

Introduction

The First Indian Muslim

I am the space where I am.

– Noël Arnaud, *L'état d'ébauche* (1950)

At the turn of the seventh century, a powerful South Indian king beheld an extraordinary astronomical event. Gazing at the stars sparkling above the Arabian Sea one night, he saw the moon divide into two halves, before it once again merged back into its customary shape. The awestruck king was Cheraman Perumal, the Hindu sovereign of the Chera dynasty, one of the three ancient Tamil royal houses that ruled over southern India. His realm was the westernmost portion of the *Tamilakam*, a region known to foreigners as Malabar or simply “the land of pepper”; its limits correspond more or less to those of the present-day Indian state of Kerala (which takes its name from the Chera dynasty). Upon witnessing this unwonted celestial occurrence, Cheraman Perumal summoned his Hindu astronomers, who although competent enough to accurately forecast eclipses, could not account for this unprecedented phenomenon. Later that night, however, it was revealed to the king in a dream that what he had seen in the night sky had been a miracle, performed by a man called Muhammad from a land across the sea.

Some years later, a group of Jewish and Christian traders disembarked on the Malabar Coast. They had come for the same reason that drew most travellers to this part of India: to purchase black pepper, the most important ingredient in the Indian Ocean spice trade, on which Malabar enjoyed a near-monopoly. Granted a royal audience, these traders told the king about an agitator back in Arabia, a man called Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd-Allāh who claimed to be a prophet and was said to have employed magic to split the moon. A few years later still, a group of Muslim pilgrims arrived at the Chera court on their way to Sri Lanka, where they intended to visit the venerated site of Adam’s Peak. The king quizzed these Muslims about their pilgrimage, but above all about their faith and its prophet. They related to him the miracle of the splitting of the

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moon, as recorded in *sūrah al-Qamar* (“The Moon”) of the Quran. The king requested that the pilgrims return to his court on their homeward journey. When they did so, he divided his realm among his ministers before joining the Muslims on their voyage back to Arabia. There, Cheraman Perumal was converted to Islam at the hands of the Prophet himself, becoming the first Indian Muslim. After a few years in Arabia, the convert king decided to return to his native land, but died on the Omani coast before he could set sail for India. Just before his death, however, he instructed a group of Arab Muslims in whose company he was travelling to proceed to Malabar regardless, and to propagate his new faith there. It was this group of Arabs who first introduced Islam to the Indian subcontinent.

Monsoon Islam

This apocryphal account of the South Indian ruler Cheraman Perumal epitomizes a particular trajectory of Islamic history as it intersects with the history of the Indian Ocean. The story-world of the legend – made up of rulers, traders, holy men, and pilgrims who are part of the trans-oceanic exchange of people, ideas, and patronage – is not invented of whole cloth but consistent with the way in which historians have come to understand the trading world of maritime Asia. In recent years, a growing number of studies has shifted our focus onto the languages, cultural content, political projects, and personal ambitions that traversed the ocean alongside trade. During the medieval period, the most momentous of these non-material transfers was the spread of Islam along the shores of monsoon Asia.¹ As Muslim merchants established communities in all the flourishing port cities of the Indian Ocean, Islamic beliefs and practices were carried across vast distances and came into contact with diverse societies on a scale comparable only to the initial expansion of the caliphate during the seventh century. This movement along the maritime trade routes, however, was not predicated on military conquest, political hegemony, or imperial design: the expansion of Muslim communities

¹ Paul Mus recommends the term “monsoon Asia” to encompass the borderless maritime world of pre-colonial East, Southeast, and South Asia as an area that despite its rich diversity shares certain cultural traits and that since the early historical period has interacted through the participation in a common world of commerce. Himanshu Prabha Ray likewise endorses this term for its ability to transcend regional constructs that she regards as a historiographical artefact of colonialism. See P. Mus, *India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*, trans. I.W. Mabbett, ed. D.P. Chandler (Caulfield: Monash University Press, rev. edn., 2010); H.P. Ray, “Narratives of Faith: Buddhism and Colonial Archaeology in Monsoon Asia”, Asia Research Institute (National University of Singapore) working paper (2007).

across monsoon Asia between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries took place haphazardly, incidental to the development of Muslim trade networks. The principal agents in this extension of the medieval Muslim world were not sultans, soldiers, or scholars but ordinary, humdrum traders whose main objective was not to spread their faith but to turn a profit.

It is the central contention of this book that this process was fundamentally shaped by the interaction of these ordinary Muslims – ordinary in the sense in that they were neither representatives of state power nor recognized religious authorities – with non-Muslim societies.² This dynamic informed the development of Islamic norms and practices even in those regions of the Indian Ocean that eventually came under Muslim rule and that over time developed into majority Muslim societies, such as the Swahili Coast, the Maldives, or Aceh. Islam was never a stable, monolithic entity, and in places across monsoon Asia, far from Arabia, local receptions, understandings, and practices were crucial to its historical development. The communities that grew out of the settlement of Muslim traders in port cities across maritime Asia have proved long-lasting: every major historic port-of-trade in the Indian Ocean has a Muslim community that in some way traces its history back to these premodern exchanges. The effects of the interaction between local societies and Islam, however, have differed widely. Some regions, such as East Africa or peninsular Southeast Asia, have been profoundly shaped by their interaction with Islamic beliefs, law, and institutions, while others such as southern India or southern China to a much lesser degree.

This book is a study of both these dynamics: the spread of Islam through the agency of Muslim merchants on the one hand, and the effects on Islam of their interaction with non-Muslim societies across the medieval Indian Ocean world on the other. In other words, it seeks to both look outwards, towards the movements of Muslim communities in space and time, as well as inwards, to ask how these communities understood and responded to changes in their social and political environments. The core argument is that during this period, a particular form of Islamic thought and practice emerged from these twin processes. This Monsoon Islam of the Indian Ocean was shaped by merchants not sultans, forged by commercial imperatives rather than in battle, and defined by the reality of Muslims living within non-Muslim societies.

² Throughout this book, the term “non-Muslim” is used to refer to the diverse individuals and groups who did not identify with Islam; it does not imply that they formed a single community nor that they conceived their identity in an explicit contrast to Islam.

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Muslims in the trading ports of monsoon Asia observed the principal acts of their faith, the so-called pillars of Islam (*arkān al-dīn*), in the same manner as Muslims everywhere: they professed their belief in the one god with Muhammad as his messenger, performed the obligatory prayers, gave alms, fasted during the holy month, and strove to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. In other ways, however, they diverged. For example, they produced new interpretations of Islamic law designed to meet the specific needs of their heterogeneous communities; many prayed in buildings that looked like Hindu temples, and some worshipped saints outside of the Islamic tradition; some practised matrilineality contrary to the otherwise staunchly agnatic Islamic tradition; they professed new understandings of religiously sanctioned warfare (*jihād*), and to that end even re-defined what constitutes the “Muslim world” (*dār al-Islām*).

This apparent tension between orthopraxy and innovation reflects the broader challenge of reconciling Islam as an analytical category with Islam as a historical phenomenon. As Shahab Ahmed points out, any meaningful conceptualization “must come to terms with – indeed, be *coherent* with – the capaciousness, complexity, and, often, *outright contradiction* that obtains within the historical phenomenon that has proceeded from the human engagement with the idea and reality” of the Islamic faith.³ It is this human, historical engagement – in the form of religious thought, social practice, commercial connection, and political allegiance – that this book connotes as Monsoon Islam. To be sure, Monsoon Islam is by no means a discrete school of Islamic philosophy: it is an etic category that does not represent a deliberate or coherent set of doctrines. Instead, it describes how Islam was *realized* by Muslims in the context of the trading world of the premodern Indian Ocean; not as abstract principles but in specific acts, attitudes, and ideas that responded to concrete historical situations and challenges. Importantly, these acts, attitudes, and ideas, however contradictory they may appear at times, were made sense of and articulated in terms of Islamic precept, history, and law – in other words, they were understood by these Muslims *as Islam*.⁴

Monsoon Islam developed outside of the traditional Islamic heartlands and independent of the caliphate and its successor states, on the coastlines and in the trade emporia of the Indian Ocean. The term is emphatically not meant to suggest that this trajectory of Islamic history

³ S. Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 6 (original emphases).

⁴ Writes Ahmed: “Islam, meaning-making for the self by one-fifth of humanity, is *Islam* – it is not anything else – and should be conceptualized, understood and appreciated as such; in terms which cohere with its meanings and by which its meanings cohere”. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 546 (original emphasis).

was defined by the monsoon as a climatic phenomenon, that somehow the weather patterns in regions affected by the Asian monsoon account for the prevalence of certain religious beliefs and attitudes there. Nor is it intended as a rebuttal to the kind of nineteenth-century orientalism that identified Islam as the natural religion of the desert: “Le désert est monothéiste”, in the words of Ernest Renan, “[s]ublime dans son immense uniformité”.⁵ Instead, the term summons the “deep structure element” underlying Indian Ocean trade during the age of sail: the system of seasonally opposing trade winds known as the monsoons.⁶ In his survey of global maritime history, Felipe Fernández-Armesto posits ebulliently that compared to the diktat of fixed wind systems, other motors of history, be they culture, politics, or economics, pale in significance: “In most of our explanations of what happened in history, there is too much hot air and not enough wind”.⁷

On account of the persistent maritime corridors created by its wind system, Monsoon Asia formed “a natural space that favoured the long-distance movement of people, commodities, languages and ideas”.⁸ The monsoons determined when ships could travel eastwards or westwards, where merchants settled, and how far their commercial networks extended. In the words of Michael Pearson, the doyen of Indian Ocean studies: “The implications of the monsoons are endless”.⁹ In the evolution of Islam across maritime Asia, the monsoons enabled and structured the exchanges and interactions that shaped how Islam came to be understood, communicated, and applied by Muslims living on the different coasts it connected. It is in this sense, as a link that fostered interaction, exchange, and relationships across the vast distances of the ocean, that the term monsoon is used in this book.

The world of Monsoon Islam was first and foremost a commercial realm, and many of its chief characteristics were defined by the imperatives of doing business in settings that were unfamiliar (in the sense of kinship

⁵ E. Renan, *Études d'Histoire Religieuse* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1857), 66–67. While the desert remains a potent symbol of and within Arab culture – and, synecdochically, for Muslim culture as a whole – from its inception Islam was a quintessentially urban faith. (By way of illustration, different terms for “city” occur more than two dozen times in the Quran, compared to only a couple of references to the desert.)

⁶ M. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), 19. The concrete workings of the monsoons are described in the next chapter.

⁷ F. Fernández-Armesto, *Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 149.

⁸ A. Acri, R. Blench, and A. Landmann, “Re-connecting Histories across the Indo-Pacific”, in A. Acri, R. Blench, and A. Landmann (eds.), *Spirits and Ships: Cultural Transfers in Early Monsoon Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2017), 5.

⁹ Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 22.

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ties), foreign (in the sense of political boundaries), and alien (in the sense of cultural difference). Embedded within these complex trade relations across the ocean were many other forms of exchange: of texts, for instance, but most importantly of people with their beliefs, customs, connections, and rivalries. At its core, Monsoon Islam was the product of the tension between the distant and the local, between these Muslims' role in far-flung trading networks and an Islamic cosmopolis on the one hand and, on the other, their need to negotiate the specific social, economic, and political conditions of particular trading locations. Muslim trading communities were interlinked not only by mutual commerce but also by the need for religious and political institutions that could address the particular needs of these far-flung diasporic settlements.

Many of these institutions continue to define the character and structures of Islam across monsoon Asia. One example of this is Islamic law, which is usually seen as the defining hallmark of the influence that Arabic high culture had on the religion. But Muslims in maritime Asia found themselves confronted by issues that were not addressed in the classical legal texts of Islam; so Muslim judges and legists in India and elsewhere began to issue their own legal opinions (Ar., *fatāwā*) to address the specific problems faced by Muslims living in non-Muslim societies, a context that was simply not envisaged by the standard treatises. That there was a real need for such legal commentaries that addressed the everyday matters of social life within a non-Islamic society – that is, in a diaspora setting – is evident from the fact that these texts were almost immediately taken up by other Muslim communities across the Indian Ocean which faced the same situation. For example, a commentary on Islamic law composed in South India was quickly adopted in Java; in fact, in a legacy of these trans-oceanic, inter-diasporic exchanges, this same legal text continues to be used by Muslim judges in Indonesia even today.¹⁰

This example highlights that the spread of Islam across the Indian Ocean was not a unilateral transfer of a stable, fully formed prototype into new settings. To translate is to create anew: Monsoon Islam is the product of the creative, cumulative effort to translate Islam (as a set of religious beliefs, legal norms, and social practices) into new settings. This effort was rooted in the precepts of a universalist faith and its cosmopolitan idiom, but needed to be adapted and justified in ways that were intelligible and acceptable locally. The legend of Cheraman Perumal, the convert king, is another example of this creative effort to bridge the

¹⁰ This text and its trajectories are examined in Chapter 2.

divide between the global and the local, to designate a place for Islam within the social and political landscape of medieval South India.

Monsoon Islam, then, offers a framework for conceptualizing a particular trajectory of Islamic history, one which evolved in the context of trade, accommodation, and the blending of practices and traditions. Arguably, it is this trajectory that has defined the lived reality of the majority of Muslims worldwide, even though it rarely figures in popular images of, or discourses about, Islam today. The history and legacy of this Monsoon Islam is the subject of this book.

Historiography

This study is not the first to explore this history but part of an ongoing effort to decouple Islamic history from Middle Eastern studies. The primary aim of Marshall Hodgson's monumental *The Venture of Islam* is to historicize Islam, for example by focusing on culture rather than the traditional mainstay of Islamic studies, law.¹¹ Hodgson coined the term Islamicate to describe cultural elements that were not directly religious in nature but influenced by (and influential on) the historical development of Islam. This led him to pay much greater attention to the development of Islamic civilization outside of its Arab heartland, in places such as India which he regarded as primary sites of religious innovation in the post-caliphate era.¹² By tracing the development of Islamicate civilization outside of legal texts and beyond the boundaries of the old caliphate, *The Venture of Islam* offers a history of Islam that is not a narrative of the dissemination (or dilution) of an authentic (but increasingly corrupted) Islam steeped in Arabic high culture but rather the story of Muslims' interaction with a much wider, and much more heterogeneous, world.

A central strand of Hodgson's work is the interactive nature of commerce, politics, and cultural change in the expansion of Islam across the Afro-Eurasian oecumene. Hodgson draws particular attention to the special role played by what he calls the commercial community in the expansion of Islam along the Indian Ocean littoral. As a result of this mercantile influence on the spread and development of the religion there, "Islamdom in the westerly coasts of the Indian Ocean formed a political and intellectual world of its own", a world in which "the focus of power

¹¹ M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

¹² On this point, also see M.G.S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*, ed. E. Burke III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), ch.7.

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lay in the Muslim communities of the many coastal towns”.¹³ From India, the “interregional citted commercial nexus” carried this strand of Islam from the western Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia, which came to be tied into oecumene. Across these regions, Islamic law developed in relative independence from the traditional centres of Islamic scholarship of the period.¹⁴

It is in this cultural and commercial oecumene that Shahab Ahmed seeks the answer to the question posed in the title of his provocative book *What is Islam?* Like Hodgson, Ahmed looks east, to a vast swath of territory spanning from south-eastern Europe to South Asia, what he terms the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” that is home to the majority of Muslims today:

The Balkans-to-Bengal complex represents the most geographically, demographically and temporally extensive instance of a highly-articulated shared paradigm of life and thought in the history of Muslims – it is demographically, spatially, and temporally, an (if not *the*) *historically major paradigm* of Islam.¹⁵

In focusing on the historical development of Islam in this region, Ahmed counters a scholarly tradition that has deemed it insufficiently central or authentic to be at the heart of normative discussions about Islam. Acknowledging and studying Islam as a historical and human phenomenon, rather than as divine revelation or as a closed system of theological prescription, means having to grapple with the peoples and societies that have embraced it, claimed it, and shaped it. This approach is shared by Falloum Ngom, whose *Muslims beyond the Arab World* explores the development of Islam through West African literary traditions to show that the faith must be seen as “a set of processes and practices, texts and interpretations” that were adapted to the culturally specific ways of people around the globe.¹⁶ If the study of Islam is ultimately the study of Muslims, then both the Balkans-to-Bengal region and sub-Saharan Africa form essential parts of what Islam is; this book argues that the same holds true for the world of Monsoon Islam.

It is no coincidence that Hodgson’s notion of Islamicate culture was taken up most eagerly, and most productively, by historians of India, who were seeking to describe the merger of Islamic, Persianate, and Indic culture that characterized the sultanates of North India and the

¹³ Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 544.

¹⁴ Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 544–545.

¹⁵ Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 82 (original emphases).

¹⁶ F. Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of ‘Ajami and the Muridiyya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1. Also see J.R. Bowen, *A New Anthropology of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

Deccan.¹⁷ Studies of paintings, architecture, poetry, courtly culture, political thought, military organization, medicine, and many other facets of South Asian history have been analysed through the lens of an Indo-Islamic pattern of society and culture.¹⁸ The focal point of these studies tends to fall on North India, and especially the Mughal dynasty, as the centre of gravity of a Persianate realm of Indo-Islam. André Wink, in his magisterial study of the long-term evolution of this Indo-Islamic world, deviates from this pattern by firmly situating Indo-Islam against the history of the Indian Ocean, a sphere that otherwise tends to be regarded as peripheral to its development:

In an overview of the entire period of Islamic expansion and hegemony in the East one fact stands out: the growth and development of a world-economy in and around the Indian Ocean – with India at its centre and the Middle East and China as its two dynamic poles – was effected by continued economic, social and cultural integration into ever wider and more complex patterns under the aegis of Islam. In a word, Islamization here stands for integration.¹⁹

Wink's emphasis on the Indian Ocean, and especially on the economic connections it embodied, has been an impetus to study South Asian Islam from the perspective of seaborne connections rather than territorial empires.

Patricia Risso's seminal effort to trace these connections has shown that tracing the intersection of Islamic and Indian Ocean history can offer a more accurate perspective on both.²⁰ The general agenda laid out by Risso has been taken up in a series of detailed studies that probe different trajectories of Islam in the trading world of maritime Asia. Two themes have received particular attention: the organization of mercantile networks and the transmission of language and texts.²¹ Both strands of research

¹⁷ A representative example of the immense scholarship on this topic is D. Gilmartin and B.B. Lawrence (eds.), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2000).

¹⁸ For a recent anthology of such studies, see for instance, A. Patel and K. Leonard (eds.), *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

¹⁹ A. Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1990–2004), I, 4.

²⁰ P. Risso, *Merchants and Faith: Muslim Commerce and Culture in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

²¹ See for instance A. Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010); P. Malekandathil, *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010); H.P. Ray and E.A. Alpers (eds.), *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); T. Tschacher, *Islam in Tamil Nadu: Varia* (Halle: Südasienswissenschaftliche Arbeitsblätter der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 2004); R. Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

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emphasize circulation as the defining hallmark of oceanic networks. This interest in the circulation of people, goods, and ideas, rather than their mere transmission, has produced innovative new frameworks of enquiry that have rejected the conventional parameters of national and regional histories and have upended received chronologies. For example, Engseng Ho recovers the 500-year history of an “ecumenical Islam in an oceanic world” by tracing the material, genealogical, and imaginary exchanges of a trade diaspora that spanned between Arabia, India, and Southeast Asia.²² Ronit Ricci uses the lens of translation to reveal interconnected processes of Islamization in South and Southeast Asia, arguing for the existence of an “Arabic cosmopolis” that over centuries bound together Muslims from different parts of the Indian Ocean.²³ Nile Green takes his readers to the intersection of Islam, imperialism, and industrialization to reveal colonial Bombay as a “primary city of Islam” that complicates notions of a uniform, global form of Islam centred on the Middle East.²⁴ And Seema Alavi draws on the “easy mingling” of seafaring cultures with the religious, economic, and political networks in Indian port cities as an expression of the cosmopolitanism of South Asian Islam in the nineteenth century.²⁵ What all these studies share is an understanding of Islam that is not predicated on an Arabian identity and that emphasizes the role of maritime networks in the formation of a variegated but interconnected Islamic world across monsoon Asia.

The concept of Monsoon Islam is, of course, only as useful as the explanatory work it helps to do. It is presented here not as a dichotomy of essentialized geographies – the harsh and forbidding desert versus the fluid and encompassing ocean – nor as a simple binary between orthodoxy and diversity. Instead, it is intended to capture the institutional and practical consequences of the interaction of Islamic beliefs and norms with other beliefs and norms in the absence of a dominant Islamic political or social order. Out of this type of interaction emerged over time a different and distinct historical trajectory of Islam, one that contrasts with the historical experiences of Arabia, Persia, and North India but that was commonplace all across the medieval trading world of the Indian Ocean: an Islam that was shaped by the priorities and preferences

²² E. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 97.

²³ Ricci, *Islam Translated*, 1–21, 245–272.

²⁴ N. Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

²⁵ S. Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 4.