

# **THE BEGINNING/END OF DIASPORA: A KERNEL OF TIME IN A MYSTICAL MODE OF EXISTENCE**

**Wilson Chacko Jacob**  
Concordia University

## **ABSTRACT**

This article considers the potential payoffs of the diasporic as an analytical category developed from Indian Ocean histories that are related to and distinct from various castings of the global. Historically tracing the Indian Ocean trajectories of a Sufi Muslim family from Hadhramawt in relation to changing terms of sovereignty from the late-eighteenth century through the interwar period, the contours and crises of a normative framework for collective and individual life are recuperated and reexamined. The history of these individuals and the theory of life they presuppose and at times explicitly predicate or oppose afford the historian a view of the diasporic as capable of materializing the simultaneity of this- and other-worldly modes of existence. The article concludes that mystical interruptions of historical time that a critical diasporic lens again makes legible as an enduring global form of life represent rarely appreciated sites of emancipation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sayyid Sahl, scion of an illustrious Muslim family, sat in Cairo on a sunny, cool, and crisp January morning in 1895 awaiting an audience with the also-noble and soon-to-be notorious de facto ruler of Egypt, Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer. Nearly half a century had passed since Sahl's father, Sayyid Fadl (d. 1900), and his family had been ignominiously ejected from Malabar by its English East India Company administrators on the authority of the Madras Presidency. Sahl had in fact been sent to Egypt from the Ottoman capital as representative of his father, who had charged him with the mission of acquiring

Cromer's aid in restoring the family to their rightful place. That place, since 1858, was within the British Raj of India, which Cromer had previously served as 'Vice-Viceroy.'<sup>1</sup>

Much had changed in the order of the world since 1852 when little Sahl was forced to sail away from Mampuram, a tiny hamlet on the Kadalundi River, inland from the fabled but long since diminished medieval trading emporium of Calicut located on the famous spice coast of Malabar. When regarded from a global oceanic perspective, the family's pre-history was entwined with 'the Age of Revolution,' and when regarded from a British imperial and colonial perspective, their story was part and parcel of an unchanging (that is, since the seventh century) transregional Muslim fanaticism.<sup>2</sup> The Indian Ocean revolutionaries were 'violently overtaken' and political and economic forms were recast by imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Much more still would change after 1895 and before Sahl's death in the 1920s, as the recast forms of the political enabled new terms of resistance and submission. Nevertheless, these new terms of dwelling in the world remained uncertain as older terms were made nearly illegible by radical transformations in land rights, production, and exchange that encompassed the globe from the mid-eighteenth century (the time of Sahl's grandfather, the patron saint of Mampuram, Sayyid Alawi's migration from Tarim in Yemen to Calicut in India). In the in-between spaces of radical change and continuity, of the intelligible and unintelligible, diasporic groups like the Alawis retained a certain level of maneuverability. This was a rapidly closing window, however, even as diasporas, in one sense, became diasporas in this period.<sup>4</sup> As the First World War ended, the container model of sovereignty (ushered in by, and in response to, the popular revolutions over a century earlier) assumed a hegemonic status; wherein, societies were territorialized and assigned, or struggled for, international recognition as nation-states. Within this emergent order of national identity, maps marking precise borders, passports, treaties, and other international legal forms and institutions, diaspora seemed a thing of the past. Genealogies, chronicles, borderless

---

<sup>1</sup> In 1858, in the wake of the 'Indian Mutiny,' the British crown took direct control over the territories previously administered by the East India Company, which was later dissolved. On Cromer, see: Roger Owen, *Lord Cromer: Victorian imperialist, Edwardian proconsul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61-88. Cromer was officially personal secretary to his cousin Lord Northbrook, Viceroy of India from 1872-76.

<sup>2</sup> This age of 'energetic indigenoussness,' as Sujit Sivasundaram calls it in his recent revision of the Atlantic-centered age of revolutions, was in Fadl's and Sahl's lifetimes overcome by imperial projects of counter-revolution. Sujit Sivasundaram, *Waves Across the South: A new history of revolution and empire* (London: William Collins, 2020), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Sujit Sivasundaram, "Closed sea or contested waters? The Persian Gulf in the age of revolution" in *Facing Empire: Indigenous experiences in a revolutionary age*, eds. Kate Fullagar and Michael A. Donnell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 117.

<sup>4</sup> Sunil Amrith locates this diaspora consciousness among Tamil migrants to Southeast Asia emerging in the interwar period at the nexus of class, nation, and empire in: Sunil Amrith, "Tamil diasporas across the Bay of Bengal," *American Historical Review*, 114, 3 (2009), 547-72.

movements, autonomous orders and so on were displaced and recoded if not erased from history.

The Alawis are a subset of a larger, global Arab Muslim diasporic group originating in Hadhramawt, Yemen in southern Arabia.<sup>5</sup> Unlike other Hadhrami Arabs, the Alawis are *sayyids*, Muslims who trace their descent from the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632 CE) via the sons of his daughter Fatma and son-in-law Ali. In their own accounts, which also distinguish them, theirs is a history of migration: of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina initiating Islamic calendrical time (622 CE, 1 AH), of Ahmad b. Isa from Basra to Tarim in Hadhramawt in the tenth century founding a sayyid homeland, and of Abu Bakr al-Aydarus in the fifteenth century from Tarim to Aden inspiring pilgrimage after his death and burial there. These foundational moments, as Engseng Ho shows, hinged on mobility, destinations, and death rather than fixity, origins, and birth, making the Alawis quite hauntingly a ‘society of the absent.’<sup>6</sup> The Alawis moved out from Aden, Mukalla, and Shihr, along the East African coast, and soon across the Indian Ocean establishing themselves in port towns extending all the way to China by the seventeenth century. In each of these places the death and burial of a sayyid, the transformation of his gravesite into a shrine, and the dead into a ‘saint,’ constituted historical events in that they generated material and documentary evidence—from the shrine complex to genealogies, ritual texts, and chronicles. However, they also replenished the diasporic character of the Alawis, or, as Ho writes, ‘...the Adeni, his saintly colleagues, and their graves were not simply like a diaspora but indeed gave representational shape to one.’ In this article, we consider the analytical and critical purchase of the *diasporic* character of the Alawis, as it confronts the limits of history and its traditional archive.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps to the dismay of many, Usama bin Laden is the most ‘famous’ member of this global diaspora. On the historical blinders handicapping certain views of globalization, see: Engseng Ho, “Empire through diasporic eyes: The view from the other boat,” *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, 46, 2 (2004), 210-46. For multiple angles on this diaspora see: Ulrike Freitag and William Clarence-Smith (eds.), *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s-1960s* (Boston: Brill, 1997); Ulrike Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in Hadhramaut: Reforming the homeland* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Ahmed I. Abushouk and Hassan A. Ibrahim (eds.), *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity maintenance or assimilation?* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean* (New York: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> A number of excellent works now exist on the Alawiyya [Alawi Sufi Way]. In addition to Ho’s seminal work cited above, see, for example: Stephen Dale, “The Hadhrami diaspora in south-western India: The role of the Sayyids of the Malabar Coast,” in *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen*, eds. Freitag and Clarence-Smith, 175-84; Anne K. Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family networks in East Africa, 1860-1925* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Kazuhiro Arai, “Arabs who traversed the Indian Ocean: The history of the al-‘Attas family in Hadramawt and Southeast Asia, c. 1600–c. 1960” (Unpublished PhD diss., Michigan, 2004); N.J.G. Kaptein, *Islam, Colonialism and the Modern Age in the Netherlands East Indies: A Biography of Sayyid ‘Uthman, 1822-1914* (Boston: Brill, 2014). My recent book follows the path struck by these and other scholars: Wilson Chacko Jacob, *For God or Empire: Sayyid Fadl and the Indian Ocean World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019). Some of the material from chapter six of the book is reproduced and recast here.

We ground our inquiry into diaspora and the diasporic<sup>8</sup> in the history of one family's long displacement—covering the period from 1852 to the 1920s—as a window into an intensifying politics of sovereignty that drew sharper lines between natives and foreigners, rendering migrant societies like the Alawiyya untenable models for forging social and political lives across regional boundaries. Sayyid Sahl's meeting with Cromer did not happen. Empires that could not recognize mobile sayyids as political actors but could recognize them as threats to imperial sovereignty eventually faded from history, but diaspora would not end in the same way. Rather, the (geo-)politics of recognition was displaced onto international bodies, yielding similarly arresting and enabling moments for members of this diasporic Alawi family, who became illegible figures in the interwar period on one register while also becoming legible in new ways. The question of illegibility, however, raises the question of readership. For whom, in which moments, and why did the terms of 'sayyid sovereignty' and its diasporic formation appear different, faded, or entirely invisible? If the relationship between sayyids and Indian Ocean peoples generated more than human sociality in discrete historical contexts, a remainder that could be read across time(s) and space(s), what might the excess reveal about diasporic life?

## PRELUDE TO PASSPORTS

When the grandfather, Sayyid Alawi (d.1844), migrated from Tarim to Calicut c. 1766 at the age of seventeen, the Alawiyya was already a very old diaspora dotting the Indian Ocean littoral and in some cases its hinterlands. His movement was not contingent on imperial blessings or passes despite the repeated efforts of European empires and trading companies to establish such a regime of control over sea lanes and seafarers ever since the arrival of the Portuguese at the same port of Calicut in 1498. His travels were not especially dissimilar from that of other Muslim voyagers who had crossed the Indian Ocean for centuries before. He likely carried with him letters from scholars and merchants who were also often family members, was additionally aided by his noble lineage, and was received in Malabar by his uncle and married to his cousin; it is said another uncle had arrived in the second half of the seventeenth century. By the time that Sahl's India-born creole<sup>9</sup> father, Sayyid Fadl, was deported from India back to his 'home country' on

---

<sup>8</sup>Though there may be slippages, we aim to limit 'diasporic' to analytical points and 'diaspora' to description.

<sup>9</sup>My usage of 'creole' here follows Engseng Ho's to mean simply: 'Hadramis born in the diaspora to foreign mothers.' Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, xxiv. He beautifully explores the significance of creolization or hybridization to the story of the Hadhrami diaspora over several centuries; hence, this concept will not be examined in any detail here. Another book-length

suspicions of inciting rebellions in 1852, he carried a pass issued by his de-porter, the East India Company Magistrate of Malabar HV Conolly.<sup>10</sup>

Such a historical irony, as we might consider it in the age of ‘fortress’ Europe and walled-off borders, was also never lost on Fadl or his children, though only two were born before the exile. They nonetheless responded differently to the changing world order in which hybridity, fluidity, and diaspora came to be regarded as dangerous (non)locations that required territorialization and disciplining. An invitation, more precisely the ‘summons,’<sup>11</sup> to recognize oneself in the terms of sovereignty elaborated by another tradition and to submit to its mode of government remained, to say the least, radically peculiar in most of the mid-nineteenth century Indian Ocean world. Hence, before moving on to the efforts of Fadl’s progeny to make their way in a world of rapidly shifting geopolitical realities, let me sketch very briefly the career of Sayyid Fadl in a transregional space where and when the window still seemed relatively open for autonomous actions.

Fadl was sent off with official recognition of sorts by agents of what Philip Stern has called ‘the Company-State,’ precisely because his standing among the local Malabari Mappila Muslim community was that of an unusual kind of ‘lord’ [*sayyid*] who represented a different and opposing tradition of sovereignty, but one that could not be simply defeated on the battlefield. Even as his life would forever after be enmeshed in the legal, economic, political and security concerns of the British Empire, this relationship did not determine the terms of his own life.<sup>12</sup> Branded the ‘Moplah Outlaw’<sup>13</sup> in the decades to come, his life was certainly changed by encounters with the expanding and

---

study on the subject is the excellent: Sumit Mandal, *Becoming Arab: Creole histories and modern identity in the Malay World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> The EIC claimed that the uprisings and ‘outrages’—attacks against Hindu landlords—had stopped with Sayyid Alawi’s death and Fadl’s departure for hajj and study in Mecca, but resumed upon his return in 1849. These little revolts are covered extensively in the historiography usually in a nationalist narrative arc that culminates in the massive Malabar Rebellion of 1921 and India’s freedom struggle. For the role of the Alawis, see: Stephen F. Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Mappilas of Malabar, 1498-1922* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 127-37, who argues that Fadl represented a vector of transregional Islamic revival and actively encouraged rebellion or jihad. For a more nuanced account of the Alawi’s anti-colonial leadership role that traces changing religious, economic, and political factors from the EIC’s seizure of Malabar until Fadl’s deportation, see: K.K. Muhammad Abdul Sathar, *Mappila Leader in Exile: A political biography of Syed Fazl Tangal* (Calicut: Other Books, 2012), 65-104. Also see: Jacob, *For God or Empire*, Ch. 2.

<sup>11</sup> In Sayyid Alawi’s case, he entered the colonial record as a fanatic who incited rebellion and refused the jurisdiction of English magistrates, who begrudgingly, and precisely because of his capacity for autonomous action, afforded him a level of respect. He successfully disobeyed summonses to appear.

<sup>12</sup> Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate sovereignty and the early modern foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Fadl’s ‘outlaw’ label was tied to his suspected involvement in pre- and post-exile disturbances. His expulsion on suspicion of instigating the outrages was followed by collective punishments that included the closure of Sayyid Alawi’s shrine, which was deemed a fount of rebellion. In response, according to the EIC, the Mappilas assassinated Magistrate Connolly in 1855. That Fadl may have had a role in that attack and in riots in the Hijaz in 1855 and 1858 were regarded as part of a broader plan to foment rebellion against the British imperial state as it expanded its writ around the Indian Ocean.

evolving terms of imperial sovereignty—both of the British and the Ottoman, as he would spend his last twenty-five years or so in Istanbul. He would experience first-hand the implications of a reformed, governmentalized state that between London and Istanbul, Jeddah and Bombay erected a myriad of hurdles for what I am calling autonomous action. Those hurdles in his case were specifically undergirded by a reconceptualization of the relationships among and between truth and history, religion and politics, subject and sovereign, diaspora and state, and they were in some ways bound to become insurmountable because they gradually recast the horizons of future time linking it to a bounded space that was also a place, a territory with specific borders.<sup>14</sup> Or, put more concretely, ‘The new, independent nation-states broke the diasporas straddling them into two: citizens and aliens.’<sup>15</sup>

It has of course been argued extensively that the perceived loss of a prior world in which dialectics of freedom and bondage operated differently gave rise to romanticism, transcendentalism, and even Marxism. In an Islamic context, neo-Sufism, Wahhabism, and Salafism have been given as the parallel development. My argument here departs from this well-trodden terrain, in that it seeks to chart a course away from narratives of the transformation of sovereignty and the appearance of a new form of agency—whether in reaction to or as a product of the political-economic changes sweeping the globe in the long-nineteenth century. In this way, diaspora is the focus, and reconceived as a space of autonomous action, the diasporic becomes a critical category more than a descriptive or purely analytical one. Elsewhere I have mapped in greater detail the nineteenth-century recoding of sovereignty as a new kind of relationship to territory and populations viewed through the lens of Sayyid Fadl’s ineluctably futile negotiations of the limits to autonomous action.<sup>16</sup>

Fadl encountered these limits over and over again: first, as he was forced to engage the Company-State and accept its terms of departure from Malabar and then as he evaded British surveillance in the Hijaz and the Hadhramawt for the next two decades and made unsuccessful efforts to return to India. He was again back on the imperial radar when he responded to the call of Dhofari tribes on the border of present-day Yemen and Oman. He assumed the mantle of amir in an effort to bring peace by extending his *baraka* to the

---

<sup>14</sup> Some argue this latter-day enclosure and grand confinement is the foundational limit of modern politics that make our present dilemmas, such as climate change versus economic growth, irresolvable, unless we are able to radically reconceive how life’s horizons are related to planetary things (non-life). See, for example: Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political power in the age of oil* (New York: Verso, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, 305.

<sup>16</sup> Jacob, *For God or Empire*, Ch. 6 and *passim*.

warring tribes as his ancestors had done before him. Drought and famine followed and his reign proved to be short lived. His future engagements were mainly with the post-Tanzimat Hamidian state as a special ‘guest’ of the sultan; however, towards the end of his life he renewed correspondence with British officialdom

By the mid-1870s the British empire-state like others, aided by the proliferation of interrelated technologies of communication, travel, and war-making, demonstrated that no region was too remote for the projection of imperial power.<sup>17</sup> The British in the Dhofar case backed Muscat’s claim to the region at a time when the Ottomans were renewing and expanding their control in the eastern Arabian Peninsula. Hence, we see a renewed discussion of the Moplah Outlaw’s potential threat to the British Raj, which had come to see ‘the Middle East’—northwestern Indian Ocean littoral—as an extension of India geopolitically and were on the lookout for Ottoman agents.<sup>18</sup> In part these deliberations were the result of Fadl’s not-so-subtle allusions to having the backing of the Ottoman Sultan and of Muslims throughout the Indian Ocean world, who would not look on impassively as his rights were violated. From 1879, Fadl repeatedly included this line about Muslim solidarity.

There appears to be a contradiction in here somewhere, as his life does not seem to be his to control. This I have shown elsewhere is not a contradiction of argument but was a partial reflection of Fadl’s historical dilemma—from the moment he diverged from the strand of Alawi tradition modeled for him by his father of assiduously avoiding the holders of temporal power.<sup>19</sup> Arguably, a mere five years before ‘the Mutiny’ that changed the world, Fadl did not have the same luxury of non-cooperation, as resistance or submission ineluctably became the only two options.<sup>20</sup> He may have regarded ‘voluntary’ and

---

<sup>17</sup> That expanding the capacity—private and public—for war-making was primary in establishing a global hierarchy of empire-states by 1815, with the British on top economically and militarily, see: Priya Satia, *Empire of Guns: The violent making of the industrial revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> The notion of British India as extending well beyond the Indian subcontinent is explored in interesting ways by James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, rulers, and the British in the nineteenth-century Gulf* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); M.C. Low, “Empire and the Hajj: Pilgrims, plagues, and Pan-Islam under British surveillance, 1865–1908,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40 (2008), 269–90; John M. Willis, “Making Yemen Indian: Rewriting the boundaries of Imperial Arabia,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41 (2009), 23–38.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob, *For God or Empire*, Ch. 3. I also suggest that ‘agency’ is not the appropriate lens through which to view the Alawis before the late nineteenth century, since as an analytical category it proves inadequate for addressing life that existed on multiple planes at once. In this paper, I deploy ‘autonomous action’ as a heuristic exercise to clarify what I see now was left somewhat allusive in the book.

<sup>20</sup> There are many works on the political and military reorganizations that ensued from the Mutiny; however, few pursue its intellectual ramifications as Faisal Devji does in: Faisal Devji, “The mutiny to come,” *New Literary History*, 40 (2009), 411–30. It was a modern war, in his account, that reconstituted sovereignty along traditional lines of royal households, with the Mughal replaced by the Hanoverian. In a reverse of the common sense, Devji argues it was the rebellion that thus made the British Empire and unmade or remade the modern moment as tradition. This reading complements Ho’s emphasis on

temporary self-exile as mitigating the negative taint of submitting to British authority in Malabar.

When Fadl's careers as outlaw, rebel, prince, and Ottoman agent are juxtaposed to his Sufi-sayyid genealogy and his late textual production, contradictions are all that seem to emerge. Moreover, locating his life in relation to the changing terms of sovereignty in the Indian Ocean world and beyond unlocks an even deeper contradiction, one that in the nineteenth century confronted all life across the global expanse.<sup>21</sup> It is here in his Sufi texts that I deciphered a life-in-tradition, which I called unity of life (playing on the Sufi concept of *wahdat al-wujud* attributed to Ibn Arabi), as a recapitulation and defense of God's sovereignty in a world quickly being overtaken by demystified and disenchanting powers.<sup>22</sup>

Accordingly, the bio-politicization of life, which some argue reflects the modernity of a sovereignty vested in states (more than the contemporary categorizations of it as autocratic, aristocratic, or democratic), might be rendered powerless.<sup>23</sup> For example, when a Sufi seeking 'supernatural ecstasy' was 'besides himself,' as one colonial official described the 'trance' state often entered by Sayyid Alawi, a potential for 'imperium in imperio' arises.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps more interestingly from the perspective of a hybridized Islamic and Christian political-theology that informed state formation and modernization in many places, even the desirable and necessary constraints of the law (*shar'ia*) were rendered inoperative in this space of freedom that was also the anti-historical space of recursive returns to God. A radical reading of this quest for unity of life found in the moment of being besides oneself and predicated on God's sovereignty might not be mistaken to conclude that all faces of sovereignty ceased to matter as they were erased along with the time-space of human history.

---

mobility as the key to assembling the disparate diasporic peoples of the British Isles into an 'imperial people.' Ho, "Empire through diasporic eyes," 215.

<sup>21</sup> A juxtaposition of Fadl's biography with other rebels and outlaws in the nineteenth century would also be quite generative. Elsewhere I have queried how memory and visitation rituals surrounding Fadl and his father in India might compare to those of the 'notorious' outlaws William H. Bonney (Billy the Kid) and Jesse James in the USA. In Canada, the case of the Métis rebel Louis Reil would merit comparison. Such work might well demonstrate that the contradictions of these lives were products of a global transformation of sovereignty felt across the Indian Ocean World and North America alike. I thank my colleague Gavin Taylor for a primer on Reil and linking him to Fadl.

<sup>22</sup> Jacob, *For God or Empire*, Ch. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An introduction*, trans. Richard Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990). Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* series builds on Foucault's bio-politics to interrogate the ways in which sovereignty's extremes (states of exception, camps) have become increasingly normalized. See: G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Jacob, *For God or Empire*, 43-5.

In the cosmology of Sayyid Alawi and Sayyid Fadl, the axes of identity and difference were multidimensional—with the human dimension having its *zahir* (outer) and its *batin* (inner)—and impossible to reduce to historical terms of sovereignty. They belonged to an Indian Ocean diaspora of sayyid-Sufis (al-Alawiyya) for whom the play of heterogeneous times and places and the simultaneous erasure of times and places constituted a distinct and yet not entirely unique way. The interlocutions of Ibn Arabi and other Sufi masters were unmistakable. However, the alterity of an Indian Ocean life and the creolization of Alawi culture, which had their historical specificities, could not not have inflected the development of an Alawi and broader Hadhrami Arab economy of difference.<sup>25</sup> In this regard, they might be said to be a ‘diaspora for others.’<sup>26</sup> Or, in Engseng Ho’s characterization:

Thus, while the British diaspora took the form of an empire, the Hadrami diaspora took the form of a religious mission. In this, the Hadrami diaspora had vastly greater universalist ambitions than did the British. It brought together not just peoples from the homeland, but peoples in destinations throughout the Indian Ocean as well.<sup>27</sup>

The real world of real people and encounters is what we turn to now but with the cautionary note that this ‘real’ had until the late nineteenth century a robust relationship with the ‘unreal’ or the unseen that could exert powerful, sometimes oppositional force (‘counter-conduct’ in Foucauldian terms) in the living of life and the ordering of people through autonomous action.<sup>28</sup> The Alawi diaspora-for-others was means and end, power and powerlessness, a site of being and becoming, at once material and immaterial—paradoxes, I argue, that invite us to rethink relations of truth to history and in turn the definition of diaspora.

---

<sup>25</sup> Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, 152-73.

<sup>26</sup> Iain Walker and Martin Slama, “The Indian Ocean as a diasporic space,” *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, 4, 2 (2021), 76-90.

<sup>27</sup> Ho, “Empire through diasporic eyes,” 215. In a generative comparison between a ‘Jewish model’ of diaspora, in which a homogeneous group disperses and remains ‘particularistic’ in its ‘sociality,’ and the ‘British model,’ in which heterogeneous peoples disperse and are reconstituted in that dispersal across global space as a composite (*the* British as diaspora and empire), the originally homogeneous Hadhramis emerge as a hybrid diaspora. Ho’s emphasis on the ‘civil and political’ aspects of this diaspora gathering a multitude of differences under the sign of ‘religion’ is balanced here with the spiritual.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault calls the indeterminable potentiality for a resistant mode of life (related to the government of souls) to emerge *within* a tradition, counter-conduct. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), esp., 207.

## OF PASSPORTS AND AGENCY: A WORLD OF US AND THEM

By the end of the long-nineteenth century, the modern transformation of the world—whose beginnings historians variously locate in the rise of globe-spanning seaborne empires, the commodification of agriculture, slavery and abolition, political, technological, and industrial revolutions—was in some ways complete, unfolding between global war in the mid-eighteenth century, 1756-63, and ending with the world war of 1914-1918. Surely this transformation, along whatever lines we map it, reduced heterogeneous formations of power that existed in previously anomalous spaces<sup>29</sup> to clear Kantian universalist binaries of despotic and republican modes of government. Now it was merely a matter of universalizing the civilization that reached the enlightened position of rationalized rights first, through colonization and other missionary works. The presupposition and deployment of this binary by imperial agents in order to better grasp the world, figuratively and literally, as Edward Said has taught us, enshrined Eurocentric terms of knowing the other.<sup>30</sup>

More recently, revisionist historians have sought to go beyond postcolonial critique's negative stance, which was of course only possible *because* the binary of East and West was internalized by modernizing reformers everywhere, just as it was being further reinforced with the professionalization of the discipline of history towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> In other words, grand critiques such as Said's *Orientalism* was contingent on poor grand narratives.<sup>32</sup> A genuinely global appreciation of the modern transformation challenges the sacrosanct positions of Eurocentrists and postcolonial critics alike. It offers a way to talk about an always-already connected global modernity that jettisons diffusion and authenticity at the heart of sovereignty claims made by empires and nations. Eschewing classic tropes of genius and cultural or racial uniqueness underwriting the origin myths of modernity and locating its paradigmatic forms—

---

<sup>29</sup> On the legal geographies involved in this *longue-durée* change, see: Lauren Benton, *Search for Sovereignty: Law and geography in European empires, 1400-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

<sup>31</sup> On the pernicious role of historians and other experts in sustaining empire through secrecy and the promotion of ignorance among the public, see: Priya Satia, "Inter-war agnotology: Empire, democracy and the production of ignorance," in *Brave New World: Imperial and democratic nation-building in Britain between the wars*, eds. Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas, (London: University of London Press, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Ho has argued, "The weakness of post-colonial theory derives from its roots in post-independence revisions of colonial history" (Ho, "Empire through diasporic eyes," 239). His emphasis on what we might regard as an intermediate phase of history writing, between the imperial and the global, was crucial for socially reproducing the idea of the nation-state as the nearly unquestionable political unit of the international.

liberalism, capitalism, rationalism, etc.—in always-already hybrid contexts, the new global history purports to present genuinely post-Orientalist accounts of the human past.<sup>33</sup>

Upon the completion of a major project on sovereignty in trans-regional perspective, I've become less optimistic about what certain conceptions of the global offer for critically reconceptualizing modernity, power, and knowledge.<sup>34</sup> Admirable are the revisionist efforts to *give* agency to Indian soldiers who equally contributed to the making of the British Empire around the Indian Ocean, or convicts and bonded labor who constituted the age of revolutions, or black and brown sailors who made exploration and expansion possible, or colonized reformers who adapted liberal ideas to their own ends.<sup>35</sup> However, what attempts to revise the narrative of global history miss out is the very conceptual and political transformation of agency that made subjects of all, evacuating the now-territorialized field of autonomous action. The Foucauldian genealogy of counter-conduct does not easily map onto the liberal histories of agency and resistance drawn within the horizon of the empire- or nation-state. Rather than being antinomies, however, their intimate relationship over and in time may become more vividly apparent within a genuinely *global* history than in the European order that preoccupied Foucault and whose terms remain so central in the work of global historians.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, rethinking modern history from the perspective of diasporas, or rhizomatic as opposed to arboreal formations in Deleuzian terms, might unearth a limit to the claims of sovereignty over life and enable the excavation of 'lines of flight' that remained unassimilable.<sup>37</sup>

## THE REAL/AL-ZAHIR: RETURNS AND REVISIONS

---

<sup>33</sup> Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> Jacob, *For God or Empire*.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean arena, 1860–1920* (Los Angeles: University of California press, 2007); Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815-53* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2000); Clare Anderson (ed.), *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Niklas Frykman, Clare Anderson, Lex Heerma van Voss, and Marcus Rediker (eds.), "Mutiny and maritime radicalism in the age of revolution: A global survey," Special Issue of *International Review of Social History*, 58 (2013); Chris Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (London: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> In many ways this critique merely echoes that from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's now classic essay: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-311.

<sup>37</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 6-7; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Ho shows how the diasporic space was always, even from within the Alawi tradition itself, open to a hierarchical and teleological (re-)ordering of 'rhizomic' images of relations of time and truth, of genealogy and history, for the sake of fulfilling Islam's mission (Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, 144-7).

Fadl's heirs' attempts to return to India, to Mampuram, ended in failure. As long as the British Empire existed, they were considered threats to the state. The British began receiving petitions and visa applications from Fadl and from his family as early as 1893 and continued to deal with their requests to be allowed to return to Dhofar or to India until at least 1925. The treatment of return in British sources gives a view into the changing international and imperial context in the years leading up to the First World War and after. Since several of the Alawi letters and petitions were included for comment and reply by the relevant offices, a window is also opened onto the diasporic experience within the changing geopolitical context. Though only a small part of that experience will be considered here, the material reality of archiving it is noteworthy. The larger folder containing the files has a certain time-travelling property. It was indexed within the 'Political and Secret' series for 1912; however, one is propelled into the future as the story of the family is taken up to 1925.

This order was possibly the result of an initial misfiling of a petition received in 1912 from Sayyid Sahl, with whom our story began—the eldest son of Fadl who had left India with him in 1852. It seemed to have been lost in a bureaucratic shuffle, until it was addressed internally during what may have been a pruning of files and the arrival of new petitions from other family members at the end of 1924:

This paper appears to belong to your Dept. [Economic and Overseas] rather than to P. & J. [Political and Judicial] or Political, dealing as it does with the question of refusing visas for India to two Arabs who, it is feared, would 'disturb the peace' in Malabar if allowed to go there. They had already received visas for India from the responsible authority at Port Said and at Baghdad. Would you be prepared to take the paper for the required action? If so, a copy of it might be sent to this Dept for attachment to the past records of the *outlaw*, Saiyid Fazil, and his family. (emphasis added)

The above was from a draft letter scribbled on a Minute Paper signed by JP Gibson in February 1925—a few years after the massive Malabar Rebellion—and enclosed within a cover of the Political and Secret Department dating from 1912. The papers and attachments in this file number sixty pages and were absorbed by the Economic and Overseas Department.<sup>38</sup> A list of telegrams and meetings pertaining to previous attempts

---

<sup>38</sup> British Library, UK India Office Records (hereafter: IOR) L/PS/11/6, 648: 1912 Secret.

to return and the decision to refuse entry revealed that members of Fadl's family had made efforts in that direction in 1893, 1905, 1907, 1912, and 1919.<sup>39</sup>

The 'secret' that names this series of archived records about the 'political' also divulges something about the futures-past of imperial sovereignty as seen from the pre-war perspective and reorganized in the post-war period. The legal and political status of border-hopping figures like the Alawis underwent dramatic reconfiguration in the interwar period. Moreover, in the Middle East, the defeat of the Ottoman Empire and the direct administration of some of its territories by the British under an international mandatory system gave rise almost overnight to new juridical and political problems—pertaining to the present as much as to the future and the past—that could not be aired publicly nor the 'debris' filed away neatly under the pre-war categories. The archive of the empire-state in the age of the international post-1919 belies its own disruption and foreshadows its own eventual dissolution.<sup>40</sup> Luckily for us this archival ambivalence—between imposing order and being overwhelmed by disorder—produces fissures through which we can regard (and read against the grain of) imperial desires *and* anxieties.<sup>41</sup>

After failed attempts to return to Dhofar and to India in the 1880s while flying under the radar and ostensibly without Ottoman backing, Fadl and Sahl finally began to petition the British directly in the 1890s, going all the way up to the Prime Minister and the Queen. Sahl's trip to Egypt in January 1895 to seek the intercession of Lord Cromer in the family's bid to regain Dhofar should be understood in this broader context of the family's shifting strategy. The Ottoman Empire did not appear the last hope of Muslims any longer.

In Cairo, Sahl met with Milhem Shakour Bey who had the ear of officials at the British Residency, serving under Kitchener as Arabic Secretary of the Sirdar (during preparations for the campaign to retake Sudan from the Mahdists). That in the closing years of the nineteenth century the Indo-Arab Muslim Sahl Pasha and the Lebanese-Egyptian Christian Shakour Bey (whose brother Mansour Shakour had been a Christian missionary in Egypt before his early death in 1873) should have a conversation in Cairo about Alawi family history, Malabar, and Dhofar in Ottoman but British occupied Egypt

---

<sup>39</sup> These dates of course only reference attempts that sought British permission.

<sup>40</sup> 'Archiving,' Achille Mbembe argues while drawing connections between death/debris and archive/document in the production of a shared temporality, 'is a kind of internment, laying something in a coffin, if not to rest, then at least to consign elements of that life which could not be destroyed purely and simply.' Achille Mbembe, "The power of the archive and its limits," trans. Judith Inggs, in Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, et al, eds. *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 22.

<sup>41</sup> On what she terms the 'force of writing and the feel of documents' in imperial archives, see: Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

was testament to the still unsettled terms of sovereignty during the height of imperial hubris. Shakour seemed rather taken by Sahl and his family's narrative.<sup>42</sup> Cromer was advised by the Foreign Office on the recommendation of the India Office not to meet with Sahl, who was staying at the Koubbeh Palace as a guest of Khedive Abbas II.<sup>43</sup> Hence, in a reversal of roles since the early nineteenth century, it was the British refusal of recognition and the sovereign power therein that decided the fate of the descendants of Sayyid Alawi. Sahl left Egypt in the summer unsuccessful in his mission and returned to Istanbul with the Khedive's entourage.<sup>44</sup>

The anxieties of the Raj and the India Office regarding Fadl and his sons' efforts to return to Dhofar heightened in March 1896 as the same tribe that had forced Fadl out in 1879 rebelled against the governor sent by Muscat, raised the Turkish flag, and called for Ottoman protection.<sup>45</sup> An earlier report indicated that the revolt was popular and that Fadl's emissary was there with his flag. The Omani Sultan pleaded with the British to 'warn the Kathiris [prominent tribe in the area] that they will not be allowed to establish Said Fadhl at Dhofar as their ruler.'<sup>46</sup> India wanted Istanbul warned that the 'Moplah Outlaw will not be permitted to go there and that no intrigues on his part or foreign interference will be tolerated.'<sup>47</sup> Ambassador Currie deemed it undiplomatic to convey this message when his sources indicated that Istanbul had no designs on Dhofar and that Sayyid Fadl seemed to be staying put.<sup>48</sup> A rift that would widen on Middle Eastern affairs between London and Bombay-Delhi might be regarded in this exchange of telegrams.<sup>49</sup> For our purposes, it is sufficient to note how the mere prospect of return by Sayyid Fadl, the Moplah Outlaw, caused significant perturbation at the highest levels of imperial governments in London, Bombay-Delhi-Madras, Istanbul, and Muscat.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Report of Shakour Bey, 5 Mar. 1895, enc. in Cromer to Earl of Kimberley, 5 Mar. 1895, FO 78-4790, The National Archives of the UK. Cromer noted Shakour's position at the time was Chief Interpreter of the Intelligence Department of the Egyptian Army. A blog by Shakour's Irish great granddaughter has some information about the family: <http://anna-green.blogspot.in/2006/05/milhem-shakoor-bey.html>. Samir Raafat who writes about Cairo's elite life mentions another Shakour involved in the suburban building projects of the early twentieth century: <http://www.egy.com/landmarks/05-01-15.php> [Accessed: 30 Aug. 2017].

<sup>43</sup> Cromer to Earl of Kimberley, 3 Mar. 1895 and Draft of Earl of Kimberley to Cromer, 5 Apr. 1895, FO 78-4790.

<sup>44</sup> Cromer to Marquess of Salisbury, 21 Mar. 1896, FO 78-4790. On the Cairo-Istanbul circuit that was renewed and remade from the 1870s, see the recent book: Adam Mestyan, *Arab Patriotism: The ideology and culture of power in late Ottoman Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Telegram draft of FO to Currie, 27 Mar. 1896, FO 78-4790: Relays information from Political Resident at Bushire.

<sup>46</sup> India Office to Under Secretary of State FO, 3 Mar. 1896, FO 78-4790.

<sup>47</sup> FO to Currie, 27 Mar. 1896.

<sup>48</sup> Currie to FO, 29 Mar. 1896, FO 78-4790.

<sup>49</sup> Ultimately the Marquess of Salisbury, who was PM and Foreign Secretary, concurred with his ambassador at Istanbul and it was decided to postpone any explicit warnings to the Turkish Government. Draft of FO to IO, 31 Mar. 1896, FO 78-4790.

<sup>50</sup> For a broader view of the Ottoman-British rivalry, see: Michael C. Low, *Imperial Mecca: Ottoman Arabia and the Indian Ocean Hajj* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Thomas Kuehn, *Empire, Islam, and Politics of*

Sayyid Sahl's 1905 petition directly addressed to King Edward must be regarded against a geopolitical backdrop that saw a more active Hamidian pan-Islamism and a newly energized, intersecting pan-Asianism. As several historians have shown, the anti-imperialism connecting Muslims across Asia was given a hopeful boost after Japan's victory in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War. Selçuk Esenbel suggests 'the victory of the downtrodden Eastern peoples over the invincible West' inspired activists across the Indian Ocean world, from Aceh to Istanbul.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, Cemil Aydin has argued that what was previously a distant dream of a non-Eurocentric international order became after 1904 (no matter how much Japanese victory depended on British support) a more tangible 'alternative vision of world order' that constituted until 1914 'an era of Asia's self-conscious revival and awakening.'<sup>52</sup> These developments could explain why the King himself reviewed the 'prayer' to allow the Alawis to 'visit all British territory and particularly the Malabar District,' even though he decided in the end that he could not 'issue any commands' given the family's history was discussed in Council and the Secretary of State recommended denying the request.

Sahl continued his petitioning, and in 1912 he addressed the Secretary of State. Again, London agreed with Madras and Delhi that 'in the interests of the public peace none of the descendants of the Mappilla outlaw should be permitted to visit [M]alabar.' If anything, Sahl was persistent, he tried his luck with the next British sovereign, King George, in March 1919.<sup>53</sup> The timing of this petition is remarkable, in the midst of failing peace negotiations at Versailles when the Council of Ten was reduced to the Council of Four soon to become only three, Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, and Woodrow Wilson, deciding the future of the world.<sup>54</sup>

In 1919, London decided that petitions from Sayyid Fadl's family for the right of return could be refused without consulting India since it had made its position clear in

---

*Difference: Ottoman rule in Yemen, 1849-1919* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). And for a more detailed view of the Hadhrami political context, in which Fadl was regarded a 'conduit' between Arab tribes and Istanbul, see: Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in Hadhramaut*, 66-79 (for the Kathiri role, see: 137-48).

<sup>51</sup> Selçuk Esenbel, "Japan's global claim to Asia and the world of Islam: Transnational nationalism and world power, 1900-1945," *American Historical Review*, 109, 4 (2004), 1140.

<sup>52</sup> Cemil Aydin, "Beyond civilization: Pan-Islamism, Pan-Asianism and the revolt against the West," *Journal of Modern European History*, 4, 2 (2006), 215. Also see: Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of world order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>53</sup> Confidential Chief Sec'y Govt. of Madras to Sec'y Govt. of India, Home Dept., 3 Sep. 1925, IOR/L/PS/11/6, p.648: 1912 Secret.

<sup>54</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 58-9. Wilson had just met with King George in London in December.

previous years.<sup>55</sup> This move reflected a larger process by which a distinct Middle East policy was carved out in relation to new imperial and international realities on the ground after the war. The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the League of Nations and the Mandates system, in which Britain assumed a leading Middle Eastern role, realigned the significance of the Gulf-India relations to reflect the London-Cairo-Jerusalem-Aden-Baghdad axis.<sup>56</sup>

It may be noted that while the memorialist (Sayyid Sahl) speaks of Zaffar as being in Yemen, Sir R. Ritchie [an old India hand and Undersecretary of State for India who had written a minute on the Alawis' desire to return in 1905] refers to it as being under the control of Muscat. As a matter of fact, it seems to be in Hadramaut at the extreme limit of the sphere of influence of Muscat.<sup>57</sup>

The interests of the Indian Raj in the Middle East as regarded from Bombay, Calcutta, then Delhi were no longer prioritized in the same way by the imperial center, which from 1919 was to some extent legally obliged—and politically committed by being a driving force behind the new international order—to treat developments in Arabia as politically linked to its Mandates in Palestine/Transjordan and Iraq.<sup>58</sup> The politics of the Great Game in the pre-WWI period had already necessitated a shift in regarding relations with Arabs, particularly the ‘notables,’ from a more global perspective than India was capable of. This was the analysis of Gertrude Bell, one of the architects of modern Iraq, from the ground in 1916: ‘There is a great deal of friction between India and Egypt over the Arab Question which entails a serious want of cooperation between the Intel. Deps. of the two countries. ... It’s absurd of course; we are all well-meaning people trying to do our best, but they

---

<sup>55</sup> Cases of Hadhrami sayyids and non-sayyids across the Indian Ocean world petitioning the British are numerous. For examples from the legal domain, see: Michael Gilson, “Translating colonial fortunes: Dilemmas of inheritance in Muslim and English laws across a nineteenth-century diaspora,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 31, 2 (2011), 355-71; Michael Gilson, “Possessed of documents: Hybrid laws and translated texts in the Hadhrami diaspora,” in *Ethnographies of Islam: Ritual performances and everyday practices*, eds. Baudouin Dupret, Thomas Pierret, Paulo G. Pinto, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 181-92.

<sup>56</sup> Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the cultural foundations of Britain's covert empire in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> Judicial and Political Sec’y Minute November 1919, IOR/L/PS/11/6, p.648: 1912 Secret.

<sup>58</sup> Each of these regional nation-states were to be prepared to lead independent political futures, and as such old transregional or new transnational movements had to be checked, even at times in the case of Zionism. For another approach to the unique triumph of Zionism as the product of global, interconnected developments, see: Frederik Meiton, *Electrical Palestine: Capital and technology from empire to nation* (California 2019).

don't realize what Arabia looks like from the West and I daresay we don't realize how it looks from the East.'<sup>59</sup>

The Ottoman drift away from the British camp, which could be dated to the latter's occupation of Cyprus after the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), and the subsequent intensification of competition for Arab and Muslim support (involving old and emerging powers such as the Italians, Germans, and Japanese) is one way to explain the British Government entertaining petitions from the Alawis at the highest levels. So when the author of a Political Department Minute wrote in 1911, 'And although *it appears necessary* to transmit the present application for their [Madras'] report, it is hardly to be expected that their view will have changed [since 1905],' the need for an Indian opinion was being gauged in terms of the contemporary politics of alliances in 'the Arab Subcontinent.'<sup>60</sup>

Those politics of alliances assumed a new territorial imperative in the aftermath of the War, which did not bode well for diasporic futures in the Indian Ocean world or the new post-Ottoman Middle East. The trajectory of Sahl's arguments in support of his right of return to India poignantly reveal how the fortunes of even a notable family of sayyids shifted, forcing a revision of their sense of historical purpose and the purpose of history. With the forced abdication of Sultan Abdulhamid in 1909, Sahl decided it was time to move the family from Istanbul. Once settled in Latakia on the Syrian coast, he wrote a petition to the Secretary of State in 1911 after consultations with the long-serving British Vice Consul there, N. Vitale, who delivered it to the Consul General in Beirut, H.A. Cumberbatch, who forwarded it on to the Ambassador in Istanbul, Gerard A. Lowther, who relayed it to London.<sup>61</sup>

Cumberbatch's cover added something peculiar based on Vitale's intelligence. Apparently, the 'Muslims' in Latakia received Sahl quite warmly, at first, because he was a sayyid; however, some were persuaded that he was not a genuine descendant of the Prophet's family, and their attitude subsequently changed. No further details were given about this intriguing local politics of recognition and who the relevant parties were in

---

<sup>59</sup> Bell to her father, Sir Hugh Bell, 24 Jan. 1916, Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University: [http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter\\_details.php?letter\\_id=145](http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=145) [Accessed: 31 Jan. 2022]

<sup>60</sup> Political Department, Foreign Office Minute, 8 No.v 1911, IOR/L/PS/11/6, p.648: 1912 Secret (emphasis added). In *For God or Empire*, I opted to translate Sayyid Fadl's geographical image of the Arabian lands as he saw it—a constellation of Arab cities that stretched from Tarim and Mecca to Damascus and Cairo—much more than a mere peninsula.

<sup>61</sup> Cemil Aydin has shown that even during Sulan Abdulhamid's reign, Ottoman pan-Islamic discourse was more about inter-imperial diplomacy than the Caliph's (re)commitment to a global umma or Muslim community. Pan-Islamism constituted a riposte to British claims to sovereignty over the largest number of Muslims in the world. Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A global intellectual history* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 65-98.

authorizing originals and outing copies. Nevertheless, Vitale reported to Cumberbatch that the downward turn in levels of hospitality along with the smallness of the stipend from the Turkish government were Sahl's immediate reasons for wanting to return to India. Similarly, reasons of patronage (Ottoman, British, French) and competition for it among sayyids could have fueled the rumor mills spreading news of the family being impostors.<sup>62</sup>

By the time of his move to Syria, Sahl seems to have developed a keen sense of the nascent international order. He used the context of Great Powers' relations with their subject Muslim populations to advance his claim for compensation and restitution of his legal right of residency in India. Here he also dropped a clue as to the possible origin of the challenge to his status as sayyid. After reproducing the letter rejecting his 1904 petition to the king, which ended with a note of 'sincere friendship,' he wrote:

I demand consequently your consideration of the matter as justice requires, and if the Indian Government will also approve I demand from the Great English Government to allow me a sum of money for my being banished, after a due enquiry into my standing, the revenue of my properties, my influence and prerogative and then to be treated on the same footing as my equals who have been treated by other Powers such as France has treated Ul-Sayd Abdul-Kader, Emir of Algeria when they exiled him from his country after a long war with the said Power. As for me, I have nothing with the exalted Government of England besides the calumnies and intrigues against me. I demand from the Great and just Power of England who rules over millions of Moslems to do justice to the family of their Prophet so as to oblige them.<sup>63</sup>

Competition among sayyid and sharifian families heightened as the Great Game intensified and local alliances were sought in the region by multiple major powers. Of the transregional migrants to Syria, the Algerian family of the world famous resistance leader Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri became relatively wealthy in exile, aided by French subsidies since 1856, and played a significant role as intermediaries among local communities and between them and imperial powers.<sup>64</sup> Even after Abd al-Qadir's death in 1883, the al-

<sup>62</sup> Cumberbatch to Lowther, 18 Oct. 1911, IOR/L/PS/11/6, p.648: 1912 Secret.

<sup>63</sup> Sahl to Secretary of State for India, 1 Oct. 1911, IOR/L/PS/11/6, p.648: 1912 Secret.

<sup>64</sup> See the interesting discussion of Abd al-Qadir's prison writing in: John Chalcraft, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge 2016), 102-11.

Jaza'iris retained their status among the leading Damascene families; the grandson Amir Said, for example, headed a delegation that sought to mediate between rebels and French Mandate officials during the Great Syrian Revolt.<sup>65</sup> In the case of Fadl's descendants, the long period spent in Istanbul obviated the potential for developing a local Arab constituency, which in turn, seemed to diminish their value in the network of notables regionally and alliances internationally.<sup>66</sup>

Appreciation of that deficit perhaps made India seem a more promising home, since it was there that the family had had an independent, historically deep base. And given their brief yet significant political investment in Dhofar in the 1870s, in later petitions Sahl proposed it as another, less attractive option, in case the British were yet again to refuse the family entry to India. Distancing himself more explicitly from his father's anti-British stance and from transregional Islamic movements also seemed necessary after the rejection of the 1912 petition. The diaspora-for-others was entering its twilight and forces of modern sovereignty were reshaping, or disciplining, political discourse and their attendant discourses of identity to fit within more legible, easily regulated state containers.

In 1919, he tried once again to place the family on the radar of the king-emperor, but for good measure he also sent a letter under separate cover to the 'Minister of Justice.'<sup>67</sup> In the letter to George V, Sahl referenced the petition from 1905 to King Edward and how it was rejected because of the intervention of the Government of Madras, information that was relayed to him by the Embassy in Istanbul.<sup>68</sup> He indicated that there was a perfect conspiracy involving Madras and Malabari 'libellers' [sic] who bore 'ill will' towards Fadl's heirs. The Government's unchanging position was based on the misinformation passed on by those who did not want to give up the benefits they accrued from 'our name, good will and the income of our lands.'<sup>69</sup> The first agent for the family who was responsible for managing their assets was Sayyid Hasan b. Ahmad Jufri, who

---

<sup>65</sup> See: M. Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas, 2005), 104-5.

<sup>66</sup> The family of Sharif Husayn of Mecca, popularized in David Lean's epic film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), leveraged their local rootedness and their imperial contacts to become more influential than most after World War I. When the dust settled, they were internationally recognized heads of three kingdoms: the Hijaz, Transjordan, and Iraq.

<sup>67</sup> Minute by J.E. Shuckburgh, Secretary Judicial and Political Department, 12 Apr. 1919, IOR/L/PS/11/6, p.648: 1912 Secret. Shuckburgh suggested that by 'Minister of Justice,' Sahl probably meant the Home Secretary.

<sup>68</sup> Sahl to King George V, enclosed in Gerald Spicer, Foreign Office to Under Secretary of State, India Office, 21 Feb. 1919, *ibid.* This letter and the other enclosed (Sahl to Minister of Justice) were undated translations from the Arabic originals. Interestingly, they were sent from Beirut via the Chief Political Officer attached to the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, likely in late 1918.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

Sahl explained, was dismissed with the help of the British Embassy in Constantinople and replaced with Sayyid Ahmad b. Abd al-Rahman Jufri.<sup>70</sup>

He proceeded to relate the history of the family since its expulsion from India in order to reveal the ‘oppression, unfairness and damages’ they have had to endure as a result. He mentioned a letter Queen Victoria had sent thanking Fadl for the care of her subjects in Dhofar, to which he replied from Constantinople and received another letter from her ‘most graciously ordering our welfare to be forwarded in all ways.’<sup>71</sup> He linked Victoria’s interest in their welfare to Fadl’s inability to return to Dhofar, insinuating that Sultan Abdulhamid was suspicious of their ties and ‘ordered that my father should not leave Constantinople.’<sup>72</sup> He appealed to the sense of ‘right and justice’ of the king to help him resolve his case. Then an unusually sharp distinction, which is elaborated further in the next petition, was drawn between him and his father:

Should the reasons for which my father was prohibited from returning to [Mal]abar have been *political*, I was then only ten years old and had nothing to do with them. But as the Madras Government did not inform my father of the reasons for which he was kept away I claim my rights at the courts of justice to all damages, the income of my lands during sixty five years absence, as well as any value to which our name and good will may have been put in our absence.<sup>73</sup> (emphasis added)

Sahl was at once acknowledging the local legacy of the Alawis in Malabar and disavowing it for its anti-imperialist implications as perceived by the colonial government. The latter required severing the “political” Fadl from other Alawis, who were more pliable and docile.

When Sahl received the same reply he had received in previous years, he wrote again to the King towards the end of 1919.<sup>74</sup> In this correspondence he essentially disavowed his father as stubbornly anti-British and as a result foolish in his actions. In one fell swoop, Sahl dismantled his family’s history of principled rejection of British

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. The English translations rendered the name as ‘Jufri.’

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Sayyid Sahl to King George (English Trans.), 23 Dhu al-Hijja 1337 (20 Sep. 1919), enclosed in Foreign Office to India Office, 11 Nov. 1919, IOR/L/PS/11/6, p.648: 1912 Secret.

imperialism as simply the product of one man's obstinacy. Examples were given to demonstrate that Sahl would have made different choices.

He first related how Fadl refused to accept a stipend of one thousand pounds a month from the British Government. He intimated that it was offered in 1854 as a just compensation through the High Commissioner in Jeddah after he revealed that Fadl and his family would not be allowed to return to India. Then, after the Dhofar episode, Sahl claimed he had developed 'intimate relations of friendship' with Lord Dufferin, the British Ambassador in Istanbul. The latter was apparently prepared to allow the family to return to Dhofar as agents of the British and presented terms which Sahl deemed 'advantageous,' but Fadl, 'who was then the favorite of Abdul Hamid,' rejected:

Being the eldest of my brothers, I venture, for myself and on behalf of my brothers, to ask to be granted either of the favours which our late father refused. During his life we had to give unquestioning obedience to our father's decisions, whether we liked it or not, but now that he is dead and that we are responsible for ourselves, we beg to accept the offer which our father then rejected./ We do not know the grounds which actuated Great Britain to prohibit us from going back to India. If this prohibition was meant for our late father (and it cannot be otherwise, because we were all young then), this prohibition should cease by the very fact that the man aimed at died.<sup>75</sup>

Sahl's disavowal of Fadl and embrace of the British, at least rhetorically, suggests that a desperation had set in after the War, surely due in part to the end of Ottoman stipends to the family.<sup>76</sup> Charting a future course for them in a post-Ottoman world thus entailed severing ties to that past and reconstructing their history as individual Alawis un-beholden to the ways of prior generations.

Feeling that he had accomplished that objective, Sahl made three demands of the king:

- 1) To be compensated for the loss which we have sustained through our being expelled from India. (I leave this to the wisdom of H.M. The King.)

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Though I did not find intense emotions of spiritual or cultural loss surrounding the end of the Ottoman caliphate and only intense fiscal concerns, they may have nonetheless been there. See: Mona Hassan, *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A transregional history* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 142-54.

- 2) To go to India in order to remove the reasons (of which we are unaware) of our expulsion.
- 3) If it is not possible to go to India I should be glad to come to terms and go to Zaffar.

In return, he offered to pledge his ‘loyalty’ to the British Government in India, and in Dhofar, to ‘strive for the progress of the country and for the enhancement of the prestige of the King.’<sup>77</sup>

### **THE UNSEEN/AL-BATIN: END AND BEGINNING**

After Sahl’s death his brothers continued unsuccessfully in the 1920s to try to break through the British surveillance net to reach and to remain in India. The twists and turns of those return efforts will not be followed in this paper; suffice it to say, by the mid-1930s the agency of the Alawis and the Mappila Malabarais, who had taken up their cause as part and parcel of the push for self-determination, seemed to undergo a naturalization within a new political horizon that simultaneously marked a beginning and an end. Elsewhere, I merely referenced the argument made in recent scholarship that this was the time when nationalism triumphed over other possible futures in the political and cultural realms.<sup>78</sup>

Surely, this was the historical development that was most significant to people everywhere, to the extent that their very freedom of movement, sense of self and belonging, individual and collective welfare, were all at stake in the political fortunes of particular nation-states. But after witnessing the power of Sayyid Alawi’s shrine in Mampuram, studying Sayyid Fadl’s Sufi texts, and considering the hagiographic evidence, my historical sensibility was troubled as my sense of historical time was challenged by the non-linear temporalities of an (un)vanquished Other. Clearly, evidence—a small glimpse of which was offered above—of early twentieth-century dilemmas facing diasporic groups aligns with global historians’ narratives of sovereignty’s conceptual journey through a world made global in the sixteenth century to a revolutionary age of reckoning in the eighteenth, and to an imperial consolidation in the nineteenth. All of these moments in the history of sovereignty’s conceptual evolution and practical deployments posit and, in turn, presuppose a particular relationship of subject

<sup>77</sup> Sayyid Sahl to King George, 23 Dhu al-Hijja 1337.

<sup>78</sup> Jacob, *For God or Empire*; Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*; Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants*; Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The furies of nature and the fortunes of migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

and state, of truth and history, that became globalized with expanding seaborne empire-states and barely contested universals by the interwar period.

However, my discomfort with the new global history rests here in the form of the subject that is presupposed when the history of interconnection reaches its most intense moment and cannot not become the history of states, internationalized in institutional form in 1919, if not earlier; whereas, other narratives, such as of diaspora, become declensions.<sup>79</sup> As argued in the opening sections above, though articulated in terms of care and protection, or good government, in the British case, imperial and later nation-state sovereignty could never fully displace other relationships of care *nor* their political valences. How we understand those other relationships and what became of them in the age of the international order of states (1919-present) tends to be mediated by a subject possessing a form of secular agency, always seeking various forms of freedom in this world, in historical time. That subject was not a fantasy—in the sense of an unreal tale—rather, history shows and typically depends on that hegemonic agentive subject of political life, actual and desired. However, this hegemonic subject of historical narratives of global modernity cannot be the only story.<sup>80</sup>

This is what the evidence scholars have gathered from religious pilgrimages, saints' shrines, devotional texts, online forums and videos, and so on begins to demonstrate. What then to make of Sayyid Sahl's disavowal of his father? Does it mark an end of the space—diasporic—that enabled another tradition, focused on a non-biopolitical conception of life? The twentieth-century's organizing rubrics at the national and international levels—constitutionally anti-diasporic—compel or hail its own subjects into being over and against problematic subjects that in time will be figured as outside the law (fanatic, extremist, terrorist, and so on) or at the margins of law (refugee, stateless, migrant, and so on). Is there no space in between the secular modern norm and its deviation? Or is history simply incapable of retrieving a form of life that was decidedly anti-historical, inhabiting and inhabited by what Walter Benjamin called a 'kernel of time?' The historian in me is challenged by, to use shorthand, the realm of the *batin* and its effects in the *zahir* found in the present in places like Mampuram that in some ways only exist because not only a

---

<sup>79</sup> The declension narrative can subtend powerful anti-diasporic and 'anti-local' practices, the most notable perhaps being that of Zionism and the Israeli state. See the analysis of Theodor Herzl, one of the founding fathers of modern political Zionism, in: Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The rise of heterosexuality and the invention of the Jewish man* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>80</sup> The late brilliant anthropologist Saba Mahmood sought to make this sphere of human agency *not* directed at liberal freedoms legible in the present in her book: Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the feminist subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

saintly corpse but an entire diaspora-for-others is buried and memorialized there. Is there in the remains of Alawis a distinctive archive whose end is ‘an instituting imaginary,’ which would make its power not dissimilar from the brick and mortar space of modern archives described by Achille Mbembe?<sup>81</sup>

A distinctive combination of material, messianic, mystical and mythical forms enabled the Alawis to constitute a recognizable thread in the tapestry of the Hadhrami Indian Ocean diaspora during the very same period of sovereignty’s gradual secular reconfiguration through administrative practices of globe straddling empire-states. The *longue-durée* implications of the distinctive, genealogical Alawi matrix for conceiving diaspora and history for the politics of belonging have been considered carefully by Engsang Ho in *The Graves of Tarim*. His broad yet deep ethno-history of the Alawis is also a map of the parallel tracks of sovereignty’s history as it is displaced from divine molds into human-centric terrestrial and territorial containers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is this global transformation that Sahl confronted and that his father had foreseen as the coming confrontation.

However, aligning with Benjamin’s explorations of eternal truth in immanent relations that are irreducible to historical time, mystical trajectories in Islam that had transregional reach had confronted the juridicalizing idea well before the emergence of the modern state. This is not to suggest that Sufis could not also support dynastic and scholarly claims to orthodoxy in founding and sustaining new political communities. The historical scholarship on the mutually constitutive relationship between sovereignty and mysticism makes that clear. However, those ‘scenes’ from history only reinforce the argument that historical time and mystical times can intersect *and* diverge in any one instant allowing for a number of possibilities for life and its relation to power(s).<sup>82</sup>

Thus, it would follow that the diasporic form’s subjugation to the modern terms of sovereignty cannot be conflated with the end of the truth ‘bound to a nucleus [kernel] of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike.’<sup>83</sup> In this regard, the form of

---

<sup>81</sup> Mbembe, “The power of the archive,” 22.

<sup>82</sup> Compare, for example: Omid Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam: Negotiating ideology and religious inquiry* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and society in medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Also see: A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred kingship and sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>83</sup> The full quote, which was in his research notes on how ‘to grasp the construction of [nineteenth-century] history as such’ through its ‘refuse’ and the ‘dialectical image,’ is: ‘Resolute refusal of the concept of “timeless truth” is in order. Nevertheless, truth is not—as Marxism would have it—a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike. This is so true that the eternal, in any case, is far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea.’ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin

life Sayyid Sahl found so difficult to reconcile with the modern terms of political subjecthood did not cease to be relevant because of individual ‘failures’ and submission to orders of historical time. We might then also be able to productively reconceive diaspora as a critical more than a sociohistorical and descriptive category, one that resembles a Deleuzian rhizome over and against arboreal formations.<sup>84</sup> Such a critical deployment of diaspora as an unpredictable branching out—with horizontal and vertical potentialities—illuminates its ever-pressing intensities that more resolutely and expansively vertical, or ‘sedentary,’ orders sought to counter and contain. The stakes are no less than the urgent need to rethink political life. Thus, we move our well-trained sights away from the spell cast by sovereignty and the politicization of life to a form of life lived relationally with other life and non-life forever re-membering a truth that eludes.

---

(Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 461, 463. I was led to the quote on time and the alternative translation of *Zeitkern* by: Philipp Ekardt, *Benjamin on Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 47.

<sup>84</sup>Sebough Aslanian, while proposing his ‘circulation societies,’ argues that even when regularly deployed as an analytical category in studies of early modern merchant communities, ‘diaspora’ nonetheless remains unexamined as a concept. Sebough Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The global trade networks of Armenian merchants from New Julfa* (New York: University of California Press, 2011).