

# The Reminders of History: The Survival of Sayyid Sovereignty in Colonial Modernity

Ali Altaf Mian

Volume 32, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090751ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1090751ar>

[See table of contents](#)

## Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

## ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this document

Mian, A. A. (2022). The Reminders of History: The Survival of Sayyid Sovereignty in Colonial Modernity. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 32(1), 149–159. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1090751ar>

## The Reminders of History: The Survival of Sayyid Sovereignty in Colonial Modernity

ALI ALTAF MIAN

“I am the Pure and Authentic Servant; I have not the slightest aspiration to sovereignty (*rubūbiyya*).” – Ibn ‘Arabi\*

Wilson Chacko Jacob’s moving monograph on the life of a single figure profoundly problematizes notions of life at the intersection of history, philosophy, anthropology, and religious studies. At the broadest level, the book allows us to grapple with the following question: How might we study a historical life to reflect on the remainder of history? I centre my response to Jacob’s book on this question not to valorize resistance qua resistance but to think about the conceptual and methodological issues concerning the remainder of finitude as a perpetual sign of plenitude. What becomes of ethics and politics — what happens to notions of linear time and modern territoriality — when we consider seriously historical claims about the transcendental origin of history’s remainders?

Perhaps you can already sense in my words a certain conceptual resonance between *life* and *sovereignty*, the latter being the fantastical aspiration to transcend the limitations that finitude imposes on biological and historical life. Jacob contextualizes the life of a single actor, the Muslim nobleman, moral theologian, and mystical aspirant Sayyid Fadl (*ca.* 1824–1900). We encounter him in *For God or Empire* on competing stages of absolute authority: Islamic sovereignty, on one side, and modern sovereignty, on the other. In one sense, formations of the latter, such as the British empire, constricted Sayyid Fadl’s life. Yet, in another sense, something of Islamic sovereignty, particularly sayyid sovereignty, survived in his worldly movements and spiritual strivings. This is so because Sayyid Fadl conceived of his life as a manifestation of the Living, the absolute origin and source of plenitude and perfection. I explain below how Jacob relates this theological view to the Sufi idea of “unity of life” (also known as “unity of being” or *wahdat al-wujud*).

---

\* Cited in Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Peter Kingsley (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 120.

This essay is an attempt on my part to flesh out the conceptual nodes of Jacob's argument, which is to say that it is an elaboration of life, sovereignty, and survival. I also find it important to draw your attention to Jacob's productive mode of analysis. To that end, the final section highlights some key elements of his "methodology of the glimpse." At the outset, let me note that Jacob's invocation of the ideas of the Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240), in both the book's argument and methodology, informs my own attention to Ibn 'Arabi in the following analyses.

### Conceptualizing Competing Sovereignities

To appreciate Jacob's argument about life, sovereignty, and survival, let us briefly encounter, perhaps imagine, Sayyid Fadl's world. What sources allow us access to this world? This question is a bit problematic since it runs the risk of overlooking Jacob's careful and creative logic of selection. I would like to suggest that the way Jacob identifies and deploys his sources itself reflects how life, sovereignty, and survival have been conceptualized in his archive. There are, of course, obvious sites of inscription where information about a life is found: archival records, personal diaries and correspondence, books, periodicals, and other print materials, spatial and institutional traces such as tombstones and mausolea, and Internet content such as YouTube videos. While Jacob draws on these sundry sources, his archive also demands an expansion of what counts as "source" in the discipline of history. In other words, to interpret Sayyid Fadl's intellectual and political activities on his own terms requires less the rigour of modalities of reason, such as grammar and discipline, and more an openness to "intuition, instinct, [and] faith" (8). This close attention to the heterogeneity of life, and living "sources" of history, speaks to one of Jacob's methodological impulses: "One cannot do a global history of the Indian Ocean without better histories of fundamental concepts that organize that world, such as life and sovereignty" (11).

To be attuned to the organizing concepts of Sayyid Fadl's world is to stand in an analytical space, one that Jacob has cleared for us, from where we might glimpse that life is reducible neither to a timed "event" nor to a serialized "worlding." It is easy to historicize the latter formulations of life in relation to their empirical sites of inscription. What is difficult, at least from the vantage of historicist enquiry, is to glimpse Sayyid Fadl's life as an ontic node in the ontology of the living,

a manifestation of being in which this historical subject was merely a theophanic surface of the Eternal. Jacob attends to this conceptualization of life and frequently reminds the reader of the remainder, namely those aspects of Sayyid Fadl's life that exceed historical inscription and historicist methodology.

Sayyid Fadl was a living testimony to the power and prestige often accorded to sayyids (the biological survivors of the Prophet Muhammad). The migration of Sayyid Fadl's father, Sayyid 'Alawi, from the Yemeni region of Hadhramaut to the Malabar Coast, exemplified the salience of Indian Ocean sayyids "in Islam's outward expansion" (66). Father and son assumed leadership roles among Malabar Muslims and exercised their social authority and charisma to challenge encroaching British imperialist ventures in South India. Resultantly, the British banished Sayyid Fadl from India in 1852. He spent the next five decades in Ottoman lands where his political roles included serving as the de facto ruler (*amīr*) of Dhofar in Oman and advisor to the sultan in Istanbul. The sayyid's multiple attempts to return to India were blocked by both the British and the Ottomans. Toward the closing of his life in this world, Sayyid Fadl intensified his mystical contemplations, which Jacob reads as a "return" to the 'Alawi Sufi Way.<sup>1</sup>

The lives of Sayyid 'Alawi and Sayyid Fadl — or more precisely, the records that allow us to glimpse their lives in multiple, sometimes contradictory social and political frameworks — "express an anxiety of rule that marks the distance between old and new conceptions of sovereignty" (55). Jacob relentlessly tracks competing conceptualizations of sovereignty across several nineteenth-century empires and communities, elaborating the important concept of "sayyid sovereignty." While sayyids might be seen as chosen "shadows" of divine sovereignty in the Islamic tradition, they have not fared well in the broader historical trajectory of the Islamic polity. Their genealogical affinity to the Prophet Muhammad bestowed them with an unmatched source of legitimacy to assume sovereign and pastoral roles among Muslims. This is why caliphal and sultanic rulers often regulated sayyids' movement and sometimes patronized religious scholars to weaken sayyid charisma and claim to religious authority. Sayyid sovereignty is thus a form of Islamic mediations of divine sovereignty that has been marginalized in Sunni Islam by both the ruling class and the dominant religious establishment. These mediated forms of divine sovereignty, argues Jacob, entered into a broader arena of secular sovereignty in colonial modernity.<sup>2</sup> In other words, ideas of God's preminent sov-

ereignty and its human representatives (including sayyids, caliphs/sultans, and *'ulamā'*) encountered and engaged with ascendant modes of popular sovereignty as well as the authoritarian sovereignty of the modern state.

Yet Islamic conceptions of sovereignty, including sayyid sovereignty, survived colonial modernity (and figures such as Sayyid Fadl embodied this survival). Sayyid sovereignty ingeniously refused the total conscription of human (and non-human) life into the global capitalist market economy. It is noteworthy that Jacob avoids Carl Schmitt's political-theological account to determine the interpretation of his archive.<sup>3</sup> Rather, he listens carefully to those moments of encounter and juxtaposition between competing sovereignties that reveal both the political and ontological limits of modern sovereignty.

### Death Is Potentiality

Let us approach life as a figure of thought to underscore what it means and does in *For God or Empire*. "Life" is attuned to Sufi lives, particularly those from Hadhramaut who had embraced Ibn 'Arabi's ideas about being (ontology), God (theology), human responsibilities (ethics), and the world (cosmology). "Life" in such lives was at once an ontological force and a mediating concept, conjoining the biological, the biographical, the historical, and the ethico-political. Like countless Muslims, Sayyid Fadl approached Allāh as the ultimate source of life. "The Giver of Life" (*al-Muhyī*) and "the Living" (*al-Ḥayy*) are two of God's 99 Beautiful Names. These names name transcendental realities and express themselves through immanent shadows: all sensible and non-sensible things have the capacity to reflect one or more name.

In this conceptual framework, Sayyid Fadl's life functions as a theophany (*tajallī* or manifestation) of the Divine Name *al-Ḥayy*. Yet, it was clear to the sayyid that he shared this valence with all living things. This is why Jacob fixes his analytical gaze on "the unity of life," or what followers of Ibn 'Arabi call "unity of being" or "unity of finding."<sup>4</sup> By taking this concept seriously, Jacob illuminates the ontological context in which we should study Sayyid Fadl and his movement between empires.

To approach life as a theophany implies that death does not annihilate life. To that end, Jacob considers what the bodily deaths of Sayyid 'Alawi and Sayyid Fadl, not as events of finality but of potentiality, continue to mean and do for the Muslim community of Kerala

as well as their sayyid descendants who currently reside in Syria (201). The idea of death as potentiality allows us to appreciate how a certain life might continue to refuse the gaze of governmentality and the capture of biopolitics beyond biological death. Life, as Michel Foucault teaches us, has been the main object of both capitalist exploitation and modern statecraft.<sup>5</sup> Yet there are ethical forms of life — ways of being with God and with one another — that refuse an easy prescription into the population-management apparatuses of the modern state. The form of life inhabited by Sayyid ‘Alawi and Sayyid Fadl presupposed an alternative notion of sovereignty based on the supremacy of the divine command, which casts its earthly shadow in the form of pious devotees of God and followers of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly sayyids.

### For God’s Empire — or, Displacing Secular Sovereignty

*For God or Empire* allows us to glimpse not some rigid binary between “Islamic sovereignty” and “the sovereignty of the modern state.” Rather, we are invited to encounter something deeper. Jacob exposes the limits of secularist representational frameworks, calling into question their ability to account for forms of sovereignty that dissolve the divides between the religious and the secular, the temporal and the eternal, and the sensible and the non-sensible. We are therefore in a position to glimpse the conceptual vitality of “sayyid sovereignty,” a linking of the human and the divine that is expressed through both *dīn* and *mulk*, or “salvation practices” and “territorial governance,” a sovereignty that manifests in everyday life as “sacred power” (*baraka*); it differs from caliphal or sultanic sovereignty as well as the interpretive and social authority of jurist-theologians or *‘ulamā*; it allows an emulative channelling of Abrahamic and Muhammadan models for the sake of contemplating and governing according to divine sovereignty; it includes minor blessings as well as major ruptures into the “fabric of time”; to name only a few of the key features of “sayyid sovereignty.” Briefly put, sayyid sovereignty is that mediation of divine sovereignty through which the Prophet Muhammad’s biological descendants govern both souls and territories for the sake of God’s empire.

Let me also note that sayyid sovereignty has a complex relationship with tribal sovereignty. At its scene of emergence, one might argue, sayyid sovereignty reorganized the hierarchy of the Arab tribes. The Prophet Muhammad’s tribe, the Quraysh, were posited as the most

superior of the Arab tribes. Some Muslim jurists held that to possess a Qurayshī lineage (*nasab*) is one of the prerequisites of a God-sanctioned ruler or *khalifa*.<sup>6</sup> The sayyid sovereignty of which Jacob speaks, however, is not to be confounded with Qurayshī preeminence. Within the Quraysh, two further stratifications were enacted: the first is the preeminence of the Hāshimīs and the second is the preeminence of the progeny of the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fātima and her two sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. The ‘Alawi sayyids of Hadhramaut traced their lineage to Ḥusayn, hence coming at the top of the inner hierarchy within the Quraysh.

Sayyid sovereignty aims to govern secular affairs and mundane matters according to divine justice and mercy. However, sayyids repudiate, at least according to Jacob’s argument, secularist institutions and aspirations, even as they repurpose the modern secular to the alternative aims of spiritual sovereignty. Theirs is an estranged but pragmatic relationship with the modern secular. At this point, I find it useful to briefly gesture toward how this view of spiritual sovereignty finds support in Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought-system.

To start, we should note that Ibn ‘Arabi decentres Qurayshī preeminence with two moves. First, he mentions that not all Muslim jurists agree on Qurayshī descent being a prerequisite of leadership.<sup>7</sup> Second, he renders obsolete the preeminence of a single race or tribe by universalizing the Prophet Muhammad’s genealogy and then by analogizing this universality with the universal control of the soul over the body.<sup>8</sup> He calls this a “strange mystery” (*sirrun ‘ajīb*). Moreover, his ideas about the preeminence of spiritual sovereignty over secular power relate to his conceptualization of territory being simultaneously empirical and transcendental. Let me examine that in some detail.

Ibn ‘Arabi speaks of “the land of reality,” a real but non-empirical territory — “a land that no geographer will ever be able to map,” in the words of Claude Addas.<sup>9</sup> The Andalusian mystic also links this alternative land to the idea of the remainder, since “the Earth of Reality,” he explains, “came into being ‘out of the surplus of clay from which Adam was created’; it is imperishable and immutable (*bāqiya lā tafnā wa lā tatabaddalu*). ... Gnostics enter it in their spirit, not their body.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, those who tread the ‘Alawi Way, or any other Sufi Path for that matter, arrive at inner experiences that enable them to dwell in two lands: the empirical of secular sovereigns and the transcendental of spiritual sovereignty. They seek to channel divine sovereignty in their everyday lives, even if they are unable to enact and exercise

secular governance. They come to view all secular manifestations of power as shadows of God's Names, such as the Majestic, the Sovereign, the Avenger, the Just, and so on. Those who remember and find their way to God are therefore no longer deceived when certain secular claimants of sovereignty feign their shadow status and claim absolute authority. It is at such historical junctures that friends of God, such as Sayyid Fadl, return to their real homeland, *the earth of reality*. The place of exile and refuge for saints and seekers is thus real and intelligible, even if it is "not of the senses."<sup>11</sup>

### Survival

Deeply and intimately related to the question of life and sovereignty are the concerns of survival — the survival of "sayyid sovereignty" in colonial modernity, as expressed and embodied so resolutely yet ambivalently by Sayyid Fadl. His survival is the continuity of a community, what Jacob calls "community survival," a gathering of ensouled bodies whose political aspirations, practices, and institutions remain elusive as targets of surveillance, containment, and destruction (91). Many Muslims in Kerala continue to commemorate, by means of their written and oral hagiographies, Sayyid 'Alawi and Sayyid Fadl. These carriers of their lives forge community not only through hagiographic texts but also by continuously returning to the shrine of Sayyid 'Alawi in Mampuram (in Kerala).

We might also ask the following: What does it mean for a rogue to survive the very system that contains life by exclusion and castigation? Recall that British colonial archives portrayed Sayyid Fadl as a rogue subject, referring to him as "the Mopilla outlaw." "Outlaws," such as Sayyid Fadl, participated, perhaps unwittingly, in the globalization of the British and other European empires. Insofar as the rogue challenges the totality of empire, this figure might be compared to those geographic gaps Lauren Benton calls "anomalies of empire."<sup>12</sup> These are spaces such as islands, corridors, and enclaves where one can observe an empire's political fragmentation, legal diversity, and "irregular, porous, and sometimes undefined borders."<sup>13</sup> The rogue becomes significant as a figure of governmentality because imperial legal and policing institutions seek to establish their legitimacy by identifying and regulating this figure. Yet, following Jacques Derrida, I would add that "outlaws," such as Sayyid Fadl, are posited as such to obfuscate the riskier rogue, the capitalist market, whose every day roguish



practices are vindicated by modern state sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> Despite being fixed in the imperial archive as the outlaw, Sayyid Fadl managed to survive, precisely because of his activation of the spiritual sovereignty of sayyids and Sufis.

### Glimpsing

Let me now turn to Jacob's "methodology of the glimpse." This becomes especially helpful to grasp how mystical doctrines about transcendence might inform historical actors, their everyday practices, and their political aspirations. The doctrines Sayyid Fadl held close to his heart manifested historically; yet their historicity only reveals itself momentarily through glimpsing, a pursuit of knowledge that is acutely aware of its partiality and liminality. In part, glimpsing as method stems from Jacob's choice to take seriously Ibn 'Arabi's mystical teachings (and the broader Akbarian tradition). This methodological choice is in fact necessitated by some key primary sources at Jacob's disposal, since liminality, understood in the Akbarian tradition as a space of knowing and feeling at the threshold of dyads such as life and death, infuses the writings of Sayyid Fadl. What Jacob gives us by modelling "the methodology of the glimpse," in turn, is some needed distance from the "thin" histories of figures such as Sayyid Fadl in recent scholarship, histories that reflect "rationalist assumptions of the interplay among time, structure, and agency" (202).

The methodology of the glimpse allows us to see how life is "a historical and theoretical problem of representation" (101). Recall how Sayyid Fadl's life is diversely represented across sundry archival, printed, material, and Internet sources. By giving us only a partial view of this historical subject's agency and mobility, each source alludes to the ahistorical aspects that escapes its representational purview. Each source thus invites speculation and at times permits a glimpse of the timeless assumptions that infuse historical lives. Our sources, to put it otherwise, permit two orders of knowing in relation to historical time: empirical and speculative. Both are immensely important to historical research, especially when pursued in relation to lives that have invested their time in pursuit of the Eternal. Speaking of the unity of life, he writes, "knowledge of it is only had in historical contexts, even as it has no need of history" (202).

By conceiving of the remainder of finitude as a living-on of originary plenitude, memories and material traces of historical lives

as sources of resistance, we can appreciate the disposable nature of modern governmentality. In this way, Jacob has gifted us marvelous intellectual resources to provincialize Eurocentric imperial history but also to listen to the voices of non-Western theophanies.

\*\*\*

**ALI ALTAF MIAN** is Assistant Professor of Religion and the Izzat Hasan Sheikh Fellow in Islamic Studies at the University of Florida. He specializes in Islam in South Africa, Sufism, Islamic law and ethics, method and theory in the study of religion, gender and sexuality in contemporary Islam, and religion and colonialism. His published work has touched on the study of Islam and the affective turn and has appeared in *Islamic Law and Society*, *History of Religions*, *Journal of Urdu Studies*, *Qui Parle*, *ReOrient*, and *Religion Compass*. Dr. Mian is currently working on *Surviving Genres: Modern Islam and Muslim Traditionalism in Colonial India*.

**ALI ALTAF MIAN** est professeur adjoint de religion et titulaire de la bourse Izzat-Hasan-Sheikh en études islamiques à l'Université de la Floride. Il est spécialiste de l'islam en Afrique du Sud, le soufisme, la loi et l'éthique islamiques, la méthode et la théorie dans l'étude de la religion, le genre et la sexualité dans l'islam contemporain, et la religion et le colonialisme. Ses publications portent sur l'étude de l'islam et le tournant affectif et ont parues dans *Islamic Law and Society*, *History of Religions*, *Journal of Urdu Studies*, *Qui Parle*, *ReOrient* et *Religion Compass*. Le Dr Mian œuvre présentement sur *Surviving Genres : Modern Islam and Muslim Traditionalism in Colonial India*.

## Endnotes

- 1 Jacob follows Engseng Ho in using the phrase, “the ‘Alawi Way,” to refer to the peculiar institutionalization of Sufism by Hadhrami sayyids. See *Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 28–31.
- 2 Jacob complexifies our understanding of the various itineraries of “sovereignty” in modern Islamic thought and practice. This concept’s articulation in *For God or Empire* might be productively compared with other accounts, such as those articulated by Zaman and March. See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “The Sovereignty of God in Modern Islamic Thought” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25, no. 3 (July 2015): 389–418; Andrew F. March, *The Caliphate of Man: Popular Sovereignty in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press, 2019).
- 3 That Jacob does not valorize resonates with Jacques Derrida’s assessment as well: “We did not have to wait for Schmitt to learn that the sovereign is the one who decides exceptionally and performatively about the exception, the one who keeps or grants himself the right to suspend rights or law; nor did we need him to know that this politico-juridical concept, like all the others, secularizes a theological heritage.” See Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford university Press, 2005), 154.
- 4 As William C. Chittick points out, “‘Finding’ renders the Arabic *wujūd*, which, in another context may be translated as ‘existence’ or ‘being.’ The famous expression ‘Oneness of Being’ or ‘Unity of Existence’ (*wahdat al-wujūd*), which is often said to represent Ibn al-‘Arabi’s doctrinal position, might also be translated as the ‘Oneness’ or ‘Unity of Finding.’ Despite the hundreds of volumes on ontology that have been inspired by Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works, his main concern is not with the mental concept of being but with the experience of God’s Being, the tasting (*dhawq*) of Being, that ‘finding’ which is at once and the same time to perceive and to be that which truly is.” See the *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 3. The following caveat by Claude Addas is also instructive here: “The expression [*wahdat al-wujūd*] is in fact never used by Ibn ‘Arabi; it seems to have been used for the first time — and even then only rarely — by Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī in the *Miftāḥ al-ghayb* and *Nafahāt ilāhiyya*, and subsequently by Ibn Sab’īn and above all by Farghānī in his commentary on Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s *Tā’iyya*. But it would appear to have been Ibn Taymiyya who — for polemical purposes — generalized the usage of the term as an emblematic designation for Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysics.” See *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, 208, n. 87.

CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION'S WALLACE K. FERGUSON  
ROUNDTABLE: WILSON CHACKO JACOB'S *FOR GOD OR EMPIRE*

- 5 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990 [1978]), 138.
- 6 Ibn 'Arabi, *At-Tadbīrāt al-ilāhiyya*, 140.
- 7 Ibn 'Arabi, *At-Tadbīrāt al-ilāhiyya*, 139.
- 8 Ibn 'Arabi, *At-Tadbīrāt al-ilāhiyya*, 141.
- 9 Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, 117.
- 10 Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, 118.
- 11 Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, 118.
- 12 Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 13 Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*, 2.
- 14 Derrida, *Rogues*. See also Srinivas Aravamudan, "Subjects/Sovereigns/Rogues," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 457–65.