

Research Article



The Keyi Mappila Muslim Merchants of Tellicherry and the Making of Coastal Cosmopolitanism on the Malabar Coast

Santhosh Abraham

Indian Institute of Technology Madras

abraham@iitm.ac.in

Abstract

The Keyi Mappila Muslim merchants of Tellicherry (Thalassery) on the Malabar Coast were one of the few early modern Indian merchant groups who succeeded in carving out a powerful political and social configuration of their own on the western coast of the Indian Ocean during the British period. Today, several branches of Keyi families remain a cultural unit in the Islamic community of Kerala. This article attempts to locate the group in the larger theoretical context of Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism and argues that the Keyis developed a distinct and significant type of coastal cosmopolitanism in an Indian Ocean setting; Chovakkaran Moosa, an influential merchant from a Keyi family during the colonial period, serves as a representative figure. Through their trade and financial relationships with British and local elites, and the characteristic architecture of their warehouses, residences, and mosques, the Keyis successfully integrated the practices of a global cosmopolitan space into a local vernacular secluded commercial space. This article presents a synthesis of a lively coastal urban and local rural cosmopolitanism that included several networks and exchanges, foreign and native collaborations, and an amalgamation of local and external cultural spheres.

Keywords

British colonialism – coastal architecture – cosmopolitanism – Indian Ocean – local entrepreneurship – Malabar Muslim merchants

Introduction

In 1792, General Robert Abercromby, governor of British Bombay, wrote in his diary that “it was necessary to protect the *Moplahs* who are a very useful merchant class in Tellicherry for their own benefits and that of the Company.”¹ The subject of his assessment was the Keyi Mappila Muslim merchants of Tellicherry² (Thalassery) on the Malabar Coast,³ an early modern Indian merchant group in the western Indian Ocean who succeeded in carving out a powerful political and socioeconomic space of their own in eighteenth-century colonial India. The history of the Keyi Mappila Muslims of the Malabar Coast during early British colonialism relates to wider issues of indigenous merchant networks and linkages with Europeans in Indian Ocean history. This paper investigates this special cosmopolitan political and cultural space in colonial south India, focusing on the exchanges, negotiations, collaborations, incorporations, and specific cultural patterns of Keyi Mappila Muslim merchants on the Malabar Coast.

Cosmopolitanism is seen as a universalist perspective emerging from western theoretical and philosophical outlooks and rooted in the fundamental work of Immanuel Kant, who presented cosmopolitanism as a philosophy that urges all to be “citizens of the world,” thereby creating a worldwide community of humanity committed to common values.⁴ Kant saw cosmopolitanism as a

1 Bombay Castle Records, *Secret and Political Department Diaries*, Abercrombie to Dick, February 29, 1792.

2 Tellichery (modern Thalassery) was a port and commercial town on the Malabar Coast. By the last decade of the seventeenth century (1694), the English East India Company had set up factory and built a fort at Tellichery. For more details see Bonaventure Swai, “East India Company and Mappila Merchants of Tellichery,” *Social Scientist* 8, no. 1 (1979): 58–70.

3 Today, the region of Malabar comprises the northern districts of Kerala in India, namely Kasargod, Kannur, Wayanad, Kozhikode, and Palakkad. The name Malabar was given by Arabs. The first component, “Mala,” signified mountain or hill in the local language, while the second component, “bar,” came from the Arabic word *barr* meaning country, i.e., “Hill Country.”

4 Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent,” in *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allan W. Wood, trans. C. F. Friedrich (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 117–132.

potential social and political order, “a universal civil society administered in accord with the right.”⁵ In a more universalist, philosophical, and contemporary context, Martha Nussbaum has defined the cosmopolitan as “one whose politics is based upon reason rather than patriotism or group sentiment and is truly universal rather than communitarian.”⁶ In making an argument about the limits of patriotism, Nussbaum argued that “the values on which citizens of liberal democratic states pride themselves, including the ideas of equality and rights, including the right to pursue their own visions of the good life as they see fit, are remarkably cosmopolitan.”⁷ In support of these universalist cosmopolitan ideas, Kwame Anthony Appiah relates “cosmopolitan patriotism”—a “rooted cosmopolitanism”—to a communitarian context in which individuals from varying locations enter relationships of mutual respect and obligation with each other despite their differing values and beliefs.⁸ In relation to such modern universalist perceptions, Simpson and Kresse have explained cosmopolitanism as an “idea of being part of a broad social project that exists outside the confines of kinship, ethnicity or nationality.”⁹

In response to Enlightenment notions of multicultural tolerance and the interdependence of cosmopolitan ideals, scholars have applied many unique labels to cosmopolitanism. Homi Bhaba and Pnina Werbner proposed using “vernacular” or “marginal” cosmopolitanism to denote a cosmopolitanism that observes from the peripheries of the centers of power.¹⁰ Werbner saw different cosmopolitan practices coexisting in late modernity, each with its own historicity and distinctive worldview, which she called marginal

5 For more details on Kantian cosmopolitanism, see Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), and idem, *Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

6 Martha Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, eds. Martha Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 17–21, at 14.

7 Ibid., 13.

8 For more details see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), and idem, “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (1997): 617–639, at 617.

9 Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse, “Introduction,” in *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean*, eds. Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse (London: Foundation Books, 2008), 1–41, at 2–3.

10 Homi K. Bhaba, “Preface to the Routledge Classical Edition,” in idem, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004). For a transnational, multicultural view of vernacular cosmopolitanism, see Pnina Werbner, “Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 23, nos. 2–3 (2006): 496–498.

cosmopolitanisms.¹¹ Though these terms represent the condition of millions of refugees and migrants in the contemporary world, Bhabha's critique of cosmopolitanism attempted to assert the existence of nonelite modes and sites of cosmopolitanism. His "vernacular cosmopolitanism" also resulted in multiple similar modalities of cosmopolitanism, such as "moral cosmopolitanism," "working class cosmopolitanism," "lower-caste cosmopolitanism," "subaltern cosmopolitanism," and "discrepant cosmopolitanism."¹² The notion of cosmopolitanism remains haunted by several cosmopolitan dispositions rooted in regionally diverse historicities and worldviews.

Since many of these ideas of cosmopolitanism were largely situated within European and North American contexts of multiculturalism,¹³ it is hard to find instances of Indian Ocean Muslim cosmopolitanisms that do not conform to this generic pattern. The premodern history of Indian Ocean regions has been characterized by cosmopolitanism stemming from trade and mercantile activities. Historiographically, Indian Ocean port towns have been analyzed as connected cosmopolitan spaces by linking littoral regions of Malaya, Burma, East Africa, and the Persian Gulf with India.¹⁴ Because pre-sixteenth-century Indian Ocean cosmopolitan port cities acted as hubs of exchange and collaboration, K. N. Chaudhuri examined the Indian Ocean as a "zone of economic consumption" that led to intimate social interactions among disparate peoples, giving rise to a cosmopolitan society.¹⁵ Other scholars attempted to understand historical trajectories with a focus on maritime India, shaped by Indian Ocean circuits of trade, religion, commercial activities, merchants, and cross-cultural

11 Ibid., 497.

12 For a survey of different types of cosmopolitanism, see Pauline Kleingeld, "Six Varieties of Cosmopolitanism in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany," *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 3 (1990): 505–524. For a recent interpretation of contemporary cosmopolitanism attributed to the state of Kerala in India, see J. Devika, "Cochin Creole and the Perils of Castiest Cosmopolitanism: Reading Requiem for the Living," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 51, no. 1 (2016): 127–144.

13 Scholars have given a variety of accounts of cosmopolitanisms found globally. See for example, Roxanne L. Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shores: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), and Magdalena Nowicka and Maria Rovisco, *Cosmopolitanism in Practice* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009).

14 For more details, see John C. Hawley, *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

15 Roxani Eleni Margariti, "Mercantile Networks, Port-cities and 'Pirate' States," *Journal of Social History of the Orient* 51, no. 4 (2008): 543–577, at 545; K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 36.

interactions in various coastal and littoral zones.¹⁶ However, Chaudhuri and others observed that this type of cosmopolitan interaction came to an end, or underwent a decisive change, with the entry of Europeans, particularly the British and the French in the late eighteenth century. This argument further creates the need to explore the possible continuity of cosmopolitan practices and localized perceptions of mixed histories of cosmopolitanism after the European entry into Indian Ocean regions. Scholarly works on the Indian Ocean, such as that of Sugata Bose, are focused on Muslim traders who opened up avenues of commercial exchange that dispersed Islam and Islamic culture throughout the Near and Far East.¹⁷ Seema Alavi examined the presence of reformist intellectual networks in the British Empire that created a new Muslim cosmopolitanism in the Indian Ocean basin.¹⁸ Most of these studies continue to describe the Indian Ocean arena as a socially constructed space witnessing cosmopolitan movements and the long-distance transit of goods and information in an Islamic Indian Ocean context.

In a more localized context, M. N. Pearson's work led a number of historians to take an approach different from those found in earlier scholarly literature; this led to the displacement of a Eurocentric perspective on the Indian Ocean region. Pearson pointed out that there were coastal populations in many port cities in the Indian Ocean who lived quite provincially, being inward-looking with limited lives. They were connected with the neighboring lands and hinterlands with which their port was linked through shipping and business.¹⁹ In another context, Engseng Ho has identified "local cosmopolitans" in the Indian Ocean as persons who, while embedded in local relations, also maintain connections with distant places, thus articulating a relation between different geographical scales.²⁰ What is most striking in these influential historiographical stances is the identification of the coastal cosmopolitan, who is deeply local and transnational at the same time, without necessarily experiencing any conflict as a result of this dual status, and who remains "itinerant across the

16 Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean* (New Delhi: Primus, 2010); Lakshmi Subrahmanian, "Commerce, Circulation and Consumption: Indian Ocean Communities in Historical Perspective," in *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social and Political Perspectives*, ed. Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal (London: Routledge, 2010), 136–157.

17 See Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

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

19 M. N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge: 2003), chap. 4.

20 Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 31.

oceanic space.”²¹ The present article follows Pearson’s and Ho’s perspectives in regarding the Indian Ocean as a space of diverse geographical entities and connectedness where many people, in various settings at many points in time, lived lives that were provincial and transnational, evolving a new space of coastal cosmopolitanism connecting local, urban, and rural exchanges.

The present article explores the possibility of a colonial type of cosmopolitanism by focusing on the transcultural nature of architectural styles on the Malabar Coast, examining traces of cosmopolitan practices generated through colonial linkages and exchanges between coastal, urban, and local-rural conditions that are at variance with Kantian theoretical lineages. The article examines cosmopolitanism not as the reduction of all cultures into a single world community, but as a process unfolding within the connected histories of coastal-urban and local-rural spaces on the Malabar Coast. Such a coastal cosmopolitanism involving a command of both local and foreign idioms developed as a mark of social distinction among the Keyi Mappilas of the Malabar Coast.

The Mappila Muslim Merchants of the Malabar Coast

The Malabar Coast of southwestern India played a significant role in India’s maritime trade during the medieval and modern periods. The coast was ruled by local kings and chieftains. From the late Middle Ages onward, this region witnessed several trade settlements by Islamic Arab traders and intensive trade between West Asia and India. The interactions and engagements between Islamic Arab traders and the communities on the western coast of India gave rise to a unique Muslim community, the Mappilas.²² Much research on the identity of the Islamic community in the Indian Ocean has focused either on the broader pan-Islamic framework of Asia or on Islamic communities in greater South Asia.²³ This approach examines Islamic ideology as a distinct sociopolitical identity, which invariably frames the Mappila Muslims of Malabar

21 Ibid., 189.

22 The name “Mappila” is a transliteration of the Malayalam word “Mapila,” which has also been transliterated as “Mappila,” “Mappilla,” and “Moplah,” among other forms. For more details, see Roland Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992), 30–36.

23 In South Asian studies also, scholars now tend to stress the “syncretic” aspect of Islam. Susan Bayly’s works are particularly notable; see Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The theme of syncretism is also stressed by Richard Eaton, “Introduction,” in *India’s Islamic Traditions, 711–1750*, ed. Richard Eaton (New Delhi: Oxford

as a distinctive “religious community” as opposed to Christian Europeans and Hindu locals.²⁴ This perspective has further identified “religiously defined militancy” as one of the characteristic features of the Mappilas, a response to atrocities initially committed by the Portuguese in their ruthless quest to control the spice trade in the region and perpetuated by subsequent European commercial competition in the region. The present study deviates from this anachronistic postulation of a so-called religious frontier that divides Kerala between Mappila Muslims and a more indigenous local Hindu society.

Before the arrival of Europeans in the fifteen century, Mappila Muslim merchants conducted a vibrant trade in pepper and spices in the markets of the Indian Ocean. Apart from the Mappila merchants, there were other merchant groups in the region, such as the Chettis, Jews, and Christians, who imparted to the Malabar Coast a cosmopolitan character. However, the Mappila Muslim merchants were the most influential here, having stimulated a brisk trade with local princes and also with a network of Middle Eastern and East African traders.²⁵ Apart from maritime trade with West Asian lands, a substantial coastal trade connected the Malabar ports with the Gujarat and Bengal ports on the Indian subcontinent. The success of the Mappila Muslim settlements was due to their intermarriage, immigration, and cultural assimilation in the coastal areas.²⁶ However, it was their successful association with the Zamorin of Calicut, who incorporated Muslim ships and seamen as potential military resources, that gave the Mappilas a political role to play.²⁷

After the arrival of Vasco de Gama in 1498, the commercial interests of Muslim merchants clashed with European commercial enterprises. The fragmented character of a Malabar polity with a large number of principalities and potentates enabled the Portuguese to establish a shadowy suzerainty in the

University Press, 2003), 1–34. See also Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

24 Stephen Frederic Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Mappilas of Malabar, 1498–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

25 The Mappila Muslim merchants strongly aided the rise of local kings in Malabar, especially the Zamorins of Calicut. For more details, see K. V. Krishna Ayyar, *The Zamorins of Calicut* (1938; repr., Calicut: Calicut University, 1999).

26 K. M. Panikkar, *Malabar and the Portuguese* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1929), 24–25.

27 For details of the relationship between Zamorin and Mappila seamen, see O. K. Nambiar, *The Kunjalis: Admirals of Calicut* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963). See also M. T. Narayanan, “Kunjalis: The Muslim Admirals of Calicut,” in *Kerala Muslims: A Historical Perspective*, ed. Ashgar Ali Engineer (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1995), 91–102.

coastal regions and impose their own system of maritime control.²⁸ The imperial, commercial, and cultural ambitions of the Portuguese on the Malabar Coast constituted a threat to the Zamorin and the Mappila merchants of Calicut.²⁹ Pearson pointed out that the introduction of violent politics into Indian Ocean commerce by the Portuguese during the sixteenth century restructured the existing port hierarchy on the Malabar Coast, making it a commercially confrontationalist region as well as a contact zone between the Europeans and local rulers.³⁰ While traditional Islamic commercial networks struggled to survive under the Portuguese threat, Indian exports of pepper more than doubled.³¹

This was also the beginning of the burgeoning of local and regional Muslim commercial groups and merchant families on the north Malabar Coast, who responded cautiously to the changing circumstances. While the Mappilas of Calicut, along with the Zamorin, showed all-out opposition to the Portuguese, the Mappilas of north Malabar, particularly from Canannore, were receptive to the Europeans. The rise of local Mappila Muslim merchants was due to the Portuguese search for intermediaries to supply spices from the hinterland of Malabar. The Portuguese clearly differentiated between the local Mappila Muslim merchants and the Arab merchants from the Middle East.³² Much Portuguese trade depended on this group of local merchants who supplied

28 For more details on the conflicts between Portuguese and Arabs in the Indian Ocean region, see Yogesh Sharma, "Facets of Ecology and Society in Coastal India in the Pre-Modern Phase," in *Coastal Histories: Societies and Ecology in Pre-Modern India*, ed. Yogesh Sharma (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2010), xiii–lxi.

29 See, for example, Pius Malekandathil, *Portuguese Cochin and the Maritime Trade of India, 1500–1663* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001); Hussain Randathani, *Mappila Muslims: A Study on Society and Anti-colonial Struggles* (Calicut: Other Books, 2007), 76–88.

30 M. N. Pearson, "India and the Indian Ocean in the Sixteenth Century," in *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800*, ed. Ashin Das Gupta and M. N. Pearson (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1987), 71–93, at 71. For more details of the Portuguese phase on the Malabar Coast, see K. S. Mathew, *Portuguese Trade with India in the Sixteenth Century* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1983); K. M. Panikkar, *Malabar and the Portuguese*.

31 M. N. Pearson, *Before Colonialism: Theories on Asian-European Relations, 1500–1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 40.

32 In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese divided the Muslim communities of the western coast of India into two groups: the Moors of the Land and the Moors from Arabia. The Moors from Arabia, the so-called Paradesi Muslims, came from a wide variety of regions besides the Arabian Peninsula and settled in the trading towns of the Malabar Coast. They dominated the western arm of the overseas trade from Malabar, and hence the Portuguese initially perceived a conflict of interest with this group in particular. For more details, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 116–120.

goods from the interior. The local Mappila merchants were successful in their efforts to adjust themselves to, and benefit from, changing commercial circumstances in the Indian Ocean when the Arackal Ali Rajas emerged as the real champion of Mappila Muslims' trade interests in the region.³³ Taking advantage of this opportunity, local Mappila Muslim merchants extended their control over the regional spice trade with powerful local support. As a result, alongside Calicut and Cochin, Canannore developed as a separate port town on the Malabar Coast. Canannore port, the Arackal Ali Rajas, and local Mappila Muslim merchants dominated the regional political economy in the eighteenth century and became a coastal cosmopolitan space in the Indian Ocean arena.

The English East India Company and Malabar Merchants

From the beginning of the eighteenth century onward, commercial activities of the English East India Company (hereafter EEIC) completely relied on the services of indigenous merchant groups on the Malabar Coast who could perform a variety of functions to the mutual benefit of both parties. These merchants supplied the English with goods from the interior and also acted as agents in the new spaces created by the British in the Indian Ocean. In South India, according to Arasaratnam, these "Company Merchants," drawn from many castes, received a new status and rights in the settlement, such as godown (warehouse) space and protection and a share in the Company's fiscal privileges.³⁴ Bagchi pointed out that eighteenth-century Indian merchants were often labeled "as bankers, servants, revenue farmers and more importantly it is with the co-operation of the leading merchants that the Company could collect the customs duties and other transit duties in various ports."³⁵ The growing importance of local merchants in eighteenth-century Indian Ocean trade created a

33 The Arakkal kingdom was a prominent Muslim ruling house on the northern Malabar Coast. The Arakkal family followed a matriarchal system of descent: the eldest member of the family, whether male or female, became its head and ruler. While male rulers were called Ali Rajah ("the Sea Ruler"), female rulers were known as Arakkal Beevis. For more details on the Arakkal kingdom, see Biju John Mailaparambil, *Lords of the Sea: The Ali Rajas of Canannore and the Political Economy of Malabar, 1663–1723* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

34 Sinnappah Arasaratnam, "Trade and Political Dominion in South India, 1750–1790: Changing British-Indian Relationships," *Modern Asian Studies* 13, no. 1 (1979): 19–40, at 20–21.

35 Amiya Kumar Bagchi, "Merchants and Colonialism," in *Economy, Society, and Politics in Modern India*, ed. D. N. Panigrahi (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1985), 1–41, at 36.

space in indigenous society through which they could create a new identity for themselves as sociopolitical figures in local and littoral networks.

In 1694 the EEIC established its important trading post at Tellicherry on the north Malabar Coast.³⁶ The successful administration of the Tellicherry trade establishment was crucial for the EEIC, as this would provide stability for its merchant capital in South India, and more generally in the Indian Ocean. As there were competitions for trade monopoly from other European powers, the Company tried several strategies of obtaining control, which resulted in a radical transformation of the sociopolitical and economic structure of much of the littoral and coastal regions of South India. In the context of the English trading post at Tellicherry, further expansion of the EEIC was based on financial assistance with a view to obtaining a trading monopoly in the region. After initial trade settlements and negotiations with the chieftains of Malabar, the Company needed intermediaries who were not merely proficient in the local languages, but also conversant with local economic conditions, current political realities, and the ruling classes. Hence, the English factory sought commercial support from local merchants—mostly the Mappila merchants—to ensure a cheap supply of spices from the Malabar hinterland. It was in this context that the Keyi Mappila merchant family of Tellicherry became important forerunners of indigenous commercial interests during this period. Apart from acting as agents of the British factory, the Keyis also maintained contact with the Coromandel Coast, particularly with the port towns of Tuticorin and Masulipatanam as well as the western port towns of Allepey, Cochin, Mangalore, Bhatkal, Bombay, and Surat.

Chovakkaran Moosa: A Cosmopolitan Coastal Entrepreneur

Although Keyi activities in Malabar Coast became more significant during the time of the EEIC, the lineage of this merchant family can be traced back to Aluppi, a small trader from Chovva, in the Chirackkal region of Canannore.³⁷ The early engagement of the Keyis with sea trade commenced when they moved their trade to Tellicherry from the hinterlands of Canannore; this resulted in the construction of several warehouses in the coastal regions. Apart

36 K. K. N. Kurup, *History of the Tellicherry Factory, 1683–1794* (Calicut: Sandhya Publications, 1985).

37 For more details of the early history of the Keyis, see M. P. Mujeebu Rahman, “Merchants and Colonialism: The Case of Chovakkaran Moosa and the English East India Company,” *History Farooq Working Paper Series 1* (2006): 1–14.

from being active in coastal trade, the crucial turning point in Keyi fortunes was their association with the EEIC in Tellicherry, particularly during the time of the early Mysore invasions in Malabar.³⁸ The Keyis remained with the Tellicherry factory; there was no likelihood of their joining Mysore. The Company also realized the importance of using this merchant class for its own benefit. This strategy resulted in the gradual isolation of the political power centers of the north Malabar Coast and the transformation of the Mappila Muslim merchants of Tellicherry into a comprador class. It is in this context that this article engages with the question of identity among the Keyi Mappila Muslim merchants of Malabar. Based on the evidence of commercial exchanges and letters between the EEIC and the Keyis of Malabar, this article identifies an inclusive form of coastal cosmopolitanism on the Malabar Coast, with multiple examples of local cosmopolitanisms.

It was Chovakkaran Moosa, Aluppi's nephew, who spearheaded the collaboration between the Keyis and the EEIC at the time of the Anglo-Mysore wars. For the Company, Moosa was a special kind of ally, and colonial reports commented:

He [Moosa] has manifested a steady attachment to the British interests on the coast on most trying occasions. He had supported our course by his fortune and credit and when the siege was raised [during the Mysore wars], accompanied our army through enemy territory to the southward of Tellicherry and by his credit and influence procured the necessary supplies of money and provisions. Without his assistance at that critical time our arm would not have moved.³⁹

Colonial records also state that "Moosa had on many instances, stood forward in support of the public cause and uniformly behaved himself to the appreciation of the Company's official servants."⁴⁰ These statements clarified the association of Mappila merchants, particularly the Keyis, with the Company and consequent British dependence on them. More evidence of a curious, ambivalent, and symbiotic relationship of mutual dependence between Moosa and the EEIC is found in *Thalaseery Rekhakal*, where the Superintendent of

38 Letter, Tellicherry to Court of Directors, December 18, 1769, Tamilnadu State Archives.

39 Bombay Castle Records, *Secret and Political Department Diaries*, Abercrombie to Dick, February 29, 1792.

40 Ibid.

Tellichery fort was observed to write to the Raja of Neeleswaram “to protect the belongings and the commodities of Moosa, who is a protégée of the Company.”⁴¹

The Malabar Joint Commissioners’ Reports of 1792 also attest to this sphere of local collaboration between the Company and the Keyis in the form of several statistical notes on the quantity, value, and price of pepper supplied by Moosa to the Company.⁴² Later, although the power of the EEIC increased in Malabar as it achieved a monopoly on the pepper trade and instituted strict measures against smuggling in Indian Ocean waters, Moosa and his associates continued to function as important collaborators of the Company.⁴³ This was due to the fact that the EEIC, in light of some cases where hinterland merchants disappeared after receiving advances, restricted the remaining pepper contracts to the Tellicherry merchants.⁴⁴ It was with this continuing confidence in the region that Moosa ventured to create his own coastal domain with the Company’s help. This attempt is visible in his dealings with the Cochin Raja and the Zamorin of Calicut during the later period of the British occupation of Malabar.

This reciprocal sphere of trade engagements in Malabar leads to another aspect of the local political cosmopolitan identity of Chovakkaran Moosa. He was able to expand his political power on the coast; in fact he swallowed up large chunks of the Bebee of Canannore.⁴⁵ In one of the letters to the Company on behalf of the Bebee of Canannore, Moosa stated that, “I, Chocara Mousa [*sic*], Merchant of Tellicherry, do hereby bind myself, my heirs and executors to pay the honourable Company the sum of Rs. 10,000/- on account of Ali Raja Bebee of Canannore within the period of twenty five days from the date hereof.”⁴⁶ Moosa wrote this letter in the context of the reported

41 Letter from Superintendent of Tellichery to Neeleswaram Raja, April 7, 1799, in Scaria Zacharia, ed., *Thalassery Rekhakal* (Kottayam: DC Books, 1996), 529–530.

42 *Report of a Joint Commission from Bengal and Bombay Appointed to Inspect in to the State and Condition of the Province of Malabar in the Years 1792 and 1793* (Madras: Government Press, 1862; repr., Trivandrum: Government of Kerala, 2010), sections 141 and 146.

43 *Malabar Second Commission Diaries*, Public, vol. 1697–98, letter from Alex Bell, Assistant Commercial Resident, to John Spencer, June 20, 1799, contract with Moosa for pepper.

44 *Malabar Second Commission Diaries*, Public, vol. 1697–98, letter from Spencer to Bell, June 22, 1799, agreement on payment to Moosa.

45 Remarks on Moosa’s association with Bebee of Canannore appear in the *Malabar Joint Commission Reports*. See *Report of a Joint Commission from Bengal and Bombay*, sections 137, 240–242, and 249.

46 Translation of an ola (palm leaf) document, Moosa’s Engagement to pay the Bebee of Canannore’s Arrears of Revenue, December 4, 1795, in William Logan, ed., *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Other Papers of Importance Relating to British Affairs in Malabar*,

bankruptcy of Arackal Bebee during the period of British occupation. Bebee had been forced by the British to sue for peace and raise money through Chovakkaran Moosa. This statement throws light on the shrinking of the age-old aristocracy in the region in the context of a marked change in the political economy of the Malabar Coast—the core of which was an alliance between foreign capital and rising indigenous merchant capital.

William Logan stated in his *Malabar Manual* that “after the British conquest of Malabar, four Islands of the Laccadive (taken by Tippu Sultan of Mysore from Bebee of Canannore) was leased to Chovakkaran Moosa by Captain Munro, Collector of newly acquired province of Canara.”⁴⁷ Other notes from *Thalassery Rekhakal* on Moosa reinforce Moosa’s local cosmopolitan political identity in relation to the local elites of the region. In a letter to the Tellicherry superintendent, the Raja of Kadatanad reported that “the total collection of revenue for the respective year from the land is insufficient, the amount which was sent by borrowing from Chovakkaran Moosa.”⁴⁸ A letter of a similar nature from the Chirakkal Raja states, “since revenue collection is delayed, the payable amount will be submitted by Moosa.”⁴⁹ Moosa’s growth as cosmopolitan merchant with wide political influence is also traceable in his relationship with the Raja of Coorg in Mysore District. In a letter found in *Thalassery Rekhakal*, the Raja of Coorg agreed that Moosa would pay his annual revenue to the British.⁵⁰ Financial assistance to local elites in troubled times takes us further into the ways in which South Indian merchants gained access to the revenue collection machinery of the colonial state. Instances of financial assistance, including advances in lieu of revenue as well as loans to local elites and to the British in different regions on the Malabar Coast, reinforce our vision of Moosa as a coastal cosmopolitan political entrepreneur.

Further evidence of the cosmopolitanism of Chovakkaran Moosa is related to colonial legal practices in a conquered region. Early European encounters in Indian coastal regions resulted in the establishment of Mayor’s courts in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras to settle maritime disputes and trade-related

vol. 3, *Malabar Manual* (Madras: Government Press, 1887; repr., Thiruvananthapuram: Gazetteers Department, 1998), 248.

47 Logan, *Malabar Manual*, 526.

48 Letter from Kadatanad Raja to Superintendent of Tellichery, May 17, 1796, in Zacharia, *Thalassery Rekhakal*, 3.

49 Letter from Chirakkal Raja to Superintendent of Tellichery, April 27, 1797, in Zacharia, *Thalassery Rekhakal*, 146. See also the letter from Chirakkal Raja to Superintendent of Tellichery, 13 September 1797, in *ibid.*, 213–214.

50 Letter from Vira Rajendra to Superintendent of Tellichery, April 20, 1799, in Zacharia, *Thalassery Rekhakal*, 540.

suits.⁵¹ Although the British colonial state, following the shift in the role of the British from traders to rulers in 1757, established colonial courts in India, the settlement of maritime disputes continued under the jurisdiction of the admiralty courts, which were the later form of the Mayor's courts. In a case reported in the Madras Mayor's court, Moosa challenged the English merchant Murdock Brown for nonpayment of a debt.⁵² When Brown countered that he had not received any pepper and hence there was no debt, Moosa called on another English merchant as witness to prove the authenticity of his claim. This case, won by Moosa in the end, illustrates the cosmopolitan character of the native merchant in the legal realm, using the new colonial law to challenge a British merchant at a moment when the concept of rule of law was still new in the traditional oral-based domains in Malabar.⁵³

Based on these examples, this article argues that the Keyi Mappila merchants, particularly Chovakkaran Moosa, may be described as coastal cosmopolitan entrepreneurs who not only acted as financiers in the Tellicherry region but also emerged as prominent merchant magnates in the whole of the Malabar Coast. Keyi Mappilas used British colonialism in Malabar to further their participation in larger maritime business practices. But at the same time their status did not define their cosmopolitanism. Keyi dominance and cosmopolitanism on the Malabar Coast came to an end with the death of Moosa in 1806. According to K. K. N. Kurup, "the Keyi family showed divisive tendencies and disintegrated thereafter, due to its unwieldy expansion and the complexities of inheritance systems. Since members of the family increased, Keyis were obliged to divide and subdivide with the result that there arose ten branches."⁵⁴

51 For an analysis of Mayor's courts in Madras, see Niels Brimnes, "Beyond Colonial Law: Indigenous Litigation and the Contestation of Property in the Mayor's Court in Late Eighteenth-Century Madras," *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (2003): 513–550.

52 Pamela Nightingale, *Trade and Empire in Western India, 1784–1806* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 114–116.

53 For details on the making of colonial law in Malabar, see Santhosh Abraham, "Formal Writing, Questionnaires and Petitions: Colonial Governance and Law in Early British Malabar, 1792–1810," *Indian Historical Review* 40, no. 2 (2013): 285–305.

54 K. K. N. Kurup and E. Ismail, eds., *The Keyis of Malabar: A Cultural Study* (Calicut: Malabar Institute for Research and Development, 2008), 85.

Keyi Architecture: A Coastal Cosmopolitan Cultural Spectacle

This section traces the relationship between Mappila Muslim coastal cosmopolitanism and European cultural patterns in Keyi construction projects and attempts to identify the architectural priorities of the Keyi Mappila Muslims, whose buildings showcased a unique blend of indigenous elements and European styles. Architecture in Kerala is mostly evaluated in terms of structures having religious functionality, particularly the Brahminic temples, Muslim mosques, and Christian churches. Scholarly works on Islamic monuments on the Malabar Coast disagree on the nature of their architectural style, since some see a blend of Arabic and local styles in the monuments, whereas the majority of scholars see them as adhering to traditional Kerala Brahminic temple styles. However, both arguments demonstrate that Muslim styles of mosque construction in Malabar were quite different from the Indo-Islamic architectural styles of north India. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these Muslim architectural designs and styles gravitated toward a more secular understanding of art based on western culture and western notions of urban design, and commercial architectural styles were introduced into indigenous domains under British colonial rule in the region.

An inquiry into Keyi architectural construction on the Malabar Coast is also important for understanding the changing nature of Islamic architecture in South India. With regard to Islamic monuments in South India, particularly at Calicut, Mehrdad Shokoohy has pointed out the combination of local influences and forms brought from other parts of the Islamic world: “the tiered roofs of the buildings and the corridors around some of the mosques conform to the local architectural features seen in both religious and domestic buildings. Other features, such as doors with semi-circular arches, and arched mihrabs semi-circular in plan, are forms which would have appealed to the Muslim settlers who were familiar with them from their homelands.”⁵⁵ Shokoohy describes a fusion of pan-Islamic styles and local vernacular styles of architecture. However, other scholars state that mosque architectural styles in Kerala largely resembled traditional Brahminical temple architecture, common in the northern and southern parts of the Kerala coast. This is largely because “the work of mosque construction was done by the local artisans under instructions of the Muslim religious heads whose immediate models for the places

55 Mehrdad Shokoohy, *Muslim Architecture of South India: The Sultanate of Ma'bar and the Traditions of Maritime Settlers on the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Goa)* (London: Routledge, 2003), 20.

of worship were only the Hindu temples of the region.”⁵⁶ Moreover, the Arabic tradition of simplicity of plan had perhaps combined itself with indigenous construction techniques, giving rise to a unique style of mosque architecture found nowhere else in the world. In a more detailed study on Islamic architecture in Kerala, Stephen Dale argued that the Muslims in Kerala had developed a special kind of architectural style—a “commercial-monsoon” style—more as a result of economic and ecological factors than of influences from either local or elite classical cultures.⁵⁷

During the period of dominant trade and exchange practices on the Malabar Coast, the Keyi Mappila merchants constructed mosques and a number of warehouses and residences, particularly along the seashore at Tellicherry. An important feature that can be traced in the styles of residences and warehouses is a rare combination of local, pan-Indian and European designs, such as Victorian glassworks, exhibiting a new hybrid cosmopolitan culture in Malabar. In this context, the Keyis introduced a broader cosmopolitan aesthetic appeal in the cultural field. In their building projects, the Keyis allowed existing architectural elements to come together and new relationships to emerge, giving rise to a new cosmopolitan architectural aesthetic in Malabar. Hence, Muslim cosmopolitanism extended beyond religious and community perspectives. It was built upon an inclusive form of cosmopolitan commercial, ritual, and cultural connections as well as coastal exchanges, networks, and competitions.

The architectural phase of Keyi cosmopolitanism can be traced from the period of the early merchant families in Malabar, who constructed several warehouses on the coast at Tellicherry that served the twin purposes of family housing in the upper portions and storage on the ground floor, much like the structures built by other business classes of the west coast of India such as the Konkanis, Gujratis, and Parsis. Later, with the expansion of the family and owing to increasing contact with the English, the Keyis started converting their residences to bungalows. This may have marked the occasion when the Keyis sought to exhibit their wealth and power as a new form of cosmopolitan social status in the region. Elaborate arrangements were made in the upper portions for sufficient numbers of family members, with proper ventilation and spaces permitting easy mobility.

56 Balagopal T. S. Prabhu, “Kerala Architecture,” in *Essays on the Cultural Formation of Kerala*, ed. P. J. Cherian (Thiruvananthapuram: Government of Kerala, 1999), 284.

57 Stephen Frederick Dale, “Islamic Architecture in Kerala” in *Islam and Indian Regions*, ed. Anna Libera Dallapiccola and Stephanie Zingel-Ave Lalemant (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993), 491–495.

An important feature of this warehouse-cum-residential architecture was the use of colored glass, different from any of the local houses found in the Malabar coastal towns of the period.⁵⁸ The use of hanging chandeliers in houses as well as carved and ornamented staircases and handles are other examples of European influence. Hence the distinctive features of Keyi architecture are visible in the combination of both indigenous expertise and European styles. Another feature was the construction of large fenced-off areas near warehouses for use as drying yards. This type of structure had multiple functions, such as the display of procured goods, which promoted speedier transaction of commodities. In addition, the security and protection of women and children were some other factors in the construction of two-story buildings. These warehouses had only one entry, through a large door facing the sea. Such structures protected stored goods from inclement weather and decay. Doors and windows in the front provide another example of European influence. The windows of the houses had arch-shaped carvings and exhibit abundant use of glass in the Victorian architectural style. The layout of the inner areas and the choice of materials used in construction were modeled on the Nair houses on the Malabar Coast. Grand houses were a symbol of social and economic status in Kerala, and the Keyis had palatial residences displaying the utmost in structural magnificence and architecture style. The introduction of small brick tiles for the roof and of wooden ceilings with decorative carvings for the ground floor are other noteworthy features. Keyi architecture illustrates the transformation, in association with colonial power, of traditional houses into the opulent residences of families of traders, a result of the amalgamation of Nair styles and the English bungalows of the period.

Examples of Keyi cosmopolitan architectural aesthetics are not limited to this warehouse-cum-residence pattern. The combination of local and European features in Keyi constructions is also seen in mosque architecture in different parts of Tellicherry. The most important mosque of the Keyis, the Oadathil Palli (Odathil Mosque), is noted for its copper-plate roofing, its use of wood, and its attractive domes. Copper sheets in the form of flat shingles were used to cover the roof, placed in such a way as to cover the joints between adjacent wooden planks and protect the bottom of the roof from rainwater.

In short, the architectural contributions of the Keyis are superb manifestations of their cosmopolitanism nature and social status, a style totally independent of the Indo-Mughal style of North India. The Keyi Mappila Muslims promoted existing architectural elements in their constructions, and in the process, they caused new relationships among the elements to emerge.

58 Kurup and Ismail, *The Keyis of Malabar*, 70–71.

The Keyi's unique composition of indigenous elements and European style celebrated a new hybridity and cosmopolitanism. This inclusive cosmopolitanism was established and maintained beyond the realms of family, community, and religion and finally developed into an open cosmopolitan socioeconomic order on the Malabar Coast.

Conclusions

This article has attempted to demonstrate the presence of a distinct and significant type of coastal cosmopolitanism in an Indian Ocean space, particularly in the career of Chovakkaran Moosa, an influential merchant from the Keyi family during the period of British colonialism. It argues for a coastal Keyi variety of cosmopolitanism, which has often been situated and discussed in terms of a religiously defined political scenario. It traces a unique cosmopolitan culture and architecture reflected in the design of warehouses, residences, and mosques in the coastal areas of Malabar at Tellicherry. Keyis successfully integrated the practices of a global cosmopolitan space into a local, secluded vernacular commercial space. What is seen in this new sociopolitical and cultural order in Malabar is not some kind of religiously defined coastal scenario, but a lively synthesis of coastal urban and local rural cosmopolitanism, inclusive of several networks and exchanges, foreign and native collaborations, and an amalgamation of local and external cultural spheres.

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