Oman’s trade ties with the Malabar Coast traces back to even before the birth and spread of Islam in the seventh century. The recent archaeological excavations in Pattanam (Kerala) have brought forth a variety of tangible evidences for South India’s trade links with the Arab World, including Oman, from first century A.D. There were frequent Omani sailings back and forth between the major ports of Oman and Kerala since the first century, though the major diasporic drive came from the merchants of Oman only during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Tibbetts noted that there are early Sumerian inscriptions refer to ship-building in Oman catering for the ancient Indian Ocean trade. Certainly Indian wood has been found in Sumerian sites. Abu Zayed, the Arab traveler mentioned:

“the Arabs of Umman (today’s Oman) take the carpenter’s tool-box with them and go to the place where coconut trees grow in abundance. First they cut down the tree and leave it to dry. When it is dry’ they cut into planks. They weave ropes of the coir. With this rope they tie the planks together and make of them a vessel. They make its mast from the same wood. The sails are made of fiber. When the boat is ready, they take a cargo of coconuts and sail from Umman. They make huge profits in this trade”.

1 Geographically, erstwhile Malabar district of Madras state under the British rule comprised seven districts of middle and north Kerala.
2 The archaeological discoveries in Oman and Baharian have revealed a rich maritime tradition associated with Magan civilization. There are evidences to Oman’s trade connection with northern part of India which dates back to Indus valley civilization. See Dionisius A. Agius, Seafaring in the Arabian Gulf and Oman: The People of the Dhow, (London, 2005)
3 P.J. Cherian, “Pattanam: South India’s Mohanjedaro” an unpublished manuscript, (Trivandrum, 2006)
5 As cited in J.W. Mc Crindle, The Commerce and Navigation of the Erythrean Sea,( Amsterdam, 19730) p. 37
By all probability, the place where coconut grows in abundance refers to Kerala.

Oman had a pivotal role in the Indian Ocean trade between East and West. Evidences are next to nil for direct sailing between Mediterranean coast and India until around 100BC. Ports in Oman, therefore, served as half-way houses or major transit points for exchange and trans-shipment from Egypt to India. Omani ports continued to hold this status until the Hellenistic King of Egypt (Plotemy VII) began to encourage direct sailing by merchants between Egypt and India. Another major development during this time that made Omani ports less indispensible was Hippalus’ (the Greek) discovery of new way of sailing to India directly using the South-West monsoon. Nevertheless, Oman by then had been emerged as the major hub of ship-building in the Indian Ocean region. Towards the beginning of third century, Omani ports regained their prominence as the new dynasty in Persia-Sassanids- with an intention to divert the Indian Ocean trade from Red Sea, began to encourage sea traffic on the Gulf. The birth and spread of Islam in seventh century fostered the trade further and under the Abbaisid rule the Gulf and the Red Sea were no longer rival waterways, but were operated together as two different pillars of the Caliphathe. Gulf in general and Oman in particular enjoyed a special position in the trade by the virtue of having direct access to the Islamic Empire. This period also marked an increase in Oman’s trade with Malabar. The products from Malabar have been essential not only to the commerce of Oman but to Omani shipbuilding itself from the earliest times, for it was Malabar that provided the teak from which Omani hulls and dhows were built. Malabar also provided Oman with many of the commercial goods including food stuff at this period.

The great traveller Marco Polo identifies Sohar and Dhofar (known at that time as al-Mansurah) as the major centres of trade; of the two the latter was a major exporter of one of the most important Omani commodities in the Middle age; horses. The export of Omani and Persian horses to South and Western India constituted a considerable volume of the total horse export from Oman.

There can be no doubt that Omani sailors were playing a significant part in a developing trade in the India Ocean region upon which the growing prosperity of the South Arabian cultures was based. The trade in spices

---

7 Two developments contributed to the decline of Oman’s position in the ancient period; first, the Hellenistic King of Plotemy’s promotion of direct sailing to India from Egypt; second, Hippalus’ discovery of new way of sailing to India using the south-west monsoon winds.
9 Marcopolo, as quoted in ibid, 37-39.
conducted both by sea from India and Africa and by land along the west coast of Arabia, was one of Oman’s major contributions to the ancient Indian Ocean trade. There is no element of exaggeration in saying that it was from Sohar, Qalhat, Muscat and the smaller ports of Batinah Coast and what is now in the United Arab Emirates such as Diba, Khor Fakkan, Kalba, Fujaira and Julfar that a large portion of the Arab mariners who controlled the maritime trade with South Asia, the Far East and East Africa in the period 750-1500 A.D came. Location was their greatest advantage; with it the Arabs, especially from Yemen and Oman played a leading role in the Indian Ocean trading activity. In certain respects, geography also favored the development of sailing from South Arabian shores. And eventually the monsoon winds were to assist their voyages both to Africa and to India. The extensive trade between these two regions played a crucial role within the Afro-Asian led ‘oriental globalization’, for many centuries.

Omani Settlers and Sojourners in Malabar

In Malabar, Arabs, in particular those from Oman and Hadramawt were the aristocracy of the Coast. The long-distance trade, from its part necessitated the presence of on-site agents from Oman and other parts of the Arabian Peninsula to represent the interests of traders sending goods from far away in many port towns of Kerala. By twelfth century, a system of interlinked trading networks had been established, with Malabar Coast possessing an all-important role. Major salience of the development of trade in Malabar was the migration of substantial merchant communities from widely dispersed lands. Moreover, this place was a spot for interaction for four major civilizations of that period; the Perso-Arabic, the South East Asian, Indian and Chinese. Cultures that often seem so widely divergent were in fact in constant contact and exchange with each other.

10 Ibid.
11 A very long coastline bounds the Peninsula on three sides, stretching from the Gulf of Suez round to the head of the Persian Gulf. Near these coasts lie the most fertile parts of Arabia, al-Yaman, Hadramawt, and Uman; communication between them by sea was no more formidable than crossing of the deserts and mountains, which separated them on land. See George Fadl Hourani, Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times, (Princeton, 1951), p.4.
12 There can be little doubt in saying that the globalisation is not a new phenomenon in the world history. John Hobson in his book The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization traces the existence of a similar process in the history of the world, which can appropriately be termed as “Oriental globalisation”. Persians, Arabs, Jews Chinese, Africans and Indians had created and maintained a global economy down to 1820, in which major political forces of the world at all times interlinked. See John Hobson, The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization, (Cambridge, 1914), pp. 204-205.
The exponential growth of Islam simultaneous to the expansion in Arab trade since the ninth century accelerated the trend of settling colonies of expatriate merchants from Arabian Gulf and Persia in major trading centres. Early Muslim success furthered the expansion of such Arab trading diasporas out of the region and into large expanse of territory belonging to different continents. Later trading brought Islam to South India. Apart from the faith-based networks of scholars and Sufis, traders also had formidable role in carrying ‘newfound’ faith to the East. The trading diasporic population of Malabar consisted mostly of Arabs from Hadramawt, Hormuz, Oman, Abyssinia and even Tunis. Among them, Hadramis and Omani were the most influential foreign Muslim settlers all over the Malabar Coast, the most important being at Calicut, which was the centre of Arab trade.

The Arabs in diaspora brought with them several innovative practices and traditions, leaving tangible imprints upon the religious domain of places like Malabar. Pulling the boundaries of Islam further to the south and east, they often established their own expatriate communities. Each expatriate community became an integral part of local social life, as they were vital to the Islamisation of insular South and East Asia. Muslim intellectuals, scholars, clerics and missionaries joined this bandwagon in great numbers along with the frequent traders.

The earliest historical evidence to the existence of Arab Muslims in Kerala according to Shah is from the Terisappalli Copper Plate of Ayyan Atikal of Venad, a subordinate of the then ruling Chera Emperor Sthanu Ravi of Cranganore (844-855 AD). Tarisappalli Copper Plate Grant (849 AD) provides significant evidence to demonstrate the presence of affluent Arab trading communities in the port towns of Kerala in the ninth century. The grant which gave the mercantile rights for a Christian group provides ample witness to the influence of the Arab Muslims who were to attest the grant. Of the ten groups of signatures on the grant, there is a set in Arabic script. The names of all ten

---

14 The trading diasporas were actually universal phenomena throughout the Indian Ocean region, since the long distance trade necessitated a situation in which the trading communities had to settle for long periods of time at the terminal points of trade. “The pre-modern trade that flourished throughout the Indian Ocean, needed on-site agents to represent the interests of traders sending goods from far away, and everywhere there was trade, those on-site agents established diaspora communities”, writes Arasaratnam. Ibid. Pp. 36 & 391.
16 The purport of the inscription is the gift of a plot of land to the Terisappalli (Terisa Church) at Quilon of south Kerala along with several rights and privileges. The grant was made in the presence of the important officers of the state and representatives of the trading communities.
witnesses seem to be that of Arab Muslims. Arab-merchant witness to the grant must be people of considerable influence and importance.

Ibn Batuta, the famous traveller was the first writer to give detailed description of the Omani settlements in various parts of Kerala. According to him, the trade on the Malabar Coast was dominated by various Arab communities including people from Yemen and Oman.18 And the Arab settlement of Ezhimala (another major trading point in northern Kerala) was composed mainly of those who came from Oman. It is clear from the writings of Batuta, the Qadi (judge) and Khatib (orator) in many of the coastal town were from Oman. Batuta wrote, “at all halting places on the road (in Malabar), there were houses belonging to Arab Muslims. They were well honored for their trustworthiness”19. Batuta’s notes bore ample evidence to the presence of affluent Arab traders, who were settled more or less freely in every major port towns of Malabar.20 Batuta also recorded the presence of merchant communities comprising Arabs and Persians in Malabar, who were engaged in the further Islamisation of coastal peoples, from the eighth century. 21

The major port of Malabar, Calicut was frequented for trade by the people of Oman and Yemen. Monsoon winds provided a free, fast and regular transport system for sailing vessels. The Omanis and other Arabs took advantage of it while travelling to Malabar. The Keralolpatti (literally means the genesis of Kerala) Chronicles dealing with the history of evolution of Kerala, has narrated an interesting story of two brothers from Maskiyath (by all probability today’s Muscat) who were instrumental in the making of Calicut (the capital city of Malabar better known to Arabs as Kalikut) which goes like follows:

“Their (young merchants from Maskiyath) father sent the elder one to look for a safe port across the Arabian Sea to settle down and start maritime trade. He went to several chieftains, an entrusted a huge jar to each of them for safe keeping for a year until he returned. They were told that the Jar contained pickles, but it was actually filled with gold under the pickles. When the merchant returned next year to retrieve the property, he found that the jars were opened and the gold was replaced with the pickles. Perhaps the chieftains found the weight too much to believe that it carried

19 Ibid.
20 During his visit in 14th century, Ibn Batuta has noticed, every town in Malabar had its lot of rich Arab merchants and their places of worship.
only pickles, but on seeing the stuff they were tempted—all of them, except the Zamorin raja of Calicut. Therefore the Arab merchant decided that Calicut was the ‘City of Truth’, and settled down there.”

There may be an element of exaggeration in this medieval tale, but the reference in Kerololpatti that a trader from Maskiyath (Muscat) acted as a pioneer among the Arab Muslim traders in Calicut could be very well true. This trader, according to the reference in Kerololpatti later on became the Koya of Calicut. In the city of Calicut, the authority of port had traditionally been conferred on the leaders of Koya community (Shahbandar Koya) who are believed to have come from Oman. Shahbandar Koyas were the Port Officers with authority to deal with trade revenue affairs on behalf of Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut. With their special rights, they were entitled to rule the Muslims dominated bazaars and residential areas of the Kingdom. Kerololpatti has a lucid reference on the assistance of various sorts provided by the Koyas for Zamorins to conquer their enemies. In reciprocation of this, the Koyas had enjoyed a special status in Zamorin’s court. As a reward for their help, the Koyas were allowed to them occupy the special position of Raksapurushas (special guards) standing on the left side of the Zamorin on the occasion of Mamankam festival.

Malabar ports were well connected with Hormuz, Dhofar, Cairo, Tunis and other Arab ports, which according to Panikkar continued up to the time of Vasco Da Gama’s arrival. However, the advent of Portuguese marked another episode in the history of Malabar-Oman relations. The event, of course, brought a situation where in a violent destruction of Arab trading interests was taken place. With this the situation in the Indian Ocean slipped completely out of the control of the Arab merchants. But, the significance of this slice in the history of Malabar-Oman relations lies in another worth-mentioning twist in history. The person who guided the way to Vasco de Gama from Africa to India was from Oman. Arab tradition relates that Ahamad bin al-Majid happened to be the pilot on Vasco da Gama pioneering voyage across the western Indian Ocean to Malabar. It is reasonable to assume that scientific motives encouraged al-Majid who was otherwise had a more worthy reputation as a widely renowned navigator, to

---

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Mamankam refers to the festival on which rulers and chieftains of the land and the sea coming under the rule of Zamorin used to send delegations to inculcate their loyalty to the ruler on invitation. It was also an occasion for traders, scholars and notables to congregate. For further details, see K.V.Krishna Aiyer, The Zamorins of Calicut (Calicut, 1938) p.104.
accept this task, which opened new horizons in the maritime history of the world.\textsuperscript{27}

The cultural consequences of the maritime trade with Arabs varied enormously and culminated in deep cultural and material commonalities between Malabar and the Arabian Peninsula in areas such as food, clothing and plethora of other themes. Thanks to a sort of globality that the Kerala society possessed for many centuries, Malabari Muslims (known popularly as Mappilas) might have more in common with the Muslims of far-flung Dhofar or Hadramawt than the Muslims of other parts of India. This element of globality has affected the pattern of religious consumption and culture of the Mappilas than those of any other Indian Muslim communities.

The Arab especially the Omani influence is very much evident in the Mappila attire also. Some of the Mappila men wear a turban on the head and put on a piece of cloth on the shoulder. \textit{Lungi} (waist cloth), which is said to have come from Yemen is the most popular dress of Muslim men in Malabar. Religious leaders and \textit{Ulema} wear full-sleeved long gowns reaching down to the feet. This might be in accordance with the Arab customs. In resemblance to the Omani knife, the Mappilas keep a knife hanging over their waist cloth.

Traders from both Malabar and Oman have benefitted with flow of goods and ideas there by enriching their culture society. It is well known that large number of Indian Hindu families from Bhatia, Baniya and other communities have set up diasporic settlements in various port towns of Oman. However, the South Indian diasporas (both group and individual) are relatively unexposed to the scholars in this field. This paper’s major objective is to understand the historical contours of Malabar-Oman relations through the life histories of two \textit{Keralites} who spent considerable amount of time in their life in Oman. Remaining part of this paper makes an attempt to locate the life histories of Cheraman Perumal and Saiyid Fadl ibn Alawi in the context of Malabar-Oman relations. There are several biographical writings on both Cheraman Perumal and Sayyid Fadl; most of them are in Malayalam, the language of the land where they spent bulk of their lifetime. But it is a sad irony that not many biographers are with extensive knowledge of life after their deportation form Malabar. Another set of literature on the life histories of these two \textit{Keralites} which are based mainly on the colonial records reflect an inevitable ‘oriental gaze’ in understanding their life.

\textbf{Life History One: Cheraman Perumal}

There has been much of mention in books of ancient history about Cheraman Perumal, a king of Kerala, who became the first know convert to Islam from the

Indian subcontinent, went to Mecca to meet the Prophet Mohammad and finally settled down in Dofar province of Oman and sent messengers who established the first ten mosques on the West Coast of South India. Though there is rich and myriad repository of local narratives and other oral traditions that provide evidence to Cherman Perumal’s conversion to Islamic faith and his journey to the Arabian Peninsula. The first written reference to this conversion and the partition of his Kingdom into eight princely states is found in The Book of Duarte Barbosa: an Account of Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants composed in the middle of the second decade of the 16th century. Barbosa writes,

“...They (people of Kerala) say in ancient days there was a heathen king whose name was Cirimay Pirimal (Cheraman Perumal), a very mighty Lord. And after the Moors of Mecca had discovered India they began to voyage towards it for the sake of pepper, of which they began to take cargoes at Coulam (Kollam), a city with a harbor where the King ofttimes abides. This will not be less than six hundred years ago...and continuing to sail to India for many years they began to spread out therein and they had such discussions with the King himself and he with them, that in the end they converted him to the sect of Mafamede( the Prophet Mohammed), wherefore he went in their company to the house of Mecca, and there he died, or, as it seems more probable, on the way thither; for they say that Malabarese never heard any tidings of him”.

Somewhat similar version is being shared by Joao de Barros, the first official historian of the Portuguese in the 16th century in his Decada de Asia. His account on the conversion of ‘Sarama Pereimal’ (Cherman Perumal) sounds as follows:

“...the King was so powerful that in memory of his name, they used to make a reckoning of the period of his reign...making it the starting point of an era”...in his time the Arabs now converted to the sect of Muhammad began to trade with India...when they were settled in the country, this king, Sarama Pereimal, became a Moor and showed them great favour...then they persuaded him that for his salvation he ought to end his life at the House of Mecca. He

---

28 Translated into English from Portuguese original by Mansel Longworth Dames and first Published in 1918. See also Duarta Barbosa, The Land of Malabar, M.Gangadharan (ed.) (Kottayam, 2000)


30 According to another tradition, the partition of own Kingdom by Cheraman Perumal marked the beginning of Kollam era which believed to have started in the year 825 A.D. See Herman Gundert, Kerolpathiyum Mattum (in Malayalam), (Kottayam, 1962).
agreed...and determined...to make a partition of this state among nearest kindred.”

Louis de Camoes, the Portuguese poet who was in Malabar in the fifties of the 18th century, mentions in his epic poem, Lusiad, the story of the conversion to Islam of a ‘Perimal’ and division of his country among “servants he loved best”. Later in the century Shaykh Zaynu’d-Din, a scholar living diasporic life at the port town of Ponnani, gave a detailed account of the “tale” about the conversion to Islam of “a monarch of the whole of Malabar, and the division of his country among “governers”. Keralolpati chronicles, a native work of the 18th or 19th century (perhaps an oral tradition of earlier times later on compiled in this period) also has a detailed reference which sounds as follows:

“Cheraman Perumal, the last Perumal ruler of Kerala, who became enamoured of Islam, partitioned the Kingdom and secretly left for Mecca with some Arab traders and lived for a few years in obscurity and peace in Arabia. There he visited the Prophet and embraced the new faith. On his return, Perumal died and was buried on the Arabian coast.”

There are different versions of the story of conversion of Perumal in circulation through the oral traditions in Kerala. The prominent one among the oral traditions says that Perumal embraced Islam on the basis of an unusual dream. “He dreamed one night that the full moon appeared on the night of the new moon, and that when at the meridian it splits into two, one half descending to the foot of the hill, where the halves joined and then set. He shared this bizarre dream with a few Arab Muslim pilgrims to Adam’s peak in Ceylon, who visited Cheraman Perumal at Muziris (Kodungallore) on their way. In an audience given by the King, one of the pilgrims, Sheikh Sooriji al-Deen, interpreted the dream by connecting it with the story of the Prophet Mohammed splitting the moon up his sleeve in Arabia. The King was much interested in the interpretation given by them and secretly informed the Sheikh of his desire to embrace the faith and to go to Arabia to meet the Prophet. “On his return journey, the Sheikh was secretly instructed by the King to have a ship prepared

---

32 Louis de Camoes, Lusiad, stanzas 33 and 34, Richard Franshawe (tr.), (Harvard, 1940).
34 Keralolpati Chronicles, Raghava Varier (Calicut, 1984), pp. 56 & 60.
35 Parappil Mohammed Koya, Kozhikotte Muslimnagalee Charithram (Calicut, 1994)
36 Ibid., pp. 33-34
for a voyage, and after eight days embarked in the vessel with the Sheikh and his companions for Shihr on the Arabian coast” writes Miles.  

**Perumal in Dhofar**

Another tradition has it; “the King Perumal landed first in Shihr from there he proceeded to Dhofar, where he settled for a while. After some years, Perumal wished to return to Kerala in order to invite his own people there to the new faith he embraced, but the deteriorating physical condition seized him and finally died and buried in Dhofar.” As per another tradition, Perumal was buried in Shahar Mukhalla in Yemen. Anyway, before he died Perumal urged his companions, Malik bin Dinar and others, to carry out his designs and propagate the faith in Malabar.  

There are numerous theories hinging on the arrival of Malik ibn Dinar in Kerala. The major one is that Cheraman Perumal on his return from Arabia was accompanied by the family and friends of Malik ibn Dinar. Before the king died at Dhofar on the Arabian coast, Perumal had instructed his companions to proceed to Kerala and spread the new faith. Following Perumal’s instructions, Malik ibn Dinar and his friends landed at the ancient port of Kodungallare (known popularly as Muziris and Craganore in historical documents). In Kodungallore they received a red-carpet welcome by the close associates of Perumal and the first mosque in the Indian subcontinent was established there. Menon writes:

“The expedition of Malik ibn Dinar who had been instructed, according to the Mappila tradition, by the convert Perumal, before his death, to proceed to Malabar for the spread of Islam and who have been provided with letters of recommendation to the Malabar, is said to have reached the court about A.H 224 ie. 856 A.D.  

Logan in Malabar writes:

“they (Malik ibn Dinar and his companions) were well received in accordance with the instruction of Perumal and were given land to build a mosque and suitable endowments were also given. Malik ibn Dinar himself became the first Kazi of Craganore (Kodungallare)”.

From Kodungallare Dinar and companions moved to different parts of Kerala and established ten mosques in different port towns of Kerala. With a view to propagate Islam in Kerala Dinar appointed Qazis in each mosque and

---

38 Ibid.  
each mosque became instrumental in spread of Islam in the respective localities. And the work of these missionaries resulted in large-scale conversion of people into Islam in different parts of Kerala.

In Omani local records Cherman Perumal is known by another name- al-Samiri though he is believed to have accepted the name of Abdul Rahiman on his arrival in Arabia. But how and where he obtained the appellation of al-Samiri by the Arabs is somewhat obscure. The appellation Samiri may be derived from the word Zamorin⁴¹ a Sanskrit word means the custodian or caretaker of the sea. Anyway, for last many centuries, Perumal’s tomb remains to be a significant place for ziarat or shrine in Oman.

As Logan notes, “worship was offered at an old grave in Dofar even that time, believed to belong to this royal convert from Kerala.” It is a nice coincidence that the place, where Cheraman Perumal’s body was buried has got strikingly similar climatic conditions and vegetation. People still maintain a powerful myth that it was through his karamat or divine powers Dhofar is blessed with frequent rain which is a rare and unique phenomenon in other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. On his visit to Dhofar Miles writes:

“he (Qasi Seyyid Ahmed) gave me some information about the Garas and about the Samiri. He informed me that the Samiri was a converted kafir and it was through his sanctity Dhofar was first blessed with rain; before this time the water of heaven had never fallen. His tom was now a ziarat or shrine, and visited by all sorts and conditions of men, and his name was included with the other Ameers, Anbias and Ulemas, and paryed to whenever rain was required by the people of the district.”⁴²

Although there are ample evidences to the Perumal episode in the history of Malabar-Oman relations, the period of these occurrences appear to be not fairly well established. Opinions of historians and researchers vary, though their findings converge on two points- Cherman Perumal’s conversion and his journey to Arabia-with near-total unanimity. The most important point which has been thoroughly debated, relates to the date and the probability of meeting the Prophet Mohammed. Kunju sums up; “there are at present three differing versions regarding the period of occurrence of this event: (i) during the lifetime of the Prophet (i.e. between 622 and 632 A. D) (ii) during the eight century and

---

⁴¹ This appellation was conferred on a set of rulers in Calicut who championed the maritime trade of the region. It has been confounded with the word Zamorin, the title given by the Portuguese to the King of Calicut, but the latter word is of Sanskrit derivation. The word signifies ‘calf’ and is applied to the worshippers of the cow, and it probably has reference to Perimal being of the Hindu religion before his conversion. S.B. Miles, The Countries and Tribes of the Gulf (with an introduction by J.B.Kelly) (London, 1966), p. 554.

⁴² Ibid., p.553.
(iii) during the ninth century. But Pillai, a historian known for his reading of early Chera inscriptions, has inferred that the ruler who took to Islam might have been the last Perumal of Mahodayapuram of early 12th century. Making a point further, Narayanan another scholar, on the basis of circumstantial evidence from inscriptions and literary works, endorses Pillai’s argument that the story of the conversion of a King of Malabar might be a reflection of what happened in the case of Rama Kulasekhara, the last Cheraman Perumal of Mahodayapuram (Kodungallore) in the early 12th century.

The inscriptions from Madayi mosque in north Kerala furnishes a hint that this mosque was built by Malik Bin Dinar, the companion of Cherman Perumal and the first Sufi missionary in Kerala, who moved to Malabar with the instruction of latter after his death in 1124 A.D. After going through many local narratives in Dhofar Miles has come to another conclusion that King Cheraman Perimal left India in 210 A.H. (25 Aug, A.D. 825), remained at Shihir two years, reached Dhofar in 212 A.H. (A.D.827), Perimal died there in 216 A.H. (A.D. 831). The inscription at Perumal’s tomb in Dhofar also reads that “Abdur Rahiman Samiri arrived in Arabia in Hijara 212, died 216 A.H.” Fard ud-Din Attar’s work Tadhikirat ul-Auliya presents totally different dates which he tries to prove by relating it to the period when Hassan ul-Basri, the famous Sufi sage lived. It was known that Malik ibn Dinar (died in 748 A.D.) was a disciple of Hassan ul-Basri. Anyway, since these sources are unanimous in their accounts about the conversion and migration to the Arabian Peninsula, the Perumal tradition cannot be dismissed as mere fiction or figment of imagination.

Life History Two: Sayyid Fadl ibn Alawi
Sayyid Fadl (1823-1901) son of Sayyid Alawi and Fatima was born at Mampuram in 1823 (1823-1901). Saiyyid Alawi, Fadl’s father had arrived in Malabar in 1767 from Hadramawt of Yemen at the young age of seventeen and settled down at Mampuram where his maternal uncle, Sayyid Hassan Jifri had already been established as prominent a religious scholar. Alawi belonged to the family of the Alawis of a Tarim, direct descendants of Prophet Muhammed through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. In Malabar, soon after the

---

43 A.P. Ibrahim Kunju, Mappila Muslims of Kerala, (Trivandrum, 1989)
44 Elankulam Kunjan Pillai, Keralacharirthathile Iruladanja Edukal, (Kottayam, 1933).
45 M.G.S. Narayanan Political and Social Conditions Under the Kulasekharra Empire, Ph.D. thesis, unpublished, University of Kerala, Trivandrum, 1972, pp. 185
arrival, he began enjoying a religious authority unmatched by any other Hadrami ulema at that time.

Sayyid Fadl inherited father’s spiritual and social status and the legacy of political activism legitimised in religious terms. Fadl’s teachings were highly influential elements in the cultural and religious life of the Mappilas. Taking up the role in anti-British rebellion, Sayyid Fadl expanded his sphere of influence among the native Muslims. He became instrumental in the evolution of an anti-British consciousness and indeed crucial in granting religious legitimacy to anti-colonial rebellion of the Mappila Muslims of Kerala. As the charismatic leaders, Fadl and his father gave spiritual benediction to several outbreaks of the Mappilas against the oppressions of colonial powers, mainly the British. Sayyid Fadl, in particular, remained to be the spirit behind several of the Mappila outbreaks. Several of his sheikhly **mu’jizats** (miracles) **karamats** (indications of divine power) have found expression in many of the popular anti-colonial narratives.

However, Fadl’s life history is still wrapped in mystery and it is troubling question where do we place him in the history as he possessed a multitude of identities. He has been identified by different names in different societies. He has been in the limelight of anti-colonial struggle for the better part of four decades in Kerala. It is possible to view his entire life as part of an anticolonialist, anti-British stance derived from his experience in India. Among the Mappila Muslims of Kerala, he ascribed enormous amount of prestige as Mampuram Thangal—a religious scholar and a champion of anti-colonial cause. In the British records, he has been identified as Sayyid Fadl the Moplah, a reference to his origin among the Malabar Muslims who were called Mapillas. Judged by how the West viewed him, Sayyid Fadl was a fanatic ulema and the spirit behind many of the anti-British outbreaks. While continued to be a threat for the British administration who referred to him as a plotter and a schemer, the strong anti-British posture helped him gaining the attention of Ottoman Empire and thereby to receive the recognition ‘Arab notable’ and the title Pasha with an official salary from Istanbul.

Religiously speaking, in a mere four decades he moved from tradition-oriented orthodox ulema who was famous for his divine powers (**karamats**) and miracles (**mu’jizats**) to an ardent advocate of Salafism and pan-Islamism while reached in Istanbul. While the doctrinal beliefs and practices of Sayyid Fadl in Malabar exemplified a pious orthodoxy, he began to share an outlook promoted by Jamal al-Din Afghani which was uncritical of religious and cultural assimilations as part of Islamic religious practice.

Whatever the transition was, he has been forced to assume a new persona more in keeping with his transformed image. His activities can be interpreted in several directions. To quote Bang:
“it is possible to view him as one of several personally ambitious, enterprising individuals who, in the unsettled political climate of late nineteenth-century Arabia, sought to carve out territory between the powers of the Ottoman Empire, the Imamate of Yemen, the Bu Saidis of Muscat and British naval interest.”

Likewise, his network transcended both genealogical and ethnic boundaries. He lived as a merger of many cultures; predominantly Arab and Mappila cultures.

The Mambram Thangals (a family established by Sayyid Jifri Thangal, uncle of Sayyid Alawi who reached Calicut in 1755 AD) inculcated the Sunni inclination, transmitting their emphasis on the orthodoxy of the Shafi School, the dominant legal school of the Southern Arabia as against the Hanafi School of other South Indian provinces and the Shiite orientation of the north. The doctrinal beliefs and practices of the ‘Sayyids of Tarim’ exemplified a pious orthodoxy, stressing on strict adherence to the Quran and the Sunnah or traditions of the Prophet. They held a Puritanist brand and shared a critical view of the then prevailing practices either for being inclined to Sufi traditions or an adoption of the local customs as part of Islamic religious practices.

The Mampuram Thangals held a special position among the Mappilas. They considered themselves to be superior to the native Muslims and enjoyed a peculiar status in religious affairs as the agents of reforms in local Muslim community. They tried to convert the people from South Indian semi-pantheist mysticism which was in wider circulation thanks to the presence of Sufis, to the orthodoxy of Mecca and Medina, inculcating Shariah. As scholars who came from the native place of Islam, the Mampuram Thangals were entitled to issue fatwas on several religious issues. The popular belief credited them with supernatural powers and stories about their supposed ability to work miracles had wide currency. The key sign of grace and authority was the acts of wonder and power, what we call miracles. The possession of these powers was usually connected with the membership in specific saintly families. The Muslims of north Kerala turn to such saintly figures, dead or living for help.

Immediately after the death of his father, Sayyid Fadl went on Hajj and returned in 1848. On his return to Malabar, he became conscious of the changed political situation in the country and became sensitive to the implications of the political and administrative order the British established. Fadl exerted himself even more vigorously in the direction his father had set. He found the British power firmly established in Malabar, but did not prevent him from opposing the Hindu Jenmis and the British courts and officials which supported the Hindu Jenmis. Fadl wrote a pamphlet in Arabic entitled Uddattul Umara wal Hukkum li

\textit{lhanattil} was \textit{Abadattil Asnam} in which he called upon the leaders and commoners to fight against the British. It was Sayyid Fadl who translated Mappila grievances into an Islamic idiom which acted as a catalyst to transform widespread discontent into specific acts of social protest. But his attitude towards the British rule was not just an extension of his religious beliefs.

Sayyid Fadl found the market place a more suitable pulpit than the mosque for indoctrinating Mappilas the spirit of anti-colonialism. He issued some \textit{fatwas} shedding lights on the anti-Islamic conduct of the British. He is reported to have instituted congregational sermons at different places in south Malabar. In these sermons, he sought not only to direct Mappilas towards the practice of Orthodox Islam, but also attempted to heighten their awareness of their Islamic identity.

The sermons were therefore a direct challenge to the authority and position of the powerful upper caste Hindu \textit{jenins} and British officials. British officials of that period succeeded in linking the Mappila rebellion of 1843 with Sayyid Fadl’s teachings. They proposed to remove himself to Arabia in order to regulate the teaching of Sayyid Fadl, who was suspected of fomenting many anti-British outbreaks in Malabar. On the 19th March, 1852 Sayyid Fadl, with his family and companions set sail for Arabia from Malabar. It is still a mysterious thing in history whether Fadl’s deportation was a banishment on the ground of his rebellion against the British or a self-imposed exile. Anyway, an important reason for Sayyid Fadls’ banishment was the prestige and influence he had among the Mappilas which constituted a challenge to the district administration. Fadl had become an alternate focus of authority and the Mappilas submitted their disputes for adjudication, thereby undermined the power and the authority of the British administration. So, his banishment from Malabar resulted in a massive uprising in Malabar. Finally, the anger arouse out of Fadl’s banishment culminated in the murder of H.V. Conolly, the then district collector of British Malabar who advocated for the removal in 1855.

**Fadl’s Emirship in Dhofar**

After 1852 sayyid Fadl spent much of his time in Mecca and the neighboring town of al-Taif, where he was very much involved in Ottoman-Arab politics. He gravitated to the Ottoman sultan with an unsuccessful attempt by the latter to intercede with the British for his return to India. However, Sayyid Fadl’s notoriety among British representatives continued as two years later, the District Collector Conolly who sentenced deportation to Sayyid Fadl was murdered by local Mappilas as a revenge for the loss of their leader and British saw Fadl’s

---

hand in the murder. Since then, movements of Sayyid Fadl were closely monitored and reported by the British administration. The ill-repute of Fadl in British records reached its upper heights with 1858 riots in Jeddah which killed many European officers and European protégés.50

Sayyid Fadl’s burgeoning influence in the region and his all-weather anti-British posture prompted British to curtail his movements. Local British officers exerted pressure over the Ottomans to block Fadl’s further encircling. With this Fadl was forced to move to Istanbul and from there to Dofar province of present-day Oman- a traditional hub of sadat and settle over there. In the meanwhile, some Dhofari shaikhs, while on a pilgrimage to Mecca had met Fadl and were much impressed by his learning and sanctity. They invited him to settle in Dhofar.51 In 1875 at the invitation of local tribes, he accepted the Emirship of Dofar, with its capital at Salalah. In Dofar his task was to rejuvenate his Hadrami network. Sayyid Fadl’s presence offered a ray of hope for the Hadarmi sadat who were ill-treated by the local tribes.52 The interaction with sadat in Dofar helped him to re-strengthen his Hadrami connection. He wished to rescue fellow sadats with the support of the al-Kathiri tribe of Dhofar and to bring this area which was almost independent under Ottoman rule.53 Fadl’s move attracted the wrath of British Government in the region and they had already made a representation to the Ottoman Government in 1873 that Sayyid Fadl should be prohibited from leaving Turkish territory, and the Turkish Government had issued an order to this effect.54

In Dhofar, Fadl immediately (in 1876) proclaimed himself ruler on behalf of the Ottoman government in spite of a strong objection from Ottoman governor in Mecca. Fadl enjoyed extensive support from the al-Gharah and al-Kathiris two powerful tribal groups making up large portion of Dhofar’s population. With the support of these two tribes, Fadl eventually established a government and began to build up an army and appointed representatives to collect zakat. Despite strong pressure on the Ottomans from British, Fadl kept appealing to the Sultan

50 Anne K.Bang, Sufis and Scholars of The Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860-1925, (London, 2003), 79-84
54 In response to British representations in Constantinople, an order was issued by the Turkish Government that Saiyid Fadl should reside permanently in Mecca on his pension ‘and not leave’. Records of Oman 1867-1947 selected and edited by R.W. Bailey, ZVol. 1V, Territorial Affairs, (Buckinghamshire, 1988).
for recognition of his governorship and for the extension of Ottoman protection
over the area. But lack of support from Ottoman office in Mecca and from Sayyid
Turki, the Amir of Muscat led to the decline of his support base among the local
tribes which eventually led to his expulsion from Dofar. Meanwhile, Sayyid
Turki claimed that Dhofar was an integral part of Muscat and sought the support
of British government in retain the rule over there. Even though, initially they
were not very keen on becoming a party into this dispute, Fadl’s presence in
Dhofar urged British representatives in the South Arabia to exert pressure on the
Ottoman Empire for the repudiation of Fadl’s declaration of governorship in
Dhofar.

In the meanwhile, Fadl’s relationship with al-Kathiris got strained and in
early in 1879, Shaikh Awad bin Abdullah, a notable al Kathiri arrived in Muscat
from Dhofar and informed Sayyid Turki that the people of Dhofar having tired
of the oppressive conduct of Sayyid Fadl, had risen in revolt and determined to
expel him. Following a tribal uprising in the same year, Fadl was thrown out of
power and forced to flee from Dhofar, heading again for Jeddah where he lived
despite tremendous pressure from the British to extradite him.

Sitting in Saudi Fadl continued to involve in the Ottoman politics and this
bonding helped him to become the governor of Yafi’i region, when Ottomans
conquered Yemen. Fadl’s political interest, however, did not confine to Yafi’i
territories; it moved beyond the border and he involved in many issues including
the unrest broke out in Dhofar. Fadl was in constant touch with the tribal leaders
in Dhofar and utilised his contact and influence with the Ottomans to solve the
issue. From Hadramawt he travelled to Egypt and from there to Constantinople.
At Constantinople, he was warmly received by the Ottoman Sultan,
Abdulhamid, who provided all convenience to him and family. Sayyid Fadl was
appointed a minister in the Ottoman ministry. There he played a key role
Ottoman administration and proposed many plans for the improvement of the
administration of the Empire.

Back in Constantinople, Fadl tried to convince the Sultan to support him
politically and militarily in his effort to regain the emirship in Dhofar. He even
submitted a comprehensive proposal to the Sultan with a request to make Dhofar
an Ottoman Province. In it he explained the strategic and economic importance

55 S. Tufan Buzpinar, “AbdulHamid II and Saiyid Fadl pasha of Hadramawt: An Arab Dignitary’s
56 Indian Office records L/P & S/7/10, Miles to Prideaux, No. 269-95, Muscat22 June 1876;
Prideaux to Thomton, No.661-137, 5 July 1877; L/P & s/3/586, Lytton to Salisbury, No.20, 25
June 1877; L/P & S/7/14, Lytton to Salisbury, 25 Juune 1877; L/P & S/3/596, Derby to
Salisbury, 13 August 1877.
57 S. Tufan Buzpinar, “AbdulHamid II and Saiyid Fadl Pasha of Hadramawt: An Arab Dignitary’s
Ambitions (1876-1900), The Journal of Ottoman Studies XIII, 1993
of Dhofar and advised him to convert it into a vilayet with Sayyid Fadl himself would be granted hereditary governorship. But the proposal met stiff opposition from the council of ministers, the Porte Hussain Pasha and from the Amir of Mecca. The major point raised by them unanimously was the unruly nature of tribes who inhabited in Dhofar. They also warned Sultan Adulhamid that any move to install Fadl as the governor would engender the anger of the local tribes who would not recognize Fadl’s authority and the resentment of Sultan Turki who had already sent a considerable number of troops from Muscat to Dhofar to defeat Fadl upon the tribal notables’ request. The opinion of Porte was influenced mainly by the strong opposition from British officials who were “monitoring Fadl’s activities and missing no opportunity to restate their objection to his ambitions regarding Dhofar.”

Having realized this fact, in 1880 Sayyid Fadl approached the British Ambassador at Constantinople for an agreement that he should return to Dhofar with his sons and offered, in return for British protection, to maintain free trade between Dhofar and all British possessions and to assist in suppressing the slave trade. But his proposals were ignored. In view of the risk of unauthorised action by Sayyid Fadl or his family, arrangements were made by the British authorities for a careful watch to be kept at Cairo, Jedda and Aden while Sultan was advised to strengthen his position in Dhofar. In the meanwhile, in 1880 Fadl made another set of requests to the Sultan asking for Sultan’s financial help to develop the basic infrastructure of Dhofar and to bring the region under Ottoman rule in the form of vilayet. Sultan under pressure from the Council of Ministers was not very enthusiastic to subscribe to Fadl’s plan.

However, Fadl’s plea got the support from an unexpected corner. In contrast to the general opinion prevailed in Istanbul, Abdulmuttalib Efendi, the new Amir of Mecca wrote to the Sultan that the expansion of the Amir of Muscat’s power over Dhofar would produce a very unfavourable impression of Ottoman authority in Arabia. In order to forestall such a situation he advised the Sultan to issue an order recognizing Fadl as the Amir of Dhofar in order to forestall the further sepsansion of Sayyid Turki in South Arabia with the support


59 Ibid.


of the British. Ibn Sumayat’s account on Sayyid Fadl’s consistent effort to regain the position in Dhofar says that the Ottoman Sultan at some point of time had responded positively to this. The sudden shift in position of Sultan, according to him occurred in the context of his displeasure over the increase of British influence in the region through the Sultan Turki, who had sent his wali Sulayman as governor in Dhofar which met a stiff opposition from the tribal leaders and eventually led to an uprising in 1883.

Sultan Abdulhamid’s policy, not to upset Fadl by rejecting latter’s request outright, had also reflected in this shift. Being still hopeful about repossessing Dhofar, Sayyid Fadl wrote a letter on 13th May 1880 to Sayyid Turki, in which he described himself as Amir of Dhofar protesting as the Sultan’s occupation of the district of Dhofar. He added that he intended to set out from the ‘Seat of the Caliphate’ with orders to return to Dhofar. At about the same time, Fadl managed to gain the support of the new Amir of Mecca, Awnurrefik Pasha. In July of 1883, Sultan Turki received a letter from, written on taking up his duties as Governor of the Holy City. Awnurrefik complained:

“The Sultan (Turki) had sent troops to Dhofar and this was certainly hurtful to the dignity of the Sublime Government and to your own, for His Excellency Sayyid Fadl Pasha is a guest of the Sublime Government and one of its wazirs and your friend and neighbour.’ The Sherief advised the Sultan ‘to repair the mischief—by directing any people of yours in Dhofar, if there is any one at all—that as soon as any person shall arrive from His Excellency Sayyid Pasha at Dhofar, they are to give up the place to him and clear out...’”

But the advice yielded an opposite effect and provoked Turki. In his reply the Sultan asserted that Sayyid Fadl had no claim either to Dhofar or to property there. As the further step, Turki sought the help of the British through Mockler, the British political agent and consul at Muscat. Sayyid Fadl’s last serious attempt to regain his supremacy in South Arabia met another setback with the British pressure on Istanbul not to send Fadl Pasha again to Southern Arabia.

However, nothing could weaken Fadl’s determination to return to Dhofar. In a somewhat subtle move, Fadl sent his son Muhammed to Mecca from where

---

64 Ibid., p.6
65 Ibid.
he was to proceed to Dhofar. The declared objective of his trip was to look after their property in Dhofar, but the covert objective has been to retain his father’s position in the area. But aware of the consequences of such move, the British who were closely monitoring his activities prevented him from entering Dhofar. Muhmmed was stopped and a huge cache of arms confiscated.

After this failed attempt, Sayyid Fadl kept aloof from politics and concentrated more on religious affairs. The British government, from their side, continued to oppose his return, not only to Dhofar but also to the Hejaz and advised the Sultan of Muscat to strengthen his position in the region. Fully aware of strong dislike of the British government to Fadl’s return, the Ottoman Sulatan also did not want to spoil the party. Thus, Abdulhamid chose to keep Sayyid Fadl in Istanbul as an honoured guest and occasional advisor, writes Buzpinar.

**Pioneer of Pan-Islamism**

In the meantime, Fadl had maintained an intimate relationship with high officials in the Ottoman administration including Ali-Pasha who was the head of reform-council set up by the Tanzimat and long-time Grand Vezir, in Istanbul. With the major setbacks, Sayyid Fadl stopped nurturing all his political ambitions and became active in religious affairs. He made a successful switch over and emerged as a consultant of the Sultan Abdulhamid in his programme of pan-Islamism. Keeping mind his contacts with Muslim societies in far-flung areas, the Sultan made him one among the chief advisors in charge of relations with the Islamic world. Sayyid Fadl was very keen on taking up the responsibility of strengthening the Ottoman’s relations with India and South Arabia.

However, Sayyid Fadl’s renewed intimacy in relationship with the Sultan did not last long because of the rift among the religious advisors of the Sultan over the difference in conceptualizing the idea of pan-Islamism. With his newfound inclination towards the Islamic reform movements which had a spill over effect all over the Arab world under the leadership of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Sayyid Fadl drifted away from the Ottoman version of pan-Islamism. He became close to Jamal al-Din Afghani and emerged as the ardent advocate of Islamic reform. This also marked a shift in his ideology; from pious Shafite

---

Orthodoxy to Salafism which stood for a dialogue with modern Europe and assimilation. Sayyid Fadl soon became one of the chief ideologues of Afghani’s brand of pan-Islam. The change in his ideological position naturally attracted the wrath of Ottoman administration. Sultan’s displeasure continued until latter’s death in 1901 under Ottoman house arrest. Sayyid Fadl died on 2nd Rajab 1318 A.H. (1901) A.D. and was buried at Constantinople.

Back in Malabar news of his death ignited a mobilization which started around 1901 and culminated in more serious ‘Mappila Uprisings’ which continued sporadically until 1921-22. In 1935, when a people’s ministry was installed in Madras under C. Rajagopalachari, efforts were made to bring back Sayyid Fadl’s family to India. A Mampuram Restoration Committee led by Mohamed Abdul Rahiman Sahib, the leader of Indian freedom movement in Malabar. But the British Government scared of its consequences, did not agree to that. Ali Thangal, Sayyid Fadl’s grandson reached at the request of the restoration committee at Mahe which was a part of Malabar but under French rule but returned to Egypt on the failure of plan to enter in Malabar. Interestingly, throughout his career, Sayyid Fadl received all sorts of supports including financial one from the loyal Mappilas in Kerala.

As Hadrami Sayyid Scholar
At the initial phase of his life Sayyid Fadl was widely renowned in South Asia, Southern Arabia and in some parts of South East Asia as a scholar attached to the tariqa Alawiyya. In Malabar, the spread of the Shafii School can really be traced back to the teachings of him and his father, Sayyid Alawi. Sayyid Fadl, in particular, commanded greater respect in the community on account of his Shafite scholarship. Sayyid Fadl, with his orthodox Shafi orientation, was highly critical of the prevailing un-Islamic practices in Mappila society and wrote several Arabic works embodying his ideas, the most important of which were: 1. Kaukabuddrar 2. Ulul-Ihsan li Tasin il-Insan 3. Fususat ui-Islam 4. Asa ul- Islam and 5. Ala man Yuvaril Kaffar. On the anti-colonial front, he has composed a treatise entitled Al-Sayful Battar (meaning cutting sword) instigating Mappilas to fight against the British regime as it is their religious duty. Apart from Al-Sayful Battar he has fifteen works to his credit. (1) ‘Iqd al-Fara’id (Dealing with the necessity for modesty in women), (2) Hululul ‘Ihsan li Tazyin al-Insan (which is an abridged form of ‘Adab al-Din wa al-Dunya of Imam Mawardi (423 AH), (3) Bawariqul Fatana li Taqwiyyati al-Bitanah (describing the qualities that a good friend should have) and (4) ‘Uddat al-’Umarai wal-Hukkam’i li Ihanati al-Kafrati wa `abadati al-suiban are the important among them. While staying in Mecca

70 Ibid.
between 1844 and 1849, he gained much of a following as a scholar. He had received students mostly from Hadrami community in diaspora. When Fadl returned to Mecca in the 1860s and 1870s, he has already been elevated to the status of great ulema of the city.

Conclusion
Due to their strategic locations at the crossroads of ancient and medieval trade routes, ports in Malabar and Oman have been a meeting place for people from different parts of the world. There is considerable archaeological evidence from various places in the Gulf suggest traders from these two regions had regular exchange of goods. It was with the liberal ambience of ancient and medieval trade that these two participating societies were extensively connected in wide realms of culture and politics. The rise and expansion of Islam must perhaps be the most critical of those factors that fostered the motion of people, culture and commodities between these two regions.

The cultural results of these linkages also varied enormously. The long-distance trade in essentially high-value goods (like spices) spurred a number of factors that operated in promoting cultures. The commercial, cultural and other relations enabled both the peoples to interact quite vigorously and many settled in both the regions. However, peoples’ movement from South India to Oman is less known to the outside world. There may not be many group migrations, but individual migrations have contributed remarkably to strengthening cultural ties between these two regions. Life histories of two Keraites, Cherman Perumal and Sayyid Fadl ibn Alawi shed lights on a relatively unknown episode in the history.

(Draft for presentation and distribution not for publication)