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Markus Vink

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The current volume under review, published in the "TANAP Monographs on the History of Asian-European Interaction" Series, is an unapologetic politico-economic narrative set in a distinct "autonomous", micro-regional Braudelian framework. Rejecting "anachronistic", "highly essentializing" approaches in both Indian and Kerala historiography stressing the "great traditions" of both Islam and textual Brahmanism, the book assumes "an emphatically regional point of view", emphasizing "relatively enduring, regional 'little' tradition[s]" and "far more important regional agencies" (pp. 7, 11). The unwavering focus is on the northern Malabar (Kerala) theater or more specifically Kolathunadu and its most important politico-economic actors. This so-called "perennial nuclear micro-region"[1] with its core around the leading port-town of Cannanore (Kannur) and its surrounding feeder ports was the domain of the Kolaswarupam (popularly known as the Kolathiris), one of the four major political houses in Malabar, claiming suzerainty over a larger area located between the kingdoms of the Keladi Nayakas of Kanara (Ikkeri) and the Zamorins or *Samudris* of Calicut (Kozhikode).

An important case study of cross-cultural encounters in the early modern "Age of Contained Conflict" (Sanjay Subrahmanyam) or "Balance of Blackmail" (Ashin Das Gupta),[2] the central theme of Mailaparambil's work is the multi-dimensional interaction between the main actors in the realm, namely: 1) the Arackal Ali Rajas, the most prominent maritime merchants in pre-colonial Malabar dominating the Mappila Muslim traders in and around Cannanore; 2) the Kolathiris, the traditional claimants to political power in Kolathunadu; and: 3) the local representatives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC after its Dutch abbreviation). The Ali Rajas, the Kolathiris and the VOC were the main contenders in a complex struggle for power shaped by both "internal" dynamics and "external" forces.

The chronological point of departure of Mailaparambil's micro-regional analysis is the Dutch conquest of the Portuguese Fort St. Angelo at Cannanore in 1663. Somewhat less obvious is the study's terminal point of 1723. By this time, Mailaparambil asserts, the evolution of the historical forces, which were constantly structuring and restructuring the relations between the local power groups in Cannanore, reached a critical juncture (p. 3). Expanding maritime trade opportunities, promoted to a great extent by the ongoing competition among the various European trading companies for Malabar pepper, opened up new opportunities for local "men of prowess". The open conflict, which erupted between the Ali Raja and the Kolathiri factions in 1721, was the culmination of the mounting pressures within the power structure of Kolathunadu. Centrifugal forces operating within the Kolaswarupam gained considerable strength, while the intensifying competition to gain

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[1] The term "perennial nuclear region" was coined by the British geographer O. H. K. Spate for South Asia, reminiscent of the "physiographic macroregions" suggested for China by the American anthropologist G. William Skinner. See O. H. K. Spate, *India and Pakistan: A General and Regional Geography*, London, Methuen and Co., 1954, pp. 148-151; G. W. Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1977. Neither of these terms are used by the author.

[2] A. Das GUPTA, "Europeans in India Before the Empire", in U. Das Gupta (ed.), *The World of the Indian Merchant 1500-1800: Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 229-230; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500-1650*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 254.

access to the surplus generated by maritime trade also set off similar tendencies within "Mappiladom" and the "informal" state of the Ali Raja among rival Mappila groups from neighboring ports such as Dharmapatanam (pp. 144-145, 155, and 176-177). From a broader perspective, alternative and more meaningful terminal points for Kerala present themselves in the form of the centralizing regional "military-fiscal states" or "sultanist regimes" of Travancore under Martanda Varma (r. 1729-1758) and Mysore under Haider Ali (r. 1761-1783) and Tipu Sultan (r. 1783-1799) and their interaction with the Dutch and English East India Companies, respectively.[3]

Relying heavily on the extensive VOC repositories in the National Archives in The Hague supplemented by local sources, the work is divided into three sections. In true Braudelian fashion, the book's first section (chapters 1 and 2) assumes a *longue durée* perspective focusing on *structures* or the "limits of the possible". In Chapter One, "The Geo-Political Setting of Kolathunadu", Mailaparambil, although professing "not to champion the notion of "geographic determinism", argues that the significance of geography in the shaping of the history of Kolathunadu "can scarcely be overrated" (pp. 22-23). Most significantly, Malabar's relative isolation and Kolathunadu's narrow stretch of agricultural land produced a "region within the region", a "sub-regional *sonderweg*", or "particular micro-region" within both South India and Kerala (pp. 16-17).

Chapter Two, "The Rajas of Kolathunadu", examines the region's long-term political structures: the nature of the pre-colonial "state" and the segmented *swarupam* polity with its limited resource base and numerous co-sharers of the realm (*taravadus*, "joint households") based on the regional concept of *sakti* ("cosmic power"). As the Kolaswarupam was gradually hiving off into various lineages, new nodes of power or so-called "houses by the sea", such as the Arackal Ali Rajas, began to emerge by the middle of the sixteenth century (esp. pp. 30-32, 37-39, 46-48, 50-51).

Having established the parameters – the crucial role of maritime trade and the decentralized, pluralistic, and fissiparous nature of the Kolathunadu polity – the book's second section (Chapters Three, Four and Five) examines the interrelated histories of the most prominent rival maritime trading groups in Cannanore: the Mappila traders of Cannanore under the Arackal Ali Rajas and the Dutch East India Company.

In Chapter Three, "Lords of the Sea", Mailaparambil argues that the rise to prominence of the thalassocratic mercantile empire of the Ali Rajas, including at times the Maldives and Lakshadweep, was anything but "a bolt from the blue" in a region where geographical factors limited the agricultural surplus and maritime trade constituted the most lucrative area of resource mobilization (pp. 77-78). The Arackal Swarupam, he alleges, presents "an unique case in Indian history" and the closest example of a "maritime state" where the "hermetically defined sociological titles of 'merchants' and 'kings' lose their relevance" (pp. 1, 78-79).

Chapter Four, "Jan Company in Coromandel (1663-1723)", describes how, for a variety of reasons, the European newcomers, including the Portuguese (until 1663) and the Dutch (after 1663), were neither able to fundamentally alter nor destroy the networking system of the indigenous Mappila traders: the existence of both alternative land routes and parallel "smuggling" routes along the coast, the limited resources of men and materiel, the growing commercial activities of English and French traders, and the VOC insistence on using barter rather than ready cash blunted all such efforts (pp. 102-103).

Chapter Five, "The VOC Trade in Cannanore (1663-1723)", provides an overview of Dutch exports from and imports into Cannanore. The volume of trade in general was

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[3] See, for example, Mark de LANNOY, *The Kulasekhara Perumals of Travancore: History and State Formation in Travancor from 1671 to 1758*, Leiden, Research School CNWS, Leiden University, 1997, esp. pp. 84-101, 116-117, and 133-137.

rather insignificant and the settlement an administrative burden. The VOC failed in realizing its primary objective of acquiring a major share of the Malabar pepper, "the bride around whom everyone dances", due to its rigid price policy, with prices fixed not locally but at Batavia, and the considerable overheads it incurred compared to local traders – what Niels Steensgaard styled "the internalization of protection costs".[4]

The book's third and final section (Chapters Six and Seven) "descends" to the level of *événéments*, divided into two subperiods set apart by the transition of power from one lineage segment (*kovilakam*) of the Kolathunadu *swarupam*, the Palli Kovilakam, to the Udayamangalam Kovilakam in 1698, leading to a new round of realignments. These events, discussed in Chapter Six, "Power Politics in Kolathunadu (1663-1697)", and Chapter Seven, "The Coast Adrift: The Ali Raja and the Rise of New Maritime Powers (1698-1723)", portray in minute detail how both the "internal" regional conditions and, less successfully, extra-regional trade relationships affected the destinies of the various political co-sharers of the Kolathunadu realm. Especially in the latter period, both the Dutch and English contributed, directly and indirectly, to the intensification of the power struggle and the strengthening of fissiparous tendencies within the Kolathunadu *swarupam* where the Ali Rajas had begun to assert a more independent status (p. 172).

Mailaparambil's overall analysis of Kolathunadu's political economy is clear and incisive. As is wont to happen, however, in his eagerness to assail what he perceives to be the two reigning paradigms in Kerala historiography, Mailaparambil's "emphatically regional point of view" falls into the mirror trap of overstating its case. Whereas he critiques these "anachronistic" and "essentializing" approaches for leading to "a serious de-contextualization of the existing early-modern regional identities" (pp. 7, 173), Mailaparambil in turn decontextualizes his own narrative by his relative neglect of cultural-religious and extra-regional agents and forces.

Thus, on the one hand, he criticizes the "pan-Islamic framework" of Stephen Dale (1980)[5] and others portraying the Mappilas as a "frontier" people characterized by a "religiously defined militancy" (pp. 7, 173). The Mappilas of Malabar in general, he asserts, and Kolathunadu in particular did not constitute one single political interest group organized under a distinct "Islamic" identity, but instead were segmented into various factions. Rather than *Fremdkörper* or foreign enclaves, the Ali Rajas and other Mappilas, hardly affected by religious consciousness, functioned as intrinsic components of the existing regional sociopolitical order. Reversing the gaze, Mailaparambil instead asserts that "it was not the Mappilas but these European company men [the English and the Dutch] who formed a 'frontier' group which remained at the periphery of the local socio-political system" (p. 177).

On the other hand, Mailaparambil denounces the "pan-Indian perspective" stressing the importance of a particular "Hindu" form of ritual kingship imbued by the Brahmin textual tradition, blaming the tendency of privileging Brahmanical scriptures and the equation of "Indian culture" with Brahmanical traditions and Sanskrit largely on European (post-)colonial Orientalist discourses on India (pp. 29-31, 188 n. 30). Though trans-regional social identities did exist and were not wholly insignificant in Malabar, they were not the dominant factors shaping the history of the region.

Mailaparambil's unapologetic emphasis on "autonomous" history and political economy comes at a certain price. While his mapping of the complex realities of Kolathunadu's

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[4] Niels STEENSGAARD, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974.

[5] Stephen F. DALE, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Mappilas of Malabar, 1498-1922*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980.

sociopolitical landscape is meticulous and provides a sharp focus to the narrative, the contours of the extra-(micro-)regional and cultural-religious "scapes" are blurry at best. Older caste members, such as the Portuguese, simply vanish from the stage, whereas "external" actors, most notably the Marathas and Mughals, make cameo appearances, at times disappearing as quickly and mysteriously as they enter the scene (pp. 148-149, 161, 164). In the case of both the Mappilas and the VOC, the micro-regional perspective is outright limiting and Mailaparambil's statements contradict his "autonomous" stance. Thus, the Mappila traders of Cannanore were part and parcel of what he styles a "Mappila system of trade", covering the entire coastal belt from Gujarat to Bengal, maintaining extensive commercial links with the "commercial world of the Indian Ocean", most notably the Arabian Sea (esp. pp. 63-79). At the same time, the Company settlement at Cannanore, "the frontier of Cochin", was on the periphery of Dutch *commandement* of Malabar, itself part of the semi-periphery of the Dutch Indian Ocean world – and (after 1679) operating on the margins of the overall calculations and decision-making process of the VOC leadership in Batavia and the Dutch Republic as Mailaparambil himself readily acknowledges (p. 85).[6]

Mailaparambil's principled neglect of extra-regional actors and outside forces flies in the face of a growing body of scholarship on the quickening pulse of "archaic globalization" in the early modern period in general and the "long eighteenth century" in particular. In fact, beyond the Kolathunadu horizon, forces were at work undermining the very foundations of Mailaparambil's "splendid isolation". After 1680, the traditional regional rivalries of India's southernmost rulers became inexorably intertwined with the pan-Indian Mughal-Maratha struggle. At the same time, intra-Asian and long-distance trade with Asia entered a new competitive phase, characterized by the diminishing importance of monopolistic commodities and monopolistic positions while European and Asian competition gained momentum, ushering into a new "age of commerce".

His "autonomous" perspective also leads Mailaparambil to overemphasize the "*sonderweg*" of Kolathunadu and the "unique case" of the Ali Rajas, straddling the spheres of *imârat* (government) and *tijârat* (trade). In the wake of Chris Bayly (1982; 1988), numerous scholars have pointed out that at least from the late sixteenth century onwards, the "portfolio capitalist", "merchant noble", or "political merchant" was a characteristic feature in the Indian politico-economic landscape as part of the "commercialization of royal power" and "politicization of merchant wealth" in the age of mercantilism.[7]

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[6] For instance, the VOC's late seventeenth-century "pepper race" with the EIC, including a moderate, controlled dumping policy on the European market, involved largely Indonesian, not Malabar, pepper. See Femme S. Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company: Expansion and Decline*, Zutphen, Walburg Pers, 2003, p. 133.

[7] Chris A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 460; *Idem*, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987; C. A. Bayly and S. Subrahmanyam, "Portfolio Capitalists and the Political Economy of Early Modern India", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 25:4, 1988, pp. 401-424; Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Merchants, Companies, and Commerce on the Coromandel Coast, 1650-1740*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 224; Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Jan Compagnie in Coromandel, 1605-1690: A Study in the Interrelations of European Commerce and Traditional Economies*, The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1962, p. 58; H. K. S'Jacob, "State Formation and the Role of Portfolio Investors in Cochin, 1663-1700", *Itinerario*, 18:2, 1994, pp. 65-85. See also Frank Perlin's analysis of the portfolio wealth of "great households" in seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries Maharashtra and David Washbrook's discussion of the role of "monied groups" in the pre-colonial Karnataka.

The most famous seventeenth-century examples of Indian portfolio capitalists are Mir Muhammad Sayyid Ardestani (1591-1663) or the *Mir Jumla* of Golconda; the Bijapur general and governor of the Karnataka, Muzaffar al-Din *Khan-i-Khannan* (d. 1657); the Balija Chitti merchant, Chinanna Malayya alias Astrappa Chitti (d. 1636) and his family in Senji, Tanjavur and the remnants of Vijayanagara around Pulicat; and the Gaud Saraswat Brahmin Babba Prabhu (d. 1696) in Kerala.[8]

The most fruitful comparative case study of cross-cultural interaction in the "Age of Contained Conflict", however, would be the Periya Tambi Maraikkayars. The multi-dimensional interaction between the Periya Tambis and Tamil Muslim Maraikkayars, the Tevars of Ramnad (Ramanathapuram), and the VOC in Tuticorin (Thoothukudi) closely resemble that between the Ali Rajas and Mappila Muslims, the Kolathiris, and the Dutch East India Company in Cannanore. From the 1670s onwards, the Periya Tambi Maraikkayars, formed by the Kilakkarai-based family of Shaykh Abd al-Qadir or "Citakkati", constituted the most formidable group of portfolio capitalists in the Madurai and Ramnad region.[9] The position of the Periya Tambis was comparable to that of the Ali Rajas: an ambiguous relationship with their sovereign authorities, the Tevars of Ramnad; a not undisputed position as patron of the local Maraikkayar community and client groups at Kilakkarai, Kulasekharapatnam, Kayalpatnam, and other "port-hamlets"; and, as powerful merchant-princes, the target of repeated attacks by the VOC. For all these potential insecurities, the Periya Tambis, similar to the Ali Rajas, were more than able to resist European competition until well into the eighteenth century, both in economic terms and by offsetting their control of the sea by their control of military force on land.[10]

These limitations notwithstanding, Mailaparambil's is an important contribution to the debate on the nature of the pre-colonial Indian state and the role of "new élites" (landholders, literate service gentry, merchants) in the "commercialization of royal power" and "politicization of merchant wealth", providing important insights into the inner workings of a micro-regional Indian Ocean world in its sociopolitical complexities.

MARKUS VINK
(State University of New York at Fredonia)

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[8] J. N. SARKAR, *The Life of Mir Jumla, the General of Aurangzeb*, 2nd ed, New Delhi, Rajesh Publications, 1979; D. C. VERMA, *History of Bijapur*, New Delhi, Kumar Bros., 1974, pp. 142-143, 146, 155, 191; S. ARASARATNAM, *Merchants*, cit., pp. 222-224; T. RAYCHAUDHURI, cit., pp. 45-74, 123-124; H. K. S'JACOB, "Babba Prabhu: The Dutch and a Konkani Merchant in Kerala", in M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofsz (ed.), *All of One Company: The VOC in Biographical Perspective*, Utrecht, HES Uitgevers, 1986, pp. 135-150.

[9] V. N. RAO, D. SHULMAN, and S. SUBRAHMANYAM, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamilnadu*, Delhi and New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 264-304; D. SHULMAN and S. SUBRAHMANYAM, "Prince of Poets and Ports: Citakkati, the Maraikkayars and Ramnad, ca. 1690-1710", in A. L. Dallapiccola and S. Zingel-Avé Lallemant (eds.), *Islam and Indian Regions*, I, Stuttgart, Steiner, 1993, pp. 497-535; S. BAYLY, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700-1900*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, esp. pp. 71-86; S. ARASARATNAM, "A Note on Periathamby Marikkar: A 17th Century Commercial Magnate", *Tamil Studies*, 11:1, 1964, pp. 51-57; L. BES, "The Setupatis, the Dutch, and Other Bandits in Eighteenth-Century Ramnad (South India)", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 44:4, 2001, pp. 540-574.

[10] Markus VINK, *Mission to Madurai: Dutch Embassies to the Nayaka Court of Madurai in the Seventeenth Century*, Delhi, Manohar Books, 2012.