

# INDIAN OCEAN HISTORY FOR THE AGE OF NON-ALIGNMENT: THE ‘MOORISH CONNECTION’ OF NORTH AFRICA AND SRI LANKA

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## ABSTRACT

Western scholarship on the Indian Ocean rarely takes into account the modern indigenous historiography of the region that emerged in dialogue with European depictions. This article traces the institutional then historiographical development of a Moorish identity in postcolonial Ceylon (from 1972 known as ‘Sri Lanka’), with a particular focus on *The Moorish Connection*, a history book published by the Moors Islamic Cultural Home to coincide with the 5th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, held in 1976 in Colombo. Like most other colonial and postcolonial Lankan Moors, the author of *The Moorish Connection* was unable to read the Arabic language of his purported ancestors, forcing him to rely on Orientalist works collected in the library of the Moors Islamic Cultural Home that commissioned his book. This produced a kind of nominative historical illusion whereby, when explored through the library of Orientalism, the English (and formerly Portuguese) name of the Moors germinated into narratives of an ancient ‘Moorish connection’ with distant Tunisia and Morocco. As a contribution to the neglected emic formulations of the Indian Ocean’s past, the article reconstructs the development of this Indian Ocean—and Mediterranean—self-history of the Moors through the colonial then postcolonial periods, culminating in its geopolitical deployment amid the soft power diplomacy of the Non-Aligned Movement and the postcolonial forging of new ‘South-South’ alliances.

## INTRODUCTION: IDEOLOGIES OF INDIAN OCEAN HISTORY

On a recent research visit to Sri Lanka, I was struck by how many times I was told by English-speaking members of the main Muslim minority community that ‘Our ancestors

came from Morocco.’<sup>1</sup> Taken at face value, this may seem an extraordinary claim, even for residents of an island amid the far-reaching networks of the Indian Ocean. But the colonial and postcolonial periods witnessed a fascinating process of identity formation among a community who not only came to call themselves ‘Moors’ by adapting the label ‘Mouro’ from the Portuguese who associated the island’s Muslims with their former enemies in Iberia, but who subsequently drew on Orientalist writings to prove their ties to an Arabic past that ultimately reached to North Africa and Andalusia. Being already aware of the existing scholarship on Moor identity formation, I sensed something of what was at play in those repeated contemporary claims to North African origins and decided to investigate the formation of this remarkable historical identity.<sup>2</sup>

As a historian, I had come to Sri Lanka to work primarily in libraries and archives, but as I spent time in one particular library—that of the Moors Islamic Cultural Home in Colombo—I realized that this prominent institution had played an important role in the postcolonial stages of the making of a Moorish historical identity, not least in sponsoring historical publications aimed at the community. Consequently, this essay traces the institutional then historiographical development of a Moorish identity in postcolonial Ceylon (from 1972 known as ‘Sri Lanka’), with a particular focus on *The Moorish Connection*, a history book published by the Moors Islamic Cultural Home in 1976 to coincide with the 5th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, held in August that year in Colombo. In this way, the following pages link Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean to recent scholarship on the cultural impact of the Non-Aligned Movement and the forging of ‘South-South ties,’ and to the deployment of history for the purposes of soft power diplomacy. As we will see, what is particularly interesting about the case of the Sri Lankan Moors is the way in which a wealthy subnational minority group was able to make use of the Non-Aligned Movement—an organization composed of the governments of nation-states—to project itself at an international level. Moreover, while the Colombo summit and Moors Islamic Cultural Home formed the combined institutional means of such

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<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to the Moors Islamic Cultural Home (MICH) and the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies (AISL) for their assistance during my research in Sri Lanka in April 2024. Special thanks to Omar Kamil and S.A. Murshid (MICH) and to Ramla Wahab-Salman (AISL) for helping with access to libraries and other institutions.

<sup>2</sup> On the development of Moor identity more broadly, see: A.C.L. Ameer Ali, *Plural Identities and Political Choices of the Muslim Community* (Colombo: Marga Institute, 2001); Qadri Ismail, “Unmooring identity: The antinomies of elite Muslim self-representation in modern Sri Lanka,” in *Unmaking the Nation: The politics of identity and history in modern Sri Lanka*, eds. Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 1995); Dennis B. McGilvray, ‘Arabs, Moors and Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim ethnicity in regional perspective,’ *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 32, 2 (1998), 433-83; Dennis B. McGilvray, “Rethinking Muslim identity in Sri Lanka,” in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious conflict in contemporary Sri Lanka*, ed. John C. Holt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

projection, its discursive medium was history by way of *The Moorish Connection* and the exhibition of Moorish heritage that accompanied it.

Over the past two decades, the nascent field of Critical Heritage Studies has increasingly brought attention to the roles of identity formation, power distribution, economic and ideological factors, and discursive conflicts in the creation of ‘heritage.’<sup>3</sup> Institutions, such as museums and ‘heritage sites,’ have been a particular focus of this scholarship, showing the ways in which claims of historical identity are shaped by the social, political, and financial ties of institutions that articulate and promote particular models of heritage. A recent body of related scholarship has identified some of the ways in which the notion of the Silk Road has been deployed as a tool of cultural diplomacy and soft power projection in museum exhibitions, historical publications, and a variety of other public history ventures, especially under the ideological influence or overt sponsorship of the People’s Republic of China and its grand geopolitical Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>4</sup> Looking back to the interplay of international diplomacy and cultural production during the mid-twentieth century, another body of work has examined the cultural impact of the 1955 Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement that eventually emerged from it, being formally established in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1961.<sup>5</sup> Literary and historiographical production formed part of this pattern of postcolonial alliance-building, albeit very much in a Cold War context that similarly prompted the Soviet Union to play a large role in the conference-hosting, translating, and plain funding of other such ventures in soft power cultural diplomacy.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On the emergence of the field, see: Kynan Gentry and Laurajane Smith, “Critical heritage studies and the legacies of the late-twentieth century heritage canon,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25, 11 (2019), 1148-68.

<sup>4</sup> Tamara Chin, “The Afro-Asian silk road: Chinese experiments in postcolonial premodernity,” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 136, 1 (2021), 17-38; Lin Shaun, James D. Sidaway, and Woon Chih Yuan, “Reordering China, respacing the world: Belt and road initiative (一帶一路) as an emergent geopolitical culture,” *Professional Geographer*, 71, 3 (2019), 507-22; James D. Sidaway and Chih Yuan Woon, “Chinese narratives on ‘One Belt, One Road’ (一帶一路) in geopolitical and imperial contexts,” *Professional Geographer*, 69, 4 (2017), 591-603; Tim Winter, *Geocultural Power: China’s quest to revive the silk roads for the twenty-first century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Christopher J. Lee (ed.), *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung moment and its political afterlives* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010); Nataša Mišković, Herald Fischer-Tine, and Nada Boškovička (eds.), *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi—Bandung—Belgrade* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Martin J. Bayly, “Global intellectual history in international relations: Hierarchy, empire, and the case of late colonial Indian international thought,” *Review of International Studies*, 49, 3 (2023), 428-47; Maryam Fatima, “Institutionalizing Afro-Asianism: Lotus and the (dis)contents of Soviet-third world cultural politics,” *Comparative Literature Studies*, 59, 3 (2022), 447-67; Hala Halim, “Lotus, the Afro-Asian nexus, and global south comparatism,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 32, 3 (2012), 563-83; Christopher L. Hill, “Tokyo in Tashkent: The Afro-Asian Writers Association and Japanese Cold War dissent,” *Past & Present* (2024); Aeron O’Connor, “Peeking under the Asian Iron Curtain: Socialist, Persianate and anti-colonial modes of friendship between Pakistani and Tajik poets,” *History and Anthropology* (2024); Francesca Orsini, Neelam Srivastava, and Laetitia Zecchini (eds.), *The Form of Ideology and the Ideology of Form: Cold War, decolonization, and third world print cultures* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2022).

However, scholars have been less adept at identifying the ideological and diplomatic purposes to which Indian Ocean histories have been put. The most obvious case—if only perhaps because of its contemporaneity—is current Chinese memorialization of a historical ‘maritime Silk Road’ as the precursor to the ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road (21 世纪海上丝绸之路),’ the sea route section of the Belt and Road Initiative, in which China is positioned as the benevolent overseeing power.<sup>7</sup> A key part of this has been the erection of statues and related monuments for the Ming admiral Zheng He (d. 1433 or 35) in places such as Malacca, Malaysia; Semarang, Indonesia; and Salalah, Oman, where the admiral’s Muslim identity serves the purposes of cultural diplomacy. In Sri Lanka, where Muslims form a minority viewed with increasing suspicion by the ruling Sinhalese Buddhist majority, Chinese efforts have downplayed the admiral’s Muslim identity to focus on the use of underwater archaeology to demonstrate the island’s longstanding economic ties to China and by funding Sinhalese and English translations of the Galle Trilingual Inscription that Zheng set up on Sri Lanka.<sup>8</sup> Displayed on signboards next to the inscription at the Colombo National Museum, the translations focus only on the Chinese and Tamil texts on the stele that commemorate Zheng He’s gifts to Buddhist temples. The Persian inscription that evokes Muslim themes is ignored.<sup>9</sup> As for the goals of this display as seen by the Sri Lankan government, a report in the leading national newspaper in 2012 declared that ‘state plans are underway to attract more tourists from China by promoting China’s efforts in re-writing world history with the focus on Admiral Zheng.’<sup>10</sup>

However, the historiography of the Indian Ocean has long served ideological purposes, which, in line with the subtle working of ideology, may be visible or invisible

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Marc Blanchard, “Probing China’s twenty-first-century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI): An examination of MSRI narratives,” *Geopolitics*, 22, 2 (2017), 246-68.

<sup>8</sup> On the stele, see: Lorna Dewaraja, “Cheng Ho’s visits to Sri Lanka and the Galle trilingual inscription in the National Museum in Colombo,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*, 52 (2006), 59-74; Eva Nagel, “The Chinese inscription on the trilingual slabstone from Galle reconsidered: A case study in early Ming-Chinese diplomatics,” in *Ancient Ruhuna: Sri Lankan-German archaeological project in the southern province*, vol. 1, eds. H.-J. Weisshaar, H. Roth, and W. Wijeyapala (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2001), 385-468; Tansen Sen, “Serendipitous connections: The Chinese engagements with Sri Lanka,” in *Connectivity in Motion: Island hubs in the Indian Ocean world*, eds. Burkhard Schnepel and Edward A. Alpers (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 369-95, esp. 382-83. On its broader context, see: Tansen Sen, “The impact of Zheng He’s expeditions on Indian Ocean interactions,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 79, 3 (2016), 609-36.

<sup>9</sup> Statements based on the author’s observations at the Colombo National Museum (April 2024). On the Persian inscription, see the partial translation in: Khwaja Muhammad Ahmad in S. Paranavitana, “The Tamil inscription on the Galle trilingual slab,” *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, 3 (Colombo: Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, 1928-1933), Appendix B, 338-39; Graeme Ford, “The Persian Translating College and Ming Tributary Communications with the Western Ocean,” *Journal of Asian History*, 56, 1-2 (2022), 1-26.

<sup>10</sup> Sunimalee Dias, “Next attraction for Chinese tourists in Sri Lanka: Zheng He,” *The Sunday Times* (Sri Lanka) (5 Feb. 2012): <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/120205/BusinessTimes/bt37.html> [Accessed: 20 Aug. 2024].

to the authors and readers of such histories. During the centuries of European rule over the regions abutting the Indian Ocean, the control of its waters became a trope for histories celebrating the achievements of empire, a tradition that began in 1572 with Camões' *Os Lusíadas* and reached its recognizably modern form in colonial Anglophone histories of the maritime exploration and conquest of Asia. As the ocean morphed from being a fundamental strategic fact to a historiographical framing device, histories of the Indian Ocean and of maritime models of historiography thus became the handmaidens of imperial expansion. In more recent decades, the revival of Indian Ocean studies since the 1990s has been shaped by the powerful and entangled ideologies of neoliberal globalization and of 'South-South' solidarity, which despite their apparent opposition share the appealing discourse of cosmopolitanism.<sup>11</sup>

Yet standing between these two phases of Indian Ocean historiography—those of the hightide of empire and of the globalized *fin-de-siècle* of the late twentieth century—was an interstitial phase between around the 1920s and 1970s that helped pave the way from the one historiographical formation to the other. Here, the shaping ideological currents were those of anticolonialism and decolonization, which were reflected and refracted through late colonial and postcolonial institutions that ranged from the Gorky Institute of World Literature (founded 1932) and UNESCO (founded 1945), to the Afro-Asian Writers Association (founded 1958), the Muslim World League (founded 1962), and—most relevant to our concerns here—the Non-Aligned Movement (founded 1961).

In examining this interstitial era of Indian Ocean history-writing, this essay also contributes to recent studies of the afterlives of Orientalism, a term used here as a neutral rather than pejorative label for European text-based studies of the Islamic past which, in line with the positivist methods of the day, paid particular attention to early written sources (in this case, by prioritizing Arabic sources).<sup>12</sup> This afterlife can be seen in an important South Asian example of the maritime historiography of this interstitial period: the Urdu *'Arabon ki Jahaz-Rani* ('The Arab Navigations,' 1935) by Sayyid Sulayman Nadvi (1884-1953). Having previously cut his political teeth as a leading member of the transimperial Khilafat Movement, Nadvi became probably the most influential Indian Muslim historian

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<sup>11</sup> For critical evaluations of some of these tropes, see: Gaurav Desai, "Old world orders: Amitav Ghosh and the writing of nostalgia," *Representations*, 85, 1 (2004), 125-48; Pedro Machado, "Views from other boats: On Amitav Ghosh's Indian Ocean 'Worlds'," *American Historical Review*, 121, 5 (2016), 1545-51.

<sup>12</sup> On the afterlives of Arabic-based Orientalism, see: Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How editors and print culture transformed an intellectual tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Susannah Heschel and Umar Ryad (eds.), *The Muslim Reception of European Orientalism: Reversing the gaze* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018). On the impact of colonial archaeology on Sinhala self-histories, see: Sujit Sivasundaram, "Buddhist kingship, British archaeology, and historical narratives in Sri Lanka, c.1750-1850," *Past & Present*, 197 (2007), 111-42.

of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> In *‘Arabon ki Jahaz-Rani*, he responded to earlier Anglophone histories that positioned India as part of Britain’s maritime empire by excavating a precolonial past in which every corner of the Indian Ocean had been explored—and civilized—by Arab Muslim navigators. Yet to recover this pre-and non-European past, Nadvi had to rely on editions of Arabic manuscripts on geography, travel, and navigation published and publicized by European Orientalists like Gabriel Ferrand (1864–1935), who in the 1910s–20s produced the series of editions of key Arabic sources—including the medieval navigational manual of Ibn al-Majid—on which Nadvi would draw.<sup>14</sup>

A few years before Nadvi wrote his book, another Indian historian—the Hyderabadī Hadi Hasan (1894-1963)—had traveled to England to master Orientalist methods at London’s School of Oriental [subsequently, ‘and African’] Studies under the supervision of Sir E. Dennison Ross (1871-1940), leading to a doctoral dissertation on ‘The History of Persian Navigation.’ Like Nadvi, Hasan was responding to a colonial historiography that had used the Indian Ocean to frame a canvas celebrating European exploratory achievements. Consequently, in his preface to the 1928 published version of his dissertation, Hasan railed at how,

Writer after writer has declared that the Persian dreaded and abhorred the sea: what Sir John Malcolm whispers in the ear, William Vincent proclaims from the housetops. Lord Curzon uses the Persian navy for his mirth and laughter; Sir P.M. Sykes, generally restrained and sober in his judgment, sees in Persian navigation almost a contradiction in terms. These are historians, deriving their authority for a denunciation of Persian sea-power directly from the verdict of history... [But] can a nation which fitted out vessels to make

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<sup>13</sup> Sayyid Sulayman Nadvi, *‘Arabon ki Jahaz-Rani* (Bombay: Islamic Research Association, 1935). For a study of this work, see: Nile Green, “Rejecting the Persianate past: A pioneering Urdu history of the Indian Ocean,” in *Iran and Persianate Culture in the Indian Ocean World*, ed. Andrew Peacock (London: Ginkgo Library, 2024). On the larger revival of Arabic historiography in late colonial India, see: Mohsin Ali, “Modern Islamic historiography: A global perspective from South Asia” (Unpublished PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2022). And, on the Khilafat Movement, see: Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious symbolism and political mobilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> Gabriel Ferrand (ed. & trans.), *Relations de voyages et textes géographiques arabes, persans et turks relatifs à l’Extrême-Orient du VIIIe au XVIIIe siècles*, 2 vols (Paris: E. Leroux, 1913-14); Gabriel Ferrand (ed.), *Voyage du marchand arabe Sulaymân en Inde et en Chine* [Akhhār al-Şīn wa-l-Hind] (Paris: Bossard, 1922); Gabriel Ferrand (ed. & trans.), *Le Pilote des mers de l’Inde, de la Chine et de l’Indonésie*, 2 vols (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1921-23).

an annual voyage from the Persian Gulf ports to Malabar and Ceylon be charged with an unconquerable aversion to the sea?<sup>15</sup>

Orientalist methods were similarly redeployed in another late imperial context stretching between Oxford, Princeton, and Jerusalem by the Lebanese-British scholar George Hourani (1913-84) for his parallel dissertation on ‘Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean.’<sup>16</sup> Unlike Nadvi’s *Arabon ki Jahaz-Rani* and Hasan’s *History of Persian Navigation*, Hourani’s book would subsequently become a foundational text in the Anglophone canon of post-1990s Indian Ocean studies. Yet all three books emerged from that overlooked interstitial phase of Indian Ocean historiography. And so too did *The Moorish Connection*, which the Sri Lankan Moor author M.M. Thawfeeq wrote in 1976 to coincide with the 5th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement and to celebrate his community’s ancestral transoceanic ties to ‘fellow’ Arab delegates to the Colombo summit.

Like Nadvi, Hasan, and Hourani before him, Thawfeeq likewise redirected the labors of earlier Orientalists for alternative ideological purposes. But unlike his Indian and Lebanese predecessors, Thawfeeq was unable to read the Arabic language of his purported ancestors, forcing him to rely even more directly on the Orientalist works collected in the library of the Moors Islamic Cultural Home that commissioned his history book.

## THE DIALOGICAL EVOLUTION OF A MODERN ‘MOOR’ IDENTITY

In recent decades, a large corpus of scholarship has demonstrated how modern ethnic and national identities developed across Asia and Africa in dialogue with narratives, categories, and methods that emerged from Europe. From Egypt to Afghanistan, East Africa, and India, this was particularly true of the role played in late colonial and postcolonial identity formation by nineteenth-century European investigations of medieval and ancient history.<sup>17</sup> In South Asia—including India and Sri Lanka—and

<sup>15</sup> Hadi Hasan, *History of Persian Navigation* (London: Methuen and Co., 1928), xi-xii. Among the still-famous names that Hasan conjured here, perhaps ironically the least known today is the classical geographer and prominent churchman William Vincent (1739-1815), editor and translator of: *Voyage of Nearchus and the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (Oxford: The University Press, 1809), and author of the pioneering Anglophone history, *The Commerce and Navigation of the Ancients in the Indian Ocean*, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1807).

<sup>16</sup> George F. Hourani, “Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean in the ninth and tenth centuries” (Unpublished PhD diss., Princeton University, 1938-1939). This was revised during Hourani’s subsequent years at the Government Arab College in Jerusalem for publication as: *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952).

<sup>17</sup> Among an extensive literature, see: James R. Brennan, *Taifa: Making nation and race in urban Tanzania* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012); Nile Green, “From Persianate pasts to Aryan antiquity: Transnationalism and transformation

Southeast Asia, a particularly important part of this recovery and rearticulation of a historical identity was played by notions of ancestral ‘Arabness.’<sup>18</sup> In many of these Indian Ocean cases, the role of history in the formulation of postcolonial identities was complicated by the fact that the communities who claimed Arab ancestry were minorities in what would become postcolonial nation-states based around the non-Arab ethnonational identities of majority groups. This was particularly the case for Sri Lanka—or Ceylon as it remained till its renaming on ethnonationalist grounds in 1972—where there existed several different groups of Muslims.

The Muslims of Sri Lanka have a very different history from their coreligionists in northern India (and Pakistan and Bangladesh), particularly due to the greater shaping role of the Indian Ocean. Consequently, by the time of Sri Lankan independence in 1948, its Muslim communities comprised not only the aforementioned Moors, but also Javanese and Malays who arrived during the Dutch period; and Bohra, Memon, and Khoja trading communities from Gujarat who, along with Afghan peddlers and Punjabi soldiers, arrived under the British, as did the occasional exile or émigré from the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> Even the Moors were an internally diverse community, with important geographical, occupational, class, and ultimately linguistic variations between the rural agricultural Moors of the eastern regions of the island and the urban trading and professional Moors of Colombo and other ports mainly in western and southern Sri Lanka. Further complexity was added by the arrival of Tamil-speaking Muslim merchants from southeastern India, whom the British labeled as ‘Coast’ or ‘Indian Moors’ (as distinct from ‘Ceylon Moors’).<sup>20</sup>

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in Afghan intellectual history, c. 1880-1940,” *Afghanistan*, 1, 1 (2018), 26-67; Steven Kemper, *The Presence of the Past: Chronicles, politics, and culture in Sinhala life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Donald Malcolm Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, museums, and Egyptian national identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Roy Bar-Sadeh, “‘Transnationalizing Arabness’: The interface between *al-Manar*’s milieu and Indian intellectuals, 1898-1935” (MA thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2015); Roy Bar-Sadeh, “Printing Islamic modernism: Arabic texts for Arab and South Asian Muslims in the early twentieth century,” *International Journal of Islam in Asia*, 3, 1-2 (2023), 43-67; Engseung Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Michael Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the narration of a Sufi Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Arabic, the Arab Middle East, and the definition of Muslim identity in twentieth century India,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 8, 1 (1998), 59-81.

<sup>19</sup> For an overview, see: Dennis B. McGilvray, “Sri Lanka,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three Online*, eds. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Devin J. Stewart (Leiden: Brill Online): [https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_ei3\\_COM\\_27597](https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_27597) [accessed August 1, 2024]. Citing the 2012 census, McGilvray notes that Muslims overall make up 9.7% of the total population of Sri Lanka, with Moors comprising 95% of all such Sri Lankan Muslims (hence 9.2% of the total population).

<sup>20</sup> On the negative conceptions of the Moors—especially the ‘Coast Moors’—in Sinhala nationalist discourse from the 1920s onwards, see: Harshana Rambukwella, *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity: A cultural genealogy of Sinhala nationalism* (London: UCL Press, 2018), 63-67.



The focus of this article is on the latter band of this Muslim sociological spectrum: the Moor urban commercial and professional elite. Exposed to British administrators—and their language and ideas—from the early nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, these elite urban Moors drew on Orientalist scholarship to bolster hazy older notions of Arab descent, then substantially realigned this ancestry in the postcolonial period by claiming more specific ties to Morocco.

The first key moment in this dialogical process of identity formation came in 1806, when Sir Alexander Johnston (1775-1849)—who served as Chief Justice during the administrative take-over of the island from the Dutch East India Company—was shown an old Arabic inscription by the Colombo Muslims whom the Portuguese had previously dubbed ‘Mouros.’<sup>21</sup> Two decades later, when Johnston retired to London and became a founding member of the Royal Asiatic Society, he supplied a rubbing of the inscription to the Cambridge Orientalist Samuel Lee (1783–1852), who was then working on the first English translation of the travels of Ibn Battuta. In response to Johnston’s request, Lee published a translation of the Arabic stele in the prestigious *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society* in which he showed it to be the gravestone of a certain Khalid ibn Abu Bakaya (or Takaya or Nakaya), who had died in the *hijri* year 337 (equivalent to 949 CE).<sup>22</sup> Although more recent epigraphic analysis has suggested a possible Persian rather than Arabian homeland for the interred figure, the combined prestige of Johnston, Lee, and the Royal Asiatic Society would ensure that subsequent generations of Anglophone Moors would cite them as positive historical proof of their Arab ancestry.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, throughout the colonial period—and beyond—Johnston’s article and Lee’s translation were repeatedly cited by Moor and non-Moor historians as the historiographical *locus classicus* of the Arab ancestry of the Moors. As a new Anglophone Muslim middle-class emerged in the nineteenth century under the aegis of British economic and educational policies, leading urban Moors felt the need for an ethnic origin story—albeit via connections to the Arab Middle East rather than Morocco—on which to base claims of cultural respectability to complement their newly-acquired wealth. The authority of Johnston and Lee provided helpful support in this venture. The next key

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<sup>21</sup> The circumstances are retrospectively recounted in: Sir Alexander Johnston, “A letter to the secretary relating to the preceding inscription,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1, 2 (1826), 537-48.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Lee, “A Cufic inscription found in Ceylon,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1, 2 (1826), 545-48. My enquiries to archivists at the Royal Asiatic Society concerning the survival of the original rubbing sent to Lee and published in his article suggest that it is no longer extant.

<sup>23</sup> On the possible reference to the Persian calendar on this and the other earliest known Arabic stele from the island, see: Ludvik Kalus and Claude Guillot, “Réinterprétation des plus anciennes stèles funéraires islamiques nousantariennes: III. Sri Lanka,” *Archipel*, 72 (2006), 29-40.

moment came when the British decided to increase the number of local representatives in the Ceylon Legislative Council, raising the question of whether the Moors should be considered as Tamils (on the basis of their everyday language) or as Arabs (on the basis of their professed ancestry). Consequently, the Moors' historical identity became a source of major political controversy, particularly when in 1885 the prominent Tamil Hindu politician Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan (1851-1930) presented a paper in English to the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in which he used the new European discipline of ethnology to argue that the Moors were descendants of Tamils who had converted to Islam—and should thereby be represented in council by the Tamil (and Hindu) member.<sup>24</sup>

It was the prominent Moor journalist I.L.M. Abdul Azeez (1867-1915) who produced the most influential rebuttal, which was published in 1907 with the institutional weight of the Colombo Moors' Union, which he himself had helped to found in 1900. In this historical pamphlet—which would be republished on its fiftieth anniversary by the Moors Islamic Cultural Home—Azeez called on Johnston and Lee as posthumous witnesses for the historiographical defense of the Arab origins of the Moors.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Ramanathan had scorned Johnston's account of this Arab etiology, Azeez leapt to his defense before concluding his own pamphlet by reprinting Johnston's and Lee's articles as appendices.<sup>26</sup> Not only did Azeez use the Orientalists as authoritative evidence for his and his fellow Moors' position, but his pamphlet opened with a facsimile of Lee's engraving of the Arabic stele as its frontispiece. In being written by a prominent journalist—Azeez was deputy editor of the influential Tamil newspaper *Muslim Necan* (Muslim Friend) and editor of its English counterpart *The Muslim Guardian*—and published by a community institution—the Moors' Union of which Azeez was founding president—his historical booklet on the Arab and thereby transoceanic origins of the Moors was the predecessor of *The Moorish Connection*, whose author M.M. Thawfeeq

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<sup>24</sup> The paper was subsequently published as: Ponnambalam Ramanathan, "Ethnology of the 'Moors' of Ceylon," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch*, 10 (1888), 234-62. For a fuller discussion of the controversy and its ramifications, see: Ameer Ali, "The genesis of the Muslim community in Ceylon (Sri Lanka): A historical summary," *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review*, 19 (1984), 65-82; McGilvray, "Arabs, Moors and Muslims;" Ismail, "Unmooring Identity." More broadly, see: John D. Rogers, "Racial identities and politics in early modern Sri Lanka," in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, ed. Peter Robb (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 146-64; John D. Rogers, "Post-Orientalism and the interpretation of premodern and modern political identities: The case of Sri Lanka," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53, 1 (1994), 10-23.

<sup>25</sup> I.L.M. Abdul Azeez, *A Criticism of Mr. Ramanathan's 'Ethnology of the "Moors" of Ceylon'* (Colombo: Moors' Union, 1907; repr. Colombo: Moors Islamic Cultural Home, 1957). For a somewhat hagiographical account of Azeez's career, see: Abdul Khafoor Azeez, *Renaissance in Serendib: The Life and times of I. L. M. Abdul Azeez, Pioneer Muslim modernizer of Sri Lanka* (Rajagiriya: Abdul Khafoor Azeez, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Azeez, *A Criticism*, 26, 28-30, 47, Appendix A and B.

was also a prominent journalist and which was published by the institutional heir to the Moors' Union.

The preceding references to Arabic, English, and Tamil necessarily bring us to the Sri Lankan linguistic elephant in the room. For analytical purposes, by the turn of the twentieth century the Moor linguistic order can be delineated as follows. As their everyday spoken language—and as their traditional literary language—Tamil functioned as the Moor vernacular.<sup>27</sup> For the urban Moor elite who made up the membership of the Moors' Union and the subsequent Moors Islamic Cultural Home, English functioned as their educational language, enabling Moor entry to lucrative professions as well as providing access to wider colonial trade networks (many Moors could also speak, though not write, Sinhala, which functioned as a marketplace language). As for Arabic, this largely functioned as a symbolic language, marking the community's religious but also increasingly their ethnic identity as Moors.<sup>28</sup> Yet as part of an overall linguistic order, these languages also worked together. Thus, the symbolic function of Arabic was reinforced by the English language on which the Moor elite increasingly relied rather than Tamil, since their older Tamil ethnonym of *Conakar* (also transliterated as *Sonagar* or *Jonagar*) carried a far less obvious symbolic allusion to an Arab identity. Moreover, as we will see below when we turn to the library of the Moors Islamic Cultural Home and to Thawfeeq's *Moorish Connection*, English also provided access to Orientalist works not only about the Arabs but also about the Moors of North Africa and Andalusia. Crucial evidence linking Sri Lanka with North Africa reached the island in 1882, when the senior civil servant, Sir Albert Gray (1850-1928), made an English translation of the section of Ibn Battuta's travelogue devoted to Ceylon. It was published in Colombo under the aegis of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, with which various elite Moors were affiliated.

This late colonial language and information order emerged through changes in Moor educational institutions on Sri Lanka in the decades either side of 1900.<sup>29</sup> Adapting Muslim educational reforms in colonial India—particularly those of the Aligarh movement led by Sayyid Ahmad Khan—this effectively created an 'Anglo-Arabic'

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<sup>27</sup> M.M.M. Mahroof, "Spoken Tamil dialects of the Muslims of Sri Lanka: Language as identity-classifier," *Islamic Studies* 34, 4 (1995), 407-26.

<sup>28</sup> Thus, as the anthropologist Dennis McGilvray has noted, 'most Moors today know Arabic only as a language of prayer and Quranic recitation.' See: McGilvray, "Rethinking Muslim identity," 69.

<sup>29</sup> M.N.M. Kamil Asad, "Muslim education in Sri Lanka: The British colonial period," *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 14, 1-2 (1993), 35-45; M.M.M. Mahroof, "Muslim education in Ceylon, 1780-1880," *Islamic Culture*, 46, 2 (1972), 119-36; M.M.M. Mahroof, "Muslim education in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), 1881-1901," *Islamic Culture*, 47, 4 (1973), 301-25.

system by way of English-medium schools and colleges in which Arabic was also taught to a lesser, and increasingly minimal, degree, such as Colombo's prestigious Zahira College. Although Persian had played a less significant role in the cultural (still less administrative) history of the Sri Lankan Muslims as compared to their Indian counterparts, the Persian language and links to Iran and the wider 'Persianate world' were disdained in favor of the revival of Arabic education and a firmly Arabocentric vision of the Moorish past.<sup>30</sup> New madrasas were established in Sri Lanka that offered a fuller Arabic syllabus, which to a greater or lesser extent marginalized older Islamic syllabi in Tamil (not to mention Persian), thus producing new generations of Moor clerics ('*ulama*) who reenforced their community's symbolic identification with Arabic.<sup>31</sup> In this way, the new educational institutions funded by the trading and professional wealth of the Moor elite reinforced the late colonial linguistic order. And this in turn contributed further to an Arabocentric model of Moor history.

A case in point is an article on 'The Origin of the Moors of Ceylon' written by M.I.M. Haniffa, a Moor Common Law advocate who had studied at the English-medium St Aloysius College in Galle, the island's secondary port and Moor population center. The essay first appeared in the 1925 issue of *The Aloysian*, the college's alumni magazine, before being republished in Colombo six years later in a compendium of Haniffa's writings on Islam.<sup>32</sup> Here, too, Haniffa quoted Johnston and drew on Ibn Battuta as made famous by Samuel Lee and Albert Gray's English translations, before concluding:

The origin of the Ceylon Moors is thus clear. According to the tradition which squares with historical facts, their early ancestors belonging to the Clan of Hashim migrated from Arabia for political and religious reasons in the early part of the 8th century and settled along the coasts, which were then inhabited by Tamils.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Here it is perhaps worth mentioning again the absence of a translation of the Persian (unlike the Tamil and Chinese) text of the Galle Trilingual Inscription in the Colombo National Museum (Personal observation, April 2024).

<sup>31</sup> M.M.M. Mahroof, "The 'Ulama in Sri Lanka 1800-1990: Form and function," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 6, 1 (1995), 25-50. On the earlier Tamil and Arwi (Arabic-script Tamil) learned corpus, see: Takya Shu'ayb 'Alim, *Arabic, Arwi, and Persian in Sarandib and Tamil Nadu* (Madras: Imāmul 'Arūs Trust, 1993). On the colonial era Arabization of Tamil, see: M.M.M. Mahroof, "Arabic-Tamil in South India and Sri Lanka: Language as mimicry," *Islamic Studies*, 32, 2 (1993), 169-89.

<sup>32</sup> M.I.M. Haniffa, "The origin of the Moors of Ceylon," *The Aloysian*, 2, 4 (1925), repr. In: M.I.M. Haniffa, *Essays in Islam* (Colombo: I.L.M. Edris, 1931), 28-33. Edris was a prominent Moor publisher with a bookstore on Colombo's Main Street.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

This combined historiographical, linguistic, and educational configuration continued through the late colonial period, whether through the founding of the Ghafooriya Arabic College in 1931 or the establishment of the Muslim Students Majlis (on the model of the Oxford University Majlis) at the University of Ceylon, which produced an English annual called *Islamica-Zeylanica*. In 1947, the year before Sri Lankan independence, it included essays on ‘Arab medicine,’ ‘Arab historians,’ an ‘Arabic manuscript’ found on the island, and of course on the visit of that most famous of Moors, Ibn Battuta.<sup>34</sup> Reflecting the wider Moorish use of Orientalist scholarship, the article on Ibn Battuta comprised extracts from the revised English translation by the Scotsman H.A.R. Gibb (1875-1971), who was by then Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford, a position held a century earlier by Ibn Battuta’s first translator, Samuel Lee, who had also translated that all-important medieval Arabic gravestone from Colombo.

However, by the time of Sri Lanka’s independence, another new institution had been founded: the Moors Islamic Cultural Home. As we will now see, it would transmit this historiographical pattern into the postcolonial era.

## THE MOORS ISLAMIC CULTURAL HOME AS AN INCUBATOR OF IDENTITY

The Moors Islamic Cultural Home was formally founded in 1944 as the successor to earlier community associations, such as the Jemiathul Islamiah (founded in 1888), the Moors’ Union (founded in 1900), the Young Men’s Muslim Association (founded in 1910), and the All-Ceylon Moors’ Association (founded in 1913).<sup>35</sup> However, as Moor leaders expressed the matter at least, rather than being modeled on neighboring colonial community associations, the Moors Islamic Cultural Home was to follow the paradigm of the Young Men’s Islamic Association (*Jamiat al-Shubban al-Muslimin*) of Egypt (though somewhat ironically that association had in any case been deliberately modeled on the YMCA).<sup>36</sup> In a reflection of the relationship between the Moor’s educational and symbolic language, the Moors Islamic Cultural Home (henceforth MICH) also bore an

<sup>34</sup> M.S. Ghouse, “Arab Medicine;” anonymous [H.A.R. Gibb], “Ibn Battuta in Ceylon;” M.J.M.M. [sic], “Arab Historians;” Dr S.A. Imam, “A Unique Arabic Manuscript on Ceylon,” *Islamica-Zeylanica* (1947), 16-23, 28-33, 33-38, 52-55, respectively.

<sup>35</sup> On the circumstances leading up to and surrounding its foundation, see: Farzana Haniffa, “The Moors’ Islamic Cultural Home and the modern Muslim ummah: Negotiating identity, politics, and community in 1940s Sri Lanka,” *International Journal of Islam in Asia*, 4, 1-2 (2024), 125-150. On these earlier organizations, see: A.I.L. Marikar, A.H. Macan Markar, and A.L.M. Lafir, “A historical sketch of the all-Ceylon Moors’ Association,” in *The Moors Association: Its impact on the community*, eds. A.I.L. Marikar, A.H. Macan Markar, and A.L.M. Lafir (Colombo: Alhamed Lebbe Mohamed Lafir, 1982). Note that the unusual Romanization of Jemiathul Islamiah reflects its transliteration from Tamil rather than Arabic, from which the name was of course ultimately derived.

<sup>36</sup> Haniffa, “Moors’ Islamic cultural home,” 127; Marikar et al, *Moors Association*, 21.

Arabic (but not a Tamil) title as the *Dar al-Thaqafah al-Islamiyah al-Muriyya*—a title that necessitated a degree of lexicographical legerdemain by Arabicizing the English ethnonym ‘Moor.’<sup>37</sup>

The leading figure in the foundation of MICH was Sir Razik Fareed (1893-1984), the grandson of the wealthy Moor contractor Arasi Marikar Wapchi Marikar (1829-1925), who two generations earlier had helped fund the first modern educational institutions for the Moors. Fareed received an Anglophone education in Colombo at Zahira College (which his grandfather had helped establish), then at Royal College, the ‘Eton of Sri Lanka,’ before building a career as a prominent civil servant and politician during the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial eras.<sup>38</sup> After laying the groundwork for MICH, he was also closely involved in the founding in 1947 of the Muslim Ladies’ College, for which he donated a valuable parcel of land in the respectable Colombo suburb of Bambalapitiya.<sup>39</sup>

Fareed managed to establish MICH by drawing upon influential members of his own network among fellow urban Moors, from whom he gathered funds and formed initial committees.<sup>40</sup> By 1946, two years after MICH’s nominal foundation, he was thus in a position to have it formally approved as a government-recognized association via a motion he proposed as a member of the colonial State Council. Fareed would remain president of MICH till his death in 1984. Membership records show that its other founding members were similarly drawn from the Moor professional and commercial class, not only in Colombo but also in other ports, such as Galle and Trincomalee, as well as the occasional inland town.<sup>41</sup>

As Farzana Haniffa has written in her recent study of the founding years of MICH, ‘the establishment of the MICH indicated the emergence of a post-World War II English-speaking Muslim middle-class sensibility in Sri Lanka.’<sup>42</sup> Quite so. Fareed had long been a campaigner for English education among his fellow Moors, and the use of English was

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<sup>37</sup> Note by contrast that in Arabic the official name of Morocco is *al-Mamlakah al-Maghribiyah* (the Kingdom of the Maghreb).

<sup>38</sup> On Fareed’s career, see: M.C.A. Hassan, *Sir Razik Fareed* (Colombo: Sir Razik Fareed Foundation, 1968). He received his knighthood as a member of the Commonwealth in 1951.

<sup>39</sup> Farzana Haniffa, *Ayesha Rauf: A pioneer of Muslim women’s emancipation in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association, 2014), 15-17, 28-29.

<sup>40</sup> “Moors Club Board of Supporters,” handwritten notebook, 1939 (Library of the Moors Islamic Cultural Home). Biographies of many of MICH’s key early players and their families can be found in: Mohamed Sameer bin Ismail Effendi, *Personages of the Past: Moors, Malays, and other Muslims of the past of Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Moors Islamic Cultural Home, 1982).

<sup>41</sup> Membership list for 1944 to 1965 in Moors Islamic Cultural Home, *The First Twenty-One Years* (Colombo: Moors Islamic Cultural Home, 1965), 150-66.

<sup>42</sup> Haniffa, “Moors’ Islamic Cultural Home,” 126.

at the heart of MICH in its functions as a ‘cultural’ home that would house a community library, publish annuals and occasional monographs, and host a range of educational and cultural programs aimed at promoting Moorish heritage. This was echoed in its Arabic name as Dar al-Thaqafah, which might be better rendered as ‘House of Heritage.’ Perhaps needless to say at this point, that heritage was conceived in terms of ancestral ties to the Arabs in general and to the Moors of North African and Andalusia in particular. Many of MICH’s early functions were held at Pasha Villa, a large colonial house named in honor of Ahmed ‘Urabi Pasha (1841-1911), a prominent Egyptian military officer who during his exile to Sri Lanka between 1883 and 1901 helped connect the Moors to contemporary developments in the Arab Middle East, as well as influencing the Moors in their adoption of the late Ottoman *tarbush*, or fez, as a sartorial marker of their transoceanic Arab identity.<sup>43</sup>

However, the activities of MICH outgrew its original home, and a plot of land was acquired on Bristol Street (subsequently renamed Sir Razik Fareed Mawatha) in Colombo’s prestigious governmental Fort district, next door to the Young Men’s Christian Association and round the corner from the Young Men’s Buddhist Association. In 1961, a consecration ceremony was held for the construction of the new building in the presence of the Iraqi ambassador, and four years later MICH moved into its new multistorey premises.<sup>44</sup> The new building was formally opened by prime minister Dudley Senanayake (1911-73). It was graced with a foundation stone inscribed with a line from the opening sura of the Quran in Arabic and English, followed by the following words: ‘Goethe called the coliseum “a vision of beauty”, Ours is but a “dream of dedication” with its aura of history cloaked in its very foundation.’<sup>45</sup> This historical orientation was further expressed by a commemorative volume that linked the new building to an earlier heritage through articles on the centuries’-long Arab links to Sri Lanka and—treading in the footsteps of Johnston and Lee—on the Arabic inscriptions that testified to those ties.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Arthur C. Dep, *The Egyptian Exiles in Ceylon (Sri Lanka)* (Colombo: Praveena Press, 2011); Michael Francis Laffan, *Under Empire: Muslim lives and loyalties across the Indian Ocean World, 1775-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 211-38; Vijaya Samaraweera, “Arabi Pasha in Ceylon, 1883-1901,” *Islamic Culture*, 50, 4 (1976), 219-27. On Pasha Villa itself, see: Moors Islamic Cultural Home, *Golden Jubilee Celebration, 1944-94* (Colombo: Moors Islamic Cultural Home, 1994), 139-40.

<sup>44</sup> Moors Islamic Cultural Home, *Golden Jubilee Celebration*, 205.

<sup>45</sup> Author’s observation, April 2024.

<sup>46</sup> For example: Dr imam, “Ceylon-Arab relations;” Dr M. Ajwad Macan Markar, “Some independent contributions by Arabian medical men;” Mohamed Sameer bin Hajie Ismail Effendi, “Archaeological evidence of early Arabs in Ceylon,” in: MICH, *The First Twenty-One Years*, 10-14, 28-31, 31-39. Ajwad Macan Markar was a prominent London-educated surgeon and the brother of Sir Razik Fareed.

The commemorative volume also contained the text of a speech made at the opening by MICH's honorary joint secretaries that linked their grand new 'cultural home' to the earlier achievements of their fellow Moors: 'For centuries the Moors of Spain were in the van of civilisation. Europe—nay whole world—drew inspiration from the Universities of Alhambra, Baghdad, and Cordova... As heirs to such a heritage, we could not remain unaffected.'<sup>47</sup> This was all part of what Farzana Haniffa has called MICH's aim of 'making claims to a dignified and thriving community existence' in the context of assertive Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.<sup>48</sup>

The spacious new building contained plenty of rooms for officers of the various MICH committees, meetings, public functions, and the occasional exhibition.<sup>49</sup> But at its heart was the large library that served as the bibliographical record of Moorish cultural heritage. The core collection—comprising books published up until the foundation of MICH in the mid-1940s—was made up of the personal library of Ahmed Hussain Macan Markar (1911-85), who served as joint-secretary of MICH from 1944 to 1985.<sup>50</sup> Ahmed Hussain was the son of Sir Mohamed Macan Markar (1877-1952), the scion of a family of wealthy Moor merchants from Galle who rose through colonial politics to a position on the Ceylon State Council and a knighthood. For his part, Ahmed Hussain received an Anglophone education at Royal College, where his colleague Sir Razik Fareed was also schooled, then Cambridge University. After spending several years as a barrister, he followed in his father's political footsteps as a member of the Colombo Municipal Council. Together with his family wealth, Ahmed Hussain's political connections enabled him, like Fareed, to become a prominent philanthropist of Moor educational causes.

As the principal institutional repository of the Moors' cultural heritage, the library that Ahmed Hussain established at MICH provides a revealing bibliographical picture of the Orientalist resources used to bolster the Anglophone historiography of the Moors; and, moreover, to provide it with wider evidence for linking the Moors with fellow Arabs, and Moors, in other regions of the Indian Ocean and beyond, as far as Andalusia. A major part of the collection of pre-1940s books consisted of studies of medieval Arab civilization.<sup>51</sup> Several of these were by leading French Orientalists, particularly Gabriel Ferrand,

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<sup>47</sup> A.I.L. Marikar, "Hon. Jt. secretaries' report presented at the formal opening of MICH building," in: MICH, *The First Twenty-One Years*, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Haniffa, "Moors' Islamic Cultural Home," 126.

<sup>49</sup> On the various committees and their chairholders from 1944 to 1994, see: MICH, *Golden Jubilee Celebration*, 209-16.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 208; Interview with S.A. Murshid (MICH head librarian), 16 Apr. 2024. Unfortunately, original accession records have apparently not survived.

<sup>51</sup> Due to word-limit restrictions, I have not provided full bibliographical citations for the works in the library mentioned in the following pages, which are in any case mostly well-known.



originally a specialist on Madagascar whose *Relations de voyages et textes géographiques arabes, persans et turks* and edition-cum-translation of Ibn Majid's medieval navigational manual as *Le Pilote des mers de l'Inde* we have earlier seen being used by the Indian scholar Sulayman Nadvi for his pioneering Urdu history of 'The Arab Navigations.' Both these works by Ferrand were in the library, along with his *Introduction à l'astronomie arabe nautique*, which further explored the early medieval Arab expansion across the Indian Ocean. Egypt made a particularly good showing—perhaps as a result of the symbolic renewal of ties forged by 'Urabi Pasha's circle of exiles—whether with E.W. Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*; J.P. Mahaffy's four-volume *History of Egypt*; or K.A.C. Creswell's landmark two-volume *Early Muslim Architecture*. The Arabists of Oxford and Ahmed Hussain Markar's Cambridge were also well represented by way of David Samuel Margoliouth, R.A. Nicholson, and A.J. Arberry.

While Markar may well have collected many of these books during his student years in Cambridge, then at the bar in London, after his return to Colombo the proximity of India fed into the collection he donated to MICH. Most of these Anglophone Indian works were published in Lahore, almost all by the publishing house of Muhammad Ashraf, as with the English translation of al-Ghazali's commentary on the Quranic light verse by the Egypt-based missionary W.H.T. Gairdner (1873–1928). However, not all these Lahore imprints were by Western Orientalists, and the library also included *The Geographical History of the Quran* by the aforementioned Indian scholar, Sulayman Nadvi, and Muhammad Enan's study of the great 'Moorish' historian Ibn Khaldun.

Another category of works comprised books on other fellow Moors. These included not only the Moors of North Africa and Andalusia (such as Stanley Lane Poole's *Moors in Spain* and the major studies of Évariste Lévi-Provencal), but also of Saharan Africa (such as Budgett Meakin's *The Moors and The Moors' Empire*), and even the Philippines (by way of Najeeb Saleeby's 1905 *Studies in Moro History, Law, and Religion*).<sup>52</sup> And, of course, there were several translations of Ibn Battuta's travels by way of the three-volume nineteenth century French edition by Defrémery and Sanguinetti and the later English version by Gibb, from which we have seen extracts appearing in the 1947 edition of the journal *Islamica-Zeylanica*.

In the 1900s other Muslim communities that had purportedly developed from Arab maritime networks (including in China) had drawn the interest of Christian missionary

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<sup>52</sup> On the career of Najeeb Saleeby (1870-1935), a Lebanese-American Arabist who served in the Bureau of Moro Affairs during the American colonization of the Philippines, see: Timothy Marr, "Diasporic intelligences in the American Philippine empire: The transnational career of Dr. Najeeb Mitry Saleeby," *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African migration studies*, 2, 1 (2014), 78-106.

scholars. Thus, the MICH library held copies of the English translation of Liu Chai Lien's *The Arabian Prophet: A Study of Muhammad from Chinese and Arabic Sources* (1921); Arnold Vissière's two-volume *Études Sino-Mahométans*; and several works by Isaac Mason (1870-1939), the British Quaker missionary to China's Muslims. Taken as a whole, the library contained far more books on the Arab Middle East, and 'Moors' elsewhere, than on other Muslim regions, though Persia was represented through the prism of Sufi studies (such as Margaret Smith's *Attar*), since Sufism also formed part of the Moors' religious heritage.

The library room was surrounded with portraits of the Moor grandees who were presumably the heirs of the luminaries of former ages. But MICH's efforts at cultural preservation came not only as a book repository but also as a publisher of books relating to Moorish history. We have already referred to the 1957 reprint of Azeez's defensive account of the Arab ancestry of the Moors, with Samuel Lee's engraving of the Arabic gravestone as its frontispiece. There were also regular annuals and anniversary volumes which, as noted earlier, contained essays that served to reiterate the Arab heritage of the Moors. And there were occasional stand-alone history books, including *The Moorish Connection*, which MICH specially commissioned for the Colombo summit of the Non-Aligned Movement.

## **MICH AND THE NON-ALIGNED MOVEMENT**

When it was announced that the 5th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement would be held in Colombo from the 16th to the 19th of August 1976, the leadership of MICH saw an opportunity to use the summit as a platform to promote their community's Arab heritage and thereby establish links with fellow Arab, and more broadly Muslim, elites attending the conference from overseas. This was a sensible idea: a decade earlier, the Iraqi ambassador had donated a thousand Pounds Sterling to the MICH building fund, and in 1970, MICH president Sir Razik Fareed had felicitated a further donation of £2,333 from Kuwait's Ministry of Islamic Affairs, then, a few months before the Non-Aligned summit, a further 17,500 Rupees from the Saudi Arabian Department of Education and 8,500 Rupees from Begum Nusrat Bhutto, the wife of the Pakistani president.<sup>53</sup> It surely helped that, since retiring from Sri Lanka's parliament in 1968, Fareed had served as High Commissioner to Pakistan, then as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Iraq and Iran. Moreover, by the time of the summit, South Asian labor migration to the Gulf

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<sup>53</sup> MICH, *Golden Jubilee Celebration*, 222; MICH, *Souvenir III: 1970-1976* (Colombo: MICH, 1977), 107, 184.

was already underway and MICH leaders may have seen an opportunity to serve the economic welfare as well as the perception of their community.<sup>54</sup>

There was also a national political context on Sri Lanka.<sup>55</sup> After the redefinitions of ethnic identity during the colonial period, the question of community origins had taken on new urgency following independence, as the 1948 Citizenship Act denied citizenship to nearly 800,000 Indian Tamil and Malayali plantation workers on the grounds that they were immigrant outsiders. Thereafter, the Moors had pressing political reasons to present themselves as distinct from the Tamils.<sup>56</sup> In the Sri Lankan context of the 1970s, a history of Arab origins therefore served an important political purpose: it rendered the Moors distinct from the Tamils (with whom they shared a common language) and fixed their presence on the island in a distant medieval era of migration rather than the more problematic recent colonial past. This was not quite the ‘indigeneity’ of Sinhala nationalists, but it was something approaching a second-best. This would become more important in the years that followed the conference, after the Bandaranaike government was replaced in 1977 and Sri Lanka’s long simmering civil conflict began to emerge.<sup>57</sup>

Back at the time of the Colombo summit of 1976, the chair of the Non-Aligned Movement was Houari Boumédiène (1932–1978), an Algerian military officer turned politician who, as Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of Algeria, was effectively Algeria’s head of state and who had subsequently assumed the chair of the Non-Aligned Movement at its 4th Summit in Algiers in September 1973.<sup>58</sup> As an Algerian, Boumédiène may have been perceived as a fellow Moor by MICH members.<sup>59</sup> However, although Morocco had joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, Socialist regimes in the Arab

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<sup>54</sup> F. Eelens, T. Schampers, and J. D. Speckmann (eds.), *Labour Migration to the Middle East: From Sri Lanka to the Gulf* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1992).

<sup>55</sup> On the political context of the 1960s through mid-1970s, see: Rohan Bastin and Premakumara de Silva, “Historical threads of Buddhist-Muslim relations in Sri Lanka,” in *Buddhist-Muslim Relations in a Theravada World*, eds. Iselin Frydenlund and Michael Jerryson (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 52-56; Farzana Haniffa, “Conflicted solidarities? Muslims and the constitution-making process of 1970-72,” in *The Sri Lankan Republic at Forty: Reflections on constitutional history, theory and practice*, ed. Asanga Welikala (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2012); Rambukwella, *Politics and Poetics of Authenticity*, 102-36.

<sup>56</sup> Ameer Ali, *Plural Identities*. On the political-economic background, see: Vijaya Samaraweera, “Land as ‘patrimony’: Nationalist response to immigrant labour demands for land in the early twentieth century Sri Lanka,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 14, 3 (1977), 341-62.

<sup>57</sup> This would subsequently play out during the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009), during which the Moors broadly sided with the Sinhala-dominated state.

<sup>58</sup> In line with established protocol, Boumédiène was replaced during the Colombo summit by William Gopallawa (1896–1981), a Sinhalese Buddhist who served as President of Sri Lanka from 1972 to 1978.

<sup>59</sup> As a former guerilla, Boumédiène’s early life is rather obscure, though he seems to have been born to a Berber rather than an Arab family.

world during the decolonization period in the 1960s-70s excluded the monarchic kingdom from wider participation in the organization.<sup>60</sup>

Still, if fellow Moors were thin on the ground, there was still plenty of inter-Arab and inter-Muslim networking to be done at the summit. Consequently, for members of the Arab and Muslim delegations, MICH hosted a series of special events at their grand headquarters. There was ‘an exhibition of rare antiquities and heirlooms of the Sri Lankan Moors,’ which gave prominent place to manuscripts in Arabic and Arabic-script Tamil and three medieval Arabic gravestones.<sup>61</sup> There was a reception for the wives of the delegates, with Madame Jehan Sadat, spouse of the Egyptian president, and the spouses of the Egyptian foreign minister and ambassador as chief guests: Madame Sadat responded with ‘an inspiring speech in English.’<sup>62</sup> Later that week President Sadat made a \$10,000 donation to MICH through Sir Razik.<sup>63</sup> Another reception was held for the wives of the Egyptian and Iranian ambassadors.<sup>64</sup> There was a commemoration in honor of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan.<sup>65</sup> There were lectures at MICH by Abdur Rauf Khan, the Pakistani ambassador, and Mohammad Atef El Nawawi, the Egyptian ambassador.<sup>66</sup> And there was a ‘Cultural Pageant of Moors’ whose distinguished audience included the representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization.<sup>67</sup> Complete with costumes, music, and an explanatory script, the pageant consisted of eleven scenes that explained Moor history and began with ‘the advent of the first Arabs to Sri Lanka.’<sup>68</sup>

The pageant was devised by M.M. Thawfeeq, a household name in Sri Lanka through his work as a cricket journalist and as editor of *The Sunday Observer*, a leading English-language newspaper founded in 1834.<sup>69</sup> To coincide with the Non-Aligned summit, MICH also commissioned Thawfeeq to write a history of the Moors ‘high lighting Sri Lanka’s connection in the historic past with Arab Countries.’<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Karima Laachir, “Moroccan intellectuals between decolonization and the Arab Cold War: Abdallah Laroui’s critical and literary writing,” in *The Form of Ideology*, eds. Orsini et al., 215-40. On the broader Arab political context, see: Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and his rivals, 1958–1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>61</sup> “Events to mark the Fifth Non-Aligned Summit Conference,” MICH, *Souvenir III*, 173-77, followed by unpaginated photographs of various events.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-78.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, captions for unpaginated photographs.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 178. An earlier ‘Pageant of the Moors of Lanka’ had been staged in 1969 to mark the 25th anniversary of MICH. See: Haniffa, “Moors’ Islamic Cultural Home,” 145-146.

<sup>68</sup> “Events to mark the Fifth Non-Aligned Summit Conference,” 178.

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

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

## M.M. THAWFEEQ AND *THE MOORISH CONNECTION*

Unlike the leading figures of MICH who had been educated at Royal College, M.M. Thawfeeq was schooled at the rather less prestigious Ananda College. It was nonetheless an esteemed institution, having been established in 1886 as the English Buddhist School by Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), the American co-founder of the Theosophical Society.<sup>71</sup> This Anglophone education enabled M.M. Thawfeeq to begin his journalistic career at *The Times of Ceylon* in 1942, whence two years later he moved to the *Ceylon Observer*. By this time, he was already becoming involved in Moor community issues, and in the 1940s he served as general secretary of the All-Ceylon Moors' Association.<sup>72</sup> In May 1947, he joined the relatively new Moors Islamic Cultural Home, and remained an active member for many decades, while continuing his successful career in English-medium print journalism.<sup>73</sup>

Those first decades of independence saw language become a major political issue. In 1956, the Official Language Act (better known as the Sinhala Only Act) made Sinhala the sole official language of the young nation, marginalizing Muslims, Hindus, and Christians who wrote in Tamil or other languages. Yet on this and other policies, Moor elites sided with the government, and later their children were allowed to attend English-medium schools while Sinhalese and Tamil children had to be taught in their ancestral languages.<sup>74</sup> Subsequently, Moors made up a disproportionately large section of the Anglophone journalism profession, and though Thawfeeq had been educated before these policies took hold, he became one of the most prominent of many postcolonial Moor reporters and commentators.

Aside from his popular sports journalism, Thawfeeq contributed essays on Moor cultural topics—such as folklore and popular religious practices—to magazines and MICH souvenir annuals. In 1961, he wrote a short book on Sri Lanka's Muslim shrines, recounting traditions of the Arabian saints who lay buried therein.<sup>75</sup> Published by MICH, it carried a foreword by Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000), the president of Tunisia who was presumably approached as a prominent fellow Moor. However, Thawfeeq also published articles on Moor history in the national press, thus following in the footsteps of his

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<sup>71</sup> I have taken details of Thawfeeq's career from the forewords in: M.M. Thawfeeq, *Muslim Mosaics* (Colombo: Al Eslam Publications and Moors Islamic Cultural Home, 1972), 2-10. Unfortunately, my enquiries have been unable to establish firm dates for Thawfeeq's birth and death, though he apparently lived between around 1925 and 2005.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 10.

<sup>73</sup> MICH, *The First Twenty-One Years*, 165.

<sup>74</sup> My thanks to John Rogers for this information.

<sup>75</sup> M.M. Thawfeeq, *Muslim Saints and Shrines in Ceylon* (Colombo: MICH, 1961).

journalist predecessor, I.L.M. Abdul Azeez, whose influential 1907 booklet we have seen making the Moors' Arab ancestry a prominent issue in the Anglophone public sphere.<sup>76</sup>

Thawfeeq's *The Moorish Connection* was not the first work of postcolonial Sri Lankan history-writing to emerge from an international congress. Fifteen years earlier, in 1961, Colombo's hosting of the eighth triennial conference of the Associated Country Women of the World (founded in 1933) prompted the writing of another history of Sri Lanka which, sponsored by UNESCO, focused on the lives of rural women.<sup>77</sup> But though its female author, Ray Blazé, belonged to the island's Dutch-descended Burgher minority, her book transcended ethnic boundaries to elevate instead the categories of nationality and gender.<sup>78</sup> By contrast, Thawfeeq's history deployed shared ethnicity to transcend national boundaries.

Like Azeez and other modern Moor historians, Thawfeeq took Johnston's and Lee's early articles on the Colombo Arabic gravestone as the empirical foundation of the Moor claim to Arab origins. Like his predecessors too, the Orientalist translation and promotion of Ibn Battuta, that itinerant Moor extraordinaire, provided another key piece of evidence for not only Arab but North African links to Sri Lanka. Ibn Battuta appeared on the second page of Thawfeeq's introduction to his 1961 book, where he quoted at length from the translation by H.A.R. Gibb we have seen held by the MICH library.<sup>79</sup>

The larger historical claim that the library collection bolstered the Moors' ties to not only the Middle East but to North Africa too was writ through *The Moorish Connection*, which Thawfeeq wrote for the Non-Aligned summit. The cover image showed a map of the western Indian Ocean and Mediterranean, on which bold lines linked Sri Lanka with Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, India—and Morocco and Tunisia. Above this was a somewhat roughly rendered Arabic version, which—as *al-'alaqat al-'arabiyya* ('The Arab Connections')—made a subtle modification to the English title beneath it.

As with other MICH publications, there were several forewords: one by Sir Razik Fareed, thanking the 'many Arab countries' who had 'made generous donations' to MICH.<sup>80</sup> Next came Ibrahim Abdul Cader (1917-79), a prominent Moor politician and MICH member—his portrait had hung in the library since 1970—who voiced his hope

<sup>76</sup> The overlapping concerns of Azeez and Thawfeeq are particularly apparent in the latter's newspaper article on: "The Fight for the Fez," reprinted in Thawfeeq, *Muslim Mosaics*, 128-31.

<sup>77</sup> Ray Blazé, *Ceylon: Its people and its homes* (Colombo & London: John Murray for ACWW and UNESCO, 1961).

<sup>78</sup> Hence, in Blazé's national women's history, the sole mention of the Moors comes in reference to their discriminatory Muslim marriage laws. See: *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>79</sup> Thawfeeq, *Muslim Saints*, 9-10.

<sup>80</sup> M.M. Thawfeeq, *The Moorish Connection* (Colombo: MICH, 1976), 4.

that the summit would ‘strengthen the unity and solidarity’ between his country and those of the Middle East and Africa, particularly if delegates accepted the proposal for an ‘Indian Ocean Peace Zone’ put forward by Sri Lankan prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike (1916-2000), one of the co-founders of the Non-Aligned Movement.<sup>81</sup> Then came a poem in which the Cambridge-educated lawyer M.A. Careem channeled the aspirations of Pan-Arabist politics in the wake of the Yom Kippur War of 1973:

Arab nations all with their weapon—“Oil”  
 Sharper than Saladin’s sanctified sword—  
 Have joined hands with the Third World Force to toil  
 And in matters grave to seek accord!

For—Unity, Determination, Will—  
 The strongest weapon e’er—must restrain  
 The shameless Usurers—her dream-world kill  
 And every inch of Arab soil regain.<sup>82</sup>

Then came Thawfeeq, who made his opening historical gambit through several quotations from *The Preaching of Islam* by Sir Thomas Walker Arnold (1864-1930). Originally published in 1896, with its account of the peaceful propagation of Islam by itinerant traders and preachers rather than sword-bearing warriors, Arnold’s book found wide appeal among Muslim intellectuals in colonial South Asia and beyond, not least through early twentieth-century translations into Urdu, Arabic, and Turkish.<sup>83</sup> For Thawfeeq, though, the point was that Arnold described how as early as the seventh century Arab Muslim traders had made Sri Lanka the maritime center-point of their trade with China.<sup>84</sup>

After a brief overview of the Moors of today, he turned back again to history, calling on numismatics, inscriptions, cooking, folklore, architecture, and the famous baobab trees of Mannar as evidence that ‘the Ceylon Moors have manifested Arabic influence in their lives even up to the present day.’<sup>85</sup> Two pages later, Sir Alexander Johnston was quoted,

<sup>81</sup> I.C. Cader, “The Non-Aligned Conference,” in: *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>82</sup> M.A. Careem, “The Fifth Non-Aligned Conference [a poem],” in: *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>83</sup> Katherine Watt, “Thomas Walker Arnold and the re-evaluation of Islam, 1864-1930,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 36, 1 (2002), 1-98. On the translations, see: Nile Green, *How Asia Found Herself: A story of intercultural understanding* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 292-3.

<sup>84</sup> Thawfeeq, *Moorish Connection*, 9.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

before Thawfeeq turned to a survey of the various nations (all present at the summit) with which ‘the Ceylon Moors can claim direct connections.’<sup>86</sup>

In the pages that followed, surveying the Moors’ links with Arabia, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Oman, Tunisia, and Yemen, Thawfeeq combined oral traditions about migrant Arab saints he had collected for his 1961 book on Sri Lankan shrines with Orientalist translations of medieval Arabic texts, such as the geography of al-Idrisi (d.1165) and of course the travels of Ibn Battuta.<sup>87</sup> There were also accounts of more recent connections, such as the exile of the Egyptian ‘Urabi Pasha, whose nationalist credentials presumably played out well in the context of the Non-Aligned summit.<sup>88</sup> But the section on Iran turned back to ancient and medieval times by citing evidence of ancient trading ties unearthed in Anuradhapura then quoting at length from Gibb’s Ibn Battuta about the Sri Lankan travels of ‘Abdullah Ibn Khafif, a Sufi from Shiraz.’<sup>89</sup>

After relating local oral traditions about ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani (d.1166)—the celebrated Sufi of medieval Baghdad whose followers were numerous in Sri Lanka—the section on Iraq turned to the medieval Arabic gravestone of Abu Bakaya, made famous by Johnston and Lee, then the journalist-historian Abdul Azeez.<sup>90</sup> Links with Oman and Yemen were furnished by further quotes from al-Idrisi and local traditions about migrant Sufis.<sup>91</sup> And as for the Moor homelands of Morocco and Tunisia—Thawfeeq curiously ignored Algeria—he provided a prominent pair of medieval and modern travelers. For Morocco, this of course meant Ibn Battuta, who was quoted again via Gibb.<sup>92</sup>

But for Tunisia, it was President Bourguiba who formed the connection, not only with Sri Lanka’s Moors in general but with Thawfeeq in particular, who had interviewed him for *The Ceylon Observer* in 1951, during Bourguiba’s travels in search of fellow Arab allies against the French.<sup>93</sup> (Bourguiba also called on Sir Razik Fareed, but in the latter’s absence, he was hosted by other prominent Moors instead.) It was during that brief visit that Thawfeeq had made the acquaintance with the roving nationalist that a decade later would lead to Bourguiba writing the foreword to his book on Sri Lanka’s Muslim saints.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>87</sup> On such hagiographical stories of migrant Arab saints, see: Nile Green, “Migrant Sufis and sacred space in South Asian Islam,” *Contemporary South Asia*, 12, 4 (2003), 493-509.

<sup>88</sup> Thawfeeq, *Moorish Connection*, 18-19.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 20-1.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 21-24.

<sup>91</sup> Thawfeeq seems to have sourced his quotations of ‘Edrisi’ regarding Arabia and Oman indirectly from Tennant’s influential colonial-era history of Ceylon, from which he also quoted earlier. Cf. Thawfeeq, *Moorish Connection*, 14-15, 16, 26; Sir James Emerson Tennent, *Ceylon: An account of the island, historical and topographical*, 2 Vols (London: Longman & Green, 1859), I, 450, 574.

<sup>92</sup> Thawfeeq, *Moorish Connection*, 24-5.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 26-9.



Now in his 1976 book for the Non-Aligned summit, Thawfeeq would quote a message that Bourguiba sent to the Moors of Sri Lanka in gratitude for their hospitality in his earlier times of need: ‘Are they not for the greater part **the descendants of those Moorish navigators and merchants,**’ Bourguiba wrote of the Sri Lankan Moors (which Thawfeeq highlighted thus in bold), ‘who were driven by adventure in the most noble and exalted sense of the word to the most distant shore of “the sea of shadows”?’ Those Moors, as you know, are the descendants of North Africans.’<sup>94</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Of the eighty-six nations that participated in the 5th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, M. M. Thawfeeq had singled out nine to prove his thesis of a “Moorish connection” that, as illustrated on the cover of his book, tied their histories together. Yet, just as the Pan-Asianist ideologues of the early twentieth century were forced to rely on intermediary European translations of texts from Asian languages they were unable to read, so during the subsequent Bandung era were seekers of inter-Asian (or even inter-Arab) solidarity forced to rely on translations and other Orientalist works to articulate their narratives of longstanding connection.<sup>95</sup> This is not to say that there were no Moors who were proficient in Arabic in 1976. Three years earlier, another Moor educational institution—the Jami‘a Naleemiah (Naleemiah University)—had been founded in Beruwala, south of Colombo, to teach Arabic ‘to produce Islamic intellectuals for Muslim world collaboration.’<sup>96</sup> But the social demographic to whom such religious schools appealed was quite different from that of the Moor elites who attended English-medium schools like Royal or Ananda College, and who patronized the Moors Islamic Cultural Home. For most of them, Arabic remained a symbolic language of identity whose literary heritage they accessed via Orientalist translations into English. Ironically, as we have seen, this produced a kind of nominative historical illusion whereby, when explored through the library of Orientalism, their English name ‘Moor’ germinated into a primordial ‘Moorish connection’ with distant Andalusia, Tunisia, and Morocco.

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<sup>94</sup> Thawfeeq, *Moorish Connection*, 29. It seem quite conceivable that here Bourguiba was simply repeating what he had been told by Thawfeeq or other Moors during his prior visit to Colombo—a narrative which was thus recycled here by Thawfeeq as a circular, or ‘circulatory’ form of evidence.

<sup>95</sup> Green, *How Asia Found Herself*; Nile Green “Writing Confucian history in an Indian language: The transimperial translation of a ‘forged classic’,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 83, 4 (2024).

<sup>96</sup> Official Jami‘a Naleemiah brochure quoted in: Nagoor Gafoordeen, Zamri Arifin, and Kasheh Abu Bakar, “Brief study on practices of Arabic language in Sri Lanka,” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 9, 6 (2013), 42-47, with quotation at 45.

As the anthropologist Dennis McGilvray has noted on the basis of fieldwork among the Sri Lankan Moors since the late 1960s,

The concept of an Arab Moorish “race” provides a simple and appealing origin story. However, at an ethnographic level, Moorish identity fails to reflect Middle Eastern Arab cultural norms in any way, apart from Islam. Moorish families are not strongly patrilineal or patrilocal; indeed, many are matrilineal and matrilocal. [...] The only contemporary Moorish families who can specifically trace their ancestry to Arabia are the Maulanas (Seyyids), patrilineal descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions.<sup>97</sup>

Yet what we have seen of the use of Orientalism to rewrite regional community pasts as histories of inter-Arab connection was by no means unique to Sri Lanka. Aside from what we have seen earlier of the work of Indian Muslim historians such as Sulayman Nadvi, a similar pattern also unfolded in the postcolonial Maldives. There the Orientalist rediscovery of the *Rihla* of Ibn Battuta, and the printed distribution of his text in Arabic and English translation, had a transformative effect on the official history of the Maldives either side of independence from Britain in 1965. Despite the insistence of precolonial Maldivian historians that the islands had been converted to Islam by a Sufi from Iran by the name of Shaykh Yusuf Shams al-Din Tabrizi, from the late 1950s Maldivian officials—and ultimately the government history committee—instead promoted Ibn Battuta’s account, in which the Maldives had been converted by a fellow North African with the *nisba* (ancestral name) ‘al-Barbari.’<sup>98</sup> As the postcolonial decades passed, this new and official Arabocentric history complemented government policies that aligned the economy, society, and religiosity of the Maldives with those of Saudi Arabia.<sup>99</sup>

Reared under empire and ripened in its wake, in Sri Lanka too, such histories of maritime Arab connections found diplomatic value in the era of non-alignment. This was certainly the view of Thawfeeq, and the senior members of MICH who commissioned his

<sup>97</sup> McGilvray, “Rethinking Muslim identity,” 69.

<sup>98</sup> Azim Zahir, *Islam and Democracy in the Maldives: Interrogating reformist Islam’s role in politics* (London: Routledge, 2021), 70-1. For fuller discussion of the Maldives’ precolonial historiographical tradition, see: A.C.S. Peacock, “History, piety and factional politics in the Arabic Chronicle of the Maldives: Ḥasan Tāj al-Dīn’s *Ta’rīkh* and its continuations,” *Asiatische Studien*, 74, 1 (2020), 195-220. On the epigraphic evidence for the *nisba* al-Barbari versus al-Tabrizi, see: Ludvik Kalus and Claude Guillot, “Inscriptions islamiques en arabe de l’archipel des Maldives,” *Archipel*, 70 (2005), 15-52, esp. 36-41.

<sup>99</sup> On this Saudi alignment, see: Ibrahim Nahushal, “Geopolitics in the Maldives: Intersection of foreign relations and internal political rivalries,” *South Asia Research*, 44, 2 (2024), 230-47.

book for whom these ties to fellow Moors were surely meaningful, and not only materially instrumental, however large the donations to MICH of Arab delegates to the 1976 summit.

Those soft diplomatic ties would continue in subsequent years. In 1981, the fiftieth anniversary of Colombo's Ghafooriya Arabic College prompted felicitation letters from the ambassadors of Egypt and Iraq.<sup>100</sup> The Egyptian embassy would also fund al-Azhar-trained Arabic teachers for Ghafooriya and Zahira College and provide on-and-off support for a museum to 'Urabi Pasha in Kandy, where the famous nationalist had been exiled. As Michael Laffan has noted, 'run with the support of the Egyptian embassy, the museum is more about placing the exiles in a lineage linking the pharaohs to Nasser..., whose career echoed that of 'Urabi.'<sup>101</sup> Once again, we see transoceanic history serving ideological purposes.

Such connected histories are flexible geopolitical tools, though, and the maritime history promoted by MICH was also directed towards Iran. During my time in the MICH library, I was invited for tea with Omar Kamil (born 1949), who served as secretary of MICH from 1987 before becoming its fourth (and current) president in 2009. Like his predecessor, Sir Razik Fareed, Kamil studied at Royal College before entering politics and eventually rising to the position of mayor of Colombo. Then, in 2003, he was appointed as Sri Lankan ambassador to Iran. During our interview, Kamil recounted how he managed to negotiate the lifting of an Iranian embargo on imports of Sri Lankan tea for which Iran had previously been an important market. He also persuaded the Iranian deputy minister of economic affairs to provide Sri Lanka's state-owned Ceylon Petroleum Corporation with three-month credit lines on oil purchases, which became something of an economic lifeline.<sup>102</sup> He also set up a Sri Lankan Trade Fair in Tehran. What clinched these agreements, Kamil explained, was his recounting to Iranian officials of how their country had always been linked with Sri Lanka: ancient Persian coins had been excavated in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa; Persian merchants had traded with the Moors since medieval times; and, then as now, Sri Lanka lay on the maritime road connecting Iran with China.

It is not only big players like the People's Republic of China, and in earlier times imperial Britain, that have written Indian Ocean histories that align with their interests. Sri Lanka too—and crucially its subnational community of Moors—have deployed narratives of connection for their own soft power purposes.

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<sup>100</sup> Letters published in: Anonymous, *Golden Jubilee: Ghafooriya Arabic College* (Maharagama: n.p., 1981), unpaginated.

<sup>101</sup> Laffan, *Under Empire*, 229.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Omar Kamil (16 Apr. 2024), to whom I am most grateful for his hospitality and insights.