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Sovereign Power and "Other Lives"

JOHN M. WILLIS

In 1954, a young Queen Elizabeth visited the Crown Colony of Aden on her way to India. Among the many ceremonies her visit demanded, she bestowed the title of Knight Commander of the British Empire on the advisor to the Kathiri Sultanate of Hadhramawt, a sayyid named Abu Bakr al-Kaf (d. 1965). The honour bestowed on Sayyid Abu Bakr resulted from his indispensable role in using his vast finances and influence, earned in his birthplace of Singapore, to build a series of roads through the Hadhramaut. The project helped unite two rival sultanates under British suzerainty and laid the groundwork for a series of treaties among the region's warring tribes that would thereafter be named for the British colonial agent, Harold Ingrams, with whom Abu Bakr worked. For his service to the British Empire, he received the highest honour it could bestow on its native subjects. Even so, Sayyid Abu Bakr was allowed to kneel on a stool as he was knighted by the queen, for he refused to bow before any other than God. If only for a moment, it seems, he was able to resolve the seemingly contradictory relationship between the sovereign power of the divine and the demands of the modern state that Sayyid Fadl b. 'Alawi (d. 1900) spent much of his life trying to balance.

Wilson Chacko Jacob's *For God or Empire* utilizes the story of Sayyid Fadl as a thought-provoking case study for an examination of the global emergence of the modern categories of sovereignty and life as foundational elements of our political present. What sets his account apart is that he does so with the historian's careful attention to context, both spatial and temporal, that ultimately insists on recognizing the deeply contested process of this emergence and its imbrication in other modes of sovereignty and life, embodied in the exemplary trajectory of Sayyid Fadl. In a dazzling narrative that traverses empires (British, Ottoman, Omani), subcontinents (Arab and Indian), virtual spaces, and individual bodies, Jacob locates the potentialities of life at the interstices of divine and modern sovereignty across the Indian Ocean. As becomes clear in the book, the question of the unity of life, or form-of-life, a life irreducible to its barest biological form, is not only Sayyid Fadl's struggle but also an ongoing struggle in our political present.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that, since the 1990s, scholars have been drawn to the Hadhramaut region of Yemen as a

paradigmatic example of an Indian Ocean society. Its history has been defined in part by the numbers of seafarers, soldiers, merchants, and scholars that have travelled from the Hadhrami interior, long known as a centre of Islamic learning, to destinations across the Indian Ocean littoral. The scholarship that emerged in the last couple of decades has generated many richly detailed accounts of scholarly networks, military entrepreneurs, and family firms that have challenged how scholars have viewed geography, community, and patterns of intellectual reform, often gesturing toward recuperative histories of pre-modern vernacular cosmopolitanisms. In this sense, much of this work has tended toward what Gaurav Desai has called the "production of history in a nostalgic mode."[1]

Although early on he invokes "hospitality" as an "originary principle of the Indian Ocean world" (2), Jacob's interest lies instead in the Indian Ocean as a domain in which European empire's expanding sovereign order was forced to engage with older modes of sovereignty, temporal and divine, that circulated in this oceanic space. Methodologically, this kind of work requires a particular kind of textual strategy, one that resists the urge to reduce Sayyid Fadl's writings, however we want to define authorship, to a kind of instrumentalism that views their import only in relationship to the proximate political goals of the state. Even more so, it resists the urge to reduce Sayyid Fadl's writings to the distinct spheres of the religious and the political, even as the emergence of these fields globally made this distinction ever more apparent. In this sense, Jacob's reading of Sayyid Fadl's works acts as a corrective to Middle Eastern history's obsession with the liberal claims of Arab *Nahdawi* writers and its emphasis on the secular political ends of modern Arab thought. Beyond the linguistic requirements, the kind of analysis demonstrated in *For God or Empire* equally demands an openness to taking seriously other forms of sovereignty (or sovereignty without power) and other forms of being in the world.

Giorgio Agamben famously wrote that the entrance of biological or bare life into the domain of the political constitutes the "foundational event of modernity."[2] But we also know that bare life didn't enter the political alone, but rather as part of a complex field along with territory, security, and the law. In an emerging secular reason of state, the management/government of life — both individual and collective in the form of population — became integral to modern government both in Europe and in the expansive domains of European

empire. Sayyid Fadl appears at a historical threshold of sorts, in which this new understanding of the political and its attendant forms of life appear, and his efforts to navigate contending visions of sovereign life — the biopolitical and what he calls "life as unity" — sit at the heart of the book. Jacob's reading of the Sufi concept of "unity of being" (*wahdat al-wujud*), "life as unity" gestures toward a mode of being that exceeds the totalizing and individualizing power of a modern state order, just as it promises a life that bridges temporalities, the boundaries of this world and the next, and the line between the individual believer and the long genealogical line of the Prophet.

As Matthew Connelly wrote in a forum on his 2010 history of population control, *Fatal Misconception*, "All biopolitics is global."[3] But as Jacob shows, an actual global history of biopolitics, one that takes into account the imperial histories of the biopolitical and the contest over life itself is perhaps more complicated than Connelly lets on. If more recent work — such as Najeeb Jan's *The Metacolonial State* — can argue that political Islam can be characterized by the biopolitical capture of an Islamic discursive tradition and its practitioners, *For God or Empire* shows the earlier encounter between modes of sovereignty, the worldly and divine, often operating in tandem, if toward different ends.[4] If Sayyid Fadl could be cast as the fanatic or outlaw by the emerging science of state brought by the English East India Company and the Raj to the broader Indian Ocean world, he could just as easily become the agent of modern state reform in the service of the Ottoman Tanzimat as governor over the tribes of Dhofar. As Jacob notes, Sayyid Fadl's engagement with modern state sovereignty, its vocabularies and procedures, was an ambivalent one that sat uncomfortably with his position, and his otherworldly desires, as the bearer and embodiment of a sayyid genealogy. Yet, within this very same positioning within a politics of secular state reason, the art of government could just as easily be cast as a pastoral engagement with the world as a mode of cultivating pious souls by enacting God's will.

Conceptually, Wilson demonstrates with great insight what is at stake in the struggle over life, particularly in the struggle for a life that cannot be reduced to bare biological (or biopolitical) being. In Sayyid Fadl's striving for a unity of life, a life that cannot be captured by the sovereign ends of the state, we see at least one possibility, even if historically specific, of a form-of-life in Agamben's terms, a life that cannot be separated from its form. As we see in the discussion of the text *This True and Merciful Way*, the path of the 'Alawiyya opened up

the possibility of a life based on an intimacy with the Prophet and his descendants and even with God in a way that confounded time and place, this world and the next. As Jacob writes, "Even as a biological life was lived out on this earth abiding by its human terms (secular and religious), the Way promised access to life and life-as-other, existing as unity" (186). The Way didn't promise a life that would displace that which was framed by the biopolitical, but rather subsumed it in its capaciousness. Closeness to God did not require the renunciation of this world *in toto*; quite the contrary, it demanded an engagement with the world as part of following the 'Alawi path itself. This form of life is also that which exceeds biological mortality. In its unity, it not only crosses but transcends the line between life and death. The juxtaposition of Sayyid Fadl's grave in Istanbul and his father's *dargah* in Kerala, a site of continuing visitation, reverence, and instruction in the 'Alawi way, indicates the power of sayyid sovereignty to act in this world in a kind of life-in-death, creating bonds of intimacy between the living and the hereafter. It is a world in which the dead both speak and listen, as well as confer blessings and even cause harm.

The silence of Sayyid Fadl's tomb in a secluded Istanbul garden, by contrast, bears witness to the shrinking space that sayyid sovereignty and its form of life occupied in the Indian Ocean. Shifting from the historical past to the ethnographic present, Jacob follows the continuing relevance, or perhaps resonance of Sayyid 'Alawi's tomb complex in Mampuram, Kerala in a series of departures and returns or attempted returns on the part of the sayyid's descendants. Yet even if one can detect the continuity of sayyid sovereignty, for example, in the modern hagiographies of the "Mampuram Thangal," its domain is increasingly circumscribed. As the discussion of Shaykh 'Umar al-Zayd's rejection of sayyid authority based on genetic analysis indicates, the transoceanic *athar* or traces of noble genealogies, embodied in chains of intellectual transmission, sacred places, and learned texts are now challenged not simply by a new biopolitical reason, but what Najeeb Jan has identified in the case of the Pakistani ulema as the "statification and biopoliticization of Islam."[5] In other words, Islam as a set of beliefs, dispositions, and embodied practices has become increasingly entangled with the modern state's imperative to govern life both individually (the person) and collectively (the population). In this entanglement, the health of the biological person becomes indistinguishable from the spiritual health of the believer or *mu'min*, the health of the population indistinguishable from that of the *umma* or the

community of Muslims. For Jan, this merger of Islam and the modern state has produced a zone of indistinction in which the ulema and state largely function along a continuum in which both operate as jurists and judges with the aim of securing the social/religious body politic. In post-Zia-ul-Haq Pakistan, he argues, biopolitical Islam operates through the sovereign ban reimagined as *takfir*, the expulsion from the community of believers, and institutionalized by the state in laws targeting religious minorities — the Ahmadis and Shiites.[6] This is the other aspect of Shaykh 'Umar al-Zayd's discourse on the genetic basis of sayyid identity. One need not look further than the contemporary Saudi state to see a similar biopoliticization of Islam operating within a domain of security and repression, cast as protecting the boundaries of a moral body, in which the powers of the ulema and the state join in targeting religious minorities and political dissidents with equal vehemence.

But in considering the political ends of the biopoliticization of Islam, one can also miss its historical emergence along multiple pathways. Jacob's movement between the historical and ethnographic at times occludes this past. At times, one can't help but feel that the shift between Sayyid Fadl's death in 1900 and the debates over return in the twenty-first century left part of the history of sayyid sovereignty unspoken. One could argue that Sayyid Fadl's burial in Istanbul also marked a definitive reply to the question of "for God or Empire" as the possibility of life-as-unity was overtaken by a secular reason of state represented by a new class of peripatetic outlaws, themselves part of an older Indian ocean migratory circuit. Members of the Kathiri and Qu'ayti tribal families of the Hadhramaut, long in the service of the Nizams of Hyderabad as mercenaries, returned to their country of origins in the late nineteenth century to found states modelled on those of their Indian counterparts. If the Kathiri and Qu'ayti sultans began as renegade military adventurers in the language of the Raj, they also functioned as the bedrock of what became the British Eastern Aden Protectorate. In this new configuration of imperial-local state power, it was the secular reason of state and the idiom of good governance that provided the vocabulary of sovereignty.

In this emerging consensus on what constituted state sovereignty, not only in Hadhramaut but among its diasporic communities, what happened to sayyid sovereignty? Sayyid Abu Bakr al-Kaf, whose story introduced this essay, represents a common trajectory of many sayyids: he became a loyal advisor and servant of the Kathiri state

and, by association, with the British government. Though he refused to bow before any but God, his actions in the world were framed squarely by the colonial imperative of good government and reform that preoccupied the British in South Arabia after the Second World War. But if Sayyid Abu Bakr's story demonstrates the realignment of sayyid sovereignty within an increasing secular reason of state, his noble genealogy serving the political ends of the British Empire, there were also decidedly more antagonistic responses to the power of the sayyids (which was always material as well as spiritual) and the form of life they fostered. Prefiguring Shaykh 'Umar's critique of the genealogical grounding of sayyid sovereignty, the *Irshad* reform movement that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century in Java within the Hadhrami diaspora targeted the practice of *kafa'a*, or genealogical equivalency in marriage, that they argued contradicted Islam's emphasis on equality among believers. In challenging the social practices and interpretative authority of the sayyids, the Irshadis were participating in a transregional movement of religious reform, often called "Islamic modernism," that sought to cultivate the believing self through the hermeneutic method of independent reasoning or *ijtihad* and that looked down on what they saw as the otherworldly pretenses of the Sufis or the patrician outlook of the sayyids.

If the modernist position of the Irshad movement also coincided with the formation of the modern state and emerging nationalist framings of anti-colonial politics, both of which limited the horizons of the kind of life-as-unity sought by Sayyid Fadl, theirs was not the only point of opposition. The anthropologist Michael Gilsenan recalled a conversation with a young Hadhrami man in Sayyun in 1959 after witnessing him kiss the hand of a green-turbaned sayyid in deference: "'We kiss their hands now,' he said, 'but just wait till tomorrow.'"[7] As Gilsenan notes, the man was a proponent of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir's secular Arab nationalist politics and its socialist aspirations. The young man's casual comment presaged the formation of a new revolutionary politics embodied in South Yemen's war of independence that lasted from 1963 to 1967, ending with the formal independence of the country and, later, its transformation into a revolutionary socialist state led by the vanguard Yemeni Socialist Party. While the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen marked the victory of the secular reason of state and the final displacement of sayyid sovereignty, it also opened up the possibility for the refashioning of the sayyid as the new revolutionary man in the framework of socialist development.

Thus if the figure of Abu Bakr al-Kaf had managed to bring both "God and Empire" into a common framework of sovereignty in a way that Sayyid Fadl could not, even if decidedly in favour of empire, one can perhaps see in the life of Sayyid Faysal al-'Attas (d. 2014) the potential for other forms of life within the ambit of the modern state. Another descendant of the Prophet from the Hadhramaut, al-'Attas, operating within the new revolutionary diasporic circuits of a decolonizing world, moved from the Arab nationalist movement to Maoism, participating first as a resistance fighter in South Yemen's independence struggle and later as a governor within the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. It was in this context that al-'Attas dropped the honorific "sayyid" from his name and initiated programs of secular reform in his home district of Hadhramaut with the intention of eradicating popular religious practices, such as pilgrimages to the tombs of local saints, that had been critical to the imagination and exercise of sayyid sovereignty.[8] Although this moment of sovereignty's politics ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and al-'Attas' defection to the neoliberal authoritarianism of the General People's Congress in a united Yemen, even reclaiming his title of sayyid and the distinctive white turban that indicated his status, his life story, just as much as Sayyid Fadl's, suggests that the struggle over sovereignty and life itself is still ongoing. And both stories, if nothing else, intimately demonstrate sovereignty's precarious hold on modern life and the possibility of other forms-of-life.

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Endnotes

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2 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 4.
3 Matthew Connelly, "Author Response: All Biopolitics is Global," *History and Technology*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (March 2010), 85–88.
4 Najeeb A. Jan, *The Metacolonial State: Pakistan, Critical Ontology and the Biopolitics of Islamm* (Hoboken, NJ : John Wiley & Sons, 2019).
5 Jan, *The Metacolonial State*, 127.
6 See in particular *The Metacolonial State*, chap. 3.
7 Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992), 10.
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