Muslim on his riverboat journey between Calicut and Kollam. Every night, he complains, this Mappila would go ashore with the Hindu boatmen (a Mukkuva perhaps?) to

⁷⁹ See for instance, Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology*.

⁸⁰ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 229; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 74.

⁸¹ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 234; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 77–78.

⁸² In addition, today's dress codes are increasingly an expression of the wearer's ideological affinity for a traditionalist, modernist, or neo-revivalist interpretation of Islam.

drink wine and brawl.⁸³ In a similar vein, Zayn al-Dīn, with a jurist's sentiment, censured Mappilas who practised matrilineality (*Malayal, marumakkatayam*).⁸⁴ It has already been noted that Nairs, with some regional variation, practised a matrilineal form of marriage and kinship in their unions with Brahmin men. The same was true of some other caste groups, including the Mukkuvas. Given the trajectory of conversion by Mukkuvas to Islam, matrilineal practices also found their way into some groups of Mappila Muslims.⁸⁵ This was no small matter, as observing *matrilineality* determined the shape and nature of fundamental social practices such as marriage, residence patterns, child-rearing, and inheritance. The observance of matrilineality, and especially matrilineal inheritance rights, by some Mappila communities stood in drastic contrast to the agnatic precepts of Islamic law, which led jurists such as Zayn al-Dīn to decry them as un-Islamic. However, they formed a lived continuity to the practices of those Hindu communities from which converts were drawn, and exemplify in a very real and tangible way the intercultural processes at the heart of Monsoon Islam.⁸⁶

Muslims within the State

The political parameters of Monsoon Islam were, for the most part, set by coastal states heavily reliant on the proceeds of maritime trade. Within these states, Muslims were minorities religiously and often outsiders to the social and political order, but in economic terms they were of central importance. On the Malabar Coast and in other trading regions of maritime Asia, Muslim merchants thrived most in polities that were relatively small, stood in competition with one another, and that were disproportionately oriented towards the sea.⁸⁷ Monsoon Islam was, in this

⁸³ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 98–99; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 816.

⁸⁴ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 125a.

⁸⁵ See K. Gough, "Mappilla: North Kerala", in D.M. Schneider and K. Gough (eds.), *Matrilineal Kinship* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1962), 415–442. The Mappillas of the northern Malabar coast are one of the few matrilineal Muslim communities; other exponents are found in coastal Malaysia and East Africa; see for example, M. Stivens, *Matriliney and Modernity: Sexual Politics and Social Change in Rural Malaysia* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996) and J. Brain, "Bantu, Central Tanzanian", in R.V. Weekes (ed.), *Muslim Peoples: A World Ethnographic Survey*, 2 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), I, 101–103.

⁸⁶ See A. Sebastian, "Matrilineal Practices among Koyas of Kozhikode", *Journal of South Asian Studies* 1:1 (2013), 66–82; K. Gough, "Kinship and Marriage in Southwest India", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 7:1 (1973), 104–134.

⁸⁷ This is true of medieval trade beyond the Indian Ocean; see for instance, M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, new edn., 2012), 408.

sense, an interstitial phenomenon that developed most dynamically in the context of weak states, whose rulers were rivals to one another but who shared in a wary suspicion of the great landed empires. Muslim merchant communities took advantage of these conditions to further their economic interest, but only rarely sought to leverage this influence for political gain.

Calicut's rulers offered Muslim merchants physical security as well as a degree of religious autonomy that extended even to converting some of their subjects to Islam. Their motivation for doing so was transparent even to a casual visitor: as Pyrard de Laval noted, the Zamorins held these policies as the cardinal maxims of their government ("principale maxime d'État") in order to make their kingdom rich and powerful.⁸⁸ Political power on the Malabar Coast depended less on the possession of territory than it did on control over commerce. It is true, the rulers of Calicut did seek to subdue rival rulers and to extend their sovereignty over the pepper-producing hinterlands. But even though they at times succeeded in imposing themselves as the bearers of the formal symbols of sovereignty, for example by minting coins or patronizing temples in those regions, the exercise of actual power, expressed for instance in the ability to collect taxes, was an altogether different matter. As Stephen Dale writes, beyond their historic provinces, Malabari kings "exercised hegemony over a sphere of influence rather than direct control over an integrated, centralized state".⁸⁹

Dale's view reflects a shift in recent scholarship towards a more critical assessment of the view that South Indian kingdoms were integrated, centralized monarchies – a vision that was actively propagated at the time, especially in the form of bombastic inscriptions, but that only rarely corresponded to the actual conditions of sovereignty. Historians of medieval South India have come to disaggregate ritual authority from the exercise of concrete political power, thereby revealing how South Indian monarchs linked together shifting constellations of smaller political and economic units without necessarily directing them in a way commensurate to their ceremonial performance of power and legitimacy.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 373.

⁸⁹ Dale, *Islamic Society*, 15.

⁹⁰ For key contributions to this historiography, see B. Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980); D.D. Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); N.B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); J. Heitzman, *Gifts of Power: Lordship in an Early Indian State* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); R. Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990); N. Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); D. Ali,

Even against this general characterization of the medieval South Indian state as a “little kingdom” whose ruler wears, figuratively speaking, a “hollow crown”, the Malabar Coast stands out as an extreme.⁹¹ Unlike say the Chola or Hoysalas, who respectively ruled Karnataka and Tamil Nadu during the medieval period, Malabari kings were by and large unable to tax land. Their inability to derive significant revenue from agricultural production was further aggravated by the steady growth of temple lands, from which the Brahmin class, rather than temporal rulers, collected dues.⁹² Because on the Malabar Coast land was not the source of power, the logic of territorial acquisition and centralization that was at play in other parts of India during this period did not gain much traction there. Instead, within the highly fragmented political framework of competing thalassocracies centred on the different port cities, kingship coalesced around “houses by the sea”, large household formations like that of the Zamorins whose power stemmed from their ability to tap into the revenues of maritime trade.

It is telling that the ruler of Malabar’s most powerful kingdom, Calicut, in his very regnal title identified the sea as the source of his power: Zamorin is widely considered to be a corruption of the term *Samudra Raja*, or “lord of the sea”.⁹³ Unlike the great agrarian empires of Indian history, to whose fortunes the sea was more or less peripheral, for the coastal states of Malabar and elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, control over maritime trade was essential to the exercise and definition of sovereignty.⁹⁴

Monarchy on the Malabar Coast was “the story of an ever-shifting coalition of merchants, naval powers and the emergent courts”.⁹⁵ Political competition between Malabari states took place within these

Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁹¹ Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, 5–10; Dirks’s use of the image of the “little kingdom” draws on B. Cohn, “Political Systems in Eighteenth Century India: The Banaras Region”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82:3 (1962), 312–320.

⁹² See for instance, Pillai, *Studies*, 325–329, 343–350.

⁹³ *Samudra Raja* is itself a derivation of the *Samudrāthiri*, meaning “one who has the sea for his border”. Over time, the title *Samudrāthiri* was shortened to *Sāmūtiri*, which then served as the basis for various bastardizations in other languages. See Ames (ed. and trans.), *Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*, 74n.19. However, it must be noted that this etymology is not universally accepted; see for instance, Haridas, *Zamorins*, 57.

⁹⁴ See Prange, “Contested Sea”, 31–32.

⁹⁵ D.M. Menon, “Houses by the Sea: State-Formation Experiments in Malabar, 1760–1800”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 34:29 (1999), 1997. Also see M. Frenz, *Vom Herrscher zum Untertan: Spannungsverhältnis zwischen lokaler Herrschaftsstruktur und der Kolonialverwaltung in Malabar zu Beginn der britischen Herrschaft (1790–1805)* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2000).

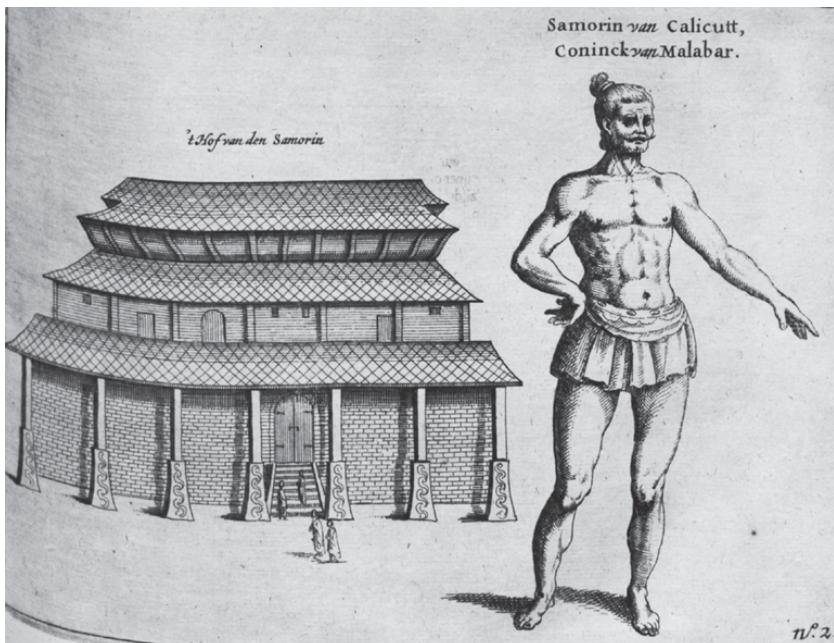


Figure 3.3 The Zamorin of Calicut and his palace, from the 1644 Dutch edition of the *Beschrijvinghe van de tweede voyageghedaen met 12 schepen naer d'Oost-Indien onder den heer admirael Steven van der Hagen*. Image courtesy of the Universiteitsbibliotheek Utrecht.

shifting alliances between political and mercantile interests. A thriving port allowed rulers to tax not only the buying and selling of indigenous products, pepper and ginger foremost among them, but also the expanding transhipment trade. In the absence of significant native trading groups, rulers patronized expatriate merchant communities to develop their ports of trade. The earliest evidence for this is the copper-plate deed from the middle of the ninth century described in Chapter 1, which granted a number of social and commercial privileges to Kollam's Christian community. For the most part, such patronage centred on giving communities varying degrees of autonomy in administering their own affairs. This has led historians to claim that while Hindu society formed the *pays légal*, foreign traders of different faiths existed on the Malabar Coast as "parallel societies".⁹⁶

⁹⁶ K.M. Panikkar, *A History of Kerala, 1498–1801* (Annamalainagar: Annamalai University, 1959), 9.

There is no question that their dependence on the revenues of maritime trade, and the constant competition with one another over this trade, caused Malabari rulers to grant a significant degree of autonomy to foreign trading groups. The epigraphic evidence shows for example that foreign traders were able to practise their religion freely and that they received certain symbolic privileges, such as the right to tile the roof of their houses of worship, as well as more concrete ones such as endowments. But the notion that expatriate merchant communities existed outside of and in parallel to the prevailing political framework is more ambiguous. As Sugata Bose points out in his survey of Indian Ocean history, pre-colonial states “possessed a shared and layered concept of sovereignty, which had helped create certain autonomous spaces for the inhabitants of port cities”.⁹⁷ The autonomous spaces that merchant groups enjoyed in the port cities of the Malabar Coast existed very much as part of the overall structure and conception of sovereignty, rather than in opposition to it.

This can be illustrated by looking at the political organization of Muslims in places such as Calicut. Duarte Barbosa, who as an agent of the Portuguese was unlikely to be intimately familiar with the intra-communal organization of the Muslim traders, claimed that at Calicut they had “a Muslim governor of their own, who rules and punishes them without interference from the king, save that the Governor gives an account of everything to the king”.⁹⁸ The phrase “Moorish governor” (“governador mouro”) must be taken to mean the head of the Muslim community since, as Barbosa himself states elsewhere, the governor of Calicut was a Hindu of the Nair caste.⁹⁹ It is not clear from his description whether this Muslim governor was the head of the merchants, that is the *ra‘is al-muslimīn* previously identified from inscriptions, or a religious authority. The latter interpretation seems less likely in light of Pyrard de Laval’s description of the role of Muslim “priests” (“prêtres”) in Malabar, who he says are only employed in conducting marriages and at the mosques but have “no hand in the administration of justice”.¹⁰⁰

Barbosa’s claim that Muslims were able to administer their own justice is problematic beyond this point. Zayn al-Din’s account shows

⁹⁷ S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 25.

⁹⁸ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 232; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 76.

⁹⁹ “In the city of Calicut the king maintains a governor who has the name *Taliaksi*, a Nair”; Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 143; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 26–27.

¹⁰⁰ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 319.

that Muslims were able to implement certain aspects of Islamic law (“*al-shari‘ah*”), for instance by punishing those among them who failed to observe the Friday prayer.¹⁰¹ However, he also makes it clear that their authority did not extend beyond such matters: if a Muslim was found guilty of a crime, he was punished according to the law of the land. The only differences in the treatment of Hindu and Muslim malfeasants were procedural, with Muslims receiving somewhat more favourable (or less excruciating) treatment than Hindus. For example, Muslims would be executed by the blade rather than boiled alive, and receive an Islamic burial rather than being left for scavengers. But Muslims were not the only ones for whom the administration of justice differed: Brahmins were entirely excluded from corporal punishments.¹⁰² As a person well-versed in (Islamic) law himself, Zayn al-Din expressly states that Muslims were the legal subjects (“*ra‘āya*”) of Malabar’s Hindu rulers.¹⁰³ In fact, Zayn al-Din goes even further than this, suggesting that the Muslims were not just subject to local justice but, in the absence of strong political leadership from within, were being actively governed by the Hindu states: “the Muslims in all the parts of Malabar did not have a powerful *amir* governing them but the infidels were ruling them and organizing their affairs”.¹⁰⁴ So despite the religious and economic privileges foreign trading communities enjoyed within the kingdoms of the Malabar Coast, they remained subject to the laws of the land and its political institutions.

In the maritime city-states of the Mediterranean, merchants were not only the economic but also the political elites. The position of Muslim merchants in the Indian Ocean was different: as outsiders, for the most part they did not share in the execution of state functions. The exception to this was the administration of trade in the port cities. As seen in Chapter 1, the role of the *shāhbandar* was more limited on the Malabar Coast than in Southeast Asian ports, but it nonetheless invested Muslims with a degree of official authority over the handling of maritime trade. As a member of the Chinese treasure fleet, Ma Huan was in a good position to observe in detail the administration of trade at Calicut. He describes the role Muslims played in supervising wholesale transactions with foreign ships, including the collection of dues which were then transferred to the royal household. For large cargoes, such as those held by the Chinese treasure-ships, prices were fixed aboard the vessel, prior to

¹⁰¹ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 127b.

¹⁰² Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 144–145, 145n.765, 150; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 28, 34; Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 128a.

¹⁰³ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 127b.

¹⁰⁴ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 127b.

unloading. Once a written agreement about the price of the different goods was prepared, the representatives of the visiting merchants and the resident merchants “all join hands, and the broker then says ‘In such and such a moon on such and such a day, we have all joined hands and sealed our agreement with a hand-clasp; whether [the price] be dear or cheap, we will never repudiate it or change it’”.¹⁰⁵ This role naturally gave the Muslim administrators of Calicut’s maritime trade immense sway, allowing them to influence not only local prices and market conditions but ultimately also state revenues.

Outside of their involvement in managing transactions of foreign merchants at the port, the other political function Muslims were involved with was the conduct of foreign relations.¹⁰⁶ With Arabic as the *lingua franca* of the Indian Ocean and the town’s merchants frequenting markets from Cairo to Quanzhou, they naturally recommended themselves as diplomats, especially in dealings with Muslim kings.¹⁰⁷ A chronicle of Yemen’s Rasulid dynasty records that in the year 1368/9 (AH 770) its sultan received a gift from the ruler of Calicut (“ṣāḥib al-Kālīqū”), which was likely conveyed by Muslim merchants from Malabar who regularly frequented Aden, a major entrepôt in the pepper trade.¹⁰⁸ Another source claims that in the early fifteenth century, the Zamorin sent a Persian-speaking Muslim from Calicut as his official envoy to the Timurid court;

¹⁰⁵ Mills (trans.), *Ma Huan*, 140–141. This passage also contains the misleading suggestion that the “two great chiefs who administer the affairs of the country [Calicut]” were Muslims. Ma Huan’s error in this regard is most likely due to his lack of knowledge about the country outside of the port of Calicut itself; this myopia would also account for his highly skewed impression that the “majority of the people in this country all profess the Muslim religion”. Mills (trans.), *Ma Huan*, 140, 143.

¹⁰⁶ See for instance, Bouchon, “Microcosm”, 45.

¹⁰⁷ Fernando Rosa Ribiero claims that Zayn al-Din, author of the *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, personally carried out diplomatic missions on behalf of the Zamorin and wrote his Arabic correspondence; the basis for these claims is not identified. See F.R. Ribiero, “Two Sixteenth-Century Indian Ocean Intellectuals in Goa and Malabar: Orta and Zainuddin”, in M. Pearson (ed.), *Trade, Circulation and Flow in the Indian Ocean World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 154.

¹⁰⁸ H. Yajima (ed.), *A Chronicle of the Rasulid Dynasty of Yemen: From the Unique MS Paris no. Arabe 4609* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1976), 31, 31n.5. This account is not without its problems: puzzlingly, the name of the ruler of Calicut is given as *al-Mālik Dāfi* (in an alternative version “Ṣāfi”). The term *dāfi* could conceivably be derived from the Arabic *daffah* (also *diffah*) meaning “coast”, which would render the term “lord of the coast”, which is actually a very close approximation of the original meaning of “Zamorin” as “one who has the sea for his border” (from *Samudrāthīri*). However, this inference does not account for the long vowel (*alif*) after the initial consonant, and the lack of a definite article would suggest that it was understood as a personal name rather than as part of the title. See N. Groom, *A Dictionary of Arabic Topography and Placenames* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1983), s.v. “Diffah”, 77.

however, the wider context of this source raises some doubts about the veracity of this story, which is examined in detail in the next chapter.¹⁰⁹

The evidence is much clearer when it comes to Calicut's Muslims interacting with foreign polities on their own behalf rather than as agents of a Hindu king. Whether seeking tax exemptions from the sultans of Yemen or interacting with the Chinese court in the context of the so-called tribute trade, Muslim merchants engaged with foreign rulers as representatives of the commercial interests of their home port.¹¹⁰ Thus, while at times Calicut's Muslims represented Malabari rulers overseas, primarily by delivering gifts that were such an essential element of premodern diplomatic exchanges, more often they merely tried to lend an official veneer to their attempts at currying favour with foreign rulers. This was important since in many cultures, most notably in China, the mercantile profession was not held in high esteem; claiming an official diplomatic mandate could ease access to foreign courts and courtiers.¹¹¹

Another role within Malabari states that is ascribed to Muslims is potentially of much greater consequence than the administration of foreign trade or the transport of official gifts to distant rulers: military support. The oft-repeated claim that Calicut came to dominate the region's political landscape through "the help of the foreign merchants and Arab soldiers" suggests that Muslims were pivotal to the politics of Malabar's most powerful kingdom.¹¹² If true, it would call into question the quintessentially commercial nature of Malabar's Muslim communities and instead put them at the very heart of the body politic of the Malabari state, for what function is more important to the working of the state than its ability to wage war? Yet, this vision of Muslims as a fourth estate within the kingdom is based in its entirety on one single passage of the *Kerālōlpatti*, the legendary and often problematic account of Kerala's history that is extant only in much later manuscripts.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Thackston (trans.), "Abdul-Razzaq", 304.

¹¹⁰ R.M. Hartwell, *Tribute Missions to China, 960–1126* (Philadelphia, PA: n.p., 1983), 200. The Chinese sources often represent Malabar as part of *So-li* (Chola), even after the end of the Chola empire. See for instance, Wang Gungwu, "The Opening of Relations between China and Malacca, 1403–05", in L. Suryadipata (ed.), *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 22n.15.

¹¹¹ See for instance, R.J. Lufrano, *Honorable Merchants: Commerce and Self-Cultivation in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

¹¹² Nambiar, *Kunjalis*, 41.

¹¹³ The *Kerālōlpatti* very clearly reflects a Brahminical vision of the past; one historian has described it as "stories concocted by a Maputiri [a Nampūtiri Brahmin] on a fine morning"; Kunjan Pillai, cited in K. Veluthat, "History in the Construction of Regional Identity: Kerala and the Keralolpatti", in R. Seshan (ed.), *Medieval India: Problems and Possibilities. Essays in Honour of Professor A.R. Kulkarni* (Jaipur: Rawat, 2006), 97n.6.

The passage in question relates to the Zamorin's conquest of Tirunavaya, near Tirur to the south of Calicut. Tirunavaya was the traditional site of the Mamankam festival, control over which was an important symbolic expression of Keralan kingship. The *Kerālōlpatti* relates that a Muslim, said to have been originally from Muscat and known only as Koya, aided the Zamorin in conquering Tirunavaya by leading a naval force to support Calicut's army.¹¹⁴

Aside from this reference of dubious veracity, there is no further suggestion of Muslim military aid to the Zamorins. On the contrary, from what is known about the Zamorins' wars of conquest in the fifteenth century, these were executed by large Nair armies with no reference to naval components.¹¹⁵ It is true, Ibn Battūtah speaks of a Muslim commanding warships for the ruler of Barkur and a colony of Iraqi archers at Kollam, but both these references are best understood in the context of piracy and corsairing rather than warfare.¹¹⁶ In all the remaining evidence, there is no suggestion that Muslims ever served Malabari rulers in a military capacity, or that their communities had acquired a martial character, prior to the coming of the Portuguese. In fact, any such role would have been highly unlikely in view of how jealously members of the Nair caste guarded their monopoly on weaponry and warfare.

In sum, there is little to show that Calicut's Muslims fulfilled political functions within the state. They played a prominent role in the administration of commerce, which corresponds to their preponderance in Calicut's sea trade. But it is far from certain that they enjoyed judicial autonomy or represented the Zamorins in diplomatic exchanges; the perception that Muslims held these roles is almost certainly rooted in the sixteenth-century history of the Malabar Coast, when Muslims acquired a much more distinctive political profile within local states. Nor do Muslims appear to have played a role in the military campaigns of South Indian states. It is in such lack of military assistance to the state that Jessica Goldberg finds the key difference between European and Muslim merchants in the medieval Mediterranean. In her view, Italian traders enjoyed only one great advantage over Muslim merchants, in that they were able to turn their ability to wage war on behalf of their sovereign into commercial privileges and political influence.¹¹⁷ This same argument can be extended to the Indian Ocean. It is often observed that Muslim networks in the medieval Indian Ocean operated for the most

¹¹⁴ Menon (trans.), *Keralolpatti*, 79–80.

¹¹⁵ See for instance, Ayyar, *Zamorins*, 121–137.

¹¹⁶ Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 78–79, 101.

For a discussion of these references, see Prange, "A Trade of No Dishonor", 1277–1279.

¹¹⁷ Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 359.

part without the backing of a state and with relatively low levels of violence. Against this background, the Portuguese, Dutch, and English were “strange new traders who brought their states with them”.¹¹⁸ European merchants operating in monsoon Asia enjoyed distinct advantages from their direct involvement in state-sanctioned violence. Muslim merchants eventually responded to this imbalance by themselves assuming an active role in the warfare of Malabari kingdoms, a development that eventually pitted them against their sovereigns.

Muslims against the State

In praising the rulers of Calicut for permitting the free exercise of every kind of religion, Pyrard de Laval notes that it is “strictly forbidden to talk, dispute, or quarrel on that subject”.¹¹⁹ This official ban naturally raises the suspicion that it was enacted in response to inter-communal problems. Intimations of such conflict can be found in the historical record. The Geniza letters record that around the year 1100, foreign traders were forced to flee from a Malabari port (perhaps Mangalore) after the outbreak of riots.¹²⁰ Ibn Baṭṭūṭah speaks of frequent violence between Hindus and Muslims at Mangalore, which the local ruler suppressed because of his (economic) dependence on the Muslim merchants.¹²¹ Of Valapattanam, an important centre of Brahmin learning

¹¹⁸ Ho, *Graves of Tarim*, xxi. Michael Murrin argues for a direct continuity between Mediterranean and Indian Ocean history in this respect, suggesting that through the Genoese colony at Lisbon, the Portuguese learned of the model of armed trade centred on the establishment of fortresses that Genoa was successfully pioneering in the Aegean and Black Seas. See M. Murrin, *Trade and Romance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 134–135.

¹¹⁹ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 410; cf. Gray and Bell (trans.), *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 404.

¹²⁰ Goitein, “Portrait”, 455, 459. That the port is on the Malabar Coast is quite clear from the context: the writer of the letter states that the ship he was travelling on had come from Goa (*Sindābur*), loaded pepper and iron at the port in which the riot broke out, and subsequently called at Barkur and Kollam. The name of the port itself is only partially legible: *al-M - - r* (ج - - ل). Goitein takes the word to refer to Malabar (known variously as *Munaybār*, *Manibār*, or *Malibār*) and proposes that the atypical use of the definite article “was meant to express the idea of both city and region” (Goitein, “Portrait”, 459n.46). An alternative interpretation is that the fragmentary word refers to Mangalore (*Manjarūr*). This would mean that having come from Goa to Mangalore, the ship turned back on itself to go to Barkur, before resuming its southbound course for Kollam. This deviation, however, could be attributed to the riot itself: the traders were caught unprepared by the outbreak of violence and hurriedly navigated to the nearest port, Barkur just to the north, to take on provisions before resuming their southbound course for Kollam. Either way, the use of the definite article remains puzzling.

¹²¹ Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 80; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, IV, 808–809.

and capital of the Kolathiri kings, he says that the Muslims live outside the town because they are hated by the local Brahmins (“*Brāhmanah*”); it was here that an enraged mob tore down the tiled roof of the local mosque.¹²² Joseph of Cranganore, a Nestorian Christian priest from Kodungallur who accompanied Cabral on his return voyage to Lisbon in 1501, reported that some eighty or ninety years earlier, the Chinese traders had deserted Calicut on account of some “outrages” that had been committed against them.¹²³ Duarte Barbosa says that at Dharmadam (“*Tremapatão*”) the Muslims are so rich, powerful, and numerous that “if any offence is caused to them, they rise up and withhold their obedience to the king, until the king goes [there] in person to redress the issue and to flatter them”.¹²⁴ Although inconclusive in themselves, together these accounts hint at an underlying tension between foreign merchants and Hindu society, especially its Brahmin hierophants, as well as between different merchant groups. They also show that like the Zamorins with their prohibition on discussing religious topics, other rulers too found themselves repeatedly engaged in dealing with such conflicts.

The palaces of Calicut’s rulers reflect this intrinsic tension. On the one hand, the Zamorins were the sovereigns of a thriving Indian Ocean emporium frequented by “merchants from all parts of the world, and of all nations and religions”, where they maintained a palace and regularly held court.¹²⁵ At the same time, they were high-caste Hindu kings of a predominantly agrarian kingdom whose social order and expressions of political legitimacy were controlled by a Brahmin elite. The Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan, writing in the fourteenth century, touched on this disjunction: “The government area is in the remote hills, the place where trading is carried on is the sea-shore”.¹²⁶ Essential as Muslim merchant groups were to the prosperity of coastal states, they also always posed the danger of upsetting this fragile balance between the hills and the shore.

The dominant narrative of the relationship between the Zamorins and their Muslim subjects in the sixteenth century is encapsulated by the title of an Arabic poem of this period. Written by Muḥammad al-Kalikūti, who, as his name implies, was a Muslim from Calicut, it is called “The complete victory of the Zamorin who loves the Muslims” (*al-fath al-mubīn*

¹²² Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 87; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 811–812.

¹²³ Greenlee (trans.), *Voyage of Pedro Álvares Cabral*, 109.

¹²⁴ The king in question is the Kolathiri ruler of Cannanore. Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 240; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 82.

¹²⁵ Ames (ed. and trans.), *Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*, 77. Also see Haridas, *Zamorins*, 59–60.

¹²⁶ Ptak, “Wang Dayuan”, 49. Also see Narayanan, *Calicut*, 76–78.

*li'l-sāmūrī alladhi juhibb al-muslimīn).*¹²⁷ Zayn al-Dīn praises Calicut's rulers in similar terms, speaking of their “love for the Muslims, especially the foreigners [al-ghurabā]”.¹²⁸ The role of the Zamorins in the struggle between Muslim and Portuguese trading interests on the Malabar Coast is amply documented in studies of the Portuguese empire.¹²⁹ These works detail the joint opposition of Calicut's rulers and Muslims against Portuguese hegemonic aspirations. Less known is that the effectiveness of this opposition was predicated on Muslims from different parts of the Malabar Coast joining together in a coalition. This development was not only essential to the coherent resistance against the Portuguese but also brought the Muslims into conflict with Malabari states.

As soon as Vasco da Gama had found his way to the land of pepper, he suspected machinations by local Muslims. When a Muslim official laughed at the presents he had brought for the Zamorin, “saying that they were not fit to send to the king, that the poorest merchant from Mecca or any other part of India would give more than this”, it only confirmed to Gama that “the Moors wished him harm”.¹³⁰ The commander of the second voyage, Pedro Álvarez Cabral, suspected local Muslims of deliberately mistranslating between the Portuguese and the Zamorin, describing them as “bad people” who “were much opposed to us, so that they were at all times deceitful”.¹³¹ This motif of Muslim intrigue runs prominently through the Portuguese sources, which is of course hardly surprising in light of the commercial rivalry between the parties and the deep-rooted historic animosity between the Portuguese crown and Muslim states.

This enmity soon expressed itself in Portuguese attacks on Muslims. Even before reaching India on his second voyage in 1502, Vasco da Gama plundered and sank a ship belonging to a Muslim merchant, not sparing the 700 men, women, and children aboard who were returning from Mecca.¹³² At Calicut, Gama demanded that all Muslims be expelled from the town, which the Zamorin refused “for it was unthinkable that he expel 4,000 households of them, who lived in Calicut as natives, not foreigners, and who had contributed great profits to his Kingdom”.¹³³

¹²⁷ British Library, MS. IO Islamic 2807f.

¹²⁸ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 124a.

¹²⁹ See for instance, Panikkar, *History of Kerala*, 35–174; Ayyar, *Zamorins*, 138–207; Mathew, *Portuguese Navigation*, 119–227.

¹³⁰ Ames (ed. and trans.), *Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*, 81, 83.

¹³¹ Greenlee (trans.), *Voyage of Pedro Álvares Cabral*, 76.

¹³² Se K.K. Nair, *By Sweat and Sword: Trade, Diplomacy and War in Kerala through the Ages* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2013), 140.

¹³³ Cited in M.N. Pearson, *Coastal Western India: Studies from the Portuguese Records* (New Delhi: Concept, 1981), 27.

The Portuguese responded to this refusal with a bombardment of the town, which the Zamorin and the Muslim suffered in unity.

The first intimation of dissent between Calicut's ruler and the town's Muslims dates from 1505. Ludovico de Varthema, an Italian who travelled under the disguise of a Muslim merchant, met two fellow Italians in the city who worked there as gunsmiths, founding cannon for the Zamorin. Varthema conspired to secretly take them to the Portuguese factory at Cannanore, but a slave learnt of this plan and reported it to the Zamorin. Incredulous that the king chose to detain rather than execute them for treason, the town's Muslims, under the leadership of their *qādī* ("Kadi"), raised funds to have them assassinated.¹³⁴ Noteworthy in this account is that the Muslims chose to oppose the decision of the Zamorin, that their religious leader played a central role in organizing them into collective action, and that they did not dare to commit the murders themselves but instead hired a group of militant Hindu ascetics for the job.¹³⁵

A few years later, in 1513, to the consternation of the local Muslims, a new Zamorin ascended to the throne and entered a peace treaty with Afonso de Alburquerque. In return for the right to construct a fortified factory at Calicut, Alburquerque conceded that the town's Muslims could send four ships per year to Aden. However, as soon as the fort was established, the Portuguese stipulated that these four ships could not carry any pepper or ginger, on which king Manuel claimed a royal monopoly. Zayn al-Dīn laments that while the oppression of the Muslims during this period increased day by day, the Zamorin turned a blind eye to their suffering.¹³⁶

It is in this context that evidence for political mobilization of Malabar's Muslims must be placed. Importantly, this included not just the Muslims of Calicut but consisted of an effort to bring together the Muslim communities of the region's different port cities and coastal kingdoms. This was, in fact, the first time that any such regional effort was made: up to this time, each community organized itself autonomously under its own religious and secular leadership, and stood in competition with the merchant groups of other towns. Zayn al-Dīn attributes the impetus for this coalition not to events in Calicut but at Kodungallur, which by that time

¹³⁴ Reichert (trans.), *Ludovico de Varthema*, 253–257.

¹³⁵ Kanpatha-Yogis, of whom Ludovico says some 3,000 were present at Calicut. He describes in some detail their distinctive weaponry; see Reichert (trans.), *Ludovico de Varthema*, 256–257, 128n.15, and G. Dharampel-Frick, *Indian im Spiegel deutscher Quellen der Frühen Neuzeit (1500–1750): Studien zu einer interkulturellen Konstellation* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1994), 251–252.

¹³⁶ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fols. 134b–135a.

was a port of only minor commercial significance, and not to a confrontation with the Portuguese but with the Jewish community. According to his account, in 1524 a Jew of Kodungallur killed a local Muslim. In response, Muslims from eleven different towns gathered at a mosque in Chaliyam and resolved to launch a retaliatory attack against the Jews. They took a large fleet to Kodungallur, where they killed many of the town's Jews and burnt their houses and synagogues. In the course of this "civil war" ("fitnah"), as Zayn al-Din terms it, the Muslims also attacked local (Nestorian) Christians and clashed with Nair soldiers, some of whom were killed. As a result of this fighting, Kodungallur's Muslims were forced to abandon the town and resettle in other places.¹³⁷

This account is remarkable for several reasons. It is likely that, in keeping with Kodungallur's reduced role in the region's maritime commerce by this time, there was only a small community of Muslims resident in the town, who depended on outside assistance to mount their retaliation. Even so, the alleged slaying of a Muslim that triggered the confrontation must have been in especially egregious circumstances, or the culmination of an ongoing dispute, to have occasioned Muslims from many different towns to gather in response. This impression is strengthened by the seemingly disproportionate scale of the Muslims' response, which in Zayn al-Din's telling takes on the character of a pogrom that then extended to the Christian community as well. It is also striking that the Muslims fought with the Nairs, even killing some of them, which meant that they directly confronted the monarch's power. It was presumably in view of this violation that they abandoned Kodungallur altogether.

Importantly, Zayn al-Din suggests that at the same gathering at Chaliyam's mosque the Muslims, including some from Calicut, resolved to wage war against the Portuguese "and not to reconcile [with them], and not even to appease the Zamorin".¹³⁸ This Muslim council of 1524 must be seen as an absolute turning point in the Muslims' relationship with the state. First, its immediate outcome was a violent attack on other trading communities at Kodungallur, which violated the peace and even directly challenged the sovereign by killing Nairs in the process. Second, they set themselves against the Zamorin and other Malabari monarchs by resolving to fight the Portuguese despite official treaty relationships with the Portuguese.

That historians have failed to appreciate the significance of this event may be attributed to their reliance on translations of the *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*

¹³⁷ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 135a.

¹³⁸ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 135a.

that render this crucial passage incorrectly. These mistranslations are the result of a mistake in the nineteenth-century Portuguese edition of the original text, which subsequent translators into English and other European languages have relied on but that can be corrected against the Arabic manuscript.¹³⁹ Reading the Arabic word “*ilā*” (اَلْ, “except”) for what is actually “*wa-lā*” (وَ, “and not [even]”) has turned the Muslims’ determination to continue fighting the Portuguese even against the king’s wishes (“not to reconcile, *and not even* to appease the Zamorin”) into the much more qualified resolve to fight them only with his assent (“not to reconcile, *except* to appease the Zamorin”).¹⁴⁰ What made the Muslims’ covenant so momentous was precisely their commitment to fight the Portuguese all along the Malabar Coast irrespective of the shifting policies and alliances of the local rulers.

The revised reading proposed here is supported by subsequent events. That same year, a number of Muslim merchants from Cochin migrated to Calicut and its satellite port Ponnani in order to fight the Portuguese. Only after the first bouts of fighting did the Zamorin learn of this: according to Zayn al-Dīn, he was engaged far away from Calicut in warring against another Malayali lord. The Zamorin sent his minister (“*wazīr*”) and eventually pledged to join them in their struggle, perhaps after threats by the Muslims to abandon his kingdom altogether as had happened at Kodungallur.¹⁴¹ In 1525, the Portuguese were evicted from Calicut and hostilities did not cease until another peace treaty was concluded in 1531.

This joint decision by Muslims from Malabar’s different port cities to commit themselves to the military struggle against the Portuguese, even if this meant going against the local monarchs, stood at the beginning of a number of interrelated processes that over the sixteenth century

¹³⁹ The otherwise very useful Portuguese edition is by D. Lopes (ed. and trans.), *Historia dos Portugueses no Malabar por Zinadim: Manuscrito Arabe do Seculo XVI* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1898), 51. For the resultant error in the most widely used translation, see S.M.H. Nainar (trans.), “Tuhfat-al-Mujāhidin, an Historical Work in the Arabic Language”, *Annals of Oriental Research* 6:1/2 (1941–42), 65. This same error is found in the new edition of this translation, Nainar (trans.), *Shaykh Zainuddin Makhdum’s Tuhfat al-Mujāhidin*, xy. Although it does not closely follow the original text in general, an earlier English translation that pre-dates the Lopes edition renders the overall gist of this passage more or less faithfully; M. Rowlandson (trans.), *Tohfut-ul-Mujahideen, an Historical Work in the Arabic Language* (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1833), 118. Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fols. 135b–136a.

¹⁴⁰ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 135a. Cf. Lopes (ed. and trans.), *Historia dos Portugueses no Malabar por Zinadim*, 51; Rowlandson (trans.), *Tohfut-ul-Mujahideen*, 118; Nainar (trans.), “Tuhfat-al-Mujāhidin”, 65.

¹⁴¹ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fols. 135b–136a.

profoundly changed the character of Malabar's Muslim community. One such development was the institutional and ideological integration of Malabar's Muslims into a single community; although this consolidation was gradual and haphazard, it is from this period that one may justifiably speak of one Muslim community on the Malabar Coast, rather than many separate trading communities of the different port cities. Signs of this were the emergence of pan-Malabari institutions, for example the position of "*qādī qudāt al-Muslimīn*", the office of chief judge of the Muslims discussed in the [previous chapter](#), but also the fact that Muslims started adopting a Malabari identity as evident from the adoption of the *nisbah al-Malibarī* by prominent families such as the Makhdūms. Another development was the greater prominence of Mappilas in the religious and political life of Malabar's Muslims, partly as a result of the emigration of *paradesi* merchants but above all through the leading role they played in the struggle against the Portuguese. This struggle engendered the militarization of Mappila society that went hand-in-hand with the new *jihād* mentality described in the [previous chapter](#): *adversæ res admonuerunt religionum*. Together, these changes led to a drastic reconfiguration of the Muslims' relationship to local polities, culminating in their attempts to build their own, autonomous states on the Malabar Coast.

Portugal's objective was not only to control the pepper trade but to exercise hegemony over the Indian Ocean in order to support and finance their commercial ambitions. The struggle of Mappila seamen against this hegemonic project is well documented. The ferocity with which the Portuguese enforced their imperial aspirations, and the resultant economic marginalization of especially Mappila Muslims, were the main reasons for the dramatic increase in the involvement of Malabari Muslims in maritime violence over the sixteenth century. This initially led to an intensification of links between Muslims and Malabari states. In earlier times, Muslims interacted with the state mainly on an economic plane, typified by their occupation of commercial offices such as *shāhbandar*. Muslim ships and sailors had always represented a potential military resource to Malabari rulers, but the extent to which some kings relied on Muslim seamen to defend their ports and protect their shipping against the Portuguese profoundly altered the political roles of Muslims within their kingdoms. In addition, whereas before *paradesi* Muslims dominated the political interaction between Muslims and Malabari states, in the sixteenth century Mappilas emerged as the central interlocutors. These changes were ultimately founded in the tenacity of Mappila resistance against the Portuguese, which came at a high cost to the Muslim community.

The Portuguese fleets constituted the most awesome display of naval power on the Malabar Coast since the end of the Ming voyages.¹⁴² The Portuguese were certainly not invincible at sea, as shown in 1508 by their defeat at the battle of Chaul at the hands of the combined fleets of Egypt, Gujarat, and Calicut.¹⁴³ Their decisive victory at Diu over the same adversaries the following year, however, was more indicative of the general superiority in the open sea of Portuguese *caravels* and *carracks* against their opponents' large galleys. In fact, on the coast of India the most effective opposition to Portuguese naval power was by lighter vessels and through tactics that avoided confrontations in open waters. The Portuguese records frequently mention attacks by small, oared boats that had been adapted for warfare:

There are in Malabar [...] long rowing boats, covered on top, leaving just room for a man to worm his way in. Each one of these takes from ten to twenty oars. They are light, and there are a great many of them, and archers go in them.¹⁴⁴

These country craft, described in the Portuguese sources as *paráos*, could not support deck-mounted cannon, nor were they sizeable enough to allow boarding of the high-sided *carracks*.¹⁴⁵ They were, however, ideal for surprise attacks on lightly armed merchantmen, which were spotted via a network of "high buildings built on stilts on the sea-shore, where they keep sentinels to watch the sea".¹⁴⁶ Attacking in packs, *paráos* could encircle and board much larger ships whose cannon, because of their cumbersome loading and aiming process, were not always an effective defence. Due to their low draft and agility, *paráos* were also able to outrun pursuers by seeking refuge in Malabar's extensive backwaters, shallow bays, or sheltered beaches. Writing at the turn of the seventeenth century, Pyrard de Laval noted that because of such guerrilla tactics, "the Portuguese have not found a way to put an end to this from the

¹⁴² See P.J. Marshall, "Western Arms in Maritime Asia", *Modern Asian Studies* 14:1 (1980), 13–28; J. Glete, *Warfare at Sea, 1500–1650: Maritime Conflicts and the Transformation of Europe* (London: Routledge, 2001), 87–89.

¹⁴³ "In Chaul, the very seas will churn/ With blood, fire, and iron resistance/ As the combined fleets of Egypt and Cambay/ Confront him with his destiny that day"; L. de Camões, *The Lusiads*, ed. L. White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 202. Other notable examples of Portuguese vulnerability include their precarious victory at Melaka in 1511, their failure to take Aden (1513) and Jiddah (1517), and the defeats inflicted by Chinese fleets in 1521 and 1522.

¹⁴⁴ Cortesão (ed. and trans.), *Tomé Pires*, I, 81.

¹⁴⁵ Similar vessels were used by the corsairs harassing Portuguese shipping at Hormuz; see de Gray Birch (trans.), *Commentaries of Dalboquerque*, II, 87. Also see Ludovico de Varthema's description in Reichert (trans.), *Ludovico de Varthema*, 169.

¹⁴⁶ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 321.

time when they first came to the Indies to the present, and they have been more often beaten by the Malabars than they have beaten them".¹⁴⁷

On the side of the Muslims, this struggle was not fought purely for religious reasons or political ends. Even Zayn al-Dīn, whose history otherwise puts great emphasis on defining the Mappilas' resistance against the Portuguese as a *jihād*, acknowledges that their aims were oftentimes economic in nature. In his description of events in the 1560s, he writes of the many Portuguese ships the Muslims managed to capture. He adds, however, that they also robbed vessels belonging to Hindu (*kuffarah*, "infidels") merchants from Gujarat (*Ǧuzarāt*) and the Konkan (*Kankan*) and even those belonging to their fellow Muslims.¹⁴⁸ This section, all the more deserving of attention for going against the general aim of Zayn al-Dīn's text, shows that Mappilas used their new-found military power at sea to engage in piracy. This impression was confirmed some two decades later by Pyrard de Laval, who was struck by the fact that Muslim pirates attacked merchant shipping quite indiscriminately, plundering vessels of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians alike.¹⁴⁹

Piracy became part of the Mappilas' economic repertoire as much as trade (including with the Portuguese) and smuggling.¹⁵⁰ Crucially, it also brought with it a more pronounced political role. The Mappila corsairs had agreements with local Nair lords from whose territories they launched their raid. Over the course of the seventeenth century, the position of these Nair lords had been strengthened by their suzerains' preoccupation with the Portuguese and the greater reliance of traders and smugglers on the smaller ports not under the direct control of the

¹⁴⁷ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 410. It has been suggested that the "snake boats" that are raced in many coastal villages as part of the Onam festival were also used in this manner; see A.P. Greeshmalatha, "Snake Boats: The Battleships of Medieval Kerala", in K.K.N. Kurup (ed.), *India's Naval Traditions (The Role of Kunhal Marakkars)* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1997), 82–86.

¹⁴⁸ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 145a. Nainar's translation of this passage ("Tuhfat-al-Mujāhidin", 83) is unsustainable. He interprets the term "infidels" (*kuffarah*) to refer to the Portuguese, even though just before they had been specified as coming from Gujarat, the Konkan, and other regions. Throughout his text, Zayn al-Dīn refers to the Portuguese as *al-franj* (the Franks), whereas the term *kuffarah* is used to denote Hindus, as Nainar rightly recognizes throughout most of his translation. The curious choice to take *kuffarah* in this instance to refer to the Portuguese may be attributed to Nainar's desire not to taint the impression of good relations between Malabar's Muslims and Hindus that the text otherwise inspires.

¹⁴⁹ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 411; the only difference, Pyrard adds, was that if their prize was not Portuguese, the captives were free to leave unharmed.

¹⁵⁰ See G. Bouchon, "L'évolution de la piraterie sur la côte malabare au cours du XVI^e siècle", in G. Bouchon, *Inde découverte, Inde retrouvée, 1498–1630: Études d'histoire indo-portugaise* (Paris: Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian, 1999), 279–289; Prange, "Trade of No Dishonor", 1280–1289.

monarch. Pyrard de Laval observed this arrangement in the kingdom of Calicut:

[The corsairs] have four ports of refuge in the realms of the Nair kings [...]. These harbours are well fortified on the sea side only, because they have a good understanding with the Nair kings who have given them these refuges, being subject to their justice and paying them tribute. This brings great profits to these petty Nair kings.¹⁵¹

Although the Nairs' position had been strengthened vis-à-vis that of the Zamorins, they still took up arms in Calicut's wars and continued to pay tribute to the sovereign. In this manner, the Zamorins themselves received a share of the corsairs' profits in the form of tributes paid to them by the Nairs.

In addition, there is evidence that the Zamorins also entertained direct relationships with the Muslim corsairs. Pyrard mentions that these were “subjected to the giving of all sorts of gratifications and presents, like they do to the king of Calicut and to others to whom they are subjects”:

I know for certain that the Zamorin [Samorin] has an understanding with all the Malabar pirates, who give him money and pay a tribute underhand. I am aware of this, from having often accompanied the captain Kutti Ahmad [a famed Mappila corsair] when he went to treat secretly with the king's officers, which he does only by night for fear of being seen. All the other lords and captains of the Malabars [meaning Mappila Muslims] do the same, as I have observed many times, and as the officers of the king himself assured me: and there is good reason for it, for he assists them in all things, and provides them with money when they have none, which they repay in full and with interest.¹⁵²

The secrecy in which the Zamorins shrouded their dealings with the Mappila corsairs was to accommodate their on-again, off-again treaty relations with the Portuguese – the political expediency that prompted these intermittent treaties is described in some detail in Zayn al-Din's history.¹⁵³

This direct involvement of Calicut's rulers with the corsairs in the form of providing capital and receiving tribute can be interpreted as the result of the failure of an earlier arrangement. In 1524, after the

¹⁵¹ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 411; cf. Gray and Bell (trans.), *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 447. The ports in question are Muttungal (“Moutingué”), Vatakara (“Badara”), and Chombal (“Chombaye”), which are all in close proximity to each other and situated about 50 km north of Calicut, as well as Kasaragod (“Cangelotte”), which is another 150 km to the north.

¹⁵² De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 322 332; cf. Gray and Bell (trans.), *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 346, 357.

¹⁵³ In contemporary terms, the Zamorins' attempt to conceal their relationship with the corsairs might be described as “plausible deniability”.

Portuguese seized one of their ships, a number of prominent Mappila merchants moved from Cochin to Calicut to join in the fight against the Europeans. Among this group were Kunjali Marakkars and his family. For the next four generations, members of this family served as the hereditary leaders of the Zamorins' naval forces, which has led historians to describe them as the "admirals of Calicut".¹⁵⁴ Relying on Mappila corsairs and the sort of guerrilla tactics they had developed to harass and evade the Portuguese, the Kunjalis' fleet became the most formidable opponent to the Portuguese in all of western India. Even decades later, this part of the Malabar Coast was still known to European traders as the "Kunjali Coast" ("costa de cuñale"); within Kerala, they became a symbol of uncompromising resistance to European imperialism.¹⁵⁵

The history of their struggle against the Portuguese has been recounted in a number of studies, but it is the story of their demise that sheds light on the evolving political role of Muslims on the Malabar Coast. In 1573, the third Kunjali obtained permission from the Zamorin to establish a fortress at Putupattanam (later Kottakal), at the mouth of the Kotta river. This fort served the fourth and last Kunjali "not only to make him secure, but also to make him so proud as to forget that he was but a vassal, and to hold himself out for a king".¹⁵⁶ Assuming the insignia of royalty, Kunjali IV styled himself as "King of the Malabar Muslims" and "Lord of the Indian Seas".¹⁵⁷ By doing so, he directly challenged both the Zamorin, whose hereditary title *Samudra Raja* expressly claimed sovereignty over the sea, and the Portuguese, whose kings had adopted the bombastic title "Lord of Guinea and of the Conquest, Navigation, and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and India".¹⁵⁸

This attempt at state-building was soon frustrated as the Zamorin joined with the Portuguese in defeating his erstwhile admiral rather than countenance his insubordination. While Kunjali was at first able to withstand an ill-coordinated attack, in 1600 he was overcome and executed

¹⁵⁴ See Nambiar, *Kunjalis*; Bouchon, "Les musulmans", 52–53; V. Kunhalil, "Origin of Kunhalil Marakkars and Organisation of their Fighters", in K.K.N. Kurup (ed.), *India's Naval Traditions (The Role of Kunhalil Marakkars)* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1997), 43–48.

¹⁵⁵ P. Borschberg (ed.), *The Memoirs and Memorials of Jacques de Coutre: Security, Trade and Society in 16th- and 17th-Century Southeast Asia*, trans. R. Roy (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2014), 190, 190n.55; K.J. John, "Kunjali Marakkars: Myth and Reality", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 58 (1997), 264.

¹⁵⁶ Cited in Gray and Bell (trans.), *The Voyage of Pyrard of Laval*, I, 511.

¹⁵⁷ See A. Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravartha Co-operative Society, 1967), 229; R.R.S. Chauhan, "Kunjali's Naval Challenge to the Portuguese", in T.R. De Souza (ed.), *Essays in Goan History* (New Delhi: Conept, 1989), 34.

¹⁵⁸ "Senhor de Guiné e da Conquista, Navegação e Comércio da Etiópia, Arábia, Pérsia, e da Índia".

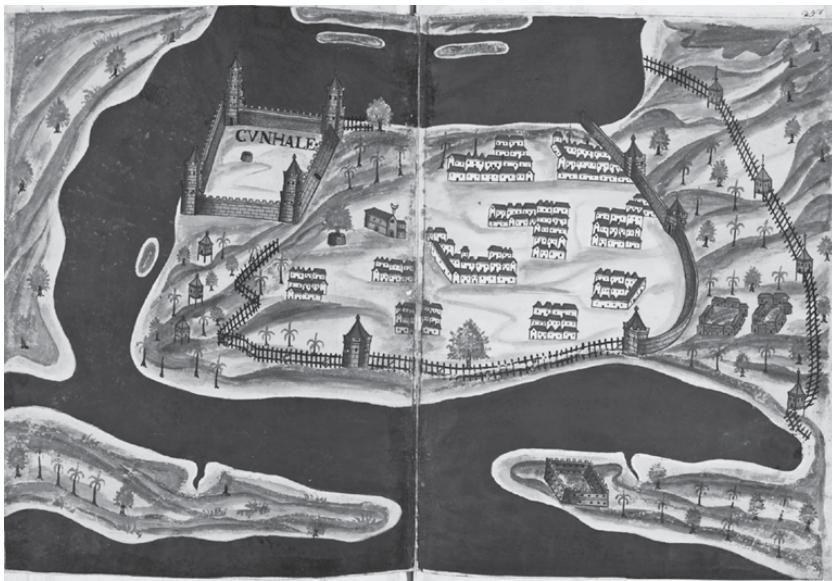


Figure 3.4 The fortress of Kunjali, from the 1640 edition of de Resende's *Livro do Estado da India Oriental*.

Image courtesy of the British Library (Sloane MS 197 ff.303*v–304r).

by the Portuguese.¹⁵⁹ It is thus not surprising that when Pyrard de Laval was on the Coast a few years later, the Zamorin exercised a more direct, albeit secret, form of control over the Mappila corsairs.

Malabar's other instance of Muslim state-building, by the Ali Rajas of Cannanore, was also forged in a struggle over the control of maritime trade, and the name by which the dynasty came to be known once again clearly reflects this concern: "Regent of the Sea".¹⁶⁰ The Arakkal Ali Rajas were an important Muslim merchant family at Cannanore, a port traditionally ruled by the royal house of the Kolathiris. In the sixteenth century, the power of the Kolathiris was greatly diminished by the Portuguese takeover of the horse trade, which had been an important source of revenue.¹⁶¹ It is in the concatenation of a waning of the power

¹⁵⁹ Pyrard was told that subsequently "the king of Calicut had great regret for having delivered up so valiant a man, for his brother and he were esteemed as the two bravest captains in all of the Orient"; de Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 331.

¹⁶⁰ Portuguese "Regedor do mar"; for a detailed study of the Ali Rajas, see Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea*, esp. 150–183.

¹⁶¹ See Kurup, *Ali Rajas of Cannanore*, 15; Mailaparambil, *Lords of the Sea*, 42–44.

of the royal household, and a growth in the economic and political influence of Mappila traders at Cannanore, that the rise of the Ali Rajas must be situated.¹⁶²

Like the Kunjali Marakkars, the Ali Rajas also had a history of conflict with the Portuguese, who in the 1520s had killed several members of the family; notwithstanding, the involvement of Muslims from Cannanore in the fight against the Portuguese was rather sporadic compared to the level of conflict at Calicut.¹⁶³ In another parallel to the Kunjalies, the rise of the Ali Rajas also involved an investment of authority by the ruler: whereas the Kunjalies were put in charge of Calicut's fleet, the Ali Rajas were given authority over the administration of trade at Cannanore.

With the Kolathiris increasingly unable to counter Portuguese claims, the Ali Rajas emerged as the focal point of Mappila commercial and political interests at Cannanore.¹⁶⁴ In fact, in the 1560s, the Ali Rajas entered a loose alliance with the Kunjalies to coordinate their trade and maritime operations; however, when the Zamorin joined the Portuguese in attacking Kunjali IV in punishment for his former vassal's pretensions of sovereignty, the Ali Rajas chose not to involve themselves. With the militarization of trade and their growing control over Cannanore, the Ali Rajas were able to establish themselves as the *de facto* rulers of the port. This culminated in their formal independence towards the end of the sixteenth century, not long before Pyrard de Laval visited this part of India:

The king of Cannanore is a Malabar [Mappila Muslim], and one of the kings of Malabar. In his territory, the Malabars are not subject to the Nairs, although there is another Nair king in the territory of Cannanore, but he no longer has authority. The Malabars of the whole coast, who are as much merchants as corsairs, respect and honour this king. The people of the country have told me that it is not long since the Malabars of Cannanore were in the same condition as the others [i.e. the other Muslims], obeying this Nair king, but they became so strong that they appointed a king for themselves, no longer recognizing the authority of the Nair king nor paying him anymore tribute. He [the Nair king] resides deep in the interior, and is often at war with this king of Cannanore [i.e. the Ali Raja]. This king of Cannanore is very rich and very powerful, as there are many men who depend on him, even the other Malabars [Muslims] who are located along the full length of the coast, whom he calls upon when in need. We call him Ali Raja [*Aly Ragea*], and he is Muslim like the other Malabars, and [...] he is very powerful on the sea.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² The definitive study of this family's history in the earlier part of the sixteenth century is Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea*.

¹⁶³ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 145a.

¹⁶⁴ See Mailaparamabil, *Lords of the Sea*, 58–59.

¹⁶⁵ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 409–410; cf. Gray and Bell (trans.), *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 444–445.

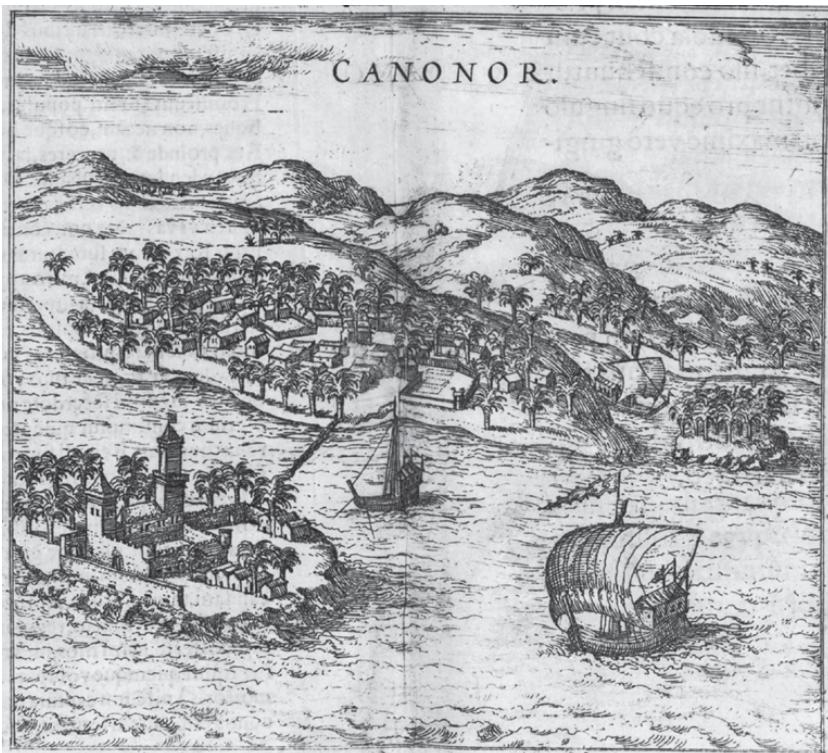


Figure 3.5 Panorama of sixteenth-century Cannanore (“Canonor”), from a 1640 Dutch edition of Braun and Hogenberg’s *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1572).

Image courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection (www.davidrumsey.com).

This account makes it clear that by turn of the seventeenth century, the Ali Rajas had thrown off any cover of Kolathiri suzerainty and were openly styling themselves as regents. What is more, with the demise of the Kunjalis, they had inherited the mantle of leadership for Mappilas across Malabar, which imbued them with greater legitimacy as well as resources. Centred on Cannanore, the Ali Rajas did not pursue territorial expansion but instead built a thalassocracy focused on maritime trade and naval power. By extending their control over the Lakshadweep Islands as well as the Maldives, they were able to

build a far-reaching commercial network outside of the purview of the Portuguese.¹⁶⁶

These two attempts by Muslims to establish their own, autonomous state on the Malabar Coast both occurred late in the sixteenth century, after decades of violent confrontation and political turmoil. By that time, as the previous chapter has shown, the religious ideology and communal organization of Malabar's Muslims had undergone profound changes. As the next chapter will highlight, the all-important spice trade had similarly been reoriented in significant ways. Contrary to Duarte Barbosa's belief that "if the Portuguese had not discovered India, the land of Malabar would have had a Moor for a king and would have been Moorish in its entirety", it was in fact the Portuguese themselves who provided the conditions for Muslims to seek political power in South India.¹⁶⁷

That Muslims in previous centuries had not sought to translate their economic clout into political power, to create their own states within the interstitial spaces of the region's political patchwork, can be attributed to two factors. First, the same social factors that had prevented the emergence of an indigenous, Malayali maritime merchant class also limited the capacity of Kerala states for opposing the Portuguese at sea. In the same way that oceanic trade had traditionally been left to outside groups, the defence of local maritime interests was likewise outsourced to Muslim merchants. The second factor was the militarization of Mappila society in response to Portuguese attacks on their shipping and commercial interests. Maritime evasion and predation became regular parts of trading in defiance of the Portuguese system as well as of direct conflict: trade and warfare became indistinguishable on the sixteenth-century Malabar Coast. As a result, Mappila traders-cum-corsairs became as essential to the political survival of Malabari kingdoms as the *paradesi* Muslims had been to their economic prospects in previous times. Not only that, but by exercising maritime warfare on behalf of Malabari states, sea power became a prerogative of the Muslims. This is demonstrated vividly by the story of the Kunjalis, who used maritime violence to establish themselves as an independent ruling house and could only be brought to heel with assistance from the Portuguese, who were able to attack them from the sea.

In the sixteenth century, Muslims occupied multiple, overlapping roles involving elements of trade, smuggling, piracy, and warfare. The

¹⁶⁶ In addition to the commercial benefits of their bases on the islands, they also earned income in the form of tribute and duties. See Mailaparambil, *Lords of the Sea*, 64–67.

¹⁶⁷ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 229; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 74.

resultant political profile of Muslims on the Coast was a qualitative shift from their earlier role, which had been primarily economic. On the side of the Muslims, this shift was as much shaped by ambitious *commerçants* as it was by coastal communities for whom maritime violence was as much an economic opportunity in the face of an increasingly restrictive commercial environment as it was a religious calling. In other words, the articulations of Muslim political power by the Kunjalis and Ali Rajas were not the outcome of a long history of Muslim involvement in political affairs on the Malabar Coast. Rather, they were predicated upon changes in the sixteenth century, ranging from a new idiom of holy warfare to Mappila militarization and new political alliances between different Muslim communities. It is therefore far from certain that, as Duarte Barbosa thought, all of Malabar would have been an Islamic state had it not been for the timely intervention of his king.

4 The Sea

Upon the sea 'tis true is boundless gain;
Wouldst thou be safe, upon the shore remain.

— Sa'di, *Gulistan* (trans. E.B. Eastwick)

Monsoon Islam was a product of contacts and mobility. Premodern mobility was almost always facilitated by some form of network. The preceding chapters have highlighted different types of networks, from familial ties like those of the al-Bushrīs to the circulation of legal norms as exemplified by *Fath al-mu‘in*. This chapter examines more closely three sets of network relationships: commercial, religious, and political.

It first follows the different strands of the Indian Ocean pepper trade to chart the commercial networks of Muslim merchant groups. It was this trade that instituted and sustained most other connections and exchanges that made up the world of Monsoon Islam. Commerce truly was the backbone of all other types of long-distance networks in the Indian Ocean. For this reason, tracing the pepper trade in all its dimensions – along the western routes that connected to markets in the Middle East and Europe, and towards Southeast Asia and especially China in the east – provides a map onto which other types of network relationships can be plotted. Moreover, observing changes in this pattern of trade that took place in the course of sixteenth century in response to the Portuguese presence helps to better understand parallel shifts in other types of networks.

The second set of network relationships is religious in nature. The circulation of scholars and their texts lent coherence to the world of Monsoon Islam. Tracing these individuals and their ideas back and forth across the Indian Ocean serves to challenge and contradict a diffusionist vision of Islam centred on a supposed Arabian heartland. But it was not only religious scholars who redefined what Islam meant in monsoon Asia: the activities of Sufi orders played a major role in translating Islam in new settings. Sufi orders formed extensive networks not only in

Central Asia and North India, where their influence is well documented, but also across the maritime sphere of the Indian Ocean. Examining the role of Sufism in South India calls attention to the challenge it posed to the Muslim religious elite of the Malabar Coast, and more importantly serves to problematize the very categories of Muslim and Hindu in the context of medieval Indian society.

The final part of this chapter demonstrates how political networks intersected with both trade and faith. It reveals the astonishingly persistent modus by which Islamic states drew autonomous Muslim trading communities into ties of affinity and allegiance, and vice versa. Even though these relationships were articulated through a religious idiom, they were rooted in commercial considerations and political rivalries.

Together, these three sets of commercial, religious, and political networks show the different ties that produced and perpetuated the world of Monsoon Islam, and how each of them was ultimately defined by the opportunities and the imperatives of Indian Ocean trade.

Commercial Networks: The Pepper Trail

Black pepper was the single most important ingredient of the Indian Ocean spice trade. This was true from the time of the earliest notices of maritime Asia – one classical Tamil poem notes that the foreign traders “arrive with gold and leave with pepper” – to at least the middle of the seventeenth century, when a commander of the Dutch East India Company declared that “pepper is the bride around whom everyone dances”.¹ The reason for pepper’s central importance to Indian Ocean trade was its constant and universal demand. The history of pepper is above all the story of this demand. Contrary to popular myths, oriental spices were never used to preserve foods or hide the taste of spoiled meat: in medieval Europe, spices were expensive and meat relatively cheap, and “anyone who could afford spices could easily find meat fresher than what city dwellers today buy in their local supermarket”.² In other words, the desire for pepper was never utilitarian. Spices were prestigious (their

¹ The poem is quoted in A. Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 91. The quote by a Dutch VOC official is from a letter by Jacob Huststaert written in 1664; it is cited in Mailaparambil, *Lords of the Sea*, 105. Also see J.I. Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire, 29 B.C. to A.D. 641* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); R.S. Lopez, “The Trade of Medieval Europe: the South”, in M.M. Postan and E. Miller (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, vol. 2: Trade and Industry in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn., 1987), 349; Wink, *Al-Hind*, I, 63–64.

² Freedman, *Out of the East*, 4.

high cost was part of their appeal) and symbolic, conjuring a web of associations of health, magic, sanctity, and the exotic.³ Although many individuals expressed disbelief as to why their societies would exchange hard currency for the ephemeral pungency of the spice, the allure of pepper transcended cultures, classes, and fashions: Persian kings, European nobles, and Chinese soldiers were all equally eager consumers.

This demand for pepper was only rarely met: in almost all societies, at almost all times, demand exceeded supply. Until at least the middle of the fifteenth century, the Malabar Coast had a near-monopoly on the cultivation of black pepper. Travellers described the region as “the land of pepper” and expressed astonishment at the fact that pepper was sold there by the sackful rather than in the preciously fine quantities they were used to seeing it weighed.⁴ Despite this sense of superabundance, supply was constricted: local rulers competed with one another for control over the pepper-producing hinterlands, which resulted in pepper being available only in certain ports and markets. Merchants did not passively anticipate the arrival of the spice but advanced payments to landlords and cultivators in an effort to secure privileged access to the spice at harvest time.⁵ It is against the background of these supply constrictions and pre-existing relationships that the inability of the Portuguese to secure full shipments of pepper must be understood. Pepper production expanded significantly in the fifteenth century as new areas in the northern part of the Malabar Coast were brought under cultivation and as the black pepper plant began to be grown in Southeast Asia. However, even so, markets eagerly absorbed the additional supplies and pepper remained a much sought-after commodity.

The profits that could be attained by meeting this ceaseless demand are evident from the Geniza documents, which suggest returns of more than 30 per cent on the trade between Malabar and Aden alone.⁶ The farther from India pepper travelled, the more expensive – and lucrative – it became: the wealth, splendour, and power of entrepôts such as Venice testify to the enormous profits generated by the medieval spice

³ See Freedman, *Out of the East*; Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes*; T. Morton, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴ Marco Polo likens the measuring of pepper in Malabar to that of wheat in his native Venice, while the North African Ibn Battūtah compares it to millet. See Moule and Pelliot (eds. and trans.), *Marco Polo*, I, 414; Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 77.

⁵ For a discussion of the production of pepper in medieval Kerala, see Prange, “Indian Ocean Pepper Trade”, 215–219.

⁶ See Prange, “Indian Ocean Pepper Trade”, 221n.53.

trade.⁷ From the twelfth until well into the sixteenth century, the profits of the Indian Ocean pepper trade accrued mainly to Muslim merchants. Whereas at the turn of the millennium various groups claimed a stake in the pepper trade, by the twelfth century, the maritime spice trade came increasingly under the control of Muslim networks.

This was true in the western Indian Ocean, from where the spice reached markets in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. In this commercial circuit, Muslims edged out Jewish merchants to take near-exclusive control of the pepper trade. The height of the Italian *repubbliche marinare* coincided with this ascendance of Muslim trade networks in the supply of ever greater amounts of pepper to places like Aden, Alexandria, and Constantinople, from where Venetian and Genoese galleons shuttled them to the European market. In the eastern Indian Ocean, this same chronology corresponds to the period of the Asian sea trade boom, which saw a great expansion in the trade between India, the Indonesian archipelago, and China. With the relative decline of the powerful South Indian merchant guilds associated with the Chola empire after the middle of the eleventh century, as suggested by the break in the epigraphic record in places like Java, Muslims emerged as the main brokers in the entrepôt trade between India and China.⁸ The Mongol defeat of the Southern Song dynasty in the thirteenth century further bolstered the influence of Muslim merchant groups on the Chinese mainland: much of China's maritime trade under the Yuan was controlled by foreign Muslim merchants resident in Guangzhou and then Quanzhou.⁹ (In fact, after their flight from Quanzhou in the 1360s, these merchants became the backbone of a resilient Muslim trade diaspora throughout Southeast Asia, again highlighting the circulatory nature of these trade diasporas.)

Given the dominance of Muslim merchants in both arms of Malabar's spice trade – towards Arabia and Europe on the one hand, and Southeast Asia and China on the other – the trail of pepper makes it possible to retrace the pattern and evolution of Muslim networks across monsoon Asia.¹⁰ Doing so highlights in particular the importance of the eastbound

⁷ See for instance, F.C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), passim.

⁸ Christie, "Javanese Markets", 368.

⁹ J. Chaffee, "Muslim Merchants and Quanzhou in the Late Yuan–Early Ming: Conjectures on the Ending of a Medieval Muslim Trade Diaspora", in A. Schottenhammer (ed.), *The East Asian Mediterranean: Maritime Crossroads of Culture, Commerce and Human Migration* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2008), 129.

¹⁰ A further dimension of Malabar's pepper trade was the coastal and overland trade within the Indian subcontinent. Even though this was another important outlet for South Indian spices, the merchants who ran this trade were not part of the Indian Ocean networks that this book is concerned with. For a brief discussion of Malabar's pepper trade with other regions of India, see Prange, "Indian Ocean Pepper Trade", 229.

trade towards China, a dimension that has long been overshadowed by the extensive focus on pepper in the economic history of Europe and its role in propelling the Iberian voyages of discovery. Plotting both these trajectories of the pepper trade makes it clear that Monsoon Islam was a phenomenon shaped by the sustained encounter with the entire span of maritime Asia, rather than solely by exchanges between Arabia and India.

Malabar's Pepper Trade in the Western Indian Ocean

Long before oil, it was pepper that Europeans venerated as their “black gold”.¹¹ And as with oil today, its supply was considered a strategically vital concern of the state, while critical voices cautioned against the risks of overuse and dependence. Already by the first century, Pliny the Elder deemed the Roman empire too heedless in exchanging its *aureii* and *denarii* for a spice that “has nothing in it that can plead as a recommendation to either fruit or berry, its only desirable quality being a certain pungency”.¹² Despite such objections, Roman demand for pepper seemed insatiable and is reflected in numerous finds (both hoards and strays) of Roman coins on the Malabar Coast, ranging from Republican silver coins from the second century BCE to sixth-century Justinian gold *solidi*.¹³ In Pliny’s own time, the Roman empire was actively engaged in managing the pepper trade with Malabar and even launched military interventions to protect the pepper supply routes of the western Indian Ocean. The Caesars also built up a strategic reserve, storing vast amounts of pepper in the imperial treasury; at the beginning of the fifth century, 3,000 pounds from these reserves formed part of the ransom paid to the Visigoth king Alaric in 401 to lift his siege of Rome.

The continued drain of silver and gold brought about by Europe’s incessant demand for pepper was an important factor in the periodic bullion shortages of the Middle Ages. Concerns over enriching foreigners (which could be Muslims or Italians, depending on one’s perspective) by exchanging hard bullion for evanescent scents and tastes combined with fears of decadence and corruption to animate various

¹¹ The Dutch coined the phrase of pepper as their “black gold”; see M.P.M. Vink, *Encounters on the Opposite Coast: The Dutch East India Company and the Nayaka State of Madurai in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 193–194.

¹² Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, ed. and trans. H. Bostock and H.T. Riley (London: H.G. Bohn, 1855–57), book 7, ch. 14, §2 (consulted at www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0137).

¹³ S.B. Majumdar, “Money Matters: Indigenous and Foreign Coins in the Malabar Coast (Second Century BCE–Second Century CE)”, in K.S. Mathew (ed.), *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris: New Perspectives on Maritime Trade* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2015), 420–422.

medieval sumptuary laws. The same concerns over the transfer of specie were expressed in other contemporary societies outside of Europe: a fourteenth-century Persian historian describes India as the great drain of gold, while China, another rapacious consumer of pepper, had a perennial problem with the escape of hard currency to foreign lands.¹⁴

Gaining direct access to oriental spices, without the need for Muslim and Italian middlemen, was a key motivation for the Iberian voyages of exploration. Even after Columbus' failure to find a direct sea route to the “land of pepper” that he had been seeking, for the next century Spanish administrators and entrepreneurs continued to invest vast resources into attempts to transplant Indian spices to the Americas.¹⁵ The Portuguese push into the Indian Ocean was likewise undertaken in the pursuit of spices: “We come in search of Christians and spices”, in the words famously attributed to Vasco da Gama, though in terms of priorities, pepper was undoubtedly the main driving force behind his expedition.¹⁶

The desire to control the trade in pepper not only propelled Portugal’s initial voyages of discovery but was a central driving force behind the subsequent competition over sources, ports, and trade routes between the different European powers. Pepper was both the source of this conflict and a means of waging it. In the words of one merchant’s entreaty to the Iberian crown: “It is necessary that Your Majesty allow the merchants to trade in pepper; with this we will be able to wage great wars on the Dutch.”¹⁷ Hugo Grotius’ famous notion of the freedom of the seas (*mare liberum*) was conceived in response to Portuguese hegemonic claims over the Indian Ocean spice trade.¹⁸ Once the Dutch broke Portugal’s monopoly, this same rivalry over the pepper trade animated conflict between the Dutch and the English East India companies. Europe’s craving for pepper and other oriental spices fuelled its colonial enterprises and thereby became “a force that

¹⁴ Waṣṣāf (Shihāb al-Dīn ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Izz al-Dīn Fadl Allāh Shirāzī), cited in S. Digby, “The Currency System”, in T. Raychaudhuri, I. Habib, and D. Kumar (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India, vol. I: c.1200–c.1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 99; R. von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000–1700* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 90.

¹⁵ See P.S. de Vos, “The Science of Spices: Empiricism and Economic Botany in the Early Spanish Empire”, *Journal of World History* 17:4 (2006), 399–427.

¹⁶ Ames (ed. and trans.), *Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*, 71; also see R. Findlay, “The Roots of Divergence: Western Economic History in Comparative Perspective”, *American Economic Review* 82:2 (1992), 158–161.

¹⁷ Borschberg (ed.), *The Memoirs and Memorials of Jacques de Coutre*, 195.

¹⁸ See for instance, P. Borschberg, *Hugo Grotius, the Portuguese and “Free Trade” in the East Indies* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2011).



Figure 4.1 Botanical sketch of the black pepper plant (*piper nigrum*), from van Rheede's *Hortus Malabaricus* (1678–93).

Image courtesy of the Peter H. Raven Library at the Missouri Botanical Garden (MS QK349.7.R4 (1686–1688) vol. 7, fig. 12).

remade the demography, politics, culture, economy, and ecology of the entire globe".¹⁹

Given the immense literature bearing on Europe's demand for and trade in spices, it would be easy to overlook the fact that pepper was as much in demand in the Middle East, if not more so. The varied uses to which black pepper was put in the Islamic world are evident from cookbooks and *materia medica*.²⁰ Much of the enormous amounts of

¹⁹ P.H. Freedman, *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

²⁰ See for instance, C. Perry (ed. and trans.), *A Baghdad Cookery Book: The Book of Dishes (Kitāb al-Tabikh) by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Karīm, the Scribe of Baghdad* (Totnes: Prospect Books, 2005); L. Zaouali, *Medieval Cuisine of the Islamic World: A Concise History*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 53; D. Waines, "‘Luxury Foods’ in Medieval Islamic Societies", *World Archaeology* 34:3 (2003), 575; M. Levey, *Early Arabic Pharmacology* (Leiden: Brill, 1973);

pepper that left India on ships bound for the Red Sea – Duarte Barbosa reports that prior to the coming of the Portuguese, every sailing season ships carrying a total of 1,200 *bahār* left from Calicut alone – never reached European markets but were consumed in Yemen, East Africa, the Hijaz, the Levant, Egypt, the Maghreb, Anatolia, and so forth.²¹ An indication of the Ottomans' taste for the spice, for instance, is contained in a never-concluded treaty with the Portuguese from 1540, in which the Ottoman sultan offered to limit his pepper imports to Basra to *only* 400 tonnes a year in return for certain concessions.²² Conciliations made by the Portuguese to other rulers, such as the king of Hormuz and the Shah of Iran, also expressly specified their right to import large quantities of pepper.²³

Aden was the primary transhipment point for Malabar's westbound spice trade. From there, pepper was transshipped for its onward journey on the Red Sea or on the caravan routes into the Hijaz. Aden's trade in the eleventh and twelfth centuries is extensively documented by the Geniza materials, which highlight the key importance of pepper within the overall commerce of the port. For the subsequent period, the records of Yemen's Rasulid dynasty (1229–1454), which controlled Aden during the heydays of Muslim maritime trade, are of special significance. The chronicles of the Rasulid ruler al-Muzaffar (r. 1250–1295) make it clear that all goods arriving from the Indian Ocean had to be transshipped at Aden for their onward journey on the Red Sea (even though ocean-going dhows were able to go as far as Jiddah).²⁴ The reasons for this policy are not difficult to surmise: the Rasulids imposed heavy taxes (as well as some other charges) on both the import and export of pepper.²⁵ Moreover, the Rasulid state also maintained its own fleet of ships

H. Brewer, "Historical Perspectives on Health: Early Arabic Medicine", *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health* 124:4 (2004), 184–187; E. Lev, "Reconstructed *Materia Medica* of the Medieval and Ottoman al-Sham", *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 80:2–3 (2002), 167–179.

²¹ Barbosa stresses that pepper was the principal commodity in this traffic. Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 233; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 76–77.

²² One of the sultan's additional demands was that these pepper imports were to be carried on Muslim ships; see G. Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 67.

²³ See M.N. Pearson, "Introduction", in M.N. Pearson (ed.), *Spices in the Indian Ocean World* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), xxix.

²⁴ See Fernández-Armesto, *Pathfinders*, 24.

²⁵ See G.R. Smith (ed. and trans.), *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia: Ibn al-Mujāwir's Tārikh al-Mustabṣir* (London: Hakluyt, 2008), 156; G.R. Smith (ed. and trans.), *A Medieval Administrative and Fiscal Treatise from the Yemen: The Rasulid Mulakhkhas al-fitān by al-Hasan b. 'Alī al-Husaynī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 41, 49, 63, 64.

(“*marākib al-dīwān*”) to convey goods to Egypt, again to the benefit of its treasury.²⁶

Since Aden not only controlled the entrance to the Red Sea but was also the southern terminus of the caravan routes that linked the Indian Ocean coast to the Hijaz and Levant, the Rasulids controlled a prime chokepoint of Malabar’s westbound pepper trade. It was comparable in importance only to the entrepôts of Qays (Kish) and Hormuz at the entrance of the Persian Gulf, a rivalry that at times found expression in attacks and sieges.²⁷ The rulers of these ports recognized that Muslim merchants from the Malabar Coast were of key importance to their fortunes. This is evident, for example, from their practice of bestowing robes of honour on important Malabari merchants; these *khil'a* ceremonies were an ancient custom that signalled the investiture of the recipient with power and prestige.²⁸ In more concrete terms, the Rasulids also provided armed escorts to the merchant fleets sailing to and from the Malabar Coast in order to protect them against “pirates” – a category that also encompassed the navies of rival states.²⁹

Between Aden and Egypt, the pepper trade was controlled by another group of Muslim merchants known as the Kārimī (*tujjār al-Kārim*). The origins and organization of the Kārimī merchants remain ambiguous: there is no consensus even on whether the term denotes a merchant association or merely designated convoys travelling between Egyptian ports and the Indian Ocean.³⁰ The Kārimī were also called “the merchants of pepper and spices”, and it appears that the term was used in this loose sense between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. However, in later sources it seems to denote a specific, closely organized merchant corporation (or *Genossenschaft*); biographical data for leading Kārimī merchants suggests a dynastic structure to their organization.³¹ Although

²⁶ Jāzim (ed.), *Nūr al-ma‘ārif*, I, 492–494. For the typical routes taken by spice traders between Yemen and Egypt, see W.J. Fischel, “The Spice Trade in Mamluk Egypt: A Contribution to the Economic History of Medieval Islam”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 1:2 (1958), 162–164.

²⁷ See Prange, “Contested Sea”, 17–24.

²⁸ On this custom, see for instance, S. Gordon (ed.), *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001); S. Gordon (ed.), *Robes of Honour: Khil'a in Pre-colonial and Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); N. Um, *Shipped but Not Sold: Material Culture and the Social Protocols of Trade during Yemen's Age of Coffee* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 94–98.

²⁹ See R.E. Margariti, “Mercantile Networks, Port Cities, and ‘Pirate’ States: Conflict and Competition in the Indian Ocean World of Trade before the Sixteenth Century”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51:4 (2008), 543–577; Prange, “The Contested Sea”, 20–24.

³⁰ See Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade*, 152–153.

³¹ See G. Wiet, “Les marchands d'épices sous les Sultans Mamlouks”, *Cahiers d'Histoire Egyptienne* 7:2 (1955), 81–147; E. Ashtor, “The Karimi Merchants”, *Journal of the*

much remains unknown, there is no doubt that Cairo-based merchants who controlled Egypt's pepper trade were able to accumulate vast wealth. The great importance that these Kārimī merchants held in both Yemen and Egypt further testifies to the fact that the pepper trade was not only of concern to traders but was also a matter of state to polities all across the western Indian Ocean. This was most vividly demonstrated in 1432, when the Mamluk sultan Barsbay introduced state monopolies on pepper and other Indian Ocean commodities; this change effectively reduced the Kārimī to the role of state agents, dealing in spices on the sultan's account.³²

The western paths of the pepper trade show that far from being a singularly European story, the spice was of great importance to rulers and cities across the western Indian Ocean. For the most part, this trade was controlled by Muslim merchants from the Malabar Coast. Their networks were of vital interest to the major polities around the Arabian Sea and as a result played an especially prominent role in tying the Malabar Coast to this wider commercial world.

Malabar's Pepper Trade in the Eastern Indian Ocean

In contrast to the broad interest in Malabar's western trade that is borne of concerns about Europe's role in the spice trade, the eastern arm of Malabar's pepper trade has received only scant attention. Yet, in total terms, it was of greater magnitude than the western trade (of which, it has been seen, only a fraction was destined for Europe). What is more, the pepper trade in the eastern Indian Ocean underpinned connections between South India and Southeast Asia that were of special significance to the long-term development of Monsoon Islam.

Malabar's eastern trade was defined by China, which formed by far the largest market for long-distance trade goods in the Indian Ocean world. Chinese sources first mention the importation of pepper from India in the second century.³³ The prefix of the Chinese word for pepper

Royal Asiatic Society pts. 1–2 (1956), 45–56; Fischel, “The Spice Trade”, 157–174; S.D. Goitein, “New Light on the Beginning of the Kārim Merchants”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 1:2 (1958), 175–184; S.Y. Labib, *Handelsgeschichte Ägyptens im Spätmittelalter, 1171–1517* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1965).

³² See for instance, J.L. Meloy, “Imperial Strategy and Political Exigency: The Red Sea Spice Trade and the Mamluk Sultanate in the Fifteenth Century”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123:1 (2003), 1–19.

³³ T. Yung-Ho, “Pepper Trade in East Asia”, *T'oung Pao* 68:4–5 (1982), 222. Before that time, only Sichuan pepper appears to have been in use; see O. Milburn, “Aromas, Scents, and Spices: Olfactory Culture in China before the Arrival of Buddhism”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136:3 (2016), 441–464.

suggests that it was originally identified with the peoples of the north, which suggests that pepper first reached China via overland routes rather than by sea.³⁴ By the seventh century, however, pepper was described as originating in the countries of the “western barbarians” and increasingly reached China by sea.³⁵ At that time, it was identified with the commercial activities of South Indian traders. The expansion of the Indo-Buddhist sphere to coastal Southeast Asia was accompanied, and in some measure facilitated, by the activities of South Indian merchant groups. The important economic role of merchant guilds such as the *Manigrāman* and *Ayyāvole* is evident from inscriptions in both Malabar and Southeast Asia.³⁶ Their activities were underpinned by the patronage and demand provided by powerful and expansionist political empires in both South India (the Cholas) and insular Southeast Asia (Srivijaya). At the same time, both regions became increasingly integrated into Muslim trade networks, for which the Malabar Coast was a key centre of activity.³⁷

By the tenth century, Chinese sources list pepper as a product of Persia.³⁸ This classification points to the greater prominence of Muslims in China’s pepper trade during this period, which corresponds to evidence for the presence of substantial Muslim trade settlements at Guangzhou, the major southern entrepôt.³⁹ The growing role of Muslims in Chinese port cities was likely a result of the new pattern of direct sea trade between the western Indian Ocean and China (rather than transhipment trade via Southeast Asian ports) during this period. The materials and construction of a recently discovered shipwreck near the Indonesian island of Belitung confirm direct shipping between the Arabian Sea and China in the ninth century.⁴⁰

³⁴ The author is grateful to Kent Deng (London School of Economics) for confirming this point. On India’s overland trade in the ancient period, see V.K.R. Menon, “The Natural Routes of Malabar”, in R. Ramachandran, G. Narayanan, and A. Ramachandran (eds.), *History of Medieval Kerala* (New Delhi: Pragati, 2005), 1–4; T. Roy, *India in the World Economy: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 20–30.

³⁵ Yung-Ho, “Pepper Trade”, 223. For the Chinese identification of pepper with Westerners, see E.H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T’ang Exotics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963), 150.

³⁶ See M. Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchant Guilds*, passim; D. Ali, “Between Market and Court: The Careers of Two Courtier-Merchants in the Twelfth-Century Deccan”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53:1/2 (2010), 185–211.

³⁷ See Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 197–201.

³⁸ Yung-Ho, “Pepper Trade”, 222–223.

³⁹ See G.F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, revised and expanded by J. Carswell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, rev. edn., 1995), 62–63.

⁴⁰ That the ill-fated ship was laden with Chinese exports (ceramics and star anise) rather than pepper suggests that it foundered on its westbound return voyage. See M. Flecker, “A Ninth-Century AD Arab or Indian Shipwreck in Indonesia: First Evidence for Direct

At the same time that greater numbers of Muslims traded (and, as in the case of al-Bushri, settled) in Chinese port cities, more Chinese junks made their way to India. Arabic sources testify to the presence of Chinese ships in Malabari ports in the ninth century (that is, for the same period as the Belitung shipwreck).⁴¹ But it was really during the Song dynasty (960–1127; Southern Song to 1279) that Chinese trade became an important factor on the Malabar Coast. China's economic efflorescence under the Song brought about unprecedented agricultural, industrial, and demographic growth. It also led to much higher levels of income, which translated into greater consumption of luxury goods such as pepper. For example, a comparison of medicinal prescriptions from the Tang and Song periods shows that Indian spices came to be much more widely used in China from the tenth century onwards.⁴²

China's taste for the spice outlasted the Song dynasty. During the Yuan period (1271–1368), both Marco Polo and Ibn Baṭṭūṭah report the presence of immense Chinese junks in Malabar's harbours. Marco Polo relates the size of these ships by estimating how many baskets of pepper each could carry, and asserts that for every shipload of pepper exported to Aden and Alexandria, ten or more are destined for Quanzhou.⁴³ (Elsewhere in his text, he inflates this ratio to more than one-to-a-hundred.) On the authority of Quanzhou's customs supervisor, he also claims that the daily consumption of pepper in that city was in excess of four tonnes.⁴⁴ By the Yuan period, China had become the largest market for pepper in the world.⁴⁵

This period also was marked by a shift in China's relations with India and Southeast Asia. It was above all marked by a transition from the private trade networks of the Song period to the government-led maritime networks of the Yuan and early Ming dynasties.⁴⁶ The Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan, a contemporary of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, describes Calicut as

"Trade with China", *World Archaeology* 32:3 (2001), 335–354. Also see G.F. Hourani, "Direct Sailing Between the Persian Gulf and China in Pre-Islamic Times", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 79:3–4 (1947), 157–160.

⁴¹ Ahmad (trans.), *Arabic Classical Accounts*, 38.

⁴² See T. Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Alignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 192–196.

⁴³ Moule and Pelliot (eds. and trans.), *Marco Polo*, I, 355, 351.

⁴⁴ In Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade*, 194. For Song maritime trade also see P. Wheatley, "Geographical Notes on Some Commodities Involved in Sung Maritime Trade", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 32:2 (1959), esp. 100–101 on pepper.

⁴⁵ Ng Chin-keong, *Boundaries and Beyond: China's Maritime Southeast in Late Imperial Times* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2017), 7–8.

⁴⁶ See T. Sen, "The Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks to Southern Asia, 1200–1450", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49:4 (2006), 421.

the principal port of the “Western Ocean”, which reflects the continued importance of pepper in Chinese views of the wider Indian Ocean world. (This perspective still finds expression in a seventeenth-century Chinese merchant map, which continues to include Calicut long after direct trade between China and India had ceased.⁴⁷) The continued significance of the pepper trade to the Chinese state is also evident from the large number of missions the Yuan emperors sent to Malabar (four alone between 1280 and 1283) and to the elaborate ceremonies with which return missions from Malabar were received at the imperial court.⁴⁸

The significance of pepper to China’s culture and economy is reflected in a practice, first recorded in 1379, of rewarding loyal subjects with gifts of pepper. In 1391/2, more than 25,000 Chinese soldiers and sailors were rewarded with small amounts of pepper. Pepper had become so essential as a culinary and medicinal product in China that in 1403 the Yongle emperor granted, in spite of objections from his ministers, traders from South India special exemptions from the taxes usually levied on selling pepper in the Chinese market.⁴⁹ It appears that in the same year, the Chinese court first learned of the existence of Melaka from one of these South Indian pepper merchants, a Muslim believed to have come from the Malabar Coast.⁵⁰

By the early fifteenth century, Malabar was still the primary supplier of pepper to China. The great Chinese treasure voyages under Zheng He between 1405 and 1433 repeatedly visited both Calicut and Cochin. According to Ming sources, the rulers of Calicut in turn sent multiple missions to the Chinese court for the purposes of tribute trade.⁵¹ These mutual exchanges caused an unprecedented inflow of pepper into China, changing the value of pepper “from being a precious commodity to one in common use”.⁵² During this period, the Chinese state used pepper

⁴⁷ See T. Brook, *Mr. Selden’s Map of China: Decoding the Secrets of a Vanished Cartographer* (New York, NY: Bloomberg, 2013), 127–128; R. Batchelor, “The Selden Map Rediscovered: A Chinese Map of East Asian Shipping Routes, c.1619”, *Imago Mundi* 65:1 (2013), 42. I am grateful to Timothy Brook (University of British Columbia) for his explanation of Calicut’s place on the so-called “Selden map”.

⁴⁸ Sen, “The Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks”, 424–425; D. Heng, *Sino-Malay Trade and Diplomacy from the Tenth through the Fourteenth Century* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), 108.

⁴⁹ H. Ray, “Trade between South India and China 1368–1644”, in O. Prakash and D. Lombard (eds.), *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal, 1500–1800* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1999), 43.

⁵⁰ Wang Gungwu, *Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1981), 82–89.

⁵¹ Sen, “Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks”, 437–438.

⁵² T’ien Ju-Kang, “Chêng Ho’s Voyages and the Distribution of Pepper in China”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2 (1981), 187.

to pay its soldiers their clothing allowance, in effect using the spice as a substitute currency.⁵³

It has even been suggested that the Chinese voyages not only purchased pepper for the home market but also traded it across the Indian Ocean world, even supplying it to Aden.⁵⁴ Economic historians Kevin O'Rourke and Jeffrey Williamson argue that this sudden demand-shock caused by the expansion of China's state-orchestrated overseas trade was felt as far as Europe, where a sudden spike in pepper prices in the early fifteenth century coincided with Zheng He's voyages.⁵⁵ This hypothesis is supported by the fact that this sudden rise in pepper prices in Europe in the 1410s and 1420s correlates to a corresponding drop in the cost of pepper in China; both events, it would appear, were a result of Zheng He's voyages, which caused a shortage of pepper in the Indian Ocean and a sudden glut in the Chinese market.⁵⁶

Another consequence of the Zheng He voyages may have been the introduction of black pepper cultivation to Southeast Asia. Because the Chinese tended to label goods not by origin but by the region from which they were imported, and because the sources tend to conflate black pepper and long pepper (two related but distinct species), medieval notices of Southeast Asian pepper must be treated with circumspection.⁵⁷ In this light, there is scant evidence for any black pepper cultivation on either Java or Sumatra before the fifteenth century. Anthony Reid even makes the intriguing suggestion that it was introduced there by the Chinese, as an alternative supply strategy after a violent confrontation put an end to their trade relations with Calicut.⁵⁸ It is generally accepted that the cultivation of black pepper spread to the west coast of Sumatra only in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On Aceh, pepper production came to be

⁵³ This system allowed the Chinese state to impose its own price on pepper, which it tended to set above prevailing market rates; T'ien, "Chêng Ho's Voyages", 188–194.

⁵⁴ W.S. Atwell, "Time, Money, and the Weather: Ming China and the 'Great Depression' of the Mid-Fifteenth Century", *Journal of Asian Studies* 61:1 (2002), 90n.9.

⁵⁵ K.H. O'Rourke and J.G. Williamson, "Did Vasco da Gama Matter for European Markets?", *Economic History Review* 62:3 (2009), 661–663.

⁵⁶ Ju-Kang, "Chêng Ho's Voyages", 190–191.

⁵⁷ Long pepper comprises two taxa, Indian long pepper (*Piper longum*, Linn.) and Javanese long pepper (*Piper retrofactum*, Vahl). For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Prange, "Indian Ocean Pepper Trade", 226–228.

⁵⁸ Reid, *Southeast Asia*, 12. The view that pepper was first introduced to Sumatra around 1450 is also expressed in B. Watson Andaya, "Women and Economic Change: The Pepper Trade in Pre-modern Southeast Asia", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 38:2 (1995), 169, and Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, II, 802. On the assertive character of China's overseas missions during this period, see T. Sen, "Changing Regimes: Two Episodes of Chinese Military Intervention in Medieval South Asia", in U. Singh and P.P. Dhar (eds.), *Asian Encounters: Exploring Connected Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 62–85.

firmly established only by the closing decades of the sixteenth century.⁵⁹ This process was accompanied by the conversion to Islam of the population in this region, which again reinforces the strong link between Muslim networks and the pepper trade across the Indian Ocean.⁶⁰

In sum, contrary to the oversized role afforded to Europe in the historiography of the spice trade, it was China that served as the most important market for the pepper trade. Due to the Chinese preference for the higher-quality pepper from the Malabar Coast, this market continued to be of vital importance to Muslim trade networks well into the sixteenth century, even after pepper cultivation was established in Southeast Asia, and even though the Portuguese were doing their best to disrupt and suppress the Muslim pepper networks.⁶¹

Muslim Pepper Networks in the Sixteenth Century

The impact of the Portuguese on the Muslim spice trade in the Indian Ocean is difficult to quantify. On the one hand, the long-held claim that the Portuguese “used superior naval skills to seize control of the commerce of the Indian Ocean” has been roundly rejected by recent scholarship that calls into question both the military supremacy of Europeans and their effect on existing trade networks.⁶² As the preceding overview suggests, markets in China and the Middle East were more important to Malabar’s pepper trade than was Europe. Even a full century after Vasco da Gama’s first voyage to India, the recorder (*escrivão*) of Portugal’s trading post at Cochin reported that only a mere 10 per cent of Malabar’s pepper was purchased by Europeans.⁶³ With Malabar’s pepper production in the sixteenth century estimated in the range of

⁵⁹ Ng Chin-Keong, *Boundaries and Beyond*, 28.

⁶⁰ See A. Wink, “‘Al-Hind’: India and Indonesia in the Islamic World Economy, c. 700–1800 A.D.”, *Comparative History of India and Indonesia* 3 (1989), 60–61.

⁶¹ Today, the region of the historic Malabar Coast only supplies a small share of world pepper production, but its varieties (known by such *appellations d’origine* as Tellicherry Extra Bold) continue to be sold at a premium. See for instance, K. Burger and H.P. Smit, “The World Pepper Economy: Developments and Outlook”, in P.N. Ravindran (ed.), *Black Pepper: Piper Nigrum* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 2000), 391–431; M. Shaffer, *Pepper: A History of the World’s Most Influential Spice* (New York, NY: St Martin’s Press, 2013), 102, 225–226.

⁶² D. Chirot, *How Societies Change* (London: SAGE, 2nd edn., 2011), 71. On the limited impact of the first two centuries of the European presence in Asia, see Pearson, *Indian Ocean*, ch. 5. On the myth of European military superiority, see for instance, T. Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age: China, Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West, 900–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁶³ F. da Costa, “Relatório sobre o trato da pimenta feito por Francisco da Costa, escrivão da feitoria de [Cochim]”, in A. da Silva Rego (ed.), *Documentação Ultramarina Portuguesa*, 5 vols. (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, 1960–83), III, 351.

5,000 to 15,000 tonnes per year, it is clear that immense amounts of the spice continued to be traded outside Portuguese purview.⁶⁴ Rough as they are, these figures point to the continued significance of Muslim spice networks right across the sixteenth century, which in terms of sheer volume dwarfed the trade of the Portuguese interlopers.

Even though the Portuguese only ever managed to capture a small amount of overall Indian Ocean commerce, their impact clearly varied across different parts of monsoon Asia. It was felt especially sharply on the Malabar Coast, their original destination and main focus of their efforts to attain a monopoly on the pepper trade. Malabar thus became the “major test case” of Portugal’s imperial project in Asia – and as their chief rivals in the all-important spice trade, Muslims in particular became the primary targets of their aggression and persecution.

This conflict was further exaggerated by the Europeans’ extra-economic impulsion to, in the language of Dom Manuel’s instructions to Cabral, “make war upon [the Muslims] and do them as much damage as possible as a people with whom we have so great and so ancient an enmity”.⁶⁵ This spirit, rooted in the *Reconquista* and the House of Aviz’s North African campaigns, was certainly a factor in the sporadic savageries committed against Muslims in Iberia, Africa, and Asia. Nonetheless, Portuguese officials on the ground, and especially those charged with conducting trade, were often more pragmatic in their actions than this aspect of Portugal’s history would suggest. While an ideological underpinning was highly convenient in justifying the capture of their ships on the open sea, in the setting of Indian Ocean port cities, the Portuguese were often dependent on the cooperation of Muslim merchants.

In spite of the injunction to *jihād* propagated in texts such as Zayn al-Dīn’s jeremiad *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, many Muslims also preferred the rewards of commercial interaction to the perils of confrontation. Given their key role in the pepper trade, Muslims were in fact among the most

⁶⁴ For data and estimates of Malabar’s pepper production, see J. Kieniewicz, “Le commerce en Asie et l’expansion portugaise vers l’Océan Indian au XVIe siècle”, *Acta Poloniae Historica* 18 (1968), 191–193; J. Kieniewicz, “Pepper Gardens and Market in Precolonial Malabar”, *Moyen Orient et Océan Indien* 3 (1986), 3–10; V.M. Godinho, *Os Descobrimentos e a Economia Mundial*, 4 vols. (Lisbon: Editorial Presença, 2nd edn., 1981), 183–191; V.M. Godinho, *Mito e mercadoria, utopia e prática de navegar;*, séculos XIII–XVIII (Lisbon: Difel, 1990), 331; Mathew, *Portuguese Trade*, 212–214; G. Bouchon, *Navires et Cargaisons Retour de l’Inde en 1518* (Paris: Société d’Histoire de l’Orient, 1977); Prange, “Measuring by the Bushel”, 219–220; F. de Romanis, “Comparative Perspectives on the Pepper Trade”, in F. de Romanis and M. Maiuro (eds.), *Across the Ocean: Nine Essays on Indo-Mediterranean Trade* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 127.

⁶⁵ “Additional Instructions Given to Cabral”, in Greenlee (trans.), *Voyage of Pedro Álvares Cabral*, 180.

important trading partners of the Portuguese in Malabar's port cities. Some of these Muslims, such as Cherina and Mamale Marakkar in the 1510s, regularly met with the Portuguese viceroy and received stipends and other privileges from him as rewards for their assistance in the procurement of pepper.⁶⁶ Mappila traders in particular were beneficiaries of the Portuguese campaign against "the Moors of Mecca", as they were able to take over some of the trade from *paradesi* Muslims who fled the region. Deals and partnerships with Muslims allowed Portuguese traders to tap into their networks. Muslims regularly transhipped goods on behalf of the Portuguese between different centres of Muslim commerce such as Surat, the Bay of Bengal, and Melaka.⁶⁷

Just as important to the notoriously underfunded Portuguese was the provision of credit. Mappila merchants – and other Muslim businessmen on the Indian coast – were among the largest financiers of Portugal's imperial project in Asia. Their loans were rewarded (though not always repaid) by concessions, including the right to trade on the officially embargoed Red Sea route.⁶⁸ A prominent example of this is Khwaja Shamsud-din Giloni, a merchant of Persian origin settled in Cannanore, who over a number of years provided credits in excess of 800,000 *cruzados* to Portuguese officials.⁶⁹ Such relationships were not defined by complaisance on the side of Muslims alone: European traders, freelancers, and renegades also provided various services to Muslim merchants, including shipping, armaments, and military assistance.⁷⁰

Even more intense than official cooperation was the interactions between Muslims and European private interests, which amounted to what some historians have described as Portugal's "shadow empire".⁷¹

⁶⁶ See Mathew, *Portuguese Trade*, 101.

⁶⁷ Mathew, *Portuguese Trade*, 103.

⁶⁸ The great wealth of some of these merchants that enabled them to provide capital to the Portuguese was remarked upon by the Florentine merchant Piero Strozzi, who wrote in 1510: "We believe ourselves to be the most astute men that one can encounter, and the people here surpass us in everything. And there are Muslim merchants worth 400,000 to 500,000 ducats"; cited in S. Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 7.

⁶⁹ This immense sum would be equal to nearly 2.25 tonnes of gold. K.S. Mathew, "Khwaja Shamsud-din Giloni: A Sixteenth-Century Entrepreneur in Portuguese India", in R. Ptak and D. Rothermund (eds.), *Emporia, Commodities and Entrepreneurs in Asian Maritime Trade, c. 1400–1750* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1991), 370.

⁷⁰ See M.A. Lima Cruz, "Exiles and Renegades in Early Sixteenth Century Portuguese India", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 23:3 (1986), 249–262; G.V. Scammell, "Indigenous Assistance in the Establishment of Portuguese Power in Asia in the Sixteenth Century", *Modern Asian Studies* 14:1 (1980), 1–11; G.V. Scammell, "European Exiles, Renegades and Outlaws and the Maritime Economy of Asia c.1500–1750", *Modern Asian Studies* 26:4 (1992), 641–661.

⁷¹ See M. Newitt, "Formal and Informal Empire in the History of Portuguese Expansion", *Portuguese Studies* 17 (2001), 1.

Portuguese participation in intra-Asian commerce, the so-called “country trade”, has been repeatedly reassessed in recent decades. The study of the interaction between Portuguese private traders, especially the *casados moradores* (married settlers), and indigenous mercantile communities has long been plagued by the unfortunate paradigm of “corruption”.⁷² Unofficial trade was an important component of the European presence in the Indian Ocean, and many Asian merchants knew the Portuguese as individual trading partners rather than through the *Estado da Índia* with its grandiose claims and unrealizable ambitions. Reliable data are meagre, but it seems clear that from the beginning of the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean, private trade was tolerated; by the 1560s, even the crucial trade in pepper was farmed out to private syndicates.⁷³ The intra-Asian trade was highly lucrative, and private European interests eagerly participated in it, whether sanctioned or not.

To highlight instances of commercial cooperation, however, is not to detract from the overall picture of commercial rivalry and military confrontation. The Portuguese presence and policies on the Malabar Coast posed a vital threat to the long-distance commerce on which its Muslim merchants had thrived. This was felt most keenly at Calicut, the principal emporium in South India and Vasco da Gama’s first port of call. After its ruler refused the Portuguese demand to expel all of the town’s Muslims, Calicut came under attack from the Portuguese and over the sixteenth century evolved into a hotbed of militant resistance against them.

Following the emigration of many *paradesi* Muslims, Calicut’s pepper trade came under the control of Mappila merchants. These, in turn, relied on Mappila sailors, including many groups and individuals who the Portuguese regarded as pirates.⁷⁴ Muslim merchants drew Mappila corsairs into their networks, using them to transport their own consignments past Portuguese blockades, to harass their commercial rivals (including, but not limited to, the Portuguese), and produce additional income from piracy.⁷⁵

Faced by attacks on Muslim shipping, and particularly on all traffic coming from Calicut, merchants increasingly relied on smaller vessels that could more easily evade the Portuguese caravels. Using small country

⁷² See Pearson, *Coastal Western India*, 18–40; G.B. Souza, “Portuguese Country Traders in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, c.1600”, *Moyen Orient et Océan Indien* 1 (1984), 117–128.

⁷³ See Disney, *Twilight of the Pepper Empire*, 71.

⁷⁴ See for instance, de Gray Birch (trans.), *Commentaries of Dalboquerque*, III, 34.

⁷⁵ See P. Malekandathil, “From Merchant Capitalists to Corsairs: The Role of Muslim Merchants in the Maritime Trade of the Portuguese”, *Portuguese Studies Review* 21:1 (2004), 75–96; Prange, “Trade of No Dishonor”, 1283–1290.



Figure 4.2 Sketch of South Indian country craft, a 1638 Dutch edition of van Linschoten's *Itinerario* (1596).

Image courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection (www.davidrumsey.com).

craft and Malabar's innumerable backwaters, rivers, and shallow bays, Mappila sailors were able to circumvent the intermittent Portuguese blockades and carry pepper northwards as well as around Cape Comorin towards Ceylon and Coromandel, where it was transhipped for further transport to Bengal, Sumatra, and China.

By the time Zayn al-Din wrote *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn* in the 1580s, the Portuguese were firmly entrenched on the west coast of India and able to prevent Malabar's Muslims from trading directly with ports in Arabia and Southeast Asia. According to his text, Muslims responded to this blockade by reorientating their trade to "Gujarat, Konkan, Coromandel, and around Kayalpatnam [Qā'il]"⁷⁶. A source from Calicut likewise mentions Gujarat as an alternative outlet for Malabari trade networks, noting that the Muslims were bringing ginger and pepper

⁷⁶ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 142b.

there “without either flag or passport”, meaning that this trade was carried on in defiance of the Portuguese *cartaz* system.⁷⁷ The role of Gujarat in Muslim pepper networks of the late sixteenth century is further confirmed by European sources. When the Portuguese launched an attack on ships at a Gujarati harbour, they found there many vessels belonging to merchants from Cannanore, Dharmadam, and other Malabari ports. From the Gujarati perspective, this reorientation of the pepper trade was welcomed by local mercantile interests:

Gujarat’s merchants [...] were happy to sit in their ports and let the Malabarlis bring them pepper, if they could evade the Portuguese. There is no record of Gujarati ships going to Malabar to get pepper, but Gujarati ships, and others, did collect pepper in the Bay of Bengal and Indonesia, and from there take it direct to the Red Sea. Much of this pepper came overland from Malabar [...].⁷⁸

The Gujarati port mentioned most frequently in the sources as an entrepôt for Malabari pepper is Diu, which was known to the Portuguese as “the port of the Turks” on account of the alliance between the sultan of Gujarat with the Ottomans.⁷⁹ In a missive from 1523, the Portuguese king was told that Diu must be conquered because it had become the centre of the “illegal” trade in pepper.⁸⁰ Other Gujarati ports, such as Cambay and Surat, also developed into hubs for the trans-oceanic pepper trade, not least because of their merchants’ deftness at playing the *cartaz* system to their own advantage.⁸¹ The increasing role that Gujarat’s Muslim merchants played in the spice trade is evident from their leadership in opposing the Portuguese at Melaka in 1510–11.⁸² However, as Tomé Pires’ account of that period makes abundantly clear, the “Malabarese” remained essential to the supply of pepper, even if they were no longer able to trade it directly to ports in the eastern Indian Ocean.⁸³

Another way in which Malabar’s Muslim merchants circumvented Portuguese attempts at suppressing their trade was to make greater use of overland routes. A number of Mappila merchants in particular, who

⁷⁷ Wye, “Translation of a History”, fol. 33b.

⁷⁸ M.N. Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat: The Response to the Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1976), 98.

⁷⁹ Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers*, 103.

⁸⁰ See M.N. Pearson, *The Portuguese in India (The New Cambridge History of India, vol. I.1)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 44.

⁸¹ See S. Subrahmanyam, “A Note on the Rise of Surat in the Sixteenth Century”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43:1 (2000), 23–33.

⁸² See M.N. Pearson, “India and the Indian Ocean in the Sixteenth Century”, in A. Das Gupta and M.N. Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 82.

⁸³ Cortesão (ed. and trans.), *Tomé Pires*, II, 268–273.

were less likely than the *paradesi* to relocate to ports outside the sphere of Portuguese control, moved further inland in search of alternative commercial outlets. One significant route was towards the north, to meet the demand for pepper in the Deccani sultanates and the Vijayanagara empire, of which Duarte Barbosa wrote that “much pepper is used [...] everywhere throughout the kingdom, which they bring hither from Malabar on asses and pack-cattle”.⁸⁴ Garcia da Orta, in his *Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India* of 1563, also notes that much of Malabar’s pepper was traded to the north “on oxen”.⁸⁵ Of even greater importance, though, were the eastern routes across the Western Ghats, which linked Calicut and other cities on the Malabar Coast to east coast ports such as Nagapattinam. Francisco da Costa, a clerk at the Portuguese factory at Cochin at the turn of the seventeenth century, believed that a substantial share of Malabar’s pepper was exported overland through the Ghat passes.⁸⁶ From ports on the Coromandel Coast, this pepper then entered the Muslim trade networks operating in Ceylon, the Bay of Bengal, as well as Southeast Asia. This impression accords to the general picture of the emergence of “a network of ports of distinctly anti-Portuguese character” in the eastern Indian Ocean in the late sixteenth century.⁸⁷

A further consequence of the Portuguese presence on the Malabar Coast, which was concentrated around the ports of Cochin and Cannanore, was the growing importance of South Kanara, a region in the far north of the historic Malabar Coast. The main port of this region was Bhatkal, which functioned as a key entrepôt to the powerful Vijayanagara empire. The Vijayanagara emperors relied on Bhatkal for their strategically vital supply of horses, but were content to exercise a loose form of political suzerainty over the port. In the first half of the sixteenth century, numerous Portuguese sources refer to Bhatkal’s pepper trade with Arabia and Persia, which was presumably carried out in exchange for horses. Barbosa mentions that the Malabaris (“malavares”), a term

⁸⁴ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 58; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, I, 203.

⁸⁵ G. da Orta, *Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India*, ed. and trans. C. Markham (London: Henry Sotheran & Co., 1913), 367–368. In the early fifteenth century, Ludovico de Varthema had completed such a journey from Cannanore to Vijayanagara in fifteen days; Reichert (trans.), *Ludovico de Varthema*, 139.

⁸⁶ da Costa, “Relatório”, 315. Also see J. Deloche, *La circulation en Inde avant la révolution des transports*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient, 1980), I, *passim*.

⁸⁷ Subrahmanyam, “Persians, Pilgrims and Portuguese”, 503. Also see J.M. Flores, *Os Portugueses e o Mar de Ceilão: Trato, diplomacia e guerra (1498–1543)* (Lisbon: Edições Cosmos, 1998), 57–76; S. Subrahmanyam, “The Coromandel Malacca Trade in the Sixteenth Century: A Study of its Evolving”, in O. Prakash (ed.), *European Commercial Expansion in Early Modern Asia* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1997), 43–68.

he usually applied to Mappilas, bring pepper to this port that is then traded on the ships of *paradesi* Muslims towards Aden.⁸⁸ This exchange is also documented in the *Tārikh al-shihri*, an Arabic chronicle from Yemen: covering the first decades of the sixteenth century, it contains frequent mentions of ships from Bhatkal (“*Bā Daqal*”), including the report of a naval confrontation between a Portuguese grab and an Indian merchantman from that port.⁸⁹ It appears that some *paradesi* Muslims from Malabar had relocated to South Kanara, using the suzerainty of the Vijayanagara empire as a shield against the Portuguese that allowed them to turn Bhatkal into an alternative hub for the pepper trade. This development explains the “unmistakably hostile” relations between the Portuguese and the port of Bhatkal throughout this period.⁹⁰ In fact, Portuguese efforts to suppress Bhatkal’s trade are regarded as a direct cause of an insurrection in a port across the Arabian Sea. In 1521, the merchants of Hormuz rose up against the Portuguese occupiers of the island, reputedly in order to safeguard their trade with Bhatkal, which to them meant not only the lucrative export of horses but, crucially, also the import of Indian rice.⁹¹

In addition to the Malabari pepper transhipped at Bhatkal and other ports in its vicinity, pepper also came to be cultivated in South Kanara itself. The exact time at which this began has been subject to some debate. In his monumental economic history of Portugal’s overseas venture, Vitorina Magalhães Godinho claims that pepper production in this region began in the 1560s in response to the increased demand created by the Cape route.⁹² This view has been repeatedly challenged by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who marshals a number of Portuguese references to argue that pepper production in this region had begun earlier, perhaps even before the Portuguese arrived in India.⁹³ In either view, it is clear that

⁸⁸ Barbosa adds that all this occurred in contravention of the Portuguese embargo. Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 39–40; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, I, 188–189.

⁸⁹ Serjeant, *The Portuguese off the South Arabian Coast*, 55, 62–63, 68, 71.

⁹⁰ Subrahmanyam, *Political Economy of Commerce*, 120–135.

⁹¹ See D. Couto, “Réactions anti-portugaises dans le golfe Persique (1521–1529)”, in J.-L. Bacqué-Grammont, A. Pino, and S. Khoury (eds.), *D’un Orient l’autre: actes des troisièmes journées de l’Orient* (Paris-Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2005), 132–144; D. Couto, “Hormuz under the Portuguese Protectorate: Some Notes on the Maritime Economic Nets to India (Early 16th Century)”, in R. Kauz (ed.), *Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road: From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2010), 44–45.

⁹² “[N]o decurso do século XVI os vergéis de *Piper nigrum* estenderam-se para o norte, e desde cerca de 1565 a pimenta canará entra em cena no comércio oceânico”. Godinho, *Os Descobrimentos*, II, 186.

⁹³ S. Subrahmanyam, “The Portuguese, the Port of Basrur, and the Rice Trade, 1600–50”, *Indian Economic Social History Review* 21:4 (1984), 443–444; Subrahmanyam, *Political*

Kanara became an important pepper-producing region in its own right; by the beginning of the seventeenth century, it even became a significant source of pepper for the Portuguese. At the same time, the use of South Kanara ports by Muslim merchants who had relocated from southern ports also made the region a continual target for the Portuguese, with Albuquerque in particular intent on “ruining the port of Bhatkal” in an effort to undermine the revived Muslim pepper networks.⁹⁴

Portuguese attempts to suppress Muslim shipping and seize control of the pepper trade resulted in a realignment, rather than the complete fragmentation or permanent displacement, of production centres, routes, and markets. What is more, the Portuguese may have inadvertently strengthened existing trade networks by supplying vast amounts of new liquidity into the Indian Ocean markets in the form of bullion: “The injection of large quantities of American treasure, in fact, intensified and deepened evolving circuits of exchange in the trading world of Asia”.⁹⁵ It is not without irony that the perpetually cash-strapped Portuguese ultimately strengthened Asian trade networks, including those of their sworn Muslim enemies, by the transfer of gold and silver across the globe in their pursuit of spices and empire.

Not all changes in the pattern of Malabar’s pepper trade over the course of the sixteenth century can be attributed to the Portuguese. The increasing involvement in the spice trade by other powers – especially the Ottoman empire and the sultanate of Aceh – was also an important factor in its ongoing transformation. The growing role of Aceh in particular must also be understood in the context of the rise in pepper production in that region, which fostered the creation of parallel, rival trade networks to those traditionally centred on Malabar.⁹⁶

The presence of Portuguese fleets in the Indian Ocean was an immediate threat to the Red Sea spice trade, which at the beginning of the sixteenth century was controlled by the Mamluks of Egypt. As early as 1502, a Venetian ambassador was dispatched to Cairo to warn the Mamluk sultan of the dangers that the Portuguese posed to their shared interests.⁹⁷ In reaction to Portuguese forays into the Red Sea in 1503 and

Economy of Commerce, 130–132; S. Subrahmanyam, “The Birth-pangs of Portuguese Asia: Revisiting the Fateful ‘Long Decade’ 1498–1509”, *Journal of Global History* 2:3 (2007), 266, 270–274.

⁹⁴ Letter from Afonso de Albuquerque to Dom Manuel of 4 December 1513, cited in Rubié, *Travel and Ethnology*, 191n.64. Also see Disney, *Twilight of the Pepper Empire*, ch. 1.

⁹⁵ R. Palat, *The Making of an Indian Ocean World Economy, 1250–1650: Princes, Paddy Fields, and Bazaars* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 190.

⁹⁶ Ng Chin-Keong, *Boundaries and Beyond*, 28.

⁹⁷ W. Heyd, *Geschichte des Levantehandels im Mittelalter*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Verlag der J.G. Cotta’schen Buchhandlung, 1879), II, 514–515.

the potential stranglehold they acquired on the Bab al-Mandab through their conquest of Soqotra in 1507, the Mamluk sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī assembled a fleet that in 1508 was able to surprise the Portuguese off Cochin. The next year, however, this Mamluk fleet was decisively routed, a defeat that not only strengthened the Portuguese hold on the Malabar Coast but also “laid the groundwork for the fall of the Mamluks, since now the Islamic world, including the Mamluk sultans themselves, realized that the only power capable of carrying on the crucial struggle was the Ottoman state”.⁹⁸

The Ottoman involvement in the Indian Ocean has recently been reassessed in a study by Giancarlo Casale. He shows that from the 1540s onwards, the Ottoman state assumed a direct involvement in the spice trade, culminating in the establishment of imperial factories in a number of Indian Ocean ports, possibly including Calicut.⁹⁹ Casale even suggests that Ottoman commercial interests in the spice trade were a factor in the plan to conquer Egypt.¹⁰⁰ Formal and informal Ottoman support of Muslim pepper networks was crucial to the revival of the Red Sea trade, arguably more so than the occasional naval challenges to the Portuguese that the Ottomans engaged in. Diplomatic exchanges between the Ottomans and the sultan of Aceh from the period 1560–80 are evidence for their ambitions of not only opposing the Portuguese militarily but also by targeting their commercial interests. Using relocated Muslim trade networks to subvert Portugal’s pretensions to a monopoly on pepper was a key plan in this strategy.¹⁰¹

The reconfiguration of the Muslim spice trade was underpinned by the emergence of new, trans-oceanic alliances. The alliances were always dual in nature. On the one hand, they had a clear politico-military component in the fight against Portuguese armed shipping. This could take the form of major coordinated attacks by multiple state powers, as was the case in the naval battles of Chaul (1508) and Diu (1509) that were fought by fleets from the kingdom of Calicut, the Mamluks of Egypt (with Venetian support), the sultanate of Gujarat, and the Ottomans. Most of the time, however, military opposition to the Portuguese was of a lesser

⁹⁸ H. İnalçik, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, vol. 1: 1300–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 320. It must be noted that this level of Mamluk introspection is attributed to them by a historian of the Ottoman empire. However, it is substantiated at least in part by their subsequent requests for Ottoman support in assembling a new fleet at Suez.

⁹⁹ Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*, 213–226.

¹⁰⁰ Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*, 25–28.

¹⁰¹ İnalçik, *Economic and Social History*, 328; C.R. Boxer, “A Note on Portuguese Reactions to the Revival of the Red Sea Spice Trade and the Rise of Atjeh, 1540–1600”, *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10:3 (1969), 415–428.

scale, consisting of a mixture of attacks, harassment, and self-defence that the Portuguese unwaveringly decried as Mappila piracy.¹⁰² On the other hand, these new alliances also had a clear economic objective, which was to take advantage of the displacement of the traditional pepper networks to gain a share of this profitable trade.

These two strands were mutually reinforcing. The commercial was also political, in that trading pepper in defiance of the Portuguese undermined their monopoly claims and the profitability of their enterprise, and profits from trade could be used to finance the resistance. The kingdom of Calicut, which emerged as the most persistent foe to the Portuguese in southern India, was a major beneficiary of both smuggling and corsairing.¹⁰³ And the political was also commercial: much diplomacy was conducted by merchants (as it had been in earlier times, when Muslim merchants from South India served as envoys to the Chinese court) and political alliances were forged and undone based on the mutual benefits from, or rival interests in, the spice trade.

Mappila merchants were at the heart of this nexus of military assistance and trade that linked the Malabar Coast to other centres of resistance such as the Maldives, Ceylon, and Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁴ Military cooperation was an important part of these new bonds. When Albuquerque seized Melaka in 1511, he found in the port “one very large gun which the King of Calicut had sent to the King of Malaca”.¹⁰⁵ Coordination through Muslim trade networks may also have been behind the near-simultaneous attacks on the Portuguese fortresses at both Kollam and Pasai in 1520–1. That same year also saw sieges of Portuguese fortresses at Colombo, Hormuz, and the Maldives, which strengthens the impression of a widely coordinated campaign.

Muslim representatives of the Zamorin also entered diplomatic exchanges with the Ottomans, assuring them of Calicut’s assistance in any attempt to rout the Portuguese from the Indian Ocean.¹⁰⁶ Similarly,

¹⁰² See Prange, “Trade of No Dishonor”; Prange, “The Contested Sea”.

¹⁰³ Prange, “Trade of No Dishonor”, 1286–1287.

¹⁰⁴ Prange, “Measuring by the Bushel”, 231–232; Prange, “Trade of No Dishonor”, 1288.

¹⁰⁵ de Gray Birch (trans.), *Commentaries of Dalboquerque*, III, 217. By 1505, there were a number of Venetian and Milanese gunsmiths producing cannon; see Reichert (trans.), *Ludovico de Varthema*, 241–244. For the diffusion of artillery technology, see C.R. Boxer, “Asian Potentates and European Artillery in the 16th–18th Centuries: A Footnote to Gibson-Hill”, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38:2 (1965), 156–172 and A.J. Qaisar, *The Indian Response to European Technology and Culture: AD 1498–1710* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 43–57.

¹⁰⁶ İnalçik, *Economic and Social History*, 329. However, despite these assurances, Diu remained the focus of Ottoman naval campaigns on the Indian coast.

Zayn al-Din's history hints at a political alliance between Calicut and the sultanate of Gujarat:

In the year 937 or 938 [=1530–2] the subjects of the Zamorin and others from outside together made a trade trip in about thirty ships to various ports of Gujarat [Jazrāt]. The group included 'Ali Ibrāhim Marakkār, his nephew Kutti Ibrāhim Marakkār and other notable persons. Most of these ships went to the ports of Jūjārī [? Janjira] and Sūrāt and a few others at Barūj [Bharuch].¹⁰⁷

The Marakkars have already been noted as the Muslim admirals of Calicut; to the Portuguese, they were notorious pirates. Their motive for accompanying this trading voyage is impossible to ascertain: did they join the convoy to protect it from attacks, or were they on a diplomatic mission on behalf of the Zamorin? The important role that Gujarat played as an outlet for Malabar's pepper, and the frequent mention of the trading interests of the Gujarati sultans in Zayn al-Din's history, suggest a tentative political alliance, based on their mutual economic interest in the pepper trade.

Such an alliance would constitute another link in the web of commercial, political, and religious ties that underpinned the successful reshaping of the Muslim pepper trade in the Indian Ocean in the second half of the sixteenth century. It was this reconfiguration that ensured the continued, albeit diminished, role of Malabar's Muslim communities in the commerce of their most characteristic trade good.

The changing paths of the pepper trade can serve as a map onto which other passages that comprised the world of Monsoon Islam can be plotted. For example, as will be shown below, the close commercial ties between Malabar and Aden were reflected in a network of politico-religious patronage. The history of the pepper trade also suggests that routes across the eastern Indian Ocean were as important, if not more so, than those linking Malabar to the west. These linkages found expression in scholarly and legal exchanges, especially with Southeast Asia where Muslim trading diasporas negotiated contexts and challenges that were very similar to those of their counterparts on the Malabar Coast. Across the sixteenth century, the upheavals to existing patterns of trade prompted by Portuguese attacks caused not only the relocation of individual merchants but also that of their associated networks.¹⁰⁸ Contemporary accounts, including those written by the Portuguese

¹⁰⁷ Zayn al-Din, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidīn*, fol. 141b.

¹⁰⁸ See P. Malekandathil, "The Mercantile Networks and the International Trade of Cochin, 1500–1663", in E. van Veen and L. Blussé (eds.), *Rivalry and Conflict: European Traders and Asian Trading Networks in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2005), 147.

themselves, make it clear that rather than dissolving Muslim networks, the Portuguese only managed to shift it to other ports and routes.¹⁰⁹ These shifts found expression in new trans-oceanic associations, which continued to align along the trails of the pepper trade.

Religious Networks: Paths of the Scholar and the Sufi

Before and after the irruption of the Portuguese, Muslim pepper networks across the Indian Ocean provided the backbone for many other types of connections, which in their sum made up and sustained the world of Monsoon Islam. Religious exchanges in particular were closely interwoven with commerce. It was, of course, above all a matter of simple logistics that caused Islamic scholars and Muslim holy men to travel aboard the same dhows and call at the same ports as the merchants. And it is not surprising that these individuals also had an eye for profitable business, partaking in trade as anyone did who moved along these routes. But trade and faith supplemented and sustained one another beyond these obvious linkages. Religious specialists provided essential services for Muslim trading communities, and trade shaped religious affiliations and networks in significant and long-lasting ways. The two most important vectors in this relationship were the movement of religious scholars and the circulation of their texts.

Ocean of Knowledge: Scholarly Networks

Throughout the medieval Islamic world, the transmission of knowledge was an intensely personal process. Scholarly qualifications and prestige were based not on where one had studied, but with whom: “An education was judged not on *loci* but on *personae*.¹¹⁰ The reputation and pedigree of one’s teacher were the essential credentials for any Islamic scholar. Even though the written word was highly valued in Islamic culture, as is evident not only from the veneration for the material form of the Quran but also the generally high level of book production in Muslim societies, the oral transmission of knowledge remained the primary vehicle of education.¹¹¹ It was the circle of master and disciples, rather than the private study over a book, that was the dominant image of Islamic learning. An

¹⁰⁹ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 302–303; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 125.

¹¹⁰ J.P. Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 23.

¹¹¹ See for instance, Touati, *Islam and Travel*, 8.

important consequence of this emphasis on the direct, personal transmission of knowledge was that most scholars travelled widely, so that they could receive knowledge from different teachers.¹¹²

At the same time, such journeys also bestowed authority on the pupil who, as he collected more and more encounters with well-known scholars, himself became transformed into a peripatetic source of experiences, opinions, and interpretations. Travelling in the pursuit of an education took special validation from a saying of the Prophet that “whoever goes out in search of knowledge is in God’s cause until he returns”.¹¹³ It is in the movements of scholars traversing the Indian Ocean that much of the legal and institutional development of Monsoon Islam took shape. Jan Heesterman, in his survey of Islamization on the Indian Ocean littoral, asserts that in order to “become firmly established and expand, Islam, like other scriptural religions, needs durable centres for maintaining, developing, transmitting, and propagating its scriptural tenets”.¹¹⁴ To the contrary: the conventional focus on the great centres of Islamic learning – places such as Mecca, Cairo, Delhi, and Samarkand – does not capture the fluid, untethered history of Muslim scholars and saints moving across the Indian Ocean. In many cases, their trajectories intersect with the traditional seats of knowledge and authority, but their studies and teachings, their masters and disciples, their affinities and allegiances are as much defined by this wider world and its particular opportunities and challenges. It is for this reason that a focus on their itineraries and networks can reveal an alternative history of how Islam came to be maintained, developed, transmitted, and propagated within the world of monsoon Asia.

It has already been noted that until the sixteenth century Malabar’s *‘ulamā’* self-consciously maintained an Arab identity. Their trans-oceanic ties, however, went beyond genealogy and were actively maintained by each generation. The pilgrimage to Mecca was an important element in these continued scholarly linkages. Pilgrimage is a central motif in the fashioning of Islamic history on the Malabar Coast: the legendary Cheraman Perumal is said to have learnt about Islam from a group of Muslim pilgrims, and

¹¹² See Robinson, “Education”, 507–508; S.I. Gellen, “The Search for Knowledge in Medieval Muslim Societies: A Comparative Approach”, in D.F. Eickelman and J. Piscatorius (eds.), *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 50–65.

¹¹³ A. Khalil (trans.), *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhi*, 6 vols. (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 2007), no. 2647, V, 57. Another *hadith* of less certain veracity beseeches Muslims to “seek knowledge even [as far as] in China”.

¹¹⁴ J. Heesterman, “The Tides of the Indian Ocean, Islamization and the Dialectic of Coast and Inland”, in J. Gommans and O. Prakash (eds.), *Circumambulations in South Asian History: Essays in Honour of Dirk H.A. Kolff* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 31.

subsequently embarked on his own pilgrimage to meet the prophet at Medina. Pilgrimage (Ar., *hajj*) is a cornerstone of Islam and incumbent on every able Muslim.¹¹⁵

Since the beginnings of Islam (and, in fact, beforehand), the pilgrimage to Mecca has always been closely tied to commerce, as is acknowledged in the age-old Arabic adage *hajj wa-hājah*: “pilgrimage and business”. Every year during the pilgrimage season, Mecca transformed into an international marketplace. Of special importance were the maritime pilgrims from South Asia, who arrived in large vessels that carried valuable cargoes and paid substantial custom duties: to many, the pilgrimage was as much a business opportunity as a spiritual calling.¹¹⁶ The voyages were largely accomplished on Muslim-owned ships and followed the established trade routes. Because of Malabar’s central place in the oceanic trade network, it also played an equally pivotal role in the pilgrim traffic, not least as a conduit for Muslims travelling from the Bay of Bengal, Southeast Asia, and China. It is thus not surprising that Muslim scholars on the Malabar Coast maintained connections to teachers, peers, and prominent personages through the maritime pilgrimage, either as direct participants or vicariously through the circulation of texts and information that accompanied this annual exchange.

For those of scholarly inclinations, participation in the *hajj* was often combined with an extended period of study in the centres of Islamic learning in the Hijaz and Egypt. The grandfather of Zayn al-Din, Zayn al-Dīn ibn ‘Alī, is thought to have travelled to both Arabia and Egypt to study Islam. Similarly, the grandson is said to have studied at Mecca under the famous Shāfi‘ī theologian Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī.¹¹⁷ Ibn Ḥajar was the author of one of the foremost textbooks of Shāfi‘ī law and lived in Mecca until his death in 1567. Although it cannot be proven, it is at least plausible that Zayn al-Din visited the city on his *hajj* and participated in the scholarly circles around Ibn Ḥajar. Ibn Ḥajar’s writings enjoyed wide success and within a few years spread “in innumerable copies to the remotest countries”.¹¹⁸ His influence in India is attested by an Arabic text

¹¹⁵ Women have participated in the rituals of the *hajj* from the earliest times; however, over time, their “ability” to participate came to be defined as having a trustworthy male companion.

¹¹⁶ See E. Tagliacozzo, “The Hajj by Sea”, in E. Tagliacozzo and S.M. Toorawa (eds.), *The Hajj: Pilgrimage in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 113–130.

¹¹⁷ Records of the Makhdūm *dargah* at Cochin. Also see Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture*, 242 and A.I. Vilayathullah, “Short Biography of Shaykh Zainuddin”, in Nainar (trans.), *Shaykh Zainuddin Makhdum’s Tuhfat al-Mujāhidin*, xviii–xix.

¹¹⁸ C. van Arendonk, “Ibn Ḥadjar al-Haytamī”, in M. Th. Houtsma, T.W. Arnold, R. Basset, and R. Hartmann (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1913–36), III, 778.

composed in Gujarat around 1604, which mentions that scholars from all over the Islamic world had travelled to Mecca to study with him.¹¹⁹ Ibn Ḥajar's work reached Malabar along the maritime trade routes from Yemen, where it was highly popular, and can be adduced as a likely influence on Zayn al-Dīn's own anthology of Shāfi‘ī law, the *Qurrat al-‘ayn* (c. 1567/8).

Remarkably, a collection of Ibn Ḥajar's *fatawā*, which in the typical fashion are presented in a question-and-answer format, contains a question that is explicitly specified as having been sent from Malabar.¹²⁰ The question at issue is whether a divorce in which the Islamic formula of divorce was uttered incorrectly due to insufficient command of the Arabic language is nonetheless legally valid. Clearly, a Malabari *qādī* found himself confronted with this legal conundrum, which because it was specific to a non-Arabian context (where Muslims are not sufficiently competent in Arabic) was not addressed in the standard legal texts. It is tempting to speculate that the question was sent in by Zayn al-Dīn in order to receive an authoritative ruling on the matter from his former teacher, but lamentably the text does not afford proof of this conjecture.

Despite the strong impetus of the *hajj* that centred many scholarly exchanges on Mecca, the travels of and interactions between Islamic scholars were not focused exclusively on the traditional seats of Islamic learning. It has already been seen that Zayn al-Dīn's *Fath al-mu‘in* sought to interpret and localize the *shari‘ah* for Muslim communities outside the *dār al-Islām*. Muslims in other parts of the Indian Ocean trading world, who were faced with the same kind of legal problems and social ambiguities, picked up *Fath al-mu‘in* in their attempts to address these issues. That this text became highly influential among Muslim communities in Southeast Asia is testament not only to the similar circumstances and close trade links between Malabar and that region, but also to Zayn al-Dīn's reputation as a credible scholar.¹²¹ Not only questions and answers about intercultural and legal conundrums – should a Muslim return the

¹¹⁹ ‘Abd al-Qādir al-‘Aydarus, *al-Nūr al-sāfir*.

¹²⁰ See R.B. Serjeant, “Notes and Communications: A Sixteenth-Century Reference to Shahri Dialect at Zufār”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 22:1/3 (1959), 128.

¹²¹ For Indonesian manuscripts of *Fath al-mu‘in* with Arabic and Javanese glosses, see P. Voorhoeve (ed.), *Handlist of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the University of Leiden and Other Collections in the Netherlands* (Leiden: Bibliotheca Universitatis Leidensis, 1957), 279. The popularity of the text in Indonesia is emphasized in M. van Bruinessen, “Kitab Kuning: Books in Arabic Script Used in the Pesantren Milieu: Comments on a New Collection in the KITLV Library”, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 146:2/3 (1990), 247 and in M.F. Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds* (London: Routledge, 2003), 22.

greeting of a Hindu woman? Is a divorce valid even if the formula was spoken incorrectly? – were traded across the ocean, but also notions of religious authority. Looking at religious specialists active on the Malabar Coast, it is remarkable how diverse their geographic origins (or, at the very least, their associations) were.

Ibn Battūṭah was singularly devoted to recording such details, and his account is testament to the wide range of backgrounds of members of Malabar's '*ulamā'*. For example, at Madayi he met a religious scholar from Mogadishu, a region he had previously visited on his travels. At the time, Mogadishu was a prosperous Indian Ocean trading port and capital of a pre-eminent sultanate on the East African coast. After leaving his homeland, this "pious jurist" is said to have spent nearly three decades of study at Mecca and Medina, and to have travelled as far as China, before settling on the Malabar Coast.¹²²

The other end of the world of Monsoon Islam is represented by another Muslim scholar, who likewise made his home on the Malabar Coast. The record of a mosque endowment at Chaliyam, just south of Calicut, defines one of the boundaries of the land that belongs to the local mosque as extending to "the house of the *faqīh* Ahmad ibn 'Umar al-Zaytūnī".¹²³ A *faqīh* (pl. *fugahā*) is a recognized expert in *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, while this homeowner's *nibah* al-Zaytūnī suggests his origins at, or affiliation with, the Chinese port city of Quanzhou (Ar., *Zaytūn*), then the main eastern terminus of the Muslim pepper trade. Residing immediately adjacent to the mosque, this *faqīh* likely served as the legal expert for the Muslim community at Chaliyam, with his house serving quite literally as a landmark of Islam in Malabar. While, as noted before, *nibahs* must be used cautiously as evidence, they can serve as clues to understanding the cosmopolitan composition of Malabar's Muslim scholarly elite. Religious authority was rooted not just in an Arabian identity but also in the qualifications, affiliations, and even a kind of worldliness acquired through travel and experience. In other words, it appears that Muslim merchants put their faith in scholars and judges who were somewhat like themselves.

Saints and Shrines: Sufi Networks

Not only the learned possessed religious authority within the world of Monsoon Islam but also the blessed. Muslim mystics shared with

¹²² Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 82; cf. Gibb and Beckettingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūṭah*, IV, 809.

¹²³ Anon., "Qiṣṣat shakarwati farmād", fol. 102b.

scholars a belief in travel as the primary vehicle for gaining and transmitting religious knowledge. Defined by the blessings (Ar., *barakāt*) of spiritual revelation and divine presence, Muslims travelled far and wide to visit spiritual masters – both the living and at shrines – in order to share in their blessings. These visitations are a central motif in the travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, who describes the encounter with one spiritual master thus: “Never since parting from him have I met with anything but good fortune, and the *shaykh*’s blessed power [*barakah*] has always been with me.”¹²⁴ Islamic mysticism, of which there are many varied forms, is collectively referred to as Sufism. The term Sufism (Ar., *tasawwuf*) is generally used to distinguish mystical practices from the more orthodox scholarly and legalistic forms of Islam. What the different strands of Sufism have in common is their core concern with individual piety and the direct experience of the divine. In spite of this focus on the individual, historically Sufism has often found expression in communal and public forms.¹²⁵

In contrast to Islamic scholars and jurists, Muslim mystics are only rarely discussed in the context of the Indian Ocean history. Whereas Sufism features prominently in the historiography of Indo-Islam, it is rarely acknowledged as a factor on the Malabar Coast, where traders are seen as the decisive agents of Islamization. This discrepancy can be explained partly by the sources: on the Malabar Coast, the absence of Muslim rulers meant that there was no patronage for the collection and compilation of local Sufi hagiographies, and in any event, the region was outside the realm of Persianate literary production, which has formed the basis for the studies of Sufism on the Indian subcontinent. The few extant texts on Sufism from Malabar were composed in Arabi-Malayalam, which has precluded most scholars from accessing them; this omission is only slowly being addressed by local researchers working in Kerala.¹²⁶ What is more, the immense influence of the Bā ‘Alawi Sufi order from the eighteenth century onwards has overshadowed many traces of earlier, differing Sufi practices and affiliations.¹²⁷ As a result, the long-standing

¹²⁴ Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, I, 53; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, I, 32.

¹²⁵ For a valuable survey of Sufism in its global dimensions, see N. Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2012).

¹²⁶ Most notably by V. Kunhali, whose recent *Sufism in Kerala* (Kozhikode: University of Calicut, 2004) is the only sustained English-language study drawing on this material. Despite the unquestionable merit of this pioneering effort, its at times uncritical use of modern compositions as historical evidence mandates further studies of this topic.

¹²⁷ On the Bā ‘Alawi order and development of its trans-oceanic connections, see E. Peskes, *Al-‘Aidarus und seine Erben: Eine Untersuchung zu Geschichte und Sufismus einer Hadramitischen Sāda-Gruppe vom fünfzehnten bis zum achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2005) and Ho, *Graves of Tarim*.

scholarly consensus that the “extensive Sufi missionary activity known elsewhere in the history of Indian Islam is not evident in South India” has remained largely unchallenged.¹²⁸

The development of Islamic mysticism on the Malabar Coast was part of the broader nexus of Sufism in premodern Islam. Many scholars have posited the distinction between two phases of Sufism: a classical period defined by the “theoretical musings of ascetic protest groups”, and a medieval one characterized by the institutionalization of discrete Sufi orders (*tariqah*, pl. *turuq*).¹²⁹ The break between the periods is usually situated in the twelfth century, with al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) seen as a pivotal figure in reconciling Sufism with mainstream Islamic institutions:

The Sūfism of this period was no longer simply the individual piety of mystically inclined Muslims, but developed first an elaborate lore and custom based on the relation of disciple and master, and then, after 1100, a whole social organization, that of the *tariqahs*, Sūfi orders, side by side with that of the mosques and the regular ‘ulamā’ scholars.¹³⁰

Most of the main Sufi orders trace their lineage (*silsilah*, lit., “chain”) to this second period of institutional formation. It was during this time that Sufi mysticism “slowly moved from the fringes of the Islamic intellectual world to its center”.¹³¹ Among the orders that attained particular prominence in India are the Qādiriyah (after ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī, d. 1166), the Suhrawardiyyah (Diyā al-Din Abu'l-Najib al-Suhrawardī, d. 1168), the Rifa'iyyah (Ahmad ibn ‘Ali al-Rifā‘ī, d. 1182), the Naqshbandiyyah (named after Bahā’ al-Din Naqshband of the fourteenth century but derived from the school of ‘Abd al-Khāliq Ghujduwānī, d. 1220), and the Chishtiyyah (Mu‘in al-Dīn Ḥasan Chishtī, d. 1236).¹³² Thus, in the same period in which an Arab-dominated religious elite established itself on the Malabar Coast, another set of Islamic institutions formed and rapidly expanded into India along the paths beaten by Muslim traders and armies.

¹²⁸ I.H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent (610–1947): A Brief Historical Analysis* (Delhi: Renaissance, 1977), 15–16. Miller (*Mappila Muslims*, 53) and Koya (*Mappillas of Malabar*, 8) expressly agree with this view.

¹²⁹ B.B. Lawrence, “Islam in India: The Function of Institutional Sufism in the Islamization of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Kashmir”, in R.C. Martin (ed.), *Islam in Local Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 27. For a critique of this categorization, see I. Weismann, *The Naqshbandiyyah: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2007), 6–9.

¹³⁰ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, II, 204.

¹³¹ J.-P. Platteau, *Islam Instrumentalized: Religion and Politics in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 100.

¹³² On the development of Sufism on the subcontinent, see for example, S.A.A. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978).

In assessing the role of Sufism in the formation of Monsoon Islam, the Cheraman Perumal legend is once again a useful starting point. The Muslim pilgrims who are said to have convinced Cheraman Perumal of the truth of their faith are described in the *Qissah* as a group of dervishes (“*darāwīsh*”).¹³³ Of Persian origin, the term “dervish” denotes a mendicant, but in Islamic usage more specifically refers to a Sufi ascetic. In its telling of the legend, the much later *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin* does not use the term dervish but instead refers to the group of Muslim pilgrims as “a company of Muslim *faqirs* with a *shaykh*”.¹³⁴ In common parlance, the word *faqir* (not to be confused with *faqīh*) means “pauper”, but within Sufi terminology has the specific connotation of a mystic who lives for God alone. Combined with the leadership of a *shaykh* – another prominent term in Sufism that was used synonymously with the Persian *pīr* or Arabic *murshid* to denote a Sufi master – and the overall context of this group’s pilgrimage to Adam’s Peak, the *Tuhfah* also conjure the sense of these Muslims as travelling Sufis.

The allusions to Sufism within the Cheraman Perumal legend do not end there. The group of Arabs who were later sent to Malabar by the converted king to propagate his new faith are likewise depicted in terms that associate them with Sufism. For example, their leader is named in the tradition as Mālik ibn Dīnār; this otherwise unusual name creates a strong association with a famous figure in Sufi lore. Mālik ibn Dīnār al-Sāmī (d. ?747/8) was a highly prominent figure in Islamic traditions and mystical folklore. The eleventh-century Iranian mystic al-Hujwīrī regarded him as a disciple of the famous Muslim theologian Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), who features in the *silsilahs* of many different Sufi orders.¹³⁵ Another important Sufi text, Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār’s *Tadhkīrat al-awliyā* (“Memorial of the Saints”) from the early thirteenth century, also makes mention of this Mālik ibn Dīnār.¹³⁶ The appellative Dīnār is very rare, so much so that ‘Attār saw it necessary to include a story setting out its purported origin.¹³⁷ Interestingly, al-Hujwīrī relates the story of a

¹³³ Anon., “Qiṣṣat shakarwati farmād”, fol. 88a.

¹³⁴ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, fol. 121a.

¹³⁵ ‘Ali b. ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī, *The Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. R.A. Nicholson (Leiden: Brill, 1911), XVII, 89–90.

¹³⁶ A.J. Arberry, *Muslim Saints and Mystics* (Ames, IA: Omphaloskepsis, 2000), 11–18. Ironically, in light of his namesake’s alleged role in the foundation of Malabar’s mosques, another story pivots around Ibn Dīnār’s rejection of the post of superintendent of the Friday mosque at Damascus.

¹³⁷ ‘Attār links it somewhat whimsically to the dinār (from Latin *denarius*), the gold currency of the early Islamic period; Arberry, *Muslim Saints*, 11–12. The only other notable person in the historic record with that name was an Oghuz chieftain who briefly ruled Khurasan in the late twelfth century; see C. Cahen, “Dīnār (Malik)”, in M.Th.

miracle performed by the Sufi Mālik ibn Dīnār, in which he is on a ship and receives jewels from the mouths of fish. It is tempting to see this as an allegorical reference to the profits available to those who venture onto the sea, an image that would have resonated with Malabar's maritime traders.

After having masterminded the foundation of mosques on the Malabar Coast, the Mālik ibn Dīnār of the Cheraman Perumal legend is then said to have travelled on to Khurasan, where he eventually died. This mention of Khurasan can be read as either another nod to the Mālik ibn Dīnār of Sufi lore, who was said to have been of Afghan ancestry (in early Islamic usage, *Kāzārūn* was conceived very broadly and included modern Afghanistan). Alternatively, the mention of Khurasan can also be understood as a reference to that region's strong association with Sufi orders that were active in Malabar at the very time during which the *Qissah* was composed. The words used in the *Qissah* to describe Mālik ibn Dīnār's journey to Khurasan tend to support the latter reading: it describes his voyage as a *ziyārah* (lit., "visitation"), a term that strongly implies a religious purpose. What is more, it then goes on to describe Mālik ibn Dīnār's meeting with the senior *shaykhs* ("mutaqaddimin", lit., "advanced", an adjective often used for important Sufis), to whom he reported his success in building mosques on the Malabar Coast.¹³⁸

As seen in Chapter 2, the central aim of the *Qissah* was to legitimize the status of an Arab '*ulamā'* within Malabar's Muslim community. Against this background, how can this sub-plot that links the ostensible founder of Islam in Malabar to a group of Khurasanian Sufis be explained? First, Mālik ibn Dīnār may have been chosen as the prototypical Sufi saint because his teachings put strong emphasis on obedience to the *sharī'ah*, of which the '*ulamā'* were the principal arbiters.¹³⁹ In other words, this was a Sufi the *qādīs* could live with. Second, the inclusion of a Sufi in the legend may be read as an acknowledgment of the role that Sufism, and perhaps especially individuals linked to Khurasan, played in the region at the time. The rather ham-fisted incorporation of Sufis and Sufism in the legend may thus be a conciliation between the aspirations of the '*ulamā'* and the reality of Sufi influence.

Taken together, these different allusions suggest a direct association of Sufism with Islam on the medieval Malabar Coast. As with the

Houtsma, T.W. Arnold, R. Bassett, and R. Hartmann (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1913–36), II, 299.

¹³⁸ Anon., "Qissat shakarwati farmād", fol. 102a.

¹³⁹ For an interpretation of Mālik ibn Dīnār's teaching, see R. Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums. Erster Teil: Scheiche des Westens* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1995), 59–121, esp. 83–85.

legitimation of the Arab ‘ulamā’, these references must not be read as evidence for the manner in which Islam was brought to the region, but rather for the period of its expansion and institutionalization around the turn of the thirteenth century, when the legend took form. This chronology corresponds to the activity of Sufis elsewhere in India: around the same time, in the early thirteenth century, Sufis began settling in significant numbers in North Indian towns, performing important social roles that inspired at least some degree of conversion.¹⁴⁰ This concurrence suggests that rather than an outlier, South India was very much part of one of the major trends in the history of Indo-Islam of the medieval period.

These inferences about Sufi activity drawn from *Qissah* can be tested against evidence for the presence of Sufi orders on the medieval Malabar Coast. In many parts of South and Southeast Asia, the popularization of Islam is attributed to the agency of Sufis, who were able to attract followers not only through individual piety or charisma but also by their willingness to accommodate pre-existing religious practices and rituals. Sufism is thus regarded as a “natural bridge between Muslim worship and the beliefs of non-Muslim groups”.¹⁴¹ As Richard Eaton demonstrates in his study of the Sufis of Bijapur, their success depended on their ability to draw on pre-existing, indigenous religious idioms, a process somewhat analogous to the attempts by Malabar’s ‘ulamā’ to interpret Islamic law in the context of prevailing local practices.¹⁴²

What Sufi leaders posited, on the broadest scale, was a recasting of mystic imagery and ascetical speculation in forms that could be promulgated among a wider range of people than merely the elites of Dar al-Islam. [...] Institutional Sufism grew because its dynamism was intellectual as well as programmatic; its originality lay in its distillation of disparate elements from the classical phase of Sufism, together with its openness to the new forms – of language, imagery and music – that emerged from the regions to which it was introduced.¹⁴³

The resultant syncretic nature of Monsoon Islam has already been noted in terms of mosque architecture as well as certain social customs, for example the practice of matrilineality among some Mappila communities. A similar intersection between Muslim and non-Muslim practices can be observed in the worship of saints. Ibn Battūṭah describes the votive

¹⁴⁰ See for instance, I.H. Siddiqui, *Composite Culture under the Sultanate of Delhi* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2012), 21–23.

¹⁴¹ S. Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 74–75.

¹⁴² R. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300–1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

¹⁴³ Lawrence, “Islam in India”, 28.

offering seafarers made to a mosque at Madayi, which was “venerated both by Muslims and infidels”.¹⁴⁴ Such cross-communal worship of both Muslims and Hindus at a mosque may have been exceptional – in this case, perhaps resulting from the special bonds forged during hazardous sea-crossings – but it was more common at the shrines of venerated saints. Sunil Amrit describes such shrines for the Bay of Bengal, built in honour of a Sufi saint thought to safeguard seafarers and venerated by Muslims, Hindus, Chinese, and Buddhists alike.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, at one of the most popular Hindu pilgrimage sites in South India, Sabarimala in the foothills of the Western Ghats, a Muslim saint (Vavar, who is said to have come to Kerala as an Arab pirate) is actively revered as part of the ritual procession.¹⁴⁶

Pyrard de Laval describes in some detail the reverence for Sufi shrines in Malabar, for which he uses the Arabic term *ziyārah* (“ziāres”).¹⁴⁷ This word has already been encountered in the context of Mālik ibn Dīnār’s purported voyage to Khurasan. *Ziyārah* can mean both the act of travel or pilgrimage, as well as a holy place that is being visited for spiritual reasons. The tombs of prominent Sufis often became the sites of *ziyārah*, on account of the belief that these individuals were possessed of divine blessing (*baraka*). The visitation of their shrines was believed to transmit some of this quality and assist with supplications. For instance, throughout Malabar, among some members of both the Muslim and Hindu communities, prayers to the Sufi saint Ahmad ibn ‘Ali al-Rifā‘i are believed to guard against snakes.¹⁴⁸

The tenuous nature of any categorical distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims in the context of popular piety is clearly reflected in the sources. Tomé Pires witnessed in Malabar the popularity of both Muslim and Hindu snake-charmers, who he described as “heathen and Mohammadan sorcerers”.¹⁴⁹ Ibn Battūtah was baffled when he encountered a yogi (“jūgī”) near Goa who clandestinely revealed himself to be a Muslim and gave him a number of gold coins; he was even more astounded when he soon afterwards met that person’s associate at

¹⁴⁴ Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 81; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 809.

¹⁴⁵ S.S. Amrit, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 88–89.

¹⁴⁶ Vavar is revered not only by Hindus but also regarded as a saint by members of the Mappila community; see D.-S. Khan, “Vavar Swami: A Hindu-Muslim Saint of Kerala”, in E.F. Kent and T.R. Kassam (eds.), *Lines in the Water: Religious Boundaries in South Asia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 78–98.

¹⁴⁷ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 319.

¹⁴⁸ Kunhali, *Sufism in Kerala*, 64.

¹⁴⁹ Cortesão (ed. and trans.), *Tomé Pires*, I, 73.

Honavar, who already knew what had secretly passed between them.¹⁵⁰ ‘Abd al-Razzāq reports meeting a descendant of the Prophet on the northern Malabar Coast who was believed to be a hundred and twenty years of age.¹⁵¹ This man’s status is emphasized by no fewer than three honorifics (*sharīf*, *emīr*, and *sayyid*); the use of *sayyid* in this context may suggest that he was regarded as a Sufi, a suggestion strengthened by his *nisbah*, al-Mashhadi, which associates him with the town of Mashhad in Khurasan.¹⁵² Significantly, ‘Abd al-Razzāq states that this man was venerated by Muslims and Hindus alike: his “words in that region were as weighty as holy writ, and no one deviated from his command”.¹⁵³ This again highlights the centrality of the charismatic individual in popular piety and more generally the intersection of Muslim and Hindu spiritual reverence in Malabar.

Pyrard de Laval was also struck by the similarities between Muslim and Hindu mendicants. His account of wandering Sufis near Calicut is worth citing in full:

[There] are a sort of men called *abedalle* [‘Abdallāh], who have taken a vow of poverty, and so go about the world. Sometimes there will be thirty or forty of them in one place together, yet they travel only in groups of two or three, and most often alone. They have alms given to them, and indeed are persistent in requesting the same. They all sleep in the temples. They are the best company in the world, for they know every language; it is a great pleasure to entertain them because they have travelled throughout the Orient, carrying their small baggage with them. We give them money, fabrics of cotton and silk, and as much to eat as they want. Some of them live in great austerity, according to their faith. They [...] all hold the faith of Mahomet [Muhammad].¹⁵⁴

This evocative description of small bands of peripatetic mendicants is familiar to any student of India’s religious traditions. Yet, these men are not *sannyasis* of the Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain traditions but are clearly described as Muslims: according to Pyrard, they are known as ‘Abdallāhs (“*abedalle*”) and hold the faith of Muhammad.¹⁵⁵ While ‘Abdallāh is a common Arabic name, its literal meaning “servant (or slave) of God” was widely understood as an expression of the Sufi ethos of submission to

¹⁵⁰ Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 62–64; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 801–802.

¹⁵¹ Thackston (trans.), “Abdul-Razzaq”, 316.

¹⁵² This town contains one of the most important shrines of Shi‘ah Islam, which is built around the tomb of the Eighth Imam.

¹⁵³ Thackston (trans.), “Abdul-Razzaq”, 316.

¹⁵⁴ De Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 319–320; cf. Gray and Bell (trans.), *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 342–343.

¹⁵⁵ Pyrard concludes by saying that the Hindus “also have their *abedalles*, who [...] are called *yogis*”; de Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 319, 319n.2.

the divine. Similarly, Mappilas denoted both Muslim and Hindu saints by the Arabic word *walī* (lit., “friend”, in the sense of “friend of God”), a term that is used extensively in Sufi literature.

Pyrard notes the gatherings of these itinerant Sufis (or *faqīrs*) at places of worship. He states that they sleep in the temple (“*temple*”). That Pyrard indeed means Hindu temples is not completely certain but is strongly suggested by the fact that elsewhere he uses the term mosque (though not consistently) and that in the immediately preceding passage he clearly distinguishes temples from Sufi shrines.¹⁵⁶ Hindu temples in medieval Kerala consisted not just of the sanctuary but formed entire walled complexes that included subsidiary shrines, houses, tanks, and processional paths.¹⁵⁷ If Pyrard is to be taken at his word, in light of the closely guarded caste regulations in Kerala, the presence of Muslim mendicants at temples would show that they were recognized locally, by Hindu society, as spiritual individuals who transcended narrowly defined religious identity. Their equivocal place within society is further underscored by their knowledge of diverse languages, which is testament to their travels but also of their access to and participation in different cultures and traditions.

Another observation by Pyrard is that even though the “*abedalles*” gather together at night, during the day they travel only in small groups. There was clearly a limit to the number of mendicants that their hosts along the way could (or would) support. Pyrard’s description of these *faqīrs* in Malabar refutes the claim of a “complete absence of asceticism in Kerala which was one of the main features of Sufism elsewhere”, an impression that seems to stem from an overreliance on programmatic Arabic texts that tend to denounce austere religious habits.¹⁵⁸

Sufism became an important medium for the translation of Islam throughout monsoon Asia. Saint-shrines became endowed not only with votive offerings but also with a rich tapestry of tales about Sufi mystics, healers, and ascetics. In South India and Southeast Asia, many of these narratives interrelate with stories from the Hindu tradition, thereby fulfilling “an assimilative role, enabling acceptance of Islam through mystical awe and familiar rituals”.¹⁵⁹ As Hodgson notes, in the intercessions of a Sufi saint people of all faiths could find “a much more believable compassion than in the remote Oneness of God”.¹⁶⁰ Rather than in the abstractions

¹⁵⁶ He refers to these shrines as “*ziares*” (from *ziyārah*); de Castro (ed.), *Voyage de Pyrard de Laval*, I, 319.

¹⁵⁷ See for instance, Narayanan, *Calicut*, 97–112.

¹⁵⁸ Kunhali, *Sufism in Kerala*, 62.

¹⁵⁹ Khoo, *The Chulia in Penang*, 67.

¹⁶⁰ Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 217.



Figure 4.3 Engraving of a Hindu pagoda and Muslim mosque, from a 1638 Dutch edition of van Linschoten's *Itinerario* (1596).

Image courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection (www.davidrumsey.com).

of religious syncretism, it was in the concrete services offered by Sufi shrines – the promise of cure from illness, of safe and profitable voyage across the sea, of conceiving a child – that Monsoon Islam manifested itself as a phenomenon that reached beyond the cosmopolitan port towns.

The reverence for individuals identified as possessed of special spiritual qualities is also evident in the Mappilas' veneration of their early *qādīs* and *sayyids*, which has led a number of scholars to identify them as Sufis. This is partly the result of the ambiguity of the concept of Sufism itself: numerous studies of Islam in India have demonstrated the deficiency of any rigid distinctions between mystical and so-called orthodox Islamic beliefs or practices.

The association between (supposedly orthodox) '*ulamā'* and (supposedly anti-establishment) mystics is particularly close in Malabar. For example, in the Mattancherry area of Cochin is a shrine (*dargāh*) containing the tombs of two *sayyids* from Bukhara, who led the Muslim



Figure 4.4 The shrine of Zayn al-Din Makhdūm al-Ma‘barīat Cochin.
Image copyright by Sebastian R. Prange.

community in the middle of the fourteenth century. Close by is another shrine, this one devoted to Shaykh Zayn al-Din Makhdūm al-Ma‘barī, the *pater familias* of the Makhdūm clan that came to hold key positions within Malabar’s Muslim scholarly elite. It remains unknown when the practice of supplication at these *dargāhs* began, and whether it was ever encouraged by the families themselves. It is possible that their active worship only began in later centuries, perhaps in imitation of the Hadhrami Ba ‘Alawis’ dual status as both *sayyids* and Sufis. However, there is some suggestion that already in the sixteenth century the Makhdūms bridged the supposed divide between their role as guardians of Islamic orthodoxy and mysticism.

One member of the family, Zayn al-Din (ibn ‘Alī) al-Ma‘barī (d. 1521/2), the grandfather of the author of the *Tuhfat al-mujahidin*, composed a mystical poem known as *Hidāyat al-adhkiyā’ ilā ṭarīq al-awliyyā’*.¹⁶¹ This poem has been described as “the manual of Sufism in Malabar”

¹⁶¹ Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, II, 221 and supplement II, 311–312.

and was widely circulated and commented upon, not only in South India but also elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, for example Java.¹⁶² According to one of these commentators, Zayn al-Din (ibn ‘Ali) was vacillating between whether to study religious science or immerse himself into Sufism; a dream moved him to choose the latter, a path that eventually culminated in the creation of the *Hidāyat al-adhkīyā*.¹⁶³ The poem describes the path to true piety as consisting of three parts: religious law (*sharī‘ah*), the Sufi way (*tāriqah*), and the individual vision of the divine (*haqīqah*). The author explains this by way of allegory. *Sharī‘ah* is like a boat, *tāriqah* like the ocean, and *haqīqah* like a precious pearl: to attain the pearl, one must first embark on a boat and dive into the ocean.

This triform process is a leitmotif throughout Sufi literature, though a particular affinity may be identified with the work of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī (d. 1166). Al-Jilānī was widely venerated by Sufis of different orders, and his message of morality and his emphasis on the pre-eminence of religious law made him also palatable to more traditional Sunni scholars. In fact, the *Hidāyah* denounces the practices of religious ascetics or recluses and instead advocates services to one’s fellow man. The later veneration of all the Makhdūms as saints may thus originate with the generation of Zayn al-Din (ibn ‘Ali) and may be read as an expression of a *sharī‘ah*-oriented Sufism that gained currency among Malabar’s ‘*ulamā’* from his time onwards.

Fath al-mu‘īn, Zayn al-Din’s commentary on Islamic law, contains an extraordinary insight into the attitude of Malabar’s ‘*ulamā’* towards Sufism two generations later. The work as a whole can be characterized as “revivalist”, in that it seeks to address a perceived weakening of piety and religious purity.¹⁶⁴ In a section of the work that deals with apostasy, it speaks about Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240), one of the most famous Sufi masters in all of Islamic history. Zayn al-Din refers to Ibn al-‘Arabī with seeming approval, declaring him “our great *shaykh* and *imām*”.¹⁶⁵ However, it then goes on to say that for those not trained in his methods (*ṭariqatihim*, lit., “in his path”), Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings are misleading (*mazalah*) and could cause unintentional apostasy. Couched in carefully crafted language drawing on classical idioms, the text is resolute that unless one is properly trained in Sufism, the use of Sufi texts is forbidden (*haram*).

¹⁶² V. Kunhali, *Sufism in Kerala* (Kozhikode: University of Calicut, 2004), 65. Kunhali claims that the Makhdūms were “Chishti Saints” (*ibid.*, 92), but any link of the family to the Chishtiyya *tāriqah* is far from certain.

¹⁶³ Ahmad, *Contribution of Indo-Pakistan to Arabic Literature*, 93.

¹⁶⁴ See Kooria, “Cosmopolis of Law”, 198.

¹⁶⁵ Zayn al-Din, *Fath al-mu‘īn*, 316.

Remarkably, *Fath al-mu‘in* itself uses the Sufi concepts of “outward appearance” and “hidden meaning” to proscribe the use of Sufi texts for the uninitiated. It expressly warns that the use of such texts by the uninitiated may deceive Muslims into that most heinous of all crimes under Islamic law, apostasy (*ridda*), something the author contends can only be redeemed by death.¹⁶⁶ So rather than criticize Sufism directly, *Fath al-mu‘in* warns against the inadvertent risk – risks so grave that only death can redeem them – run by those who seek mystical insights without proper training and without guidance by the learned ‘*ulamā*’.

This unusually severe passage in *Fath al-mu‘in* prompts the question of whether it was directed against the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī specifically, or whether he stood in as a prominent exemplar of Sufism in general. Ibn al-‘Arabī was certainly widely read in India, as evident from the numerous commentaries on his work that were written there.¹⁶⁷ Not all these commentaries were sympathetic, however. Al-Taftāzāni’s (d. 1390) polemical attacks, according to which Ibn al-‘Arabī “apart from being an infidel was also a hashish-eater” who led men into heresy, were widely read and debated.¹⁶⁸ A number of refutations of Sufism that circulated in medieval India focused directly on Ibn al-‘Arabī, particularly on his doctrine advocating submission to a Sufi *shaykh*. The most prominent critic was Ibn Taimiyya (d. 1327), whose writings were highly influential among North Indian Muslim scholars.¹⁶⁹ Ibn Taimiyya rejected Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings and instead argued for the central role of the ‘*ulamā*’ in regulating the life of Muslim communities, even where political power was exercised by non-Muslims.

In this context, the dire warnings about dabbling in Sufism expressed in *Fath al-mu‘in* are perhaps best understood not as an attack on mysticism in general, but rather on the specific notion that Muslims can find their own path to God without guidance of the ‘*ulamā*’, or that loyalty to a Sufi master should trump obedience to Islamic scholars. In doing so, Zayn al-Dīn seems to echo a warning issued by Ibn al-‘Arabī himself:

When a book falls into a person’s hand concerning a subject he knows [in the sense of having studied it with a master] nothing about and has not learned by engaging in it at first hand, he should do absolutely nothing with the book, but

¹⁶⁶ Zayn al-Din, *Fath al-mu‘in*, 315.

¹⁶⁷ Ahmad, *Contribution of Indo-Pakistan to Arabic Literature*, 101–102.

¹⁶⁸ Cited in A.D. Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 148.

¹⁶⁹ K.A. Nizami, “The Impact of Ibn Taimiyya on South Asia”, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 (1990), 120–149.

rather return it to those whom it concerns. He should not believe, disbelieve, or discuss it at all.¹⁷⁰

By linking Sufi teaching to apostasy, Zayn al-Din advocates the primacy of the learned – of *imāms* and *qādīs* such as himself and his family – in interpreting Islam. *Fath al-mu‘in* was exactly that, an endeavour to interpret Islam, and specifically Shāfi‘i law, for use by ordinary Muslims who found themselves living in complex, multi-confessional societies in which religious authority was neither self-evident nor uncontested. The explicit mention of Ibn al-‘Arabī, combined with the strict admonition about the danger of reading his books, can only be taken to mean that his texts were in circulation in Malabar. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Fusūs al-hikam wa qusūs al-kilam* in particular was widely debated in Yemen during this period, from where it presumably reached the Malabar Coast along the well-trodden trade routes. It also stands to reason that if such Sufi texts were circulating in Malabar, with their allegorical language and specialized terminology, they were being read by individuals with a thorough knowledge of the Arabic language.

This prompts the question of to whom *Fath al-mu‘in*’s dismal warning of potential apostasy was actually addressed. Local Mappillas, it has been seen, were frequently engaged in unorthodox practices, such as making offerings at shrines or frequenting places of Hindu worship; but this constituency was unlikely to engage with a complex Sufi text composed in Arabic. Rather, it was members of the commercial and religious elite who were most likely to have access to, and the ability to engage with, works of mystical poetry and philosophical rumination such as those written by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s – that is, the same groups who would have formed the natural audience for Zayn al-Din’s own text. In this light, *Fath al-mu‘in* – as well as its base text, *Qurrat al-‘ayn* – may be seen as an effort to defend the traditional primacy enjoyed by local *sayyid* families such as the Makhdūm clan. This effort, it appears from the language and style of the texts, was directed primarily at the Arabic-speaking commercial elite of Malabar’s port towns. Did Zayn al-Din, who is otherwise best known for his historical treaty that agitates against the Portuguese, write this other work of his under the cloud of a perceived threat posed to Malabar’s ‘*ulamā*’ not by the “Franks” but by Sufi *tariqahs*? Was there an ongoing conflict between the ‘*ulamā*’ and Sufis that revolved around Ibn al-‘Arabī’s averment of the superiority of the Sufi *shaykh*? While these tantalizing questions cannot be resolved on the basis of the available evidence,

¹⁷⁰ This maxim of Ibn al-‘Arabī is by Ibn al-Naqib, *Reliance of the Traveller*, r.20.3, 757.

Fath al-mu‘in is a remarkable historical document for providing the grounds to pose it.

The broader context makes this hint of a potential competition between the established ‘ulamā’ and new claims to religious authority among Malabar’s Muslims all the more plausible. Sufism on the Malabar Coast was not limited to the circulation of Sufi texts and the activities of individual mystics or small groups of *faqīrs*, but also included highly organized Sufi orders. The most significant information on these is provided by Ibn Battūtah, who throughout his travels took a keen interest in all aspects of mystical Islam and who had himself initiated into a number of *tariqahs* along the way. At the port of Honavar in northern Malabar he visited what he referred to as a “zāwiyah”.¹⁷¹ In his North African usage, this term refers to a small mosque, erected over the tomb of a saint with teaching facilities and a hospice.¹⁷² Such establishments are better known as *khānqahs* (from Persian *khānāgah*) and typically associated with Sufi orders; it is clear from the descriptions of *zāwiyahs* elsewhere in Ibn Battūtah’s text that he uses the term in this sense.¹⁷³

The establishment of *khānqahs* was an important aspect of the institutionalization of Sufi orders across the medieval Islamic world.¹⁷⁴ In the fourteenth century, Ibn Fadl Allāh al-‘Umari noted that Delhi contained as many as two thousand *khānqahs* of different orders.¹⁷⁵ These buildings served as places of worship, centres of education, and hospices; that is to say, they fulfilled many of the same roles that Chapter 2 has ascribed to Malabar’s mosques. In India, *khānqah* networks of the Suhrawardiyya, Chishtiyya, and Kāzarūniyya *tariqahs* emerged from the thirteenth century onwards. According to Ibn Battūtah, the *khānqah* at Honavar was under the leadership of one Shaykh Muhammad al-Naqarwī.¹⁷⁶ This *nisbah* is derived from Nagore, a town in Rajasthan strongly associated

¹⁷¹ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 66; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 803.

¹⁷² See J. Cowan (ed.), *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 4th edn., 1994), s.v. “zāwiya”, 450. Along the same lines, another Arabic lexicon likens “zāwiyah” to *ribāt*, a term also conventionally used to denote Sufi hospices; see E.W. Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), s.v. “zāwiya”, III, 1273–1274.

¹⁷³ For instance, Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, II, 90; III, 156; IV, 89, 103, 271. In the French translation of Defremery and Sanguinetti, “*khānqah*” is rendered as “ermitage”, while Gibb’s English translation has it as “hospice”; for example, Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 812.

¹⁷⁴ See K.A. Nizami, “Some Aspects of Khānqah Life in Medieval India”, *Studia Islamica* 8 (1957), 51–69.

¹⁷⁵ O. Spies (ed.), *Ibn Fadlallāh al-‘Omari’s Bericht über Indien in seinem Werke Masālik al-Abṣār fi Māmālik al-Amṣār* (Leipzig: Otto Harrasowitz, 1943), 36.

¹⁷⁶ Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 66.

with the Suhrawardī order.¹⁷⁷ Ḥamīd al-Dīn of Nagore (d. 1274) was one of the order's chief *khalīfah* in India, appointed by Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardi himself.¹⁷⁸ However, he is said to have later transferred his allegiance to the Chishtī saint Quṭb al-Dīn Bakhtiyār al-Kākī (d. 1235).¹⁷⁹ This makes it impossible to determine whether the *khānqah* at Honavar was affiliated with the Suhrawardiyya or Chishtiyya order, but Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's terminology and the connection to Nagore make it possible to confidently regard this hospice as a manifestation of institutional Sufism in Malabar.

The presence of another Sufi order, which is also associated with *khānqah* networks in Malabar, is entirely unambiguous. This is the Kāzarūniyya (also known as Murshidiyya or Ishaqiyā) *tariqah* of Khurasan, named after Abū Ishāq al-Kāzarūnī (d. 1033). This order is known to have been active in the enclaves of mercantile Muslims in the coastal cities of the Indian Ocean, and to have developed a distinctive Indian branch.¹⁸⁰ At Calicut, Ibn Baṭṭūṭah describes a lodge under the leadership of a Shaykh Shihāb al-Dīn al-Kāzarūnī, "to whom are paid the offerings made in vows by the people of India and China to the Shaykh Abū Ishāq al-Kāzarūnī, God profit us by him".¹⁸¹ At Kollam, the Moroccan stayed at another *khānqah* of this same order, this one run by the son of the leader of the Calicut lodge.¹⁸²

Also at Kollam, a local mosque contains an inscription on its *mīhrāb* dated 1325/6, which records its gift by one Aḥmad ibn Abu'l-Fath al-Kāzarūnī.¹⁸³ It is likely that this Aḥmad was of the same family as the two men encountered by Ibn Baṭṭūṭah some fifteen years later, and

¹⁷⁷ In sources of this period, Nagore refers to the Rajasthani town about halfway between Jodhpur and Delhi, not the place of the same name in the Nagapattinam District of Tamil Nadu, which became a prominent Sufi centre only in the sixteenth century; see S. Digby, "Review of Trimingham's *Sufi Orders in Islam*", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 36:1 (1973), 138–139.

¹⁷⁸ See J.S. Trimingham, *Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 22. In Islamic mysticism, the term *khalīfah* was used to denote the (appointed) successor of a *tariqa*'s founder; see D. Sourdel et al., "Khalifa", in M. Th. Houtsma, T.W. Arnold, R. Basset, and R. Hartmann (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1913–36), IV, 937.

¹⁷⁹ Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, 65. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah visited al-Kākī's shrine in Delhi and describes it as enjoying great veneration; see Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, III, 156–157; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, III, 625.

¹⁸⁰ See B. Lawrence, "Abu Eshaq Kazaruni", in *Encyclopædia Iranica* I:3, 274–275; A.J. Arberry, "The Biography of Shaikh Abū Ishāq al-Kāzarūnī", *Oriens* 3:2 (1950), 163–182.

¹⁸¹ Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 89; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, IV, 812.

¹⁸² Defrémy and Sanguineti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 103.

¹⁸³ H. Sarkar, *An Architectural Survey of Temples in Kerala* (New Delhi: Architectural Survey of India, 1978), 49.

it is beyond doubt that he too belonged to the same Sufi order. The Kāzarūniyya were strongly associated with the maritime sphere, and it became a widespread practice of seafarers to pledge offerings to its saint. By the fourteenth century, this practice had developed into a ritualized system that was managed by a series of hospices strung along the Indian Ocean littoral. Ibn Battūtah had earlier visited that saint's shrine in Khurasan and describes the operation of this system in revealing detail:

This sheikh Abū Ishāq [al-Kāzarūni] is highly venerated by the people of India and China. Travellers of the Sea of China make a practice when the wind turns against them and they fear pirates of making vows to Abū Ishāq, and each one of them sets down in writing the obligation he has undertaken in his vow. Then, when they come safely to land, the servitors of the hospice [zāwiyah] go on board the ship, take the inventory, and exact [the amount of] his vow from each person who has pledged himself. There is not a ship that comes from China or from India but has thousands of dinars in it [vowed to the saint], and the agents on behalf of the intendant of the hospice come to take delivery of that sum. There are some poor brethren who come to beg alms of the shaykh; each of these receives a written order for some amount, sealed with the shaykh's device [i.e. his seal] to this effect: "Whoso has in his possession [money dedicated under] a vow to the Shaykh Abū Ishāq, let him give thereof so-and-so much," [...]. Then, when the mendicant finds someone who has in his possession anything under vow, he takes from him and writes for him a receipt for the amount on the back of the order.¹⁸⁴

In this remarkable system, sailors and merchants aboard Indian Ocean dhows pledge, in writing, sums of money to the saint al-Kāzarūni in the hope for a voyage unscathed by storms and pirates. Safely at their destination, agents of the Sufi order physically board the ship, collect the written vows, and extract the promised sums (some of which go towards alms) against a receipt.

This trans-oceanic arrangement can be likened to a complex insurance system based on "baraka-exploitation".¹⁸⁵ Its extent is testified to by Ibn Battūtah, who visited another lodge of this order at Quanzhou that also was part of this system.¹⁸⁶ Other than sharing their blessings with the anxious seafarer, the Kāzarūniyya hospices also provided more tangible aid, such as lodging itinerant merchants in foreign ports. It is thus not at all surprising that an order so closely linked to maritime trade had a presence in several of Malabar's port cities, and the Kāzarūniyya order in particular is a vivid example of the overlap between religious and commercial networks.

¹⁸⁴ Defrémery and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, II, 90; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūta*, II, 320.

¹⁸⁵ Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, 236.

¹⁸⁶ Defrémery and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 271.

The evidence for Sufism on the Malabar Coast shows that it was an important factor not just in North India but also in the Indian Ocean world of Monsoon Islam. From the presence and veneration of individual Muslim mystics on the Malabar Coast, to the circulation and debates (both approvingly and disparagingly) of the texts by the famous Sufi masters of Islamic history, to the activities of trans-oceanic orders, Sufism was as much part of the lived experience of Malabari Muslims as were the opinions and rulings of their ‘*ulamā*’. Sufism, it appears, was of particular importance in the maritime realm, as is evident from the veneration of specific mosques or shrines associated with seafaring, the functions of Sufi lodges in port cities, and the nautical “insurance system” of the Kāzarūniyya *tariqahs* that operated at the intersection of religious and commercial networks.

Most importantly, through the practice of *ziyārah* and the veneration of saints and tombs, Sufism presents itself right at the interface of what has become crystallized into the distinct and mutually exclusive belief systems of a universal Hinduism and a global Islam. Anthropologists employ terms such as “localized”, “vernacular”, or “syncretic” to conceptualize the startling conjunctions of religious devotion and spiritual practice they observe in contemporary South India.¹⁸⁷ Difficult as they are to trace in the historical record, the intimations of popular spiritual practices stand as a reminder of how routinely these supposedly fixed categories of Hinduism and Islam were traversed in the past, and offer a glimpse into the sort of pluralist religiosity that oftentimes continues to defy them.

Political Networks: Patronage across the Indian Ocean

Religious authority in the world of Monsoon Islam was a much more complex issue than in lands under Muslim rule. There, offices such as leader of a mosque (*imām*), preacher (*khatīb*), or judge (*qādī*) were usually appointed by the Muslim ruler and remunerated by the state. Outside the *dār al-Islām*, on the other hand, such appointments were ultimately for the communities themselves to decide. This process was complicated by the fact that these communities were mobile, transient, and highly diverse. At the same time, a special onus was placed on their religious leaders, for they could not simply apply existing Islamic law but had to creatively adapt it to the circumstances of life in extremely heterogeneous port cities, many of which were part of societies in which

¹⁸⁷ See for instance the excellent work by A. Mohammed, *The Festival of Pirs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Muslims did not form a majority. Throughout the Muslim communities of the Indian Ocean world, religious authority depended on a mix of ancestry, affiliation with a prominent master or established school, and the ability to apply independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) to pragmatically resolve legal problems.¹⁸⁸ Religious offices were often hereditary, as sons benefitted from their fathers' reputation for piety and probity. This model was extolled by texts such as the *Qissah* and can be observed in the enduring eminence of families such as the Makhdūms.

This general picture, however, is complicated by evidence that Muslim preachers and judges in different parts of the Indian Ocean were affiliated to Muslim polities. This evidence relates to two interlocking spheres: the payment of stipends by Muslim rulers to *qādis* and *khatībs*, and the invocation of distant sultans in Friday prayers in local mosques. The existence and extent of these relationships has only recently become known through newly accessible manuscripts. They prompt the question of why Muslim rulers invested in the sponsorship of Muslim preachers and judges in distant places that were not under their aegis, and in turn why these religious leaders sought to align themselves and their communities with these rulers.

In contrast to interpretations that regard these ties as expressions of universalist political claims or religious hyperbole, it is argued here that they were designed for concrete commercial purposes. Muslim communities in the world of Monsoon Islam used the terminology and rituals of religious affiliation to underpin commercial ties, to strengthen relationships within a context of economic competition and political rivalry. This conclusion emerges by again adopting a dual perspective, which focuses, on the one hand, on Malabar's role in trans-oceanic networks, and on the other hand, on how these networks manifested themselves within the local Muslim communities.

From Aden with Gold: Rasulid Stipends

There is perhaps no better illustration of the nature of Malabar's Muslim communities than to note that many of the most significant sources for their history are found not in India but other places around the Indian Ocean. A case in point is a thirteenth-century chronicle from Yemen that is of singular importance for tracing the trans-oceanic relationships of

¹⁸⁸ In general usage, the Arabic word *ijtihād* means “utmost effort”. In its Islamic legal connotation, it denotes the thorough exertion of a jurist's mental faculty in finding a solution to a legal question through independent reasoning where authoritative texts are ambiguous.

Malabar's Muslims. The Turkish Rasulid dynasty took control of Yemen in the late twelfth century as clients of the Ayyubids and ruled independently from 1229 until the country passed into the hands of the Tahirids in 1454. The extensive (predominantly Arabic) historiography on the Rasulids has traditionally been preoccupied with cultural and political history, but in recent years has broadened its focus towards administrative and economic concerns.¹⁸⁹

This trend has received a major impetus through the emergence of new sources, foremost among them an Arabic edition of a previously unknown corpus of administrative records that is extant only in a single manuscript in private hands.¹⁹⁰ Entitled *Nūr al-ma‘ārif*, it constitutes a wide-ranging archive of the governance of the second Rasulid sultan, al-Muzaffar Yūsuf (r. 1249–95). Of special interest are numerous documents that relate to Aden's maritime commerce that provide details on goods, prices, taxes, and even individual merchants at one of the most important ports-of-trade in the Indian Ocean. As with the Geniza records, the implications of the *Nūr al-ma‘ārif* for understanding the history of medieval Indian Ocean trade are only just beginning to emerge.

One of the revelations provided by the *Nūr al-ma‘ārif* comes in the form of a list of payments made by Aden's treasury to Muslim communities in coastal India, a practice which previously was entirely unknown.¹⁹¹ This ledger details the expenditures of Aden's treasury for sending gifts to Muslim judges and preachers in India. The document itself is undated but from its sequence it can be attributed to the 1290s; the very fact that it is undated strongly suggests that it recorded a customary practice to be repeated annually, as is the case for other, similar documents of this source.¹⁹² The original list is arranged geographically by region, and is reproduced in that format as Table 4.1.

¹⁸⁹ For a survey of Rasulid historiography, see E. Vallet, “L'historiographie rasūlide (Yémen, VII^e–IX^e/XIII^e–XV^e siècle)”, *Studia Islamica* 102–103 (2006), 35–69.

¹⁹⁰ Jāzim (ed.), *Nūr al-ma‘ārif*. To date, the most comprehensive study of this source is É. Vallet's *thèse de force*, “Pouvoir, commerce et marchands dans le Yémen rasūlide (626–858/1229–1454)”, unpublished PhD thesis, Université Paris 1-Phantéon-Sorbonne (2006); published in part as É. Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande: Etat et commerce sous les sultans rasūlides du Yémen (626–858/1229–1454)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011).

¹⁹¹ The interpretation of this ledger has been pioneered in two excellent studies: É. Vallet, “Les sultans rasūlides du Yémen: Protecteurs des communautés musulmanes de l'Inde, VIII^e–VIII^e/XIII^e–VI^e siècles”, *Annales Islamologiques* 41 (2007); E. Lambourn, “‘India from Aden’: Khutba and Muslim Urban Networks in Late Thirteenth-century India”, in K.R. Hall (ed.), *Secondary Cities and Urban Networking in the Indian Ocean Realm, c. 1400–1800* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 55–98.

¹⁹² A good analogy is another ledger detailing “the goods to be sent to Mecca” (“‘ādat al-haram al-shari‘i”): because this was done annually, the copyists did not record a year on the document. See Jāzim (ed.), *Nūr al-ma‘ārif* I, 116–117. I am grateful to Éric

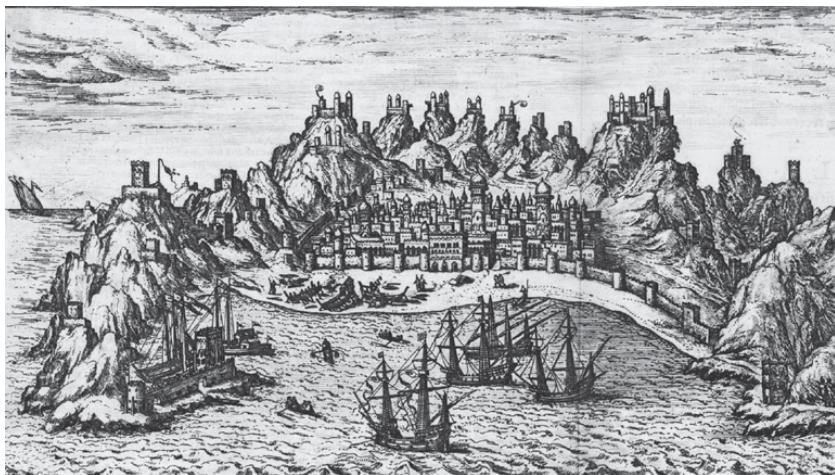


Figure 4.5 Panorama of sixteenth-century Aden, from a 1640 Dutch edition of Braun and Hogenberg's *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1572).
Image courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection (www.davidrumsey.com).

According to this record, the Rasulid treasury sent stipends to sixty-four individuals in at least forty-three different places in India, spanning virtually the entire west coast from Gujarat to the Malabar Coast and even extending to locales on the east coast. What can be learnt from this list? First, all these places were obviously home to Muslim communities sizeable enough to have a judge and/or preacher. Second, although not all toponyms can be positively identified, it is clear that these places are invariably coastal or situated on waterways accessible from the sea. Correlating these places with other sources shows that they were all known as centres of commerce. Lastly, the organization of the list contains some clues as to its rationale. Each section begins with a principal port, for example, Cambay ("Kanbāya"), which is then related to the land in which it is situated, for example, Gujarat ("bilad al-Ǧuzarāt").¹⁹³ Places that were part of the same polity are at times listed under different headings, and important trade emporia are prioritized over political capitals. This suggests that the list is primarily concerned with the organization of trade on the Indian coast rather than the region's political structures and boundaries.

Vallet (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne) for clarifying this convention in the Rasulid records.

¹⁹³ Jāzim (ed.), *Nūr al-ma'ārif*, I, 516–517.

Table 4.1 *Repartition of Rasulid grants sent to Muslim communities in India*

Region	Number of locales listed	Number of grantees listed	Heading
Northern Gujarat	12	12	<i>al-Qass</i> [Bhadresvar in the Gulf of Kachh] and its districts [<i>a'māl</i>], country of <i>al-Juzarāt</i> ^a
Southern Gujarat	9	9	<i>Kanbāya</i> [Cambay] and its districts, country of <i>al-Juzz</i>
[unidentified]	[unspecified]	9	<i>Lamībāsur</i> and its districts, country of <i>al-Kamkam</i> ^b
Malabar	9	20	[no heading] ^c
Northern Konkan	7	9	<i>al-Kaww</i> [Chaul], <i>Tāna</i> [Thana], country of <i>al-Balagha</i> ^d
Coromandel	5	5	<i>al-Ṣūliyān</i> [referring to the Cholas], [country of] <i>al-Ma'bar</i>

^a See M. Shokoohy, *Bhadreśvar: The Oldest Islamic Monuments in India* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), esp. 5–11.

^b *Lamībāsur* has not been identified and no additional locales are specified to determine its region. The text's addition that it is situated in the Konkan ("bilād al-Kamkam") is of little value, as this region was defined very loosely and differently in Arab geographies of India; see for example Nainar, *Southern India*, 42–43. Elizabeth Lambourn suggests that it may refer to Basrur (Ar., *Bāsarūr* or *Abū-Sarūr*) on the South Kanara coast; see Lambourn, "India from Aden", 70, 87. However, as the other regions are listed under major ports and Basrur is described in the fourteenth century by both Ibn Battūtah and Abū al-Fidā' as a small town, this identification must remain tentative.

^c In the edition of this source (Jāzim, ed., *Nūr al-ma'rif*, 517–518), only eight places are listed in the section on the Malabar Coast. The first locale in the next section is *Nūr Dahbattan*. However, no place by that name can be identified in that region, whereas Dharmapattam in Malabar is known as *Dahbattan* from the Geniza records (*India Traders*, 598), as *Dahfattān* by al-Dimshqī (see Nainar, *Southern India*, 32), and *Dah-fattān* by Ibn Battūtah (IV, 83–84). Consequently, Lambourn ("India from Aden", 88) suggests that *Nūr Dahbattan* belongs to the section on Malabar and has been mistakenly included with the next section. This proposition is accepted here and *Nūr Dahbattan* has been added to the locations in Malabar. The question of why *Dahbattan* is given the prefix *Nūr* ("Light"), a usage otherwise unknown from the sources, remains unresolved. Lambourn's suggestion that it might refer to a lighthouse is plausible, yet Ibn Battūtāh, who visited the port less than fifty years later, makes no mention of such a feature.

^d Vallet ("Pouvoir, commerce et marchands", II, 101n.173) points out that the country's name ("al-Balagha") refers to the Rashtrakuta dynasty that controlled the Konkan coast from 743 to 974. *Al-Ballaharā* is the Arabicized form of the Sanskrit title *Vallabharājā* (Prakrit, *Ballaha-rāya*) that was applied to several kings of this dynasty; see Wink, *Al-Hind*, I, 303.

There are two exceptions to this pattern: the Malabar Coast, for which the heading is omitted altogether, and the Coromandel Coast, which is described by the name of the Chola dynasty, which had traditionally ruled that part of the subcontinent. Facing the Bay of Bengal rather than the Arabian Sea, Coromandel had only limited direct trade with Aden. Of all the regions listed on the ledger, Coromandel also received the smallest number of stipends, which likely reflects the Rasulids' comparative lack of interest in, and interaction with, the east coast of India. Malabar, on the other hand, has a significant number of locales listed and the highest number of individual grantees of any of the regions.

The fact that the ledger's section dealing with Malabari ports lacks a header could simply be attributed to a scribe's inconsistency. However, Elizabeth Lambourn makes the more intriguing suggestion that this omission "actually reflects a qualitative change in the networks along this coast", with each port maintaining its own links with Aden rather than channelling them through a central hub.¹⁹⁴ This corresponds to the overall pattern of trade on the Malabar Coast, with its competing polities centred on the different port cities. However, as plausible as this hypothesis is, it does not explain why the heading is missing altogether, seeing as the name Malabar was very familiar to Aden's administrators.

Even more than the overall organization of the list, which offers an overview of the pattern of Muslim trade on the coast of India at the end of thirteenth century, the individual entries provide insights not available from any other source of that period. Focusing on the Malabar Coast, nine locations in the region can be identified with a high degree of confidence; these are listed in [Table 4.2](#) and plotted on [Map 4.1](#).

These places correspond closely to the organization of Muslim trade as described in [Chapter 1](#). They are all coastal, situated along the main pepper-producing regions, with the majority clustered in the north.¹⁹⁵ The title of the ledger makes it clear that it records payments to judges and preachers, *qādīs* and the *khatībs*. For the Malabar Coast, it specifies

¹⁹⁴ Lambourn, "India from Aden", 71.

¹⁹⁵ The three best-known trade emporia on the Malabar Coast – Calicut, Cochin, and Kollam – do not appear on this list. The omission of Calicut corresponds to the impression that the port only rose to prominence in the early fourteenth century, a couple of decades after this ledger was compiled. Similarly, Cochin is not mentioned because it came to commercial significance only after the nearby port of Kodungallur was destroyed by flooding in 1341. By contrast, Kollam was an active port-of-trade in the 1290s: it was visited by Marco Polo around the same time as the ledger was composed. However, while the Venetian mentions Jewish and Christian merchants at the port, he does not speak of Muslims there; the absence of a prominent Muslim trading community at Kollam at that time likely explains why the port is not included on the Rasulid ledger.

Table 4.2 *Locations of qādīs and khaṭībs in Malabar receiving Rasulid stipends^a*

Arabic Toponym	Suggested Transliteration	Identification	Remarks
بود	Bud	Valapattanam	Read as contraction of <i>Buddfattān</i> (al-Dimishqī) or <i>Budfattān</i> (Ibn Battūtah); corresponds to <i>Peudifetania</i> of Conti ^b
هيلى	Hilī	Madayi	
هرتيلى	Hartīlī	Kasaragod	Read as <i>Harqīlī</i> ^c
حورش	Hawrash	Cannanore	Read as <i>Jūrfattān</i> ^d
فدرينة	Fandarīnah	Pantalyani-Kollam	
منجلور	Manjūlūr	Mangalore	
الشاليات	al-Shāliyāt	Chaliyam	
فالكونر	Fākanūr	Barkur	
نور دهبن	Nūr Dhahbattan	Dharmadam	Included with the next section

^a Jāzim (ed.), *Nūr al-ma’ārif*, I, 516–518; see Lambourn, “India from Aden”, 87–88.

^b Nainar, *Southern India*, 29n.20; Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d’Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 83; Bracciolini (trans.), “Travels of Nicolò Conti”, 7.

^c Vallet (“Pouvoir, commerce et marchands”, II, 100n.166) suggests that this corresponds to the *Harqilyah* of al-Dimishqī, which has been identified as Kasaragod; see Nainar, *Southern India*, 39. The discrepancy is easily attributed to a misspelling by the scribe or misreading by the editor of the letter *tā* (ت) for *qāf* (ق).

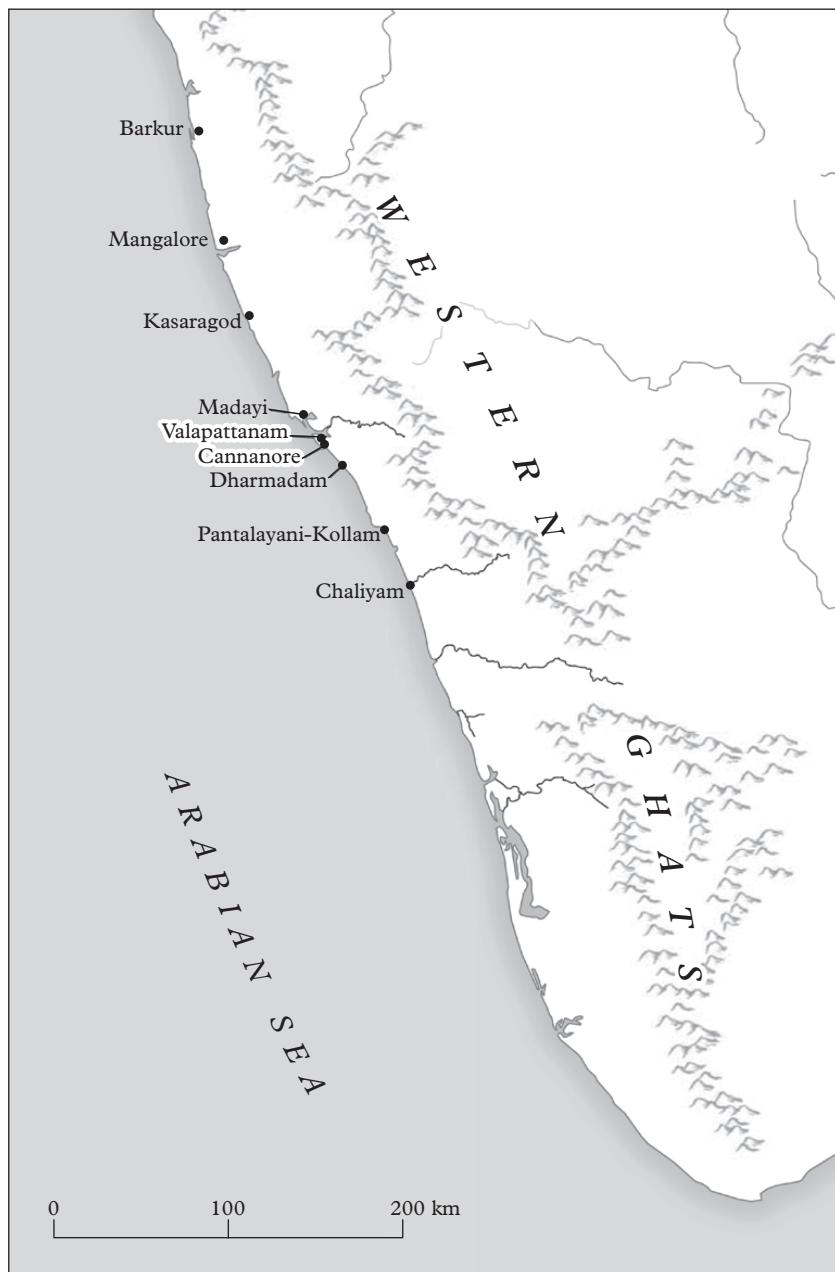
^d The discrepancy is again attributable to a misreading, as suggested by Vallet, “Pouvoir, commerce et marchands”, II, 100n.167.

that a total of twenty individuals in eight different places were in receipt of stipends. (As noted above, a ninth location also on the Malabar Coast, *Nūr Dahbattan*, is included with the next section of the ledger.)

According to the document, the “salaries for twenty persons [was] an amount of 200 [*mithqāls*]”.¹⁹⁶ The average grant for Malabari judges and preachers was thus ten *mithqāl*, or 42.5 grams of gold.¹⁹⁷ This is consistent with stipends paid in the Konkan and on the Coromandel Coast, though in other parts of western India payments were made in quantities of madder, a dye produced in Yemen; this alternative arrangement may have been prompted by the demand for rare dyes in the textile-producing

¹⁹⁶ Jāzim (ed.), *Nūr al-ma’ārif*, I, 517.

¹⁹⁷ The term *mithqāl* refers to a full-weight gold *dīnār*; at times, it was also used to refer to the Egyptian *dīnār*, a coin originally of that weight but often debased, in which case the actual gold content would be somewhat lower. See G.C. Miles, “Dīnār”, in P. Bearman et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005), II, 297.



Map 4.1 Towns on the Malabar Coast in receipt of Rasulid stipends.
Map drawn by Nat Case; copyright by Sebastian R. Prange.

regions of Kutch and Gujarat, which allowed the Rasulids to preserve their stocks of precious metals and local recipients to realize an additional profit on their stipends through advantageous trades.

Whether paid in gold or in kind, these stipends were considerable: the customary sum a well-to-do merchant would give his wife to run the household whilst he was away on business was half a *mithqāl* per month.¹⁹⁸ Given that this was an annual payment, and that the value of gold was higher in India than at Aden (and though no data are available to say this for certain, the cost of living was likely much lower), these were clearly substantial payments. These stipends, then, were not ceremonial investments like the robes of honour the Rasulids occasionally bestowed on Malabari merchants – rather, they were direct and regular payments to the religious leaders of merchant communities all along the Indian coast, to be conveyed annually with the merchant fleets from Aden.

What was the motivation for this practice? Éric Vallet was first to interpret it as an expression of a Rasulid “oceanic policy”, designed to boost their commerce and promote their self-appointed role as the champions of Muslim communities across the Indian Ocean.¹⁹⁹ Notably, the places detailed in the ledger – in Gujarat and the Konkan, on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts – were all under Hindu rule at the time. To extend patronage to judges and preachers in territories ruled by another Muslim would have been an unmistakable claim to political suzerainty that no self-respecting Muslim sultan would have countenanced. In lands under Hindu rule, however, the Rasulids could act as the benefactors and patrons of the local Muslim communities without calling into question the sovereignty of the local sovereign.

This institutionalized system of patronage was a way then for the rulers of Aden to formalize ties to those Muslim communities in India on whose trade the prosperity and future prospects of their own emporium depended. Crucially, the Rasulids engaged in this practice at a critical time, when the patterns of trade in the western Indian Ocean were shifting and as Aden was facing stiff competition. They were not, however, the only rulers who engaged in the trans-oceanic giving of gifts. In an analogy to the Rasulid stipends in the western Indian Ocean, there was a long history of patronage extending from India to ports and courts in Southeast Asia. A good example of this dynamic is the “Indianization” of Funan, in the Mekong delta. The process of cultural synthesis that

¹⁹⁸ See Goitein and Friedman (eds.), *India Traders*, 344–345n.47.

¹⁹⁹ See É. Vallet, “Yemeni ‘Oceanic Policy’ at the End of the Thirteenth Century”, *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 36 (2006), 289–296 and Vallet, “Les sultans rasūlides”, 149–176.

led to the adoption of Indic culture and political traditions by Southeast Asian rulers was facilitated by merchants and appears to have been largely motivated by the benefits of trade.²⁰⁰ However, grants and gifts did not only travel from India to Southeast Asia but also in the opposite direction. Upinder Singh traces a long tradition of Southeast Asian rulers making religious endowments to Buddhist sites in India. These exchanges too closely intersected with the world of trade and suggest a high degree of religious pluralism that made gifts from a distant sovereign acceptable locally.²⁰¹ In the absence of plausible claims to trans-oceanic sovereignty, religious endowments formed an important tool within the repertoire of Indian Ocean politics, allowing rulers to manifest and strengthen bonds of religious affinity as a way of cementing the ties of commerce.

In the Name of the Lord: Invoking the Ruler across the Indian Ocean

In the 1290s, when the ledger of Rasulid stipends was composed, Calicut was not yet a prominent port-of-trade on the Indian coast, and as a result is not listed as receiving any stipends from the rulers of Yemen. Remarkably, another source from Yemen makes it possible to trace the subsequent integration of Calicut into the Rasulid patronage network. A dynastic chronicle of the Rasulids, al-Khzraji's *al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, contains a letter received by the Rasulid sultan al-Ashraf II in early 1393 that had been sent to him by the *qādī* of Calicut.²⁰² In this letter, Calicut's Muslims tender their allegiance ("*al-tā'ah*", lit., "obedience") to the Rasulid sultan and request the right to honour the *minbar* of their mosque with the recital of his name.²⁰³ This refers to the congregational Friday prayer (*khutbah*) and the convention of reciting the name of the ruler at the beginning of the sermon.

The custom of invoking a temporal ruler in prayer, known as *du'ā' al-sultān* ("invocation of the ruler"), is not a required element of the *khutbah*. However, by the eleventh century it had become a widespread practice, as is evident from the repeated protestations of Shāfi'i jurists against it.²⁰⁴ The purpose of the *du'ā' al-sultān* was to openly declare the

²⁰⁰ See K.R. Hall, *A History of Early Southeast Asia: Maritime Trade and Societal Development, 100–1500* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), 49–59.

²⁰¹ U. Singh, "Gifts from Other Lands: Southeast Asian Religious Endowments in India", in U. Singh and P.P. Dhar (eds.), *Asian Encounters: Exploring Connected Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46–61.

²⁰² al-Khzraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 244–247 (English translation at II, 216–220).

²⁰³ al-Khzraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 244.

²⁰⁴ See N. Calder, "Friday Prayer and the Juristic Theory of Government: Sarakshi, Shīrāzī, Māwardī", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 49:1 (1986), 36.

relationship between a city or territory and its ruler. The dedication of the Friday prayer was a highly symbolic act: when a new sovereign was installed, the altered *khutbah* is frequently noted in the annals as the most significant public affirmation of the new political reality. In the ninth century, not long after the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate, it is reported that Muslim communities as far afield as China delivered their sermons in the caliph's name.²⁰⁵

In the fourteenth century, however, there was no longer a caliph; the question is, why did Calicut's Muslims seek out the right to specifically invoke the ruler of Yemen in their Friday sermons? The request by Calicut's Muslims to invoke the Rasulid sultan in their *khutbah* must be read as an expression of their desire to align themselves more closely with Aden at that particular moment in time. Although the request relates to a *prima facie* religious practice that had acquired political overtones, its commercial dimension is only thinly veiled. The Rasulid chronicler introduces the letter into his compilation by stating that it had been sent by Calicut's *qādī* and its resident traders ("*al-tujjār al-muqimīn*").²⁰⁶ This point is underlined in the text of the letter itself, which is reproduced in the chronicle. It lists a number of notable merchants ("*al-tujjār al-ma'adūdīn*", lit., "the merchants of limited number", in the sense of "the distinguished merchants") by name. The reference to specific individuals suggests that these merchants were active in the Calicut–Aden trade and that their names were expected to resonate at the Rasulid court.²⁰⁷

Moreover, their *nisbahs* imply that they represented the different Muslim trading groups of Calicut: they include a Turk (*al-Rūmī*), a Khorasani (*al-Ardabili*), an Arab (*al-Ghassānī*), a person perhaps from Khuzistan (*al-Khūrī*), and two of unidentified origins (*Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī al-Qawwī* and *Sād al-Dīn Mas'ud*) who may represent other groups.²⁰⁸ The coexistence of different expatriate Muslim merchant groups in Calicut, which were distinguished by their ethnic or geographic origins

²⁰⁵ Mackintosh-Smith (ed. and trans.), "Abū Zayd al-Sirāfī", 31.

²⁰⁶ Al-Khazraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 244. This passage can be translated with two different meanings: either the letter was translated on behalf of the *qādī* and merchants, or it was translated by them. The second variant seems preferable on logical grounds: those men translated the request of the whole Muslim community, not all of whom spoke Arabic. Redhouse, in his translation, sidesteps this question altogether by rendering the passage as "there came an address to the Sultan from Calicut, with a translation, from the judge there, and from the merchants"; *ibid.*, II, 216.

²⁰⁷ Al-Khazraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 246.

²⁰⁸ Al-Khazraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 246. The identification of the *nisbah* "*al-Khūrī*" is uncertain. Redhouse (Al-Khazraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, II, 219) translates it as meaning from Khuzistan. Lambourn apparently follows this lead by reading "الخوري" ("*al-Khūrī*") as "*al-Khūzī*". Although this shift is not made explicit, she presumably takes *rā* (ر) as a scribal error for *zāī* (ز). See Lambourn, "India from Aden", 75.

and commercial specialization, has been described in [Chapter 1](#); Duarte Barbosa listed the main groups as Arabs, Persians, Gujaratis, Khorasanis, and Deccanis.²⁰⁹ The letter from the town's Muslims to the Rasulid sultan suggests this kind of stratification within the Muslim community at Calicut, and implies that all these groups were party to the request. This is further substantiated by the letter's use of terms such as "the congregation of its chief men" (*jama'a at ru'asā hā*), which shows that this request was backed by a general consensus of the principal Muslims.²¹⁰

To a degree, Muslim traders on the Malabar Coast were able to pursue their own foreign policy, which of course was directed towards cordial relationships with important trading partners, perhaps with a view towards obtaining privileges such as tax exemptions. The [previous chapter](#) has described how, for example, Muslim merchants sent missions to the Rasulid sultan, either on behalf of the Zamorin or of their accord, resulting in a preferential tax regime for Calicut merchants at Aden. Living under a Hindu sovereign, they could trade their *du'ā' al-sultān* freely in a way that subjects of a Muslim ruler would not have been able to.

From a merchant's point of view, dedicating the Friday sermon to the ruler of Aden was a richly symbolic, yet entirely free, way of substantiating their commercial ties. The symbolic value of the offer is impressed upon the sultan in the letter from Calicut: it states that the town's *khutba* had never been read in the name of the sultans of either Yemen or Egypt. Not only that, but other Muslim states such as Bengal (*al-Sūjalah*), Hormuz (*al-Hurmūz*), Sumatra (*al-Sumātrah*) and more had expended immense sums of money in an effort to obtain this very privilege for themselves.²¹¹ Although the letter is too decorous to say so directly, what is presented to the sultan is a simple trade of the prestige inherent in the *du'ā' al-sultān* for continued or renewed commercial privileges for Calicut's merchants at Aden. For the Rasulids, it also offered a way to formalize their relationship with Calicut, which by that time had become the premier entrepôt of the land of pepper, in an arrangement that explicitly included all the different factions within its Muslim trade community.²¹² The invocation of Yemen's ruler at Calicut's Friday prayers was thus above all economically motivated, rather than an expression of political or religious claim-staking.

²⁰⁹ Sousa (ed.), *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, II, 231; cf. Dames (ed. and trans.), *Duarte Barbosa*, II, 76.

²¹⁰ Al-Khazraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 245.

²¹¹ Al-Khazraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 244, 246.

²¹² Lambourn, in her erudite study of these *khutbah* networks in the western Indian Ocean, arrives at the same conclusion, writing that the "advantages of these alliances must have lain primarily in preferential trading conditions, a kind of 'special relationship', that benefitted both parties"; Lambourn, "India from Aden", 82.

It is not known whether as a result of this request, which the Rasulid sultan graciously accepted, Calicut's *qādī* and *khatib* also began to receive stipends from Aden's treasury; no source comparable to the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* that could answer this question is extant for the fourteenth century. However, this later evidence for how the *du'ā' al-sultān* was practised – or even traded, as the case may be – on the Malabar Coast also puts the earlier evidence of the Rasulid stipends in a new light. It has already been noted that the two persons who are specified in *Nūr al-ma'ārif* as recipients of Rasulid stipends in all the different locations are the preacher and the judge, the *khatib* and the *qādī*.

The essential function of the *khatib* was to read the *khutbah*, so if the stipends were in fact an inducement or reward for invoking the Rasulid sultan in the Friday sermon, it would make sense to pay the person actually reading the sermon. As far as the judge is concerned, the key role claimed by *qādis* is evident in early sources – such as the *Qissah*, the main objective of which is to legitimize the power of a particular group of *qādis* – as much as it is in sources from the sixteenth century, when there was an attempt to unify Muslim judges from across the Malabar Coast under the authority of a single “judge of the judges”. In fact, the letter sent to al-Ashraf that proposes reciting the Friday prayer in his name was written by the town's *qādī*, emphasizing the pivotal role this office played within the community.

That these two offices, the *qādī* and the *khatib*, were the recipients of Rasulid patronage suggests that the *khutbah* was indeed read in the name of the Rasulid sultan in the Indian port cities that are listed in the ledger. Since all of these places were ruled by Hindu kings, the dedication of the Islamic Friday prayer to a foreign ruler would not have been a cause of concern to local power-holders, even if it would have come to their attention. It is likely, then, that the generous payments sent annually from Aden to Muslim judges and preachers in India had always been in recognition – or recompense – for the invocation of the Rasulid sultan in the Friday sermons of these trading ports.

This conjecture is substantiated by the letter of 1393, which requests that the sultan issue an order to his chancery (“*al-dīwān al-mahrūs*”, lit., “the chancery preserved by God”) that the name of Calicut's *qādī* be inscribed on the pages (“*sahā'if*”) of the earlier preachers (“*al-khuṭabā' al-ma'dūdin al-mutaqqaddimīn*”, lit., “the countable [i.e. limited in number] antecedent preachers”).²¹³ This suggests that Calicut's Muslims

²¹³ Al-Khazraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 246. The translation by Redhouse (Al-Khazraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, II, 219), who renders this phrase as “the enumerated ancient preachers”, seems less suited: the adjective “*al-ma'dūdin*” is better understood as an emphasis on the high status of the preachers named on those pages, rather than a

were well aware of the long-established Rasulid practice of recording the names of those Muslim communities that invoked them in their sermons, and that such a list was used to issue payments.

Importantly, the letter also invokes precedent, stating that the *khutbah* was already recited in the name of al-Ashraf by “the eleven *khāfiṣ* in the eleven towns, one of which is Nalanbūr”.²¹⁴ If this is taken to refer to towns on the Malabar Coast, then the nine locales listed in the ledger from the 1290s had expanded to eleven a century later. Moreover, the letter specifies that Nalanbūr had received the honour of invoking the Rasulid sultan only “this new year” (“*hadha al-sanah al-jadīdah*”), suggesting that Calicut’s request must be seen in the context of an actively expanding patronage network centred on Rasulid Yemen.²¹⁵ The *qādī* of Calicut was thus eager to see his own name added to this expanding list, so as to receive his ten *mithqāl* with the next fleet from Aden, and to enter Malabar’s premier emporium into a network of patronage and symbolic affiliation that was ultimately intended to strengthen the ties of commerce.

A Tale of Two Mosques: Calicut and the Timurid Connection

Remarkably, there is evidence of another instance in which Calicut’s Muslims requested the right to invoke a foreign Muslim king in their Friday prayer. ‘Abd al-Razzāq Samarqandī relates that some years prior to his own visit to Malabar in 1442, a number of Timurid envoys had found themselves stranded in Calicut. They used the occasion to impress upon the Zamorin the great power and magnificence of Shāhrukh Mīrzā, who ruled over the eastern portion of the empire that his father Timur had built. This prompted the Zamorin, the account continues, to send an embassy of his own to the Timurid court, “to say that in his port in

reference to the fact that they were listed sequentially. This interpretation is supported by the use of the same word to stress the importance of those Calicut merchants who supported the request (see above). The second adjective, “*al-mutaqqaddimīn*”, does not necessarily have the connotation of ancient, but rather refers to those who went before. Here, then, the *qādī* alludes to a list held at the Rasulid chancery that records those preachers and communities that recite the *khutbah* in the name of the Rasulid sultans, to which new additions are occasionally appended.

²¹⁴ Al-Khazrajī, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 245. The toponym *Nalanbūr* (نلنبر) is not encountered elsewhere and remains unidentified. Lambourn suggests that it might relate to Nilambur, some 50 km inland from Calicut (personal communication). If this was confirmed, it would constitute the first evidence for the participation of an inland town in Malabar in these trans-oceanic networks, which would be all the more remarkable for pre-dating the establishment of Calicut’s own formal relationship with the Rasulids.

²¹⁵ Al-Khazrajī, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 246.

the Friday prayer and the holiday [*'id*] prayer the *khutbah* of Islam was recited, and if His Majesty would allow it, they would recite the *khutbah* in his [Shāhrukh's] royal name".²¹⁶ The Zamorin's envoy is said to have been a Persian-speaking Muslim, who further intimated to the Timurid ruler that the Zamorin could be converted to Islam if only Shāhrukh were to send a suitable ambassador. In what ultimately proved a fool's errand, 'Abd al-Razzāq was chosen for the task, which brought him to Calicut in 1442.

'Abd al-Razzāq's account of these events that prompted his mission to Calicut is as problematic as it is tantalizing. The suggestion that the Hindu sovereign of Calicut involved himself in deciding to whom the Friday prayer at the local mosque was dedicated stands in stark contrast to the religious autonomy of Calicut's Muslim community that is otherwise attested. The very idea of invoking a foreign ruler in such a public way also goes against all concepts of Hindu kingship: doing so would imply a recognition of Timurid suzerainty over this South Indian kingdom, a preposterous notion even during Timur's lifetime and all the more so after his death.

As there is no other evidence of such drastic interventionism by Malabari rulers in the religious affairs of their Muslim subjects, and as it clearly conflicts with local conceptions of sovereignty, this entire story is best interpreted in a different light. Most likely, the Persian-speaking Muslim who appeared at Shāhrukh's court was not on a royally sanctioned mission, but rather acted on behalf of the Muslims, opening diplomatic relations on their behalf much as had been done with the Rasulids some forty years prior. This explains the cool reception 'Abd al-Razzāq received when he showed up at Calicut's royal court, for the Zamorin was either dismayed at the attempt by local Muslims to enter into a relationship with a foreign ruler, or in fact entirely unaware of it. Either way, to his frustration, 'Abd al-Razzāq was not received as the honoured envoy in a diplomatic exchange the Zamorin was keen to engage in.²¹⁷ That the Muslims from Calicut sought to pique Shāhrukh's interest not only by promising him the *du'ā' al-sultān*, the invocation of his name in Friday prayers, but also dangling before him the possibility of converting a Hindu king to Islam, may have been designed to appeal to his piety, or perhaps vanity, in order to ensure that he would indeed send a mission to Calicut. The ultimate motivation behind these machinations was likely the desire to

²¹⁶ Thackston (trans.), "Abdul-Razzaq", 304. For a contextual reading of 'Abd al-Razzāq's account of Malabar, see Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, 54–67.

²¹⁷ Thackston (trans.), "Abdul-Razzaq", 305.

open trade relations with the Timurid court or to otherwise profit from the ensuing diplomatic exchange.

Yet, even if any involvement by the Zamorin is discounted, the promise to read Calicut's *khutbah* in the name of the Timurid monarch remains problematic. Less than forty years earlier, Calicut's Muslims had consensually decided to read the *khutbah* in the name of the Rasulid sultan. Admittedly, Rasulid power was waning by the 1440s, but by all accounts the trade with Aden remained a mainstay of Calicut's commerce. Against this background, can 'Abd al-Razzāq's claim that Calicut's Muslims sought to shift their allegiance from the Rasulids to the Timurids be at all redeemed? The answer to this question may be found in evidence that points to a serious rift within the town's Muslim community at this very time.

In his account of Calicut, 'Abd al-Razzāq mentions that Calicut had two congregational mosques for the communal Friday prayer.²¹⁸ In Arabic, a town's central, congregational mosque is known as the *masjid al-jama'ah* or "mosque of assembly". The Jāmi‘ Masjid in the Kuttichira area of Calicut clearly served this purpose, as is indicated by its name. The Mithqālpalli, the mosque named after the famous shipowner Mithqāl, was also designated as a congregational (or *jāmi‘*) mosque, as has been shown in Chapter 2. This is further confirmed by Zayn al-Dīn as well as epigraphic evidence from the mosque's pulpit (*minbar*).²¹⁹ The *minbar* was designed as a platform from which the preacher would read the *khutbah*; it is mostly, though not exclusively, found in *Jāmi‘* mosques where the congregation gathers on Fridays to hear the sermon. The presence of two Friday mosques in the same town is highly unusual in Islamic history and was in fact explicitly proscribed by religious authorities.²²⁰ In fact, this very issue had led Muslim jurists to contend that having a Muslim ruler was a necessary precondition for holding Friday prayers at all, since in the absence of a Muslim ruler, different groups could offer different forms of the *khutbah*, a situation that would lead to chaos and civil strife (*fitna*) within the Muslim community.²²¹

The implication here is that the existence of two separate Friday mosques at Calicut resulted in two different Friday sermons. This situation

²¹⁸ Thackston (trans.), "Abdul-Razzaq", 303.

²¹⁹ Zayn al-Dīn, *Tuhfat al-mujāhidin*, 131a.

²²⁰ See Calder, "Friday Prayer", 36.

²²¹ See A.A. Moin, "Sovereign Violence: Temple Destruction in India and Shrine Desecration in Iran and Central Asia", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57:2 (2015), 475.

could only come about in the absence of a Muslim ruler who could regulate the worship of a city's Muslim population, and would of course have himself named in the sermon as public expression of his sovereignty. At Calicut, however, it was possible, likely even, that the respective *khutbahs* of the two separate congregational mosques were dedicated to different rulers. Was the mission to the Timurid court orchestrated by a divergent faction that recited its own *khutbah*, perhaps a group formed by merchants of Persian origins? In this light, variant forms of the *du'a'* *al-sultān* within the same town may have been an expression of the congregation's disunion – or even its cause. The *khutbah* thus serves as a tale of the two mosques; and their respective *khutbahs* thus serve as an indication not only of the external affiliations of the Muslim trading community but also of their internal discord, of a congregation that was not unified in prayer but divided by it.

Routes and Rulers: Malabar at the Crossroads

The argument that both the original request to read Calicut's Friday sermon in the name of the Rasulid sultan as well as the latter attempt by some faction of the town's Muslim traders to shift their allegiance to the Timurids were driven by commercial expediency comes into sharper focus when viewed against the wider background of Indian Ocean trade during this period. Calicut, it has been seen, was not included on the ledger of Rasulid stipends recorded in the *Nūr al-ma'arif* because in the 1290s it was not yet a consequential port-of-trade. Fifty years later, however, Ibn Battūṭah describes it as the principal port of all the Malabar Coast, visited by merchants from all parts of the Indian Ocean.²²² This chronology prompts the question why the Muslims of Calicut waited another fifty years, until 1393, to try and enter into the Rasulid patronage networks and thereby strengthen their ties with Aden?

A possible answer to this question can be found in their letter to al-Ashraf. After stating that the *khutbah* had never been dedicated to the sultans of either Yemen or Egypt, a sub-clause adds that in former times, the rulers of Delhi ("Dili") and Hormuz had won that privilege over them.²²³ This suggests that at some point in the century between the 1290s and 1393 – the period spanning from Calicut's rise to prominence

²²² Defrémy and Sanguinetti (eds. and trans.), *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, IV, 88–89; cf. Gibb and Beckingham (trans.), *Travels of Ibn Battūṭa*, IV, 812.

²²³ Al-Khzraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'līyya*, V, 244. Redhouse's translation (Al-Khzraji, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'līyya*, II, 217) of the phrase "ghalaba 'alayhim" (غلبوا عليهم) as "acquired dominion over them" is somewhat misleading, for it implies that Calicut was in some way under their sovereignty.

up to the time of the petition to al-Ashraf – Calicut’s Muslims had dedicated their Friday prayers to the rulers of Delhi and Hormuz. Moreover, the letter states that they were invoked together (“*ma’ān*”), which shows that a dual form of the *du’ā’ al-sultān* was practised in the town.²²⁴ Again, this evidence is best understood from the perspective of commercial networks. It is argued that the dedication of *khutbahs* among the Muslim communities of coastal India is a direct reflection of the competition between the two main channels of the trade in the western Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

This dynamic is best illustrated by briefly turning to another region on the west coast of India, Gujarat. In the 1220s, the Arab traveller Ibn al-Mujāwir wrote the following account of Qays (or Kish; Ibn al-Mujāwir uses both terms interchangeably), an island at the entrance to the Persian Gulf:

The Friday address is also given in the name of the ruler [of Qays] in Cambay, Sūmanāth [Somnath in Gujarat] and ?d.r.?s.r [unidentified]. These areas are one country. When the ship of the ruler of Qays arrives, it is shown the utmost respect, since the people there choose the king from Qays [for their *kuṭbah*] because he is close to them. When the Friday address has been given in the name of the caliph, it is pronounced after this in the name of the lord of Kish.²²⁵

What Ibn al-Mujāwir reports is that in three port cities in Gujarat, the ruler of Qays was invoked by the local Muslims in their Friday prayers (together with the caliph, formality that ceased soon after with the end of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258). This invocation appears rooted in some sort of trade relationship, as he mentions the arrival of ships there. With the demise of the port of Siraf in the tenth century, Qays had become the key entrepôt of the Persian Gulf. Its position as an important power in the western Indian Ocean was underscored by its large fleet (which is likely referred to by Ibn al-Mujāwir when he speaks of “the ship of the ruler”).

The Persian Gulf had historically stood in competition with the Red Sea as the preferred route for traders wanting to send Indian Ocean trade goods into the Middle East and towards the Mediterranean world. In fact, in 1135, the ruler of Qays had used his fleet to attack and blockade Aden itself in an effort to divert its trade towards the Persian Gulf. Ibn

²²⁴ Al-Khazrajī, *Al-‘Uqūd al-lu’lu’iyya*, V, 244.

²²⁵ G.R. Smith (ed. and trans.), *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia: Ibn al-Mujāwir’s Tarikh al-Mustabṣir* (London: Hakluyt, 2008), 290. Smith (*ibid.*, 290n.8) suggests that the corrupted place name may refer to Madwara in Gujarat, which would fit with the statement that all three places are of one country. For Somnath and Madwara in Arabic sources, see Tibbetts (ed. and trans.), *Arab Navigation*, 451.



Figure 4.6 A sixteenth-century map of Arabia Felix, showing the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, from Ruscelli's 1599 Italian edition of Ptolemy's *Geographia*.

Image courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection (www.davidrumsey.com).

al-Mujāwir's description suggests that like the Rasulids, the rulers of Qays (or, in Jean Aubin's characterization, "*les pirates de l'île de Qays*") promoted networks of politico-religious allegiance, based on commercial exchange and manifested in practices such as the *du 'ā' al-sultān*.²²⁶ In 1229, Qays itself was conquered by the ruler of Hormuz and the kingdom of Hormuz subsequently usurped control of the Persian Gulf trade.²²⁷ Epigraphic evidence from this period attests to close ties between port cities in the Gulf and on the west coast of India. A bilingual Arabic-Sanskrit inscription dated to 1264 from Somnath, in Gujarat, records

²²⁶ J. Aubin, "La ruine de Sirâf et les routes du Golfe Persique aux XI^e et XII^e siècles", *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 3 (1959), 297.

²²⁷ The trade of Hormuz received a major impetus in 1300, when it moved the port from the mainland (Old Hormuz) to the island of Jarun. See V.F. Piacentini, *L'emporio ed il regno di Hormoz (VIII-fine XV sec. D. Cr.): vicende storiche, problemi ed ospetti di una civiltà costiera del Golfo Persico* (Milano: Istituto Lombardo Accademia di Scienze e Lettere, 1975), 75–78 and D. Whitehouse, "Kish", *Iran* 14 (1976), 146–147.

the endowment (*waqf*) of the mosque by the Hormuzi merchant and *nākhudā* Firūz ibn Abī Ibrāhīm al-‘Irāqī.²²⁸ Somnath is one of the places named by Ibn al-Mujāhir in his list of ports that read the *khuṭbah* in the name of the king of Qays; following the annexation of Qays by the sultan of Hormuz, and this evidence of the dominant role a Hormuzi merchant played in establishing the town's Friday mosque, it is likely that the *du‘ā’ al-sultān* was simply transferred onto the new hegemon of the Persian Gulf. The Rasulid stipends were thus neither unprecedented nor exceptional but part of a wider pattern of Muslim potentates using religious patronage to underpin commercial ties.

In 1297, Gujarat became incorporated into the Delhi Sultanate. The Delhi sultans put particular emphasis on the *khuṭbah* as a key symbol of their sovereignty, equal only to the striking of coins in their name.²²⁹ Consequently, after 1297 the Friday sermons in Gujarat invoked the sultan of Delhi. However, local Muslim trading communities apparently continued to assert their ties with their main trading partners, be it Hormuz or Yemen, by also invoking their rulers in the *khuṭbah*. A practice of dual invocation in at least some Gujarati ports is suggested not least by the Rasulid stipend list, which includes a number of them, including Cambay. It is this practice, which may have been either transplanted to Calicut (perhaps by its Gujarati merchant group?) or independently developed there, that could explain the town's invocation of both the sultan of Delhi and Hormuz as reported in their letter to al-Ashraf of 1393.

By the later fourteenth century, Persian Gulf trade declined relative to the Red Sea route, and Aden surpassed Hormuz as the most important emporium in the western Indian Ocean. This development was chiefly driven by the gradual decline of the Ilkhanate, hastened by outbreaks of the plague in the empire. Mamluk Egypt, which controlled the rival Red Sea route, was also affected by the Black Death but reacted to agrarian

²²⁸ See E. Hultzsch, "A Grant of Arjunadeva of Gujarat, dated 1264 A.D.", *Indian Antiquary* 11 (1882), 241–245; R. Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004), 76–104; Patel, *Building Communities*, 73–76.

²²⁹ Sources for the Delhi Sultanate are rife with references to the *khuṭbah*, which was clearly a political tool to declare sovereignty and demonstrate dynastic or political allegiances. They also testify to the practice of invoking multiple rulers. The Delhi sultans recognized the suzerainty of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate and through the *khuṭbah* sought to style themselves as its deputies. Their own dynastic predecessors were also often included. Conversely, refusal to include a suzerain in the *khuṭbah* was a common way of asserting autonomy. Moreover, it is clear that the sultans ordered, rather than requested, that the *khuṭbah* be read in their name, and that they rewarded the preachers for this service. See for instance, P. Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), *passim*.

losses with a greater investment in the overseas trade, which it increasingly brought under state control. The combination of the ravages of the plague, the disintegration of Mongol rule in Persia, and the collapse of the Yuan dynasty in China engendered a temporary slump in Indian Ocean trade. From this constellation, the Red Sea route emerged as the more dominant commercial artery.²³⁰

Astoundingly, it is not only the competition between the Red Sea and Persian Gulf routes that can be seen reflected in the shifting *khutbahs* on the Indian coast, but also analogous developments in the eastern Indian Ocean. It has already been noted that the letter from Calicut's *qādī* to the Rasulid sultan states that in earlier times, the sultans of Bengal and Sumatra (meaning Samudra-Pasai) had sought to have the town's *khutbah* read in their name. Not only that, the letter adds, but they had expended great wealth in trying to obtain this privilege.²³¹ This expenditure may have been similar in intention to the Rasulid stipends; it likely took the form of gifts to the religious leaders of the Muslim community at Calicut, and perhaps also certain trade concessions for its merchants.

The manifold commercial and religious links between the Malabar Coast and Southeast Asia have already been noted. As for Bengal, 'Abd al-Razzāq mentions the presence of Bengali ambassadors in Calicut in the early fifteenth century, and both regions were also involved in mutual trade, especially through the agency of Malabari Muslims in Ceylon. Given the importance of the pepper trade with China, the reference to Bengal and Sumatra in the letter can be read as hinting at another dimension of commercial competition, namely between the western and eastern Indian Ocean. Religious patronage was again used as a way to further commercial interests, alongside other means such as more conventional diplomacy.

The political and commercial reorientations that occurred between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries produced a series of competing and at times overlapping networks of religious patronage on India's west coast. The currency of these networks were the prestige of the *du'ā* *al-sultān*, lavish payments for Muslim preachers and judges, and commercial privileges for merchant groups. It is clear from the sources that Islamic courts and rulers paid close attention to the *khutbah*. In towns within their own territories this was a political necessity: it signified a ruler's sovereignty, a function of the *khutbah* that is widely recognized by historians. Outside the *dār al-Islam*, in the world of Monsoon Islam,

²³⁰ See for instance, Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 209; Ptak, *Die maritime Seidenstrasse*, 203–207.

²³¹ Al-Khazrajī, *Al-'Uqūd al-lu'lū'iyya*, V, 246.

however, the *khuṭbah* served a different function. Rather than dismiss the fact that rulers had the *khuṭbah* read in their name by Muslim communities far outside their own realm as grandiloquent claims to universalist suzerainty, it should be understood as evidence for the evolving patterns of commercial relationships. Shifts between inclusion and exclusion, cooperation and competition, can be read as indices of broader developments in the organization of trade across the Indian Ocean world.

Remarkably, this continued to be the case even in the sixteenth century. The religious patronage networks that characterized the relationship of India's Muslim trading communities with Muslim rulers across the Indian Ocean were continued or revived by the successors of the Rasulid dynasty in Yemen, the Ottomans. After he had established his rule over the Hijaz, Ottoman emperor Selim I (r. 1512–20) assumed the twin titles of "Caliph" and "Protector of the Holy Cities". Both these titles entailed responsibility for the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*). With the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean, and their policy of aggression against Muslim shipping, this role demanded actual exertion. In 1517, an Ottoman fleet was able to prevent the Portuguese from conquering Jiddah and Mecca. This successful defence greatly enhanced the Ottomans' standing among Muslim communities across the Indian Ocean, who by that time were in desperate need of a champion.

When the Muslims of Malabar and Sumatra appealed for Ottoman support, they addressed the emperor as the "Protector of Islam".²³² In recognition of Ottoman leadership in the struggle against the Portuguese, many Muslim communities in territories outside of Ottoman rule started to invoke Selim and his successors as caliphs in their Friday prayers.²³³ According to the account by the famous Ottoman admiral Seydi Ali Reis, the Ottomans were invoked in Friday sermons as far away as China!

Ottoman power in the Indian Ocean reached its apogee under Soqullu Mehmed Pasha, who served as Grand Vizier from 1565 to 1579 and came to be the empire's *de facto* ruler. In his study of the Ottomans in the Indian Ocean, Casale quotes from a remarkable edict that Soqullu Mehmed issued to his governor-general of Egypt in 1576:

In times past, one hundred gold pieces [a year] were sent to the mosques of the twenty-seven cities located in the Indian port of Calicut for the Friday sermon [*hutbe*]. However, it has been reported that for the last few years only fifty gold pieces have been sent, and sometimes not even that amount [...]. Be diligent in

²³² See İnalçık, *Economic and Social History*, 58.

²³³ See Á. Vámbéry (trans.), *The Travels and Adventures of the Turkish Admiral Sidi Ali Reis in India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Persia, during the Years 1553–1556* (London: Luzac & Co., 1899), 52–53; Casale, *Ottoman Age of Exploration*, 122.

this affair and see to it that, in fulfilment of the requirements of my orders, one hundred florins are sent every year without fail and in perpetuity from the port of Jiddah for the above-mentioned sermons. As far as any payments that have still not been paid from previous years are concerned, these also should be paid in full from the revenues of Jiddah.²³⁴

Casale regards this edict as a singular document that “provides a fleeting but invaluable insight into the bureaucratic infrastructure supporting Ottoman dynastic pretensions in the Indian Ocean”.²³⁵ It shows that Calicut remained central to networks of religious patronage in the Indian Ocean, which were now administered from Jiddah rather than Yemen. It is not clear what the precedent (“In times past”) invokes: does it refer to previous Ottoman practice that had intermittently lapsed, to patronage by the powerful Sharifs of Mecca who had sent stipends from their port of Jiddah, or even to earlier Mamluk or Rasulid precursors?

With the extension of their rule over the Red Sea and subsequent occupation of Aden (1538), the Ottomans inherited not only a commercial network but also a network of religious patronage that included the payment of stipends to Muslim communities on the Malabar Coast. Whereas Calicut was missing from the original list of Rasulid stipends to Malabar, now it is at the very heart of it: the twenty-seven cities (Turkish, “*şehirde*”) must be different port cities in the region that were meant to receive stipends. That these are referred to as the cities “of Calicut” may be read as an echo of the thirteenth-century Rasulid ledger, in which each region was also represented, in the header to each section, by its pre-eminent port city.²³⁶ (In both cases, in the view from Arabia, the Indian coast was conceptualized through the lens of commerce rather than by any attempt to properly reflect political boundaries.) Crucially, while in the earlier sources the relationship between the payment of stipends and the invocation of the ruler in the Friday sermon can only be inferred, in Soqullu Mehmed’s edict this connection is made perfectly explicit: “the hundred gold pieces were sent to the mosques [...] for the Friday sermon”.

The Ottomans expended considerable efforts to protect their trade links with the Malabar Coast against the Portuguese. Casale’s study of Ottoman policy in the Indian Ocean concludes that they sought to build a “soft empire” based not on territorial dominion but on an infrastructure of trade, communication, and religious ideology.²³⁷ Like the Rasulids, the Ottomans sought to assume the role of the protectors of

²³⁴ Translated in Casale, *Ottoman Age of Exploration*, 148.

²³⁵ Casale, *Ottoman Age of Exploration*, 148.

²³⁶ I am grateful to G. Casale for his views on this point (personal communication).

²³⁷ Casale, *Ottoman Age of Exploration*, 150. Also see S. Özbaran, *Ottoman Expansion Towards the Indian Ocean in the 16th Century* (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2009).

Muslim communities along the Indian Ocean littorals. To this end, they drew on the established idioms of politico-religious allegiance such as the *du‘ā’ al-sultān* that had long characterized the relationships between Muslim potentates and the autonomous Muslim trading communities of the Malabar Coast.

While most other parts of India's west coast had come under direct rule of Islamic states, from the sultanates of the Deccan to the nascent Mughal empire, the Malabar Coast remained under the rule of Hindu kings, which made it possible for the Ottomans to recreate the bonds invoked during the call to prayer – now addressed to the new, self-styled caliphs of Islam – without challenging local sovereignty. (In fact, the Zamorin of Calicut and the Ottomans joined forces in opposing the Portuguese at Diu.) In another parallel to earlier patronage networks, the competition between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf was again a central constituent. By successfully defending Jiddah and Aden, the Ottomans were able to preserve the Red Sea as a viable trade route despite intermittent blockades by the Portuguese, who in turn developed Hormuz into an important base and client state.

The patronage of religious specialists and the declaration of allegiances through practices such as the *du‘ā’ al-sultān* were not attempts at proclaiming political suzerainty or religious supremacy but rather designed to promote and maintain linkages based on commercial exchange. As the letter from Calicut of 1393 makes clear, these were not cases of Muslim rulers unilaterally imposing such ties of allegiance: they were also actively sought out by the autonomous Muslim communities of western India to further their own commercial position. From the thirteenth century onwards, the commercial competition between the Persian Gulf and Red Sea and their entrepôts was extended into western India through the establishment of rival networks of patronage. Rituals such as the exchange of robes of honour and invocation of Muslim rulers as part of the *khutbah* were the currency of these networks.

For Malabar's ‘*ulamā'*, such connections were without doubt prestigious, and in the case of Rasulid and Ottoman stipends also personally rewarding. However, the choice of allegiance was made by the merchants, as the letter from Calicut unambiguously demonstrates. This highlights that these patronage networks were primarily driven by commercial concerns, and that authority within Malabar's Muslim communities ultimately rested with their merchants.

The interplay of social and political developments with commercial pursuits is a growing theme in South Asian historiography.²³⁸ By

²³⁸ See for instance, K.M. Shrimali, “Social Structure and Commercial Pursuits in Early India”, in K. Veluthat and D.R. Davis, Jr. (eds.), *Irreverent History: Essays for M.G.S. Narayanan* (Delhi: Primus, 2014), 147–166.

expanding the concerns of economic history to encompass social and political change, new fields of enquiry have opened up in which otherwise marginal actors, such as small communities of foreign traders, emerge as vital agents of change. These communities often served as bridgeheads that connected societies to wider currents of material and ideological exchange across the range of monsoon Asia. To argue for the key role of commerce in underwriting other forms of exchange, as this chapter does, is not to claim the primacy of economics. As the preceding chapters have shown, merchants were not merely *homines oeconomici* but social and political beings. Trade itself operated not autonomously, according to some kind of natural law, but as a social construct and within set political frameworks. However great the distance it spanned, in the end trade, like politics, was always local.

Conclusion

Monsoon Muslims

What is characteristic of myth? To transform a meaning into form.

– Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957)

Using his signature mode of communication, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi tweeted in April 2016: “A Chera King, a visit to Mecca & a mosque in Thrissur … seeing India-Saudi Arabia ties through my gift to King Salman”.¹ The occasion was Modi’s state visit to Saudi Arabia, where he presented the Saudi king with a gold-plated replica of India’s purported first mosque, the Cheraman Juma Masjid at Kodungallur, in Kerala’s Thrissur district. The presentation was marked by another short-form communiqué that elaborated on the symbolic content of this gift: “Cheraman Juma Masjid is symbolic of active trade relations between India and Saudi Arabia since ancient times”.² Modi’s aim, of course, was to lend historic lustre to his agenda of promoting bilateral trade – but by drawing on the figure of Cheraman Perumal to epitomize the long history of exchange between India and Arabia, and by embodying this history in the form of an archetypal monsoon mosque, the prime minister evoked much more than just the moving back and forth of goods. Viewing the historic ties between the two regions through the prism of the Cheraman mosque ineluctably calls forth the entire world of Monsoon Islam. The origins of this world can indeed be said to lie in the pursuit of trade, but it comprises much more varied and complex exchanges that are inseparable

¹ Narendra Modi (@narendramodi), “A Chera King, a visit to Mecca & a mosque in Thrissur… seeing India-Saudi Arabia ties through my gift to King Salman”. Twitter post (3 April 2016), <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/716650467841814528>. Also see www.narendramodi.in/pm-modi-presents-king-salman-bin-abdulaziz-al-saud-a-gold-plated-replica-of-the-cheraman-juma-masjid-in-kerala-439914 (accessed 20 August 2016).

² Office of the Prime Minister of India (@pmoindia), “Cheraman Juma Masjid is symbolic of active trade relations between India and Saudi Arabia since ancient times”. Twitter post (3 April 2016), <https://twitter.com/PMOIndia/status/716622379573587969>. Also see www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-gift-to-the-king-of-saudi-arabia (accessed 20 August 2016).

from the commercial relationships. The sum of these exchanges amounts to a distinct trajectory of Islamic history that developed within and in between the trading ports of the medieval Indian Ocean. Contrary to the interpretation proffered by India's prime minister, a mosque can never be a symbol just of trade.

Albeit unintentionally, Modi's handsel draws attention to a key dimension in the history of Monsoon Islam, which this book describes as *global*. It comprises the material and ideational connections that tied far-flung Muslim trading communities into shared networks of exchange. The most important manifestations of these connections were trade networks, which inspired and sustained other forms of interaction. As much as the buying and selling of goods sustained other types of exchange, trade itself was not self-sufficient, either, but depended itself on those other forms of relationship. Kinship networks, for example, served as an organizing principle of long-distance trade and helped overcome the fundamental problem of trust. Political networks were a way for Muslim merchants to secure access to markets and negotiate favourable conditions for their economic interests. And religious networks tied far-flung Muslim communities into shared bonds of legal norms and institutional practice.

The global dimension of Monsoon Islam also finds expression in how Muslims imagined themselves as part of a wider Islamic cosmopolis that extended far beyond the territorial boundaries of Muslim rule. Whether through Arabic as a *lingua franca*, the trans-oceanic circulation of scholars and Sufis, investments in religious education, or creative reformulations of what the *dār al-Islām* should mean legally and practically, Muslims across the Indian Ocean sought to actively produce a sense of their communities as part of a greater whole. This identity was reinforced by the astonishing ease with which individual Muslims moved across the immense distances and among the vastly different societies of monsoon Asia as a matter of course.

The peripatetic movement of merchants and the trans-oceanic linkages they engendered underscore the global dimensions of Monsoon Islam. In the context of Indian Ocean history, these activities have been primarily understood through the framework of trade diasporas. The concept of trade diaspora denotes spatially dispersed but socially interdependent groups of commercial specialists.³ The renowned world historian Philip

³ The term was first coined by the anthropologist Abner Cohen in A. Cohen, "Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas", in C. Meillassoux (ed.), *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

Curtin championed the study of trade diasporas, regarding them as “one of the most widespread of all human institutions over a very long run of time”.⁴ A plethora of case studies has shown that under the conditions of imperfect information and contract enforcement typical of premodern long-distance trade, trade diasporas “remained the most efficient way of organizing commerce across much of Afro-Eurasia until the nineteenth century”.⁵ These studies resonate strongly with a growing interest among historians in themes of mobility, cross-cultural encounters, and historical antecedents to modern-day globalization, which have all been refracted through the lens of trade diasporas.

For all the important work in overturning long-standing parochial frameworks this interest in trade diasporas as global phenomena has led to, it has also resulted in de-emphasizing what is the second key dimension in the making of Monsoon Islam: the *local*. To Curtin and others, the defining characteristic of trade diasporas is their inherent dichotomy to the host society: “merchants living among aliens”.⁶ In fact, according to this model, the more a diaspora group becomes part of its host society, the more diminished it is by this process. Curtin describes this as the tendency of trade diasporas “to work themselves out of business”, meaning that their role as cross-cultural brokers – as “middlemen minorities” – disappears after a period of mediation and integration with the host society.⁷

However, the very processes of cultural mediation and social integration that this functional model regards as the antithesis of diaspora are actually its core. The socio-political negotiations between merchants and different constituencies within the host society, and the repeated re-formations of communal identities among both groups that result from this process, are what defines the history of trade diasporas from the outset. For this reason, this book describes these groups as trading communities rather than trade diasporas, in order to put emphasis on these processes of localization that gave the world of Monsoon Islam its distinct character. In the words of Burton Stein, the notion of community encompasses the “very localized affinities, sentiments and,

⁴ Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, 3.

⁵ K. Pomeranz and S. Topik, *The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400–the Present* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 7. See for instance, Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers*; Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean*; Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*; Lambourn, *Abraham's Luggage*.

⁶ Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, 3.

⁷ Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, 3; E. Bonacich, “A Theory of Middleman Minorities”, *American Sociological Review* 38:5 (1973), 583–594. For a critical perspective on the historiography of cross-cultural brokerage, see Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers*, 1–5.

especially, entitlements, as well as the cultural, social, and political means for defending them".⁸ Perceiving Muslim trading groups as diasporic outposts whose integration into local societies undermines their very identity also implies a corresponding view about the faith they carry with them. In this reading, Islam too is reflexively orientated back towards its presumed Arabian homeland, and diminished in its essence by the process of change, a change driven by the encounter with other cultures and societies. Critical as the global dimension is to both Muslim trade networks and their religion, it is in their embeddedness as communities in indigenous social and political contexts that their distinct histories must be located.

The history of Monsoon Islam emerged at the interface of the global and the local – what in recent scholarship has been described by the ungainly portmanteau of the “glocal” – through mobility and contact, negotiation and acculturation, but also contestation and conflict.⁹ The tension between the distant and the local that has shaped and defined the world of Monsoon Islam is found perfectly replicated within the story of the convert king, that archetypal Monsoon Muslim. The story of Cheraman Perumal exemplifies how the global came to be brought into the realm of the local, and how what was local became connected to the wider world. Crucially, the legend not only reflects these processes but itself played a vital part within them.

The first recorded iteration of the Cheraman Perumal story, in the Arabic manuscript known as *Qissat shakarwati farmād*, represents an attempt to draw upon the global – the Islamic prestige associated with high-status Arabs – to address the local challenge of legitimizing a burgeoning religious elite among the prospering Muslim trading communities of the Malabar Coast. In the absence of a Muslim ruler who could sanction such an ‘ulamā’, the narrative of the convert king helped instil the nascent institutions that were needed by the fast-growing Muslim communities with a sense of ancient authority. Malabar’s ‘ulamā’ based their status on a supposed mandate by the dying Chera king, who was said to have invested a group of ethnic Arabs with spreading Islam in his

⁸ B. Stein, *A History of India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 20.

⁹ “Glocalization”, from “globalization” and “localization”, is a sociological concept that has been taken up by Business Studies to describe the adaptation of international products to the particularities of local markets. A well-known example of this is the McDonald’s fast food chain, which in India makes its patties not from beef but from chicken or vegetables and instead of the iconic Big Mac serves the idiosyncratic “Chicken Maharaja Mac”. See for instance, V. Roudometof, “Transnationalism, Cosmopolitanism and Glocalization”, *Current Sociology* 53:1 (2005), 113–135. On the related concept of translocality, see U. Freitag and A. von Oppen (eds.), *Translocality: The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

homeland and serving there as *qādīs* until the Day of Judgment. These *qādīs* were then able to provide the highly heterogeneous communities of Muslim merchants in different Malabari port cities with much-needed religious and legal guidance, from contract law to matters of social interaction, marriage, and inheritance, guidance that was not available in the canonical texts on Islamic law that assumed a Muslim society under Muslim rule. In this manner, the legendary king came to stand in for an actual Muslim ruler by conferring his royal authority onto the '*ulamā*' in much the same way as any real-life sultan would do.

The earliest Arabic tradition of the Cheraman Perumal story is all about a pressing challenge of localization: how to establish plausible religious authority outside the *dār al-Islām*, in a society in which Muslims were a minority composed of individuals of diverse backgrounds, affinities, and allegiances. This challenge was at least in part resolved through an appeal to the global. Within the legend, this appeal takes the form of the convert king's personal trajectory to Arabia, from where he issued his mandate, and through the narrative's continual emphasis on the Arab identity and membership in an Islamic cosmopolis of learning that are attributed to the original champions of Islam on the Malabar Coast.

There are, of course, always two sides to localization: newcomers need to find a place within the prevailing order, while the host society needs to come to terms with the presence and entitlements of the new groups among them. The processes of accommodation and negotiation that define the historical evolution of Monsoon Islam did not occur within a political vacuum but as part of the discourses and praxes of sovereignty that defined the body politics of Indian Ocean states. The development of Monsoon Islam occurred within social and political spaces that had to be actively granted and allocated by indigenous elites; it was only where indigenous political elites saw a clear benefit to ceding such spaces that Monsoon Islam could take root.

On the Malabar Coast, the legend of India's first Muslim was an essential part in making the presence of Muslims intelligible and acceptable to the host society, and in particular to its political and religious elite. This process had two sides. On the one hand, Malabari kings found in the Perumal's division of his realm a source for their own legitimacy: every royal house in medieval Kerala traces its origins back to the allocation of demesnes by the departing king. Even Calicut, which attained prominence only much later than many of the other major kingdoms in the region, predicates its history on Cheraman Perumal: in lieu of a significant territory, the Zamorins were granted the Perumal's sword, which carried with it the implicit mandate to expand their dominion by conquest. Last in his line and without direct successor, Cheraman Perumal

was able to serve as a virtual overlord for Malabar's various "little kings", who could call on him as a source of legitimization.¹⁰ Within this framework, the connection to the global – represented by the trans-oceanic pilgrims who led the last Chera king on his journey to Arabia – played a critical role in shaping the political landscape of a post-Chera Kerala, with every royal house in some way tracing its origins to this pivotal event.

Closely related to the way in which Malabar's political class drew on the myth of Cheraman Perumal to legitimize their status is the manner by which its religious elite used this same narrative to account cosmologically for the presence of Muslims within a society strictly organized around Vedic principles. The *Kerālōlpatti*, the collection of legends that relates the origins of Kerala society from the viewpoint of its Brahmins, acknowledges the conversion to Islam of the last Chera king, although it differs from the Arabic version in its description of his motive: rather than having seen the truth of Islam, in the *Kerālōlpatti* the Perumal seeks forgiveness in another faith for a sin so grave that no absolution was available to him within Hindu beliefs.¹¹ Incorporating the story of the convert king within their own *Weltanschauung* allowed Nampūtiri Brahmins to construct a framework for the presence of Islam within Malayali society. Remarkably, the *Kerālōlpatti* reproduces the account known from the Arabic manuscript in all its self-serving specifics (the names of the Arab families, the places at which they founded the ten original mosques, their role as the champions of Islam on the Malabar Coast), thereby integrating more or less unchanged the historical vision of a foreign religious elite into their own. As the ultimate arbiters of political and social power, the acceptance by Brahmins was of special importance to the status and prospects of Islam in the region. Chapter 3 has shown that this process was neither untroubled nor uncontested, but that the economic imperative of accommodating Muslims could be couched in the narrative of the Perumal's conversion.

Several centuries after the introduction of Islam to South India and the region's integration into trans-oceanic Muslim networks, another world-historical development impinged on the Malabar Coast. Once again, the legend of the convert king served to address the tension between

¹⁰ Margret Frenz points out the analogy between this legitimizing role of Cheraman Perumal in Kerala's political history and that played by Charlemagne in European history; see M. Frenz, *Vom Herrscher zum Untertan: Spannungsverhältnis zwischen lokaler Herrschaftsstruktur und der Kolonialverwaltung in Malabar zu Beginn der britischen Herrschaft (1790–1805)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000), 162.

¹¹ Acting on false information, the Perumal had unjustly killed a fellow Nair; a divine vision then promised him "half deliverance" from his sins if he completed the *hajj*. See T.M. Menon (ed.), *Keralolpatti*, 64.

the local and the global. Confronted by Portugal's monopolistic designs on the pepper trade and widespread attacks against Muslim merchants in the sixteenth century, Malabari Muslims invoked the narrative of the convert king in an attempt to situate the Malabar Coast within the *dār al-Islām*. When Zayn al-Din wrote his famous *Tuhfat al-Mujāhidīn* to inspire Muslim rulers to assist Malabar's Muslims in their struggle against the Portuguese interlopers, he was faced with the challenge of how to construct their fight as a lawful *jihād*. By drawing on the story of a powerful Hindu king who had embraced Islam, he constructed a historical narrative in which the Malabar Coast formed a *de facto* part of the Islamic world: beginning with Cheraman Perumal, Muslims had been welcomed by South Indian rulers to such a degree that effectively they enjoyed all the same freedoms and protections that they would if they resided within the bounds of the *dār al-Islām*. As with the earlier appeal to his authority by Malabar's '*ulamā'* in their attempt to legitimize their own status, the legendary king again compensated, as a sort of imaginary stand-in, for the lack of an actual Muslim ruler. In Zayn al-Dīn's discursive project, Cheraman Perumal served as the exemplary Indian king who transcended the difference between Hindu king and Muslim sultan, between the abode of peace and the land of war, between the Islamic world in a strict legal sense and the existence of this wider sphere of Monsoon Islam.

This globalizing project of positioning the Malabar Coast as part of the wider world of Islam in even a legal sense was mirrored, once again, in an accompanying process of localization. With the flight of many *paradesi* merchants from the Coast in the face of Portuguese aggression that was directed most directly against them, Mappilas increasingly came to direct the economic, political, and social affairs of Malabar's Muslim communities. This process of wresting control away from the traditional Arab elites, Mappilas could point to Cheraman Perumal as a source of communal identity and Islamic prestige. After all, the first Muslim convert from the region – the first Mappila, so to speak – had not only been an all-powerful, high-caste king but he was also of unassailable Islamic pedigree, having embraced the faith under the personal guidance of the Prophet himself. To Mappilas of the sixteenth century and beyond, Cheraman Perumal thus helped to establish their communal filiation both locally and globally, within Malabar's socio-political context as well as vis-à-vis the wider Islamic world.

This role of Cheraman Perumal as symbolic figurehead of the Mappila community continued beyond the sixteenth century. The religious identity of Malabari Muslims, which had been sharpened by the conflict with the Portuguese and ensuing *jihād* rhetoric, took on new significance in

the eighteenth century. Shortly after the English East India Company seized control of Bengal and thereby began the period of British colonial rule over the subcontinent, the Malabar Coast too became a dependency of an outside power. In the 1760s, the kingdom of Mysore, by then under the *de facto* Muslim rule of Haidar Ali, annexed the kingdom of Calicut and reduced Cochin to a tributary relationship. During the brief decades of Mysorean occupation, led first by Haidar Ali and from 1782 by his son Tippu Sultan, the Mappilas found themselves, for the first time in their history, under the patronage of a Muslim sovereign. Their new patron bestowed land and other privileges on them, but also used his power “to emphasize and deepen the cleavages – religious and economic – between them and local Hindu society”.¹²

These latent tensions became intensified in the aftermath of the Anglo-Mysorean wars of the 1790s, which resulted in the British annexation of what became Malabar District and South Kanara. (The southern kingdoms of Cochin and Travancore retained at least formal independence as subsidiary princely states.) A hallmark of the modern imperial project was the classification of colonial subjects along the lines of race, social status, and religious affiliation, which in the case of India resulted in a hardening of religious and social (especially caste) identities. A wide-ranging body of scholarship has shown how these previously more open-ended categories became closed and were enforced and reinforced in a mutual process between colonizer and colonized.¹³ In this context, the Mappilas’ embrace of Cheraman Perumal as the legendary forebear of their community served two ends. First, it was used to differentiate the Mappilas from other groups of Indian Muslims. Identifying the first Malayali convert to Islam as having been of a high caste (of royal blood, no less) was seen as elevating the community’s status. Second, in an ironic echo of how in the medieval period a foreign ‘*ulamā*’ had used the legend to elevate themselves above local Muslims, the Mappilas also used the legend to highlight the role of Arabs in the genesis and growth of their community, which likewise was seen as way to distinguish their

¹² P.A. Kurien, *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity: International Migration and the Reconstruction of Community Identities in India* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 56. Also see S.N. Hasan, “Kerala under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan”, unpublished PhD thesis, Aligarh Muslim University (1968) and S.F. Dale, “The Mappilas during Mysorean Rule: Agrarian Conflict in Eighteenth-century Malabar”, *South Asia* 6:1 (1976), 1–13.

¹³ See for instance, C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); N.B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); S. Sen, *A Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India* (London: Routledge, 2002).

community from other, less redoubtable groups of Indian Muslims. Put differently, in a society in which traditional categories and relationships were in upheaval, and in which caste and race took on new social and political meanings, the figure of Cheraman Perumal served as a source of communal history, pride, and status.

This sense of a distinct Mappila identity was articulated vis-à-vis Indian society but also through the community's relationship with the wider Islamic world. This intersection of the local and the global found dramatic expression in the 1920s, when Kerala, which otherwise tended to be on the periphery of Indian national politics, became drawn into the Khilafat movement. In the aftermath of the First World War, Indian Muslims agitated against the British in order to preserve the status of the Ottoman sultans as caliphs. Their cause was espoused by Indian nationalist leaders, most prominently by Mohandas Gandhi who saw it as a way to galvanize anti-British sentiments and bring Muslims into the nationalist Non-Cooperation movement.¹⁴ Mappilas were among the most fervent protestors against the British disbandment of the Ottoman caliphate, and it was on the Malabar Coast that the Khilafat movement took a violent turn.

Beginning in August 1921, in a series of events the British called "Moplah Outrages" and that are known in Malayalam as the *Mappila lahala*, Muslims attacked police stations and government outposts in an attempt to establish "Khilafat kingdoms", areas of autonomous self-rule in the countryside. Although some Hindu leaders publicly sympathized with their cause and a few even actively participated in the rebellion, it was mainly carried out by poor Muslims from the rural areas. The rebels' attacks were aimed not only against the British. Especially in the southern areas, Hindu landlords were targeted by impoverished Mappila labourers and petty cultivators as part of long-standing agrarian disputes, but which were now articulated in terms of religious hostility.¹⁵ Mappila men and boys carried out these attacks as *jihāds*, in the spirit of martyrdom, after severing all worldly ties and receiving rites of purification from their local '*ulamā*'.¹⁶ Remarkably, in an echo of Zayn al-Din's

¹⁴ See for instance, G. Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹⁵ It was not only Muslims but also (Syrian) Christians who felt severe communal resentments against caste Hindus during this period, which resulted in frequent rioting from the 1880s onwards. See S. Bayly, "Hindu Kingship and the Origin of Community: Religion, State and Society in Kerala, 1750–1850", *Modern Asian Studies* 18:2 (1984), 211.

¹⁶ See S.F. Dale, "The Hadrami Diaspora in South-Western India: The Role of the Sayyids of the Malabar Coast", in U. Freitag and W.G. Clarence-Smith (eds.), *Hadhrimi Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s to 1960s* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 179; Randathani, *Mappila Muslims*, 138–146.

sixteenth-century casuistry, the ‘*ulamā*’ again construed the region as part of the *dār al-Islām*. Because Malabar was a proper constituent of the “house of Islam”, their *fatwās* declared, it was once more incumbent on all Muslims to aid in its liberation from foreign occupation.¹⁷

Clashes continued into 1922 but were then dealt with effectively and harshly by the British army under the cover of martial law.¹⁸ The British sought to explain the rebellion, which to their delight helped break up the national entente between Hindu and Muslim leaders, as an outbreak of irrational religious fanaticism, playing on the age-old trope of Muslims as violent zealots. This characterization was bolstered by the fact that the Mappilas themselves had articulated their protest not only in the language of global Islam – by pledging fealty to the Ottoman caliph and parading through Malabar townships in Turkish uniforms – but also by drawing on their own communal history.¹⁹ The *jihād* rhetoric deployed in the struggle against the Portuguese four centuries earlier provided them with a ready way to frame the fight against another overbearing European power seemingly intent on subjugating Muslims on the Malabar Coast, across India, and globally.

The defeat of Mysorean rule over northern Malabar and the rout of the Ottoman caliphate by the British were thus portrayed as a continuation of the Portuguese attacks on Muslim economic interests in the sixteenth century. And as in this earlier struggle against the Portuguese, when Cheraman Perumal was marshalled as evidence for the special status in which Islam was held on the Malabar Coast to justify the region’s inclusion as part of the “house of Islam” (and thereby demand its defence), the legendary king was again mobilized in the twentieth century as part of the Mappilas’ ideological armoury in their conflict with the British. Alongside familiar themes of Islamic history such as the Battle of Badr, Mappila war songs glorified the story of Cheraman Perumal as part of their communal history and character, linking a local confrontation to the struggle for a global caliphate.

¹⁷ Randathani, *Mappila Muslims*, 147–148.

¹⁸ For accounts of the rebellion, see for instance, Miller, *Mappila Muslims*, 100–154; R.L. Hardgrave, Jr., “The Mappilla Rebellion, 1921: Peasant Revolt in Malabar”, *Modern Asian Studies* 11:1 (1977), 57–99; C. Wood, *The Moplah Rebellion and its Genesis* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1987); K.N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836–1921* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989); M. Gangadhara Menon, *Malabar Rebellion, 1921–1922* (Allahabad: Vohra Publishers, 1989); T.A. Mohamed, “Muslim Politics in Kerala (1921–1967)”, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Calicut (2001).

¹⁹ See M.N. Qureshi, *Pan-Islam in British Indian Politics: A Study of the Khilafat Movement, 1918–1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 448; J. Abdelhalim, *Indian Muslims and Citizenship: Spaces for Jihād in Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2016), 37–40.

Despite such continuities, in other ways the imperial period marked the end of many of the dynamics that had come to define the world of Monsoon Islam. Michael Pearson identifies the nineteenth century as a singularly decisive break in the long run of Indian Ocean history. During this period, he writes, the “deep structure elements” of this maritime world underwent systemic changes as technology overcame the tyranny of wind and currents and the ocean became embedded in global systems of exchange, production, and imperial control.²⁰ At the same time that the routine use of steamships – the “engines of empire” – broke the age-old diktat of the monsoon wind system, the modern imperial world system was encroaching on the very spaces in which Monsoon Islam had flourished: cosmopolitan port cities, in which traders lived as part of heterogeneous communities whose autonomy had been safeguarded by polities dependent on the revenues of maritime trade.²¹ Equipped with new bureaucratic tools and techniques to classify and control people and a rule-bound form of governance that sought to standardize strict administrative jurisdiction over all subject territories, the colonial state aggressively policed marginal groups.²² This was felt especially keenly by diasporic communities who, unless they directly served British interests, found their earlier mobility and legal plurality curtailed as they struggled to carve out alternative, liminal spaces.

The process of imperial ordering was accompanied by a concomitant epistemological process. By filtering indigenous knowledge through the sieve of European historicism, most orientalist scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought to distil India’s past into a coherent Whiggish narrative that has British rule as its inexorable apex. This endeavour tended to dismiss traditional accounts of communal history, such as the story of Cheraman Perumal, as a “farrago of legendary nonsense”.²³ After Independence, this view was perpetuated by the first generations of India’s “modern” historians who were trained in the methods, and often imbued in the attitudes, of Western empiricist scholarship. Faced with the task of producing from the full-bodied multiplicity of India’s past a “discrete, empirical, retrospectively organised sequence of solid facts”, legends like that of Malabar’s convert king were relegated

²⁰ Pearson, *Indian Ocean*, 11–12.

²¹ The term “engines of empires” is borrowed from D.R. Burgess, Jr., *Engines of Empire: Steamships and the Victorian Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

²² See for instance, J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), chs. 10, 11.

²³ Logan, *Malabar Manual*, I, 244.

to the realm of ahistorical, fantastical myth-making.²⁴ As colonialism and then nationalism circumscribed and reduced the hybrid plurality of the world of Monsoon Islam, its most iconic embodiment was likewise banished from the annals of history proper.²⁵

In spite of his academic exile, Cheraman Perumal's presence has been maintained in public discourse, albeit in conflicting ways. Even in the twenty-first century, the tension between the local and the global that has defined the historical development of Monsoon Islam can still be found reflected microcosmically in this tradition. Because of its association with the figure of the convert king, this otherwise unremarkable mosque in a backwater town of Kerala has been used to articulate the competing worldviews of the holders of the two highest political offices in the land. Whereas for Indian president Abdul Kalam, the mosque's significance is local, in its potential to shift a domestic discourse of communalism that posits Hinduism and Islam as perpetually antagonistic, for prime minister Narendra Modi its message is global, with the Cheraman Masjid serving as an avatar of international trade and exchange.

Chapter 2 of this book relates Kalam's visit to the mosque in 2005, during which he described it as a symbol of harmonious coexistence across religious lines against the recent background of the Gujarat riots. The riots were ultimately rooted in a vision of India's past – which has its roots in colonial historiography that liked to contrast Britain's civilizing mission to the “pillaging” of India by Muslim rulers – that posits an unending and unresolved conflict between two distinct entities, Hinduism and Islam. Kalam drew on the mosque and its associated legend to highlight a trajectory of Indo-Islamic history this book describes as Monsoon Islam, marked by long-term interaction, commercial cooperation, and gradual acculturation.

A decade later, Narendra Modi stripped the legend of such connotations in his explication of his gift to the Saudi king. Modi himself had been the chief minister of Gujarat at the time of the 2002 riots and for many years stood accused of condoning communalist violence. He was officially cleared of any complicity in the events by a special investigative panel in 2012, shortly before he took office as prime minister of India on the Hindu nationalist platform of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Since then,

²⁴ Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, 2. For an analogous effort to trace the various trajectories of the legend of a twelfth-century Hindu ruler, see C. Talbot, *Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²⁵ For a critical examination of history as a set of narrative conventions rather than fixed reality, see for instance, H. White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality”, *Critical Enquiry* 7:1 (1980), 5–27.

Modi has become a champion of the country's business elite by declaring India "open for business" during his tireless trips abroad. Presenting the Saudi king with a golden replica of the Cheraman Masjid was in keeping with this mission since: in Modi's telling (or tweeting, rather), the mosque represents an earlier era of history in which India was also open for (foreign) business. In this rendering, the mosque and the tradition it embodies are reduced to a simple tale of material exchange.

Even a closer look at Modi's own gift reveals the obvious deficiencies in this reductionist conception. For the miniature that he presented to the Saudi king does not actually resemble the mosque as it exists today: instead, what is reproduced in gold-plated intricacy is the mosque in its historic form, in its original guise as a traditional monsoon mosque.

King Salman may have well needed some gentle prompting to recognize his gift as a mosque. Distinct from the conventional paradigms of Islamic architecture, the Cheraman Masjid shares its stylistic features with similar mosques in other historic trading ports of maritime Asia. Resembling a local Hindu temple, the mosque manifests the syncretic nature of Monsoon Islam that developed from the embodiment of the Islamic faith within the context of Indian Ocean societies.

A replica of the Cheraman Masjid as it exists today would have been more immediately recognizable to his Saudi hosts. In 1974, the front part of the old mosque was demolished and replaced by a new façade that incorporates all the visual elements that are typically associated with Islamic sacred architecture. In a pastiche bordering on caricature, this new front of the Cheraman Masjid obscures the original, syncretic features with no fewer than four domed minarets, which frame a central faux cupola that vaguely recalls the grand domes of Middle Eastern mosques. As one commentator has put it, the traditional mosque has been put into "purdah", encased within a concrete burqa, so to speak, that hides the traditional monsoon mosque within.²⁶ The "appropriated aesthetic" of the new structure is deliberately anodyne and devoid of local context; its purpose is to project a vision of pan-Islamic unity, of a single, coherent, monolithic Islam.²⁷

The context to this false frontage, which serves to practically and symbolically obscure the history of Monsoon Islam, relates back to the same ties – old and new – between India and Arabia that Modi sought to evoke,

²⁶ T. Mackintosh-Smith, *The Hall of a Thousand Columns: Hindustan to Malabar with Ibn Battutah* (London: John Murray, 2005), 274. Mackintosh-Smith attributes the mosque's false front to an attempt to hide Hindu-style wood-carvings in the original entryway.

²⁷ S. Dalvi, "The Architecture of New Mosques in Kerala: Appropriated Aesthetics in the Aftermath of Urbanization and Globalization", in S.M. Akhtar (ed.), *Islamic Architecture at the Cross Roads* (New Delhi: Wellworth, 2011).



6:44 AM - 3 Apr 2016

Figure C.1 Twitter post by the Office of the Prime Minister of India (@pmoindia) from 3 April 2016.

Image copyright by the Office of the Prime Minister of India; Twitter trademarks copyright by Twitter, Inc.



Figure C.2 New façade of the Cheraman Masjid at Kodungallur.
Image courtesy of Hornbil Images (Alamy Stock Photos).

though in ways that are quite different from the simplistic story of trade his gift was meant to convey. Beginning in the mid-1960s, thousands of poor Mappilas migrated as cheap labourers towards the newly opened oil wells of the Gulf states. They did so often illegally, aboard dhows that plied the same ancient trade routes that Muslim pepper traders had traversed in earlier centuries. Over the next decades, as air travel and new immigration policies broadened this path, millions more followed suit. Today, it is estimated that as many as 2.5 million workers from Kerala – or some 7 per cent of the state's total population – live temporarily or permanently in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, with Muslims by far the largest group of these migrant labourers.²⁸

The resulting influx of foreign currency into Kerala has caused a prolonged real-estate boom there, especially in the northern parts of the state, the historic Malabar Coast, where palatial “Mappila mansions” crowd out traditional dwellings even in remote villages. Alongside hard-earned funds, Muslims returning from the Middle East have also brought with them new understandings of their faith. After extended stays in Muslim-majority countries whose governments are avowedly Islamic and committed to enforcing religious orthopraxy, many Kerala Muslims returned with a reformed religious identity. This new attitude to their religion was typically centred on a sentimentalized vision of Arabia as the heartland of Islam and expressed by “the embrace of an Islamic and Gulf-oriented modernity and way of life”.²⁹

This [development] has the effect of intensifying processes of communalisation and community closure. The need for such a turn has been reinforced by political events: locally, the emergence of strong and successful Hindu and Christian communal and caste organisations which dominate the public sphere; nationally, the state of living ‘post-Ayodhya’ and under the rise of Hindutva; internationally, the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions and widespread post-9/11 Islamophobia giving a sense being a ‘community under siege’ which needs to stick together.³⁰

²⁸ See for instance, Miller, *Mappila Muslims*, 321–326; K.C. Zachariah et al., *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala: Dimensions, Differentials, and Consequences* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003); K.C. Zachariah and S.I. Rajan, “Dynamics of Emigration and Remittances in Kerala: Results from the Kerala Migration Survey 2014”, Centre for Development Studies (Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India) Working Paper 462 (2015).

²⁹ F. Osella and C. Osella, “I am Gulf”: The Production of Cosmopolitanism in Kozhikode, Kerala, India”, in Simpson and Kresse (eds.), *Struggling with History*, 348. Also see Miller, *Mappila Muslims*, 326–330; F. Osella and C. Osella, “Islamism and Social Reform in Kerala, South India”, *Modern Asian Studies* 42:2/3 (2008), 317–346; Kurien, *Kaleidoscopic Ethnicity*, ch. 4.

³⁰ Osella and Osella, “The Production of Cosmopolitanism”, 348.

In other words, the ideals and ideologies of a different strand of Islamic history, one rooted in a Middle Eastern tradition, has increasingly become superimposed onto a Muslim society whose history had been primarily shaped by a different trajectory of Islamic history, that of Monsoon Islam. This trend is reflected in the treatment of Malabar's historic mosques, many of which have been demolished in the past decades, their wooden structures replaced by buildings in the Middle Eastern style of mosque architecture that is seen as more properly representative of Islam.³¹

The rise of new forms of religious identity and Islamic practice among Kerala Muslims has been reinforced by the success of reformist discourses. Islamic reformism is understood as “projects whose specific focus is the bringing into line of religious beliefs and practices with what are held to be the core foundations of Islam, by avoiding and purging out innovation, accretion and the intrusion of ‘local custom’”³². Just as the faux façade of the Cheraman Masjid harks to the vision of a unified, global, pan-Islamic identity, so does the discourse of reformist Islam tout a vision of the faith as a stable, unchanging, universal constant (or “truth”). Faced with the failure of pan-Islamism as a political project in the face of Arab nationalism that defined politics after the Second World War across the Middle East, the goal of political unity of the Muslim world came to be replaced by the aim of greater religious cohesion. Fuelled by the rapid growth of oil revenues in the 1970s and the ferocious ideological rivalry with Revolutionary Iran after 1979, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states used umbrella organizations such as the Muslim World League or the Organization of the Islamic Conference to funnel vast grants into educational, informational, developmental, and humanitarian projects in Asia and Africa.³³ The stated aim of these activities was to “propagate Islamic culture and to protect it”, which in practice meant instilling a sense of unified Islamic identity based on a particular view of Muslim history and tradition.³⁴

Home to a population of more than 150 million Muslims, India has been an important target of this drive. Drawing on its prestige as protectors of the holy cities – in much the same way as the Ottomans

³¹ This process has also caused the loss of many historically significant inscriptions; see Shokoohy, “Sources for Malabar Muslim Inscriptions”, 8.

³² F. Osella and C. Osella, “Introduction”, in F. Osella and C. Osella (eds.), *Islamic Reform in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xi.

³³ See for instance, J.M. Landau, *Pan-Islam: History and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2016), ch. 6; Y. Sikand, “Stoking the Flames: Intra-Muslim Rivalries in India and the Saudi Connection”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27:1 (2007), 95–108.

³⁴ Landau, *Pan-Islam*, 294.

did in the sixteenth century – the Saudi religious establishment promotes itself as the guardians of the “true” Islam.³⁵ This sponsorship, which echoes the politico-religious patronage networks of the Rasulids in earlier centuries, forms part of an unspoken compact of mutual expectation. The custodian of a minor Sufi shrine in the back alleys of Cochin, at which both Hindus and Muslims make offerings (often in form of eggs for the snakes guarding the site), made it known that “we cannot show the Kuwaitis [this], or they will have us tear it down”.³⁶ At many of the new (or newly renovated and expanded) mosques built with funds from the Gulf, Saudi-trained preachers assumed the pulpit, extolling visions of a “great Islamic tradition” rooted in a unified and authentic doctrinal core.³⁷

Such reformist impulses do not only come from the outside but are also generated locally. Whether as a result of time spent in the Gulf as migrant workers, or through the growing presence of transnational Islamic agents in Kerala, many Mappila Muslims have come to regard some elements of their culture that they had previously viewed as “Indian” as Hindu – and therefore, at least to some degree, as un-Islamic. This trend is reflected, for example, in recent changes in the sartorial choices made by Mappila women, who have largely abandoned the practice of wearing the same types of saris as Hindu women for forms of dress that conspicuously project an unambiguous Islamic identity.³⁸ This local dynamic highlights that these trends cannot simply be regarded as a conflict between local forms of Islam that are plural and inclusive and a reformist “global Islam” that is imposed on unwilling participants; instead, the tension between the distant and local is reflected at every level of these discourses, from

³⁵ On reconstructions of Islam into a coherent system of “orthodox” text and history in twentieth-century South and Southeast Asia, see T. Sevea, “‘Islamist’ Intellectual Space: ‘True Islam’ and the *Ummah* in the East”, *Asian Journal of Social Science* 35:4 (2007), 575–607.

³⁶ Both the shrine and its custodian (*kaikkar*) will remain anonymous. On historic precedent for this Mappila veneration of snakes at a Muslim shrine, see D.M. Menon, “Becoming ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’: Identity and Conflict in Malabar 1900–1936”, Centre for Development Studies (Thiruvananthapuram) Working Paper 255 (1994), 7.

³⁷ For study of “religious transnationalism” based on an examination of religious decrees issued by Saudi-funded mosques, see M. al-Rasheed, “Saudi Religious Transnationalism in London”, in M. al-Rasheed (ed.), *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 149–167.

³⁸ See A. Lindberg, “Islamisation, Modernisation, or Globalisation? Changed Gender Relations among South Indian Muslims”, *South Asia* n.s. 32:1 (2009), 86–109. Also see C. Osella and F. Osella, “Muslim Style in South India”, *Fashion Theory* 11:2–3 (2007), 233–252; F. Shirazi, *Brand Islam: The Marketing and Commodification of Piety* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2016), ch. 6.

ideo-theological debates to the everyday decisions made by individual Muslims.³⁹

Islamic reformism in Kerala is as much a product of local and national conditions as it is an outcome of transnational projects. The underlying negotiations between local and global impulses and affinities are reminiscent of those of earlier times. As before, economic exchanges (now the movement of labour rather than trade in spices) provide the impulse and underlie other forms of interaction – ideational, religious, political – as texts, ideas, and histories are reinterpreted within different contexts and to differing ends. And they remain ongoing and open-ended: at present, the management committee of the Cheraman Masjid is planning to renovate the mosque once more. Already, the state government has granted permission to demolish the concrete annexure in order to restore the building's original form and features, “using the concepts of Kerala's traditional architecture”.⁴⁰ It remains to be seen whether this endeavour will go beyond an effort to promote local “heritage” tourism as part of a push for World Heritage status for the nearby site of the ancient pepper port Muziris.⁴¹

In addition to the Cheraman Perumal legend, the successive reiterations of which mirror key themes in the evolution of Monsoon Islam, the eponymous mosque itself, through its architectural renovations and political reinterpretations, has become an index of the complex, contested, contradictory, and ever-changing nature of Islam on the Malabar Coast. These trajectories highlight that Monsoon Islam was not a coherent system of belief, a consistent code of practice, or a unified political project. The myth itself has served to anchor this shifting world in a viable past. It was constructed and reconstructed by different constituencies – by an Arab justifying his religious authority, an Indian Muslim lending credence to his call for *jihād*, a community defining its identity, a politician seeking to promote communal harmony or boost bilateral trade – in a constantly evolving effort to instil meaning into evolving identities, entitlements, and aspirations.

Myth is a story that can be retold by anyone, with infinite variation, and still be recognisable as itself. The outline of surviving myth is re-recognised in the lives

³⁹ “Global Islam” has emerged as an umbrella term for the various transnational projects of Islamic reformism; see for instance, O. Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004); P. Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁴⁰ “1400-year-old Mosque to Be Restored to its Original Form”, *The Hindu* (29 June 2011); “Murals to Soon Adorn Cheraman Mosque”, *New Indian Express* (13 March 2016).

⁴¹ “Muziris Rises from the Ruins, as one of India's Largest Heritage Tourism Projects”, *Indian Express* (5 April 2016).

of each generation. It's an instrument by which people simplify, rationalise and retell social complexities. It's a means to haul the abstract, the global and the relative into the realm of the concrete, the local and the absolute. It's a way to lay claim to faith in certain values. If those who attempt to interpret the world do so only through the prism of professional thinkers, and ignore the persistence of myth in everyday thought and speech, the interpretations will be deficient.⁴²

The story of the convert king, and the sets of individuals, ideas, and ideologies it has intersected with, directly speak to this persistent tension between the global and the local. Monsoon Islam is the sum of answers proposed by Muslims who found themselves in the trading world of the medieval Indian Ocean. Rather than treat South India as an outlier within a general pattern of Indo-Islam – in much the same way that Southeast Asian Islam has often been regarded as broader trends – tracing the historical connections between Muslim communities spread around the Indian Ocean littoral reveals a world of dense interaction and shared dynamics.⁴³ Nile Green, in his provocative study of Global Islam, regards contacts and exchange as the primary driving forces of religious change; in his view, increased interaction has always led to a greater diversity of, and more competition between, religious ideas, practices, organizations, books, schools, shrines, and networks.⁴⁴ The great port cities of the medieval Indian Ocean were contact zones of intense interaction between otherwise distant people, economies, and cultures. The trading world of monsoon Asia constituted a trans-oceanic marketplace not only of goods but of information, ideas, and individuals.

Malabar's Muslims were, in the memorable image by Engseng Ho, a community facing in two directions: “on the one hand bound in multiple moral and legal relations with non-Muslim rulers and peoples over generations in Malabar, and on the other engaged in trade with distant places”.⁴⁵ This duality means that it is misleading to speak simply of the indigenization of a Muslim diaspora on the Malabar Coast. This is not to say that this process, expressed in this book as the dimension of “the local”, was not essential. It finds expression in such diverse phenomena as mosque architecture, changing configurations of the ‘ulamā’, conception of *jihād*, saint worship, and Mappila culture. But it was taking place in conjunction with another dimension of interaction described here as

⁴² J. Meek, “Robin Hood in a Time of Austerity”, *London Review of Books* 38:4 (2016), 3.

⁴³ On Southeast Asia, see F.R. Bradley, *Forging Islamic Power and Place: The Legacy of Shaykh Dā’ūd ‘Abd Allāh al-Fatāñi in Mecca and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016), 1.

⁴⁴ Green, *Terrains of Exchange*, 7–16.

⁴⁵ E. Ho, “Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat”, *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 46:2 (2004), 223.

“the global”. At the same time that these Muslims were negotiating their place within local polities and societies, they were also oriented towards port cities across the Indian Ocean. These linked them into networks of commercial partnership, economic institutions, religious learning, legal *communitas*, mysticism, political allegiance, and warfare. Monsoon Islam is the history of the interplay between these two dimensions in the economic, social, and political lives of Muslim merchant communities – it is the process of embedding global forces in local contexts, and vice versa. It is from this perspective that the focus on circulation, which becomes legible to the historian through network relationships, is so essential, in that it makes explicit the concurrent making and transcending of place.

Monsoon Islam is not a unified historical phenomenon, not a coherent set of principles, practices, and precepts. In the absence of a central political power, a clear hierarchy of religious authority, or a unifying purpose, the accumulated efforts Muslims made over the course of centuries to reconcile the local and the global are necessarily incongruous and incomplete. Their answers varied within communities, between different places, and over time – as was the case for any group of Muslims, in any place and at any time. The need to negotiate between the local and the world beyond, between the faithful and the infidels, between ideals and necessity, has been a central feature of Islamic history from its inception. Monsoon Islam is one trajectory within the diverse development of medieval Islam, a post-caliphal age marked by regionalization and diversification. What sets Monsoon Islam apart is that its traditions, ideologies, and customs primarily reflect the values of merchants rather than the interests of a state, political elite, or state-supported religious class. Its history, then, offers a window into the ways in which communities across the trading world of the medieval Indian Ocean shaped Islamic institutions and precepts to address the specific challenges, opportunities, and settings they found themselves confronted by in their pursuit of profits.

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