

REVIEW: WILSON CHACKO JACOB, *FOR GOD OR EMPIRE: SAYYID FADL AND THE INDIAN OCEAN WORLD*. STANFORD, CA: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019.

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For God or Empire endeavours to historicise the modern concept of ‘sovereignty’ through the life of Sayyid Fadl, a descendant of the Prophet. In doing so, Wilson Jacob presents a global history that explores a series of changes affecting the nature and character of modern religion, state, and subjectivity. Sayyid Fadl, the main protagonist, was born in British Malabar to a Hadrami immigrant Sufi father, and was exiled to Arabia where he became a renowned Sufi scholar, an Ottoman Governor in Dhofar, and later an advisor to the Sultan in Istanbul, where he died in 1900. Offering new insights into the multifaceted life of Sayyid Fadl, one which has been the interest of several studies in recent decades, Jacob follows Fadl from the perspective of life as its unity – an adaptation from the Sufi tradition of Ibn Arabi’s *Wahdat al-Wujud* – reveals the in-betweenness of secular and divine sovereignty. The many spaces that this British ‘outlaw’ moves across – from Malabar to Hejaz, Dhofar, Cairo and Istanbul – offer an extremely productive lens to undertake this task, as Jacob explores his engagements with British, French and Ottoman imperial sovereignties. In turn, the book successfully examines this figure and the concept of sovereignty from a broad temporal and spatial framework.

In Jacob’s telling, the work is a history of Alawi Sayyids and their relationship to distant geographies linked through aquatic quests, prayers, blessed marriages, and offspring; all being tied to the idea of *One*. This is embodied by the strange unity of the prophets, lineages, and Gods, as they confront the nexus of capital, territory, and renewed subjection of biological life to the forces of meta-narrativity. By the time Sayyid Alawi arrives in the Indian Ocean world, the region was already simmering with Travancore-Calicut-Mysore-East India Company (EIC) alliances and rivalries. It was within this

context that Sayyid Alawi's distinct form of Sufism took root in the interior of Malabar, where he was soon overwhelmed by followers. In its quest for expanding its claims to territorial sovereignty, the EIC confronted this popular mystic as a figure who sat at the base of nothingness, a power whose centre and source they were unable to locate. The strange reversal was acutely felt as all the powerful machinery of state building was rendered 'powerless' against this Tangul (45).

Next, Jacob follows Sayyid Fadl's later exile to Hejaz after his father's death. Here, as Jacob writes, "[t]he knowledge and the visceral experience" (84) of a cosmology of Sufism, of which Sayyid Fadl was a veritable part, placed him between the rising power of the British Empire and the decadent tradition of Ottoman sultan as a mediator between the God and the subjects. In part, Fadl "appeared to throw himself at the mercy of the British as he turned more towards his Alawi Sufi tradition" (108). In this "true and merciful way" (167), Sayyid Fadl is said to have found an "elixir for the tormented heart" (167). Here, Dhofar becomes a subliminal and contradictory geography that linked Dhofar's landscape, its valleys, fruits, waters and ports, to the 'sublime state' of the Ottoman sultanate, and to Sayyid Fadl himself. As we move towards his later life, Sayyid Fadl's quest to find a language where the secular dimension of life and the ecstatic dimension of divine sovereignty could merge, freed from the weight of imperial biopolitics "seemed to fall silent" (179).

Jacob's reading of Fadl's life makes several important departures from previous works. Early scholarly engagements with this history largely relied uncritically upon colonial archives, and unsurprisingly ended up reaffirming the 'fanatic' image of the Moplah and Sayyids.¹ Later nationalist narratives in post-independent India appealed to an earlier generation of scholars (Bahauddin 1992; Kurppu and Pokker 2002).² Marxist scholars Namboodiripad (1943) and K. N. Panikkar (1989) relegated activism to class struggle, while the local religious writings offered largely hagiographical recordings of Karamats and Sufi activities.³ More recently, confounded with contradictory claims that Fadl made in his relationship to empires, scholars such as Bang (2003) call Fadl a political

¹ Stephen Frederic Dale, "The Islamic frontier in South West India: The Shahid as a cultural Ideal among the Mappilas of Malabar," *Modern Asian Studies*, 11 (1977), 41-55; Stephen Frederic Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922: Islamic society on the South Asian frontier* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

² K.M. Bahauddin, *Kerala Muslims: The long struggle* (Trivandrum: Sahitya Pravarthaka Cooperative Society, 1992); K.K.N. Kurup and P. K. Pokker (eds.), *Mamburam Sayyid Fadl Pookoya Thangal* (Kozhikode: Chintha Publications, 2002).

³ E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *A Short History of the Peasant Movement in Kerala* (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1943). K.N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and peasant uprising in Malabar, 1836-1921* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

opportunist, while Seema Alavi (2015) has positioned him within a Muslim cosmopolitanism characteristic of post-1857 India.⁴

Making use of a much wider archive in this work, Jacob presents a more textured sense of Fadl's relationship with ideas of divine sovereignty. The extensive use of Fadl's writings – including *Udda al Umara*, *Idah al-Asrar* and *al-Tariqa al-Hanifiyya* – the significant use of Malayalam hagiographies, and the exploration of the digital contents of Wahabi preachers, for one, offer much. It is commendable that Jacob finds easy communion with many of Fadl's Sufi works in order to delineate unity of life in terms of sovereignty, though there are some crucial omissions of his significant texts such as *Bawariq* and *Meezan Tabaqat*.

As an autobiographical examination of this layered history, from the outset Jacob employs a productively suspicious approach to an archive intimately related to empire and state formation. Through a broader *longue durée* historical frame, Jacob moves between Sufi treatises, hagiographies, social media, and ethnography, as he fathoms a 'unity of life' whose influences criss-crossed numerous territories, oceans, and empires. The attempt to unravel the complexities of divine sovereignty that Fadl conceives in his Arabic texts provides challenging opportunities in helping us better understand this particular conception of modern sovereignty. The work as it pursues 'life in its unity' with the transcendental is then intercepted by the myriad earthly forces that at times seem to reduce it to barer forms of politics. These 'otherworldly' lives as they are irreducible and uncontained become a challenge for the structures of the archive through which modern ideas of sovereignty and discipline are inscribed. At the heart of conflict are the two varied inscriptions of sovereignty: that of God or empire.

As Jacob demonstrates, it is one thing to read between the lines, but another to read between the blanks and absences. In this process, he defies history by contemplating lives on a scale of senses beyond the logic of objectivity. Sayyid's sovereignty in Fadl's life emerges first in the context of encounters between the Alawis and the East India Company, backed with a prior history of Alawi expansion at a time of colonial experimentations with state formation. Later, the race between two forms of sovereignty, the Sayyid and the imperial, are examined in detail as the work progresses: Fadl promotes himself as the Amir of Dhofar, while the empire reconstitutes itself territorially, economically, and politically.

⁴ Anne K. Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family networks in East Africa, 1865-1925* (London: Routledge, 2003); Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

From the outset, the task of the work is an attempt at reaching clarity via obscurity in order to get hold of history by a bricolage of bones, graves, flesh, time, and space in fragments while in communication with the *One*. The work unravels the notion of a sovereign life enmeshed in the ‘excess’ of prayer beyond exception by “supplementing the historical with the genealogical in a consideration of returns- of lineages to their rightful places, of places to their rightful lineages, of the repressed other-we are able to view a politics of life confronting a philosophy of life” (2). Sayyid Fadl’s search no doubt continues to grapple with the conceptual-territorial paradigm of life as biopolitical finitude, as his decaying Sayyid sovereignty becomes the only leftovers of a passing tradition that links the body to the absolute and the infinite. Lives like these, as they are read and interpreted today by historians and anthropologists in autobiographical contexts, are the products of multiplicities and contradictions. As they are born, live, and die, they are only to be remembered by later generations in ways that always, to some degree, lie beyond our grasp. This work not only illuminates history in a series of snapshots, but it also provokes us, as we, ourselves, grapple with life’s meaning and search for the same, with or without god in the here and now.