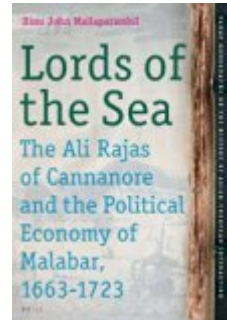


Binu John Mailaparambil. *Lords of the Sea: The Ali Rajas of Cannanore and the Political Economy of Malabar (1663-1723)*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2011. 256 p. \$116.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-18021-5.



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The maritime state of the Ali Rajas and the inland state of the local ruler, the Kolathiri, had intricate relations which were further complicated by the intrusions of European companies. Dutch sources read with critical acumen by the author provide insights into the workings of indigenous political networks. The Dutch were handicapped by their own experience of European states and often misinterpreted political relationships in Malabar. But the author relies less on Dutch analytical statements and more on their detailed reporting of the interactions of the “men of prowess” who controlled political affairs in Malabar. He refers to modern models of the “segmentary state” and the “little kingdom”, but feels that they are insufficient for capturing political reality in Malabar. He shows that territorial sovereignty is not the essence of the state in Malabar. Fluid networks of personal relations are more important. The basic unit of such relationships is the “swarupam”, the extended family or household which produces rulers whose successions follow the principle of seniority within a matrilineal system. The swarupam of the Kolathiri, the hereditary ruler of Kolathunadu, to which the port of Can-

nanore belongs, is only one of several swarupams. The Arackal swarupam of the Ali Rajas was founded in the sixteenth century by an Arab trader who married a Kolathiri princess. He thus gave rise to a Mappila kingdom based on maritime trade rather than on the control of land and labour. The Mappilas were the offspring of such mixed marriages.

The Kolathiri swarupam, being an old one, was subdivided in several lineages which vied with each other for succession to the position of the ruler. The Arackal swarupam, being a new one, had no subdivisions and the succession to the position of the Ali Raja was hardly contested. The book covers the reigns of seven Kolathiris and two Ali Rajas. The author refers to them more or less collectively, the personalities of the holders of these offices remain indistinct. Princes like Ramathiri and Unnithiri who dared to defy the Kolathiri emerge as powerful personalities in this text. In dealing with them, the author reflects the attention paid to these princes by the Dutch. Unnithiri was of particular interest to them as he sided with the British.

Throughout the period which is covered by the book, the power of the Kolathiri wanes and that of the Ali Raja increases. Vasco da Gama had found in the Kolathiri of his time a useful ally who supplied him with pepper. The Kolathiri of the seventeenth century could still marshal troops and fight against inland enemies, but he had lost the control of the pepper trade to the Ali Raja who also had bases on the Lakshadweep and Maldivian islands which enabled him to circumvent European attempts to capture the trade in spices. In addition to pepper, cardamom was also a valuable spice which was in great demand in West Asia. The import of horses from West Asia for the cavalry of the Vijayanagar empire was also of great profit for the traders of Malabar. The Portuguese had participated in this trade in a big way, whereas the Dutch were not active in it.

The activities of the Dutch in Cannanore were not very successful. The author reports that they remained ensconced in the Fortress S. Angelo, which they had captured from the Portuguese. They were hamstrung by the line of command via Batavia and Cochin which left them little room for discretion. Moreover, whereas the British paid in cash for the spices, the Dutch were under instructions to sell their merchandise so as to earn money for buying spices. Since the goods they had to offer were not in great demand in Malabar, they could at the most rely on the sale of Japanese copper. The Ali Raja treated them diplomatically. He refrained from confronting them politically, but conducted his trade by violating their system of control. Similarly he avoided clashes with the Kolathiri whom he had deprived of the control of the spice trade by extending his trading network into the hinterland in which the spices were produced. As "Lords of the Sea" the Ali Rajas had accumulated much more "sakti" (power) than the inland rulers. As the author argues "sakti" was of decisive importance in the political affairs of Malabar. It was far more than wealth and military strength, it consisted of the social perception of the influence of the "men of prowess" which the author

has studied in detail. B. J. Mailaparambil deserves to be congratulated for this monograph which sheds new light on the "state society" of Malabar. It is a valuable sequel to Pius Malekandathil's *Portuguese Cochin and the Maritime Trade of India, 1500-1663*. Pius Malekandathil, *Portuguese Cochin and the Maritime Trade of India, 1500-1663*, New Delhi 2002. Unfortunately Mailaparambil has not taken note of Malekandathil's work at all. Both these books contribute to a fascinating portrayal of Kerala in early modern times.

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