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Wilson Chacko Jacob. *For God or Empire: Sayyid Fadl and the Indian Ocean World.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780804793186 (hardcover, \$90.00); 9781503609631 (paperback, \$30.00).

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REVIEW BY TAUSHIF KARA, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

While the entangled life of Sayyid Fadl might have come to end in 1900 in Istanbul, to anchor or indeed conclude any telling of it firmly in time or in space would be to limit it, and perhaps more critically, to misread it. This rather simple precept provides the underlying thrust of Wilson Chacko Jacob's highly experimental and multilayered work on the complex life of the peripatetic Fadl Ibn Alawi (b. 1825), a Hadhrami *sayyid* (descendant of the Prophet) of the Alawi *tariqa* (Sufi order or Way) who was brought up on the Malabar coast in southern India. Fadl departed the subcontinent in 1852 for his 'homeland' in the Hijaz, an exile anticipated by the suspicious albeit confused British for his supposed role in radicalising the 'fanatic' and 'rebellious' Mappila Muslims. He eventually became the Emir of Dhofar, a region on the shores of the Arabian Sea, at a moment when the Ottoman state was reckoning with its shifting boundaries, both territorial and ideational. During that moment of global transformation and reordering, Fadl reflected deeply on his own role as a *sayyid* as well as the political and spiritual future of the nascent but crystallizing 'Muslim world,' the *ummah*. In a robust biographical rendering which also paints an inverted picture of the modern political subject, Jacob ultimately argues that Fadl's "life was not always and entirely his own—it was also a life of his predecessors and successors, of graves and texts, of followers and detractors, of one place and many" (202).

It is important to note from the outset that *For God or Empire* is not a biography in any conventional sense, though Jacob certainly provides us with a 'life and times' of Fadl as well as the broader political and intellectual context in which he lived. It straddles the boundaries of imperial, oceanic, and community histories, and could be described as a hagiography from without and an intellectual history of the Indian Ocean world from above and below. In a sense, Fadl is not the subject of this history but a metonym for the Indian Ocean world more broadly and for what Jacob calls "sayyid sovereignty": an inexplicitly Islamic mode of government and an understanding of life which grew alongside and despite its relationship to empire, modernity, and the nation-state. And like the history of the Indian Ocean itself, Fadl's life was and "is local, transregional, and global at once: both multi-scalar and multi-vectored, it can only be told in terms of many places, many times, and many communities" (1). The *sayyid* sovereignty Jacob recovers is one grounded in hospitality and pastoral care for one's followers, in notions of temporality that are not bookended by the beginning and end(s) of biological life, and in an idea of place that is boundless. But framing the argument and indeed defining this sovereignty is a concept Jacob presents forcefully at the start and returns to—in "glimpses"—throughout the six vastly different chapters: *wahdat al-wujud* or the "Unity of Life." Borrowed from the thought of the great twelfth century Sufi, Ibn Arabi, the Unity of Life is for Jacob rooted in a significant paradox, on a power that "belongs everywhere and nowhere at once, which in turn enables the further paradox of a relation to sovereignty that is also a release from it" (166).

If all this appears to be convoluted and shrouded beneath a heavy veil, it is. The author self-consciously deploys a "methodology of the glimpse" which is meant to enable us to "view the transhistorical yet space-time-canceling unity of life that was and is believed to be beyond the veil, between God and creation." (10). This approach allows for a creative and invigorating approach to rich archival material, but it also makes for demanding and at times arduous reading. Narratives are cut short and shuffled around, and a reader might find herself without a sense of where or when one is. The prose is

often dense. But this, perhaps, is precisely the point: the ineffable Unity of Life can only ever be caught in glimpses. In order to grasp—even loosely—the meaning of the life we seek to understand, we must be willing to *not* understand.

In the first chapter, Jacob shifts our focus to the entrances and failures of the East India Company (EIC) in southern India, and its attempts to come to terms with *sayyid* sovereignty. While the Indian rebellion of 1857 undoubtedly lingers in the background, pushed to the fore of the analysis are the more prolonged dealings of the EIC and later administrators with the Mappila Muslims, as well as the Company's awkward conceptions of Sayyid Fadl and his father Sayyid Alawi. In this telling, Jacob's book escapes the lingering colonial binaries—many of which are still present across archives and historiographies—and which tend to cast figures like Fadl as either rebels or mystics, fanatics, or imperial collaborators. The second and third chapters move swiftly across the Indian Ocean both in time and in space, between the 'arrival' of Islam in Malabar in the seventh century through the legendary conversion and migration of the Hindu sovereign Cheraman Perumal, and the exile of Fadl from Malabar to his Arab 'homeland' centuries later, neither of whom returned to their place of birth. These beautifully composed chapters allow Jacob to narrate a global history of 'connection' and 'exchange' on very different terms than we are used to. The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters—perhaps the strongest—are also the most unexpected and experimental. The first of these, titled "*Time is the Only Veil: Sufism and the Politics of Recognition*," takes very seriously the notion of *al-akhira* not only as the hereafter or the afterlife, as it is conventionally translated, but as 'life-as-other,' thus generating a new discourse on political subjectivity wherein the soul is linked to the present and future subject and "the politics of interest constitute only one dimension" (110).

Though Fadl himself died in exile, and his body was never returned to Malabar, we are gifted in the fifth and perhaps most methodologically innovative chapter the various strands tracing the *sayyid's* many failed or what Jacob calls "uncertain returns" to the subcontinent after his death. In a kind of prolepsis, such returns follow familiar routes in unfamiliar ways, from the Hijaz to Malabar and back again via satellite waves and social media streams. On YouTube, contemporary Wahhabi critics marshal DNA testing and genetics to debunk the sacred genealogical claims of their *sayyid* and Shi'a foes, making even more salient Jacob's ultimate point that modern sovereignty and its biopolitical claims quite literally erode that of the *sayyid*: "The genetic encoding and decoding of life's meaning may mean the final victory of a kind of sovereignty that began its march forward three to four centuries earlier" (166).

Jacob writes against those who cynically prefer to read Fadl as an Ottoman imperial agent acting out of his own self-interest, thereby eliding his role as a *sayyid* tasked with care and hospitality, and also against those who read the latter as a fundamentally exploitative or even archaic role.¹ He also writes against a curious and recent turn in intellectual histories of the Indian Ocean world which can uncritically valorize the 'vernacular' production of texts.² Proponents of this approach might have ignored or even misread the various 'elite' Arabic texts upon which Jacob relies and which constitute some of the book's most interesting material. Relatedly, the narrative also escapes the now well-trodden dialectic of modern Indian history, one caught between elite and subaltern actors and narratives competing for the telos of the nation. Jacob's book radically opens up the question and genealogy of modern sovereignty in order to recover a narrative that is tied neither to the nation nor to empire, and *without* recourse to its familiar canon.

For God or Empire contributes most significantly to a wider and exciting tendency in Indian and Muslim political thought in particular, and in global intellectual history more broadly, which hopes to emancipate texts and their authors from the hermeneutical confinements of 'religion' and 'culture'. If Engseng Ho's now classic work on genealogy and mobility inaugurated new ways of thinking diaspora in the Indian Ocean, Wilson Chacko Jacob helps us to think through what sort

¹ Other scholarship on Fadl includes Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

² Nile Green, "The Waves of Heterotopia: Toward a Vernacular Intellectual History of the Indian Ocean," *American Historical Review* 123:3 (June 2018): 846-874.

of questions an intellectual history of the Indian Ocean might seek to pose.³ But perhaps the most provocative contribution here is methodological. Moving between and across imperial archives—both Ottoman and British—as well as hagiography, ethnography, Sufi treatises, and even YouTube and Facebook, Jacob evinces throughout the often-overlooked fact that any narration of the Indian Ocean cannot but be composed from myriad vantage points and multiple disciplinary perspectives. The disunity of history, as it were, and of the social sciences more broadly, has served to obscure the Unity of Life. Recovering from anthropology the vital role of memory and community in the making of history, and from the study of Islam the relevance of intellectual histories which do not need to reference the ideational world of the Enlightenment, *For God or Empire* is a refreshing and vital theoretical intervention in the study of the Indian Ocean and for intellectual history more broadly.

Taushif Kara is a doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge. His research focuses on the modern intellectual history of the Indian Ocean world and on Muslim political thought in the 20th century. He is a former convenor of the Cambridge World History Workshop and a producer at *Interventions: The Intellectual History Podcast*.

³ Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).