



# The Monsoon Archive: Re-Reading The Kerala-Southeast Asia Nexus Through Travel Narratives

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**Abstract:** This paper challenges the terrestrial biases of Indian Ocean historiography by deploying a "Blue Humanities" framework to examine the under-theorized cultural corridor between the Malabar Coast (Kerala) and the Malay Archipelago (*Nusantara*). By juxtaposing the theoretical architectures of Sebastian Prange's *Monsoon Islam* and Engseng Ho's *The Graves of Tarim* with the vernacular literary archive of S.K. Pottekkatt's travelogues (*Bali Dweep* and *Malaya Naadukalil*), the study constructs a genealogy of transregional connection. The research argues that the pre-colonial "sacred mobility"- defined by the circulation of merchants, Sufis, and Sayyids- evolved into a mid-twentieth-century "secular pilgrimage" characterized by political solidarity and cultural recovery. While Prange and Ho delineate the structural mechanisms of "Monsoon Islam"- the port, the mosque, and the genealogy- Pottekkatt's narrative offers a phenomenological account of their afterlife, revealing how ancient maritime networks persisted as "creole kinship" in the modern era. This research posits the ocean not merely as a conduit for trade, but as a "Monsoon Archive"- a fluid repository of contested identities and shared histories.

**Index Terms** -Blue Humanities, Indian Ocean Studies, Monsoon Islam, S.K. Pottekkatt, Kerala-Southeast Asia relations, Vernacular Cosmopolitanism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The historiography of the Indian Ocean has traditionally been bifurcated by terrestrial biases, viewing the maritime expanse merely as a void separating the distinct cultural zones of South Asia and Southeast Asia. The emerging paradigm of "Blue Humanities" challenges this land-centric epistemology, positing the ocean not as a barrier but as a connective tissue which is dynamic a site of memory, mobility, and ecological imagination. Within this fluid geography, the historical and cultural corridor linking Kerala (specifically the Malabar Coast) and the Malay Archipelago (*Nusantara*) constitutes one of the most profound, yet under-theorized, axes of transregional interaction. This connection was not merely a conduit for commodities like pepper and textiles; it was a vibrant channel for the circulation of cosmologies, legal codes, genealogies, and literary imaginations. This research paper interrogates the Kerala-Southeast Asia connection by juxtaposing two distinct forms of archival knowledge: the theoretical historiography of the Indian Ocean and the vernacular literary archive of Malayalam travel writing. By focusing specifically on Sebastian Prange's *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* and S.K. Pottekkatt's travelogue *Bali Dweep* (The Island of Bali), we aim to construct a nuanced narrative of "Monsoon Cosmopolitanism." We argue that the maritime link between these regions fostered a unique form of "creole" identity - one that

was rooted in local specificities yet universally connected through the rhythms of the monsoon winds and the networks of faith and labor. While Prange provides the structural architecture of this world through the lens of trade and religion, Pottekkatt provides the phenomenological texture, documenting how these ancient connections manifested in the lived experiences of the 20th-century Malayali traveler.

## II. The Architecture of Connection: Monsoon Islam and the Polycentric Ocean

To understand the pre-colonial depth of the Kerala-Southeast Asia link, we must look beyond the standard narratives of empire and conquest. Sebastian Prange's *Monsoon Islam* serves as a critical theoretical anchor, offering a framework that privileges the agency of the "ordinary merchant" over the state. Prange's central thesis is that the spread of Islam across the Indian Ocean - from Malabar to Melaka - was not driven by the sword or the centralized state, but by the "commercial imperatives" of maritime trade, facilitated by the predictable reversal of the monsoon winds. Prange conceptualizes this oceanic world through four distinct spaces: the Port, the Mosque, the Palace, and the Sea. This typology is essential for understanding how Malabar functioned as a prototype for the Malay sultanates. The port functioned as a zone of neutrality and cosmopolitan exchange. The model of the "free port," exemplified by Calicut (Kozhikode) under the Zamorin, was replicated in Southeast Asian emporia like Melaka and Aceh. These ports facilitated the seamless movement of goods and people irrespective of religious affiliation. The Mosque was employed as a social anchor and legal hub. The mosque in Malabar was not just a place of worship but a node in a transoceanic legal network (Shari'a), providing a "moral community" for itinerant merchants moving between India and the Archipelago. The third was the palace which worked as a site of political accommodation. In Malabar, Muslim merchants served Hindu kings; in Southeast Asia, this relationship evolved, with merchants often marrying into elite families, eventually influencing the conversion of rulers to Islam. And the sea - the most important of them all worked as the connective tissue governed by the "Law of the Sea" (lex mercatoria). Prange demonstrates how maritime customs and risk-sharing mechanisms developed in Malabar circulated eastward, shaping the commercial culture of the Malay world. This framework reveals that the Islamization of Southeast Asia was significantly mediated through the Malabar Coast. The "Makhdum" families of Ponnani in Kerala, for instance, were not geographically bound clerics but mobile scholar-merchants who traveled to Sumatra and Java, carrying with them the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence that dominates both regions today. Thus, "Monsoon Islam" was a trans-oceanic system where a merchant in Calicut was structurally and culturally akin to a merchant in Palembang, bound by shared economic interests and religious orthopraxis. While Prange focuses on the merchant, Engseng Ho, in *The Graves of Tarim*, talks about the role of the Sayyid (descendant of the Prophet) in stitching these regions together. Ho describes the Hadrami Sayyids as a "society of the absent," a diaspora that maintained a coherent identity across the Indian Ocean through the circulation of genealogies (*nasab*) and texts. Malabar served as a crucial waystation in this "genealogical geography." Religious adepts traveling from Tarim (Yemen) often settled in Kerala before moving further east to the Malay courts, where they were welcomed as 'prestigious figures descending from superior cosmopolitan centers'. Ho's concept of 'creole kinship' is particularly relevant here. When these migrants became local cosmopolitans - they married local women in Kerala (giving rise to the Mappila community) and in the Malay world (creating the Jawi Peranakan), thereby embedding themselves in the local soil while maintaining a universal lineage. This dual belonging allowed them to act as bridges between the cultures of the Indian Ocean, facilitating not just the flow of goods but the flow of moral authority.

## III. S.K. Pottekkatt Bali Dweep: *The Gaze of the Secular Pilgrim*

If Prange and Ho provide the macro-historical structures of the Indian Ocean, the travelogues of S.K. Pottekkatt provides the micro-historical texture. Pottekkatt, a colossus of Malayalam literature, travelled extensively across Southeast Asia in the 1950s. His work *Bali Dweep* (The Island of Bali, 1958) is not merely a travelogue but a "vernacular archive" that documents the enduring cultural and emotional ties between Kerala and the Malay world during the transition from colonialism to independence. In *Bali*

*Dweep*, Pottekkatt adopts the persona of the *Sanchari* (Traveler) - a figure distinct from the colonial tourist or the religious pilgrim. He engages in a form of comparative ethnography, constantly juxtaposing the landscapes and rituals of Bali with those of his native Kerala. The text is replete with moments of recognition where the "foreign" is rendered "familiar." Pottekkatt describes the paddy fields (*sawah*), the coconut groves, and the village pathways of Bali in terms that evoke the *idavazhis* (lanes) of rural Kerala. This is not merely a stylistic device but an act of cultural recovery. When he observes the Balinese temple festivals (*Odalan*), he draws explicit parallels to the *Pooram* festivals of Kerala, noting the similarities in the percussion ensembles, the procession of deities, and the communal feasting. He posits a "civilizational continuity" that predates the Islamic and colonial layers of the region, seeing Bali as a "lost sibling" that preserved a pristine Indic culture that Kerala had perhaps modified under rigid caste hierarchies. Pottekkatt's methodology sets him apart from the colonial travel writers who preceded him. He eschewed the verandah view of the British official, preferring to walk ten miles a day into the interior villages to engage with the local man. This pedestrian approach allowed him to document the agrarian rhythms of Balinese life like the *subak* irrigation systems and collective labor, which resonated deeply with the agrarian sensibilities of a Malayali Marxist-humanist. However, Pottekkatt's gaze was not without its complications. It is to be noted that his fascination with the 'half-nude' women of Bali. While this trope was common in the travel literature of the era, in Pottekkatt's hands, it reflects a specific Malayali ambivalence: a mixture of puritanical shock and aesthetic admiration for a society that appeared more liberal than the conservative society of 1950s Kerala. This gaze constructs the Southeast Asian woman as a symbol of the land's fertility and "poisonous" allure (echoing the *Vishakanyaka* or Poison Maiden archetype in his fiction), simultaneously exoticizing and celebrating the region.

In his companion volume, *Malaya Naadukalil* (In the Malayan Lands), Pottekkatt shifts his focus from the 'cultural past' to the 'sociological present.' Here, he documents the lives of the Malayali diaspora in British Malaya and Singapore. He provides a typology of the Malayali migrant that differs significantly from the Tamil "coolie" narrative found in colonial records. Pottekkatt identifies the 'service class' Malayali as the *Kanakka Pillai* (accountant), the clerk, the teacher, and the estate manager, occupied a middle stratum between the European master and the manual laborer and through this he attempts to capture the "cosmopolitan anxiety" of this community. In Singapore, he observes the intense political consciousness of the Malayalis, who were deeply involved in the Indian Independence League and the INA. Yet, he also notes a fear of cultural dilution in them, documenting the hybrid lifestyles of second-generation migrants who spoke English and Malay better than Malayalam. This text serves as a crucial archive of the "pre-Gulf" era of Malayali migration, characterizing Southeast Asia as a land of settlement and political awakening, in stark contrast to the later Gulf literature which portrays migration as temporary exile and survival. Synthesizing these theoretical insights of Prange and Ho with the literary evidence of Pottekkatt reveals a fundamental shift in the nature of the Kerala-Southeast Asia connection over the *longue durée*. The pre-colonial connection, as described by Ho and Prange, was characterized by a sacred mobility. The movement of people was inextricably linked to the movement of the divine - whether through the circulation of Sufi saints, the transmission of Hadith, or the genealogy of the Sayyids. The ocean was a space where the *spiritual* and the *commercial* were fused. A merchant's creditworthiness was often tied to his religious standing or lineage. By the time of Pottekkatt's travels in the 1950s, this mobility had become 'secularized'. The journey was no longer a pilgrimage to the *Graves of Tarim* or a mission to spread the faith; it was a journey of "curiosity," "labor," and "political solidarity." Pottekkatt represents the secular pilgrim - the writer- who seeks not spiritual merit but "cultural capital." The infrastructure of the connection had also changed: the *dhow* and the monsoon wind had been replaced by the steamship and the colonial railway. Yet, the underlying networks persisted. Pottekkatt often relied on the hospitality of Malayalis and Indians settled in the region, utilizing the 'creole kinship' networks described by Ho to navigate the foreign landscape. A critical reading of Pottekkatt's oeuvre also reveals the operation of what scholars have termed "nationalist biopolitics". While Pottekkatt championed Asian solidarity, his solidarity was often hierarchical. As evidenced in his comparison of African and Southeast Asian societies, Pottekkatt viewed



the Balinese and Malays as "civilized" and "proximate" to the Indian self, sharing a high culture of temples and courts. In contrast, his writings on Africa often reproduced colonial stereotypes of "primitivism". This distinction is crucial for understanding the specific texture of the Kerala-Southeast Asia connection. It was not just a generic "South-South" link; it was a "privileged" connection based on perceived civilizational kinship. Southeast Asia was viewed by the mid-20th-century Malayali intellectual not as a "foreign" land, but as an extension of the "Indic sphere" (*Greater India*) - a view that erased some of the region's autonomous history while simultaneously forging strong affective bonds.

The Kerala-Southeast Asia connection, when viewed through the combined lenses of historical theory and literary memoir, emerges as a resilient "Monsoon Cosmopolis." It is a world where the boundaries of the nation-state - India, Malaysia, Indonesia - are constantly subverted by the fluidity of the ocean. Sebastian Prange's *Monsoon Islam* demonstrates how the commercial and religious networks of Malabar provided the channel for the Islamization of Southeast Asia, creating a shared maritime culture of ports and mosques. Engseng Ho's *The Graves of Tarim* reveals the deep "genealogical infrastructure" that allowed communities to remain mobile yet rooted across this vast expanse and finally through them, S.K. Pottekkatt's *Bali Dweep* serves as a testament to the afterlife of these connections in the modern era, capturing the nostalgia, affinity, and complex identity politics of the Malayali traveler in the Malay world. Through these texts, we witness how for centuries, the people of Kerala and Southeast Asia did not see the sea as a barrier, but as a bridge. Whether through the silent transmission of a genealogy or the lyrical observation of a travelogue, the ocean remains a repository of their shared history - a "monsoon archive" waiting to be read.

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