



Sebastian R. Prange. *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 358 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-42438-7.

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Sheikh on Prange, *Monsoon Islam*

The apparently peaceful arrival of Islam in Kerala, brought by merchants, not marauders, is often compared favorably to that in north India, but there has been inadequate thought given to how Islam came to be transferred. In Malabar, modern Kerala, there is a powerful story about the first Indian Muslim, the seventh-century Cherman Perumal, who, after seeing the moon split into two before reuniting, came to understand that the miracle he had witnessed had been performed by a man named Muhammad. Later, the king voyaged to Arabia in the company of a group of Muslim pilgrims, where the Prophet Muhammad converted him to Islam. Cherman Perumal never returned to his homeland but Islam was taken to Malabar by a group of his Arab associates. While this early conversion narrative might be legend, Sebastian Prange argues that its “story-world” (pp. 2, 7, 107) is reflective of prevailing patterns of religion, trade, and rule in the Indian Ocean world, one that he calls “Monsoon Islam.” Islam in this zone did not transfer fully formed from a hypothetical Arabian origin. It evolved, he argues, out of “the tension between the global and the local, between competing impulses and imperatives of severalty and syncretism” (p. 23). Prange’s book is an attempt to understand the creative engagements, facilitated by politics and trading contacts,

that went into “realizing” Kerala’s characteristic versions of Islam (p. 4). While the book’s subject is Kerala, its implications go further: it encapsulates and develops much recent thinking about Islam and its transmission, emphasizing its local, vernacular, and contested histories as shaping and forming the broader Islamic world.

Monsoon Islam is arranged around spaces—port, mosque, palace, sea—which are the rubrics for its four chapters. Its locale is the Malabar coast between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries when local production of pepper and other spices made it a coveted trade destination. As traders, and not rulers, are the main actors in the tale, Prange did not find epigraphic and courtly sources particularly helpful, nor the few Malayalam historical records that have survived, most of which are primarily concerned with temples or royal households. The book’s key records include Arabic texts and epigraphs from India and Yemen, travel writings, the Cairo Geniza records in Judeo-Arabic, a handful of Malayalam sources, and sixteenth-century European accounts. Prange’s profuse notes do not merely name-check lists of references; they reflect a generous and serious acknowledgement of previous scholarship in multiple languages. The book is carefully produced with a list of thirty-six

pages of primary and secondary sources and a useful table with English, Malayalam, and Arabic transliterations of place names. Closely argued and densely packed with detail, this volume should be of equal interest to the specialist and the general reader.

The first chapter sets up Kerala's sea-facing economy, where multiethnic merchant communities generated institutional and legal mechanisms to establish the networks of trust required for business. Kerala's pepper made it a destination for far-flung trade from an early period and in its ports could be found Tamils, Christians, Jews, Gujaratis, Chinese, Zoroastrians, and Muslims from a variety of ethnic and geographical origins. Interestingly, local Malabar merchants did not participate directly in maritime commerce; it was left largely to settlers. From the thirteenth century, Muslims started to dominate the sea trade and Islamic law became the shared legal system (even "legal *mentalité*," p. 63) for setting up trade arrangements—including partnerships and risk-spreading systems—and resolving disputes. Prange rounds up recent research that shows the preponderance of Islamic law in the western Indian Ocean, a circumstance that necessitated the presence of Muslim *qadis*, or judges, in all ports.

The second chapter (titled "Mosque") is perhaps the most fascinating of the book, offering a close look at the central legend that has come to characterize Islam in Kerala. The legend of Cheraman Perumal's conversion has become a powerful symbol of merchant-driven Indian Ocean Islam that continues to resonate in present-day politics and diplomacy. For the former Indian president A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, the Cheraman mosque in Kodungallur was a manifestation of the popular narrative of the antiquity of Islam in Kerala and of its peaceful transfer. For Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, who presented a gilded model of the mosque to the Saudi government, it was a symbol of a history of transactional relations. Many in Kerala and beyond take the conversion story and

the antiquity of the Cheraman mosque as fact. Prange's careful unpacking of the story as it changed and evolved over centuries ripples through the whole book. By asking what purpose the tale served and for whom, he uncovers generations of accreted meaning, demonstrating that a narrative that seems to circulate airily through history turns out to have specific and local origins as an assertion of local authority and elite family status.

As there is no epigraphic record of a Chera king contemporary with Muhammad, Prange argues that the tale must have come into circulation at a later stage. The Cheraman Perumal legend is known from two sixteenth-century texts: the travel account of Portuguese Duarte Barbosa and the Arabic *Tuḥfat al-mujāhidīn* of Zayn al-Dīn al-Malabarī. In addition is a less noticed and undated Arabic text, *Qiṣṣat shakarwatī farmād*, the "Tale of the Great Ruler Cheraman Perumal," which, according to Prange, offers the oldest and most comprehensive version of the tradition. The latter text lists the names of the Muslim pilgrims who converted Cheraman, many of which suggest Arab ethnicity and high religious prestige. It further lists ten of the earliest mosques on the Malabar coast, all built with merchant patronage at key centers of Muslim commerce. Based on the evidence of the *Qiṣṣat*, Prange suggests that widespread Muslim settlement in Malabar goes back no earlier than the twelfth century, a period corresponding to an uptick in trade and one characterized by a number of trade-based port polities that arose in the wake of the disintegration of Chera rule. The antiquity of the text is attested by the fact that it does not mention Calicut and Cochin, both of which developed later, in the fourteenth century.

Further confirmation of the *Qiṣṣat*'s evidence comes from Yemen. Records of the reign of the Rasulid ruler al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf (r. 1249-95) include a list of payments of stipends made to Muslim preachers and judges who were located in almost exactly the same places as the early mosques listed

in the *Qiṣṣat*. Similar confirmation comes from the *Keraḷōlpathi* (Rise of Kerala) and other Brahmanical accounts of Kerala's history. Prange thus concludes that the origin story of Cheraman Perumal comes not from the eighth century, as is often believed, but from a period between the early twelfth and early fourteenth centuries. (He similarly dismisses the widely believed eighth-century date of the Cheraman mosque in Kodungalur.) The proliferation of names and places in the story had two functions: first, it served to buttress the claims of Kerala Muslims to land or wealth, and second, to establish the elite and hereditary status of ethnic Arabs to hold judicial offices. It is therefore not an origin story of Islam in India; it is in fact a claim of later Muslims to status and authority. The various iterations of Cheraman's conversion, many of which are from the sixteenth century, helped establish the legitimacy of religious authority in Kerala's port towns.

Prange does a thorough and convincing job of establishing the historicity of key parts of the *Qiṣṣat*, bringing it, as he says, from "the story-world of myth into the realm of history." (p. 107) As a scholar, he is surefooted and precise with historical detail and analysis. Where he is less convincing is in his explication of the less tangible aspects of the "story-world." Religious affiliation functions because people agree to believe and disseminate certain narratives. While he is right to assert the local and political origins of myths, he is sometimes content to explain their contents as evidence of unproblematized syncretism. In the absence of a translation or summary of the *Qiṣṣat shakarwatī farmāḍ*, one is left guessing about how the text functioned and how the tale of the convert king gained traction over time.

Prange goes on to offer a rich discussion of the meanings and forms of mosques in Kerala and beyond. In this cosmopolitan landscape, mosques served multiple functions—they were refuges for travelers, centers of education, and locations for negotiating "intra-communal politics" (p. 123). We

learn that mosques were granted the coveted right to tiled roofs in the sixteenth century, a right traditionally only granted to Hindu temples and certain palaces. What is more, mosques served to entrench the authority of their patrons or builders, including some who might have been manumitted slaves. Mosques also became associated with specifically local manifestations of *jihad*, especially in the wake of Portuguese attacks on Kerala's mosques in the sixteenth century.

In the next chapter, “Palace,” Prange charts the rise of Calicut from the fourteenth century as the preeminent port of Malabar, made wealthy, in account after account, because of the activities of Muslim merchants. He interrogates why Muslims flocked to Calicut, a Hindu kingdom ruled by the Zamorin, and investigates the place and influence of Islam and Muslims in this medieval city-state. He discusses the circumstances in which conversion to Islam took place: intermarriage (as a result of which Mappila Muslims practice matrilineality), caste circumstances, and slavery. The final chapter, “Sea,” pulls together the networks of trade, religion, and political alliances in which Kerala was enmeshed. Of particular interest to me was the reconstruction of links between the Rasulid rulers of Yemen and the west coast of India. Why did Rasulid sultans send regular stipends to judges and scholars along the western coast of India? The answer, says Prange, lies in the Rasulids’ attempt to offer patronage to and exert authority over a swathe of Indian Ocean Muslim communities with whom they desired closer commercial contacts, an effort which was rewarded by several such communities, including the multiethnic Muslim community of Calicut, dedicating their Friday prayers to the Rasulid sultans. Stipends were sent to Muslim communities in places under Hindu rule and thus did not risk conflict with local Muslim rulers. This characteristically Indian Ocean practice of creating far-flung commercial-political networks built upon older traditions of long-distance endowments such as those made by Southeast Asian rulers to Buddhist sites in India.

Historians often have the task of dismantling grandiose narratives of uplifting harmony or undying hatred and revealing the smaller motivations of real people as they made their way in the world. In *Monsoon Islam*, Prange shows how the Malabar coast was the site of a lot of local jostling and bickering but also of enduring and far-flung partnerships and truces. The spaces that people inhabited in Kerala were particularly interconnected to the wider world, through pepper, religion,

and politics. Islam in Kerala has suffered academic neglect for being marginal to north Indian narratives as well as those of Arab-centered Islam. Sebastian Prange shows that we should pay attention to Kerala and to its place in making the interconnected world of Monsoon Islam. He has brought scrupulous multilingual scholarship to difficult questions of history, identity, and myth and his book deserves to be widely read.

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