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The Ali Rajas of Cannanore: status and identity at the interface of commercial and political expansion, 1663-1723

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CHAPTER TWO

THE RAJAS OF KOLATHUNADU

Introduction

This chapter sets about to analyse the political set-up in pre-colonial Kolathunadu. I will argue that the political formation in this region was in many respects distinct from that of the other regions in South India in general and Kerala in particular. Hitherto, the studies on the political system in pre-colonial Kerala did not pay sufficient attention to the regional differences in process of state-formation. The heavy dependence of the scholars on the Brahmanical textual traditions often obscured the variations and gave the impression of the development of a homogeneous state-form throughout Kerala. The political system developed in medieval Kolathunadu exemplifies the regional variation in the political configuration of pre-colonial Kerala. For a better understanding of this regional political system, I will try to present my research in the framework of the academic debate on state-formation in pre-colonial Kerala.

The 'state' in pre-colonial Kerala

The 'state' in pre-colonial Kerala is not a well-attended field of research. Although, K.V. Krishna Ayyar, the author of *The Zamorins of Calicut*, traced similarities between the *naduvazhi* system of Kerala and the feudal order in Europe long before D. D. Kosambi who introduced a 'feudal' model as an analytical concept in Indian historiography,¹ he did not develop it as an analytical tool to study the pre-colonial Kerala states. His argument was that the *naduvazhis* of Kerala 'were similar to the tenants-in-chief of feudal England having more or less the same rights and obligations'.² Similarly, O. K. Nambiar also attributed 'feudal' status to the Kunjalis of Calicut, hence sharing a common platform with Krishna Ayyar.³ Later, Kathleen Gough, borrowing from the study on medieval Ceylon by Edmund Leach, proposed the concept of 'hydraulic feudalism' to portray the political system in the region.⁴

¹ D. D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India In Historical Outline* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965).

² K. V. Krishna Ayyar, *A History of the Zamorins of Calicut: From the Earliest Times to 1498 A.D* (Calicut: Ramakrishna Printing Works, 1929), 92.

³ O. K. Nambiar, *The Kunjalis: Admirals of Calicut*.

⁴ In my opinion, in Malabar, where the agriculture was almost entirely depending on the monsoon and where any mammoth irrigation work for this purpose was lacking, it may be better to speak of 'monsoon feudal'— if one prefers to use the term

M. G. S. Narayanan's doctoral dissertation on the Cheras of Mahodayapuram can be considered as a breakthrough in Kerala historiography in terms of analysing the state structure in the early medieval Kerala.⁵ His attempt to construe a kingdom with a centre at Mahodayapuram (Kodungalloor) exercising control over the *nadus* across the region tallied well with the feudal perception of medieval Indian states. Similarly, although perceiving differences with the contemporary Chola-Pandya state organizations, Kesavan Veluthat also tried to highlight the feudal aspect of state in early medieval Kerala under the Chera rulers of Mahodayapuram.⁶

One fact that seems indisputable is that the political formation in post-Chera Kerala was in many ways different from those in other parts of South India. The rise of an array of petty principalities in Kerala after the twelfth century has made it difficult for scholars to conceive and schematize the development within a broader theoretical framework. For many, medieval Kerala represents an odd case which is therefore often neglected in the general historiography of India.⁷ Dick Kooiman suggests that this negligence is due to 'the bewildering variety of numerous coastal kingdoms [which] does not seem to offer the historian a solid base for the construction of more enduring frameworks'.⁸ The easiest way to escape from such an academic predicament, which failed to encompass medieval Kerala in a pan-Indian, 'enduring' theoretical framework, was simply to omit it altogether from historical discourse. Notwithstanding this situation, recently some attempts have been made to look at the pre-colonial Kerala polities from new theoretical perspectives, deviating from that of the 'feudal' approach. Burton Stein's 'segmentary state' model found some reflection in Kerala historiography, though not without striking some sceptical notes.⁹ Dick Kooiman had this to say on the matter:

'feudalism'—rather than 'hydraulic'. It is also important to note that Edmund Leach uses the term 'hydraulic feudalism' to denote the ancient Sinhala polity which flourished until the time of Parakrama Bahu I (1164-97) in the northern dry zone of Ceylon where the rainfall was scarce and the agriculture entirely dependent on large-scale irrigation projects. See, Kathleen Gough, 'Dravidian Kinship and Modes of Production', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 13/2 (1979), 265-91. E. R. Leach, 'Hydraulic Society in Ceylon', *Past and Present*, 15 (1959), 2-26.

⁵ It was only later that this work was published. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*. Later, however, Narayanan adopted a more flexible stance on the Perumal rule by characterizing it as a sort of ritual sovereignty created and maintained by a Brahmin oligarchy. M. G. S. Narayanan, 'The State in the era of Cheraman Perumals of Kerala', in R. Champakalakshmi, Kesavan Veluthat, T. R. Venugopalan, *State and Society in Pre-modern South India*, 111-19.

⁶ Veluthat, *Political Structure of Early Medieval South India*.

⁷ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Aspects of State Formation in South India and Southeast Asia, 1500-1650', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 23/4 (1986), 357-77 at 358.

⁸ Dick Kooiman, 'State Formation in Travancore: Problems of revenue, trade and armament', in A.W. van den Hoek, D. H. A. Kolff, M. S. Oort (eds.), *Ritual, State and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J. C. Heesterman* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 587-609 at 587.

⁹ Even though Burton Stein's 'segmentary state' model radically altered the outlook of scholars about the nature of medieval South Indian states, Kerala historiography remained largely overlooked. Stein excludes Kerala from his study on South Indian macro-region because of various reasons, including the presence of influential warrior lineages in medieval Kerala, which, he argues, was absent in the rest of South India, compounded by the absence of sufficient historical data to analyse

As far as the character of the state on the Malabar Coast is concerned, there is much evidence to argue for an interpretation along the lines of the segmentary state model. Fiscality does not seem to have been a prominent aspect of internal relations, whereas religious grants were a major source of power. However, the problem remains that the numerous states in this region had no single dominating centre. So we should ask ourselves whether the sacred memory of a former kingship in the old Chera days served the same purpose in Kerala as ritual deference to a living ruler in the Chola Empire did in Tamil Nadu.¹⁰

Similarly, Hugo K. s'Jacob suggested using the 'segmentary state' model to analyse the political structure in early-modern Kerala, but he did further develop this argument.¹¹ It is noteworthy that both these Dutch scholars were dealing principally with the political formations in the southern parts of Kerala—Venadu (Travancore) and Cochin. Their area of study obviously influenced their perception that 'ritual' and 'religious grants' were prerequisites necessary to acquire political power in Kerala.

The 'little kingdom' model

Adopting the concept of the 'little kingdom', mainly from Nicholas B. Dirks,¹² Margaret Frenz, modified it to suit the Malabar situation and made an attempt to give theoretical coherence to the analysis of pre-colonial Kerala politics.¹³ Although, another Dutch scholar, Mark de Lannoy already in 1997, suggested the 'little kingdom' model as a tool with which to analyse the state forms in early modern Kerala, it was Margaret Frenz who presented it as a full-fledged model in Kerala historiography.¹⁴ Frenz summarizes the 'little kingdom' model of Dirks as follows.

The State structure is depicted as pyramidal, with the *great king* positioned at the very top. His political and ritual might enables him to exercise supreme power over the little kings. The great king's range of power, however, continually decreases at the periphery of this

the agrarian characteristics of the region. In spite of his serious criticism against the 'segmentary state concept, Kesavan Veluthat states: 'after this... no serious work in this area can follow the conventional pattern of treating dynastic/political history with chapters on 'economy', 'society', 'culture' etc. as uncomfortable appendages'. Stein, *Peasant State and Society*, 48-9, 58. Veluthat, *Political Structure of Early Medieval South India*, 7.

¹⁰ Kooiman, 'State formation in Travancore', 603.

¹¹ s'Jacob, *Rajas of Cochin*.

¹² Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹³ Frenz, *From Contact to Conquest*.

¹⁴ Lannoy, *Kulasekhara Perumals of Travancore*.

‘catchment area’; there, it is the *little kings* who are more important, since they are actually on site. The *little king* legitimises and manifests his rule through political and ritual actions, which express the extent of his participation in power. This pattern is repeated on a smaller scale in the lower levels, right down to the foot of the pyramid to individual person’s relations and family relationship.¹⁵

Although this description depicts a close resemblance to the ‘segmentary state’ model of Stein, unlike him Dirks considers ‘ritual and political forms were fundamentally the same’, rather than separate entities.¹⁶ Dirks also recognizes military power as an important element of authority within a ‘little kingdom’, though the military system was ‘organised around subordinate chieftains, connubial connections, and privileged landholding rather than on centralized or bureaucratically organized revenue collection and military rule’.¹⁷ The relationship between the ‘great king’ and the ‘little king’ is mutually beneficial, whereas the military might of the former did not play a decisive role. The ‘great king’ had to depend on loyal ‘little kings’ when he had conflicts to settle with other ‘great kings’ or rebellious little kings. In such a situation, the ‘little king’ enjoyed complete freedom within his domain. In brief, the relationship between ‘little king’ and the ‘great king’ remained largely ‘symbolic’.

Frenz, albeit of her acceptance of the ‘little kingdom’ model as a useful tool with which to analyse the pre-colonial Malabar polity, Frenz criticised Dirks’ model as too rigid and without any scope for further development.¹⁸ So, she tried to develop it to suit the medieval Kerala situation. For Frenz,

A little king is a ruler who has, within his territory, essential instruments of rule such as financial and military means at his disposal, and who legitimises his rule through political and ritual acts. Outwardly the little king must accept the rule of a great king who is superior to him in a ritual and political sense, and who can demonstrate this by military means if necessary. The little king also relies on the great king, since he can legitimise his rule internally over the great king by the system of ritual redistribution, thereby gaining a share of the *great king*’s power. Conversely, the great king cannot, in the long term, assert his rule over the little kings by military means, since he requires the political and ritual support of the little kings for the legitimation of his rule.¹⁹

In his model Dirks proposes a two-tier system, where the ‘great king’ and ‘little kings’ occupy the first and second positions. In preference to this, Frenz suggests a more flexible arrangement in Malabar

¹⁵ Frenz, *From Contact to Conquest*, 41-2.

¹⁶ Dirks, *Hollow Crown*, 5.

¹⁷ Ibid. 123.

¹⁸ Frenz, *From Contact to Conquest*, 42.

¹⁹ Ibid. 44-5.

and tries to put 'little kings' between the 'great king' and such minor chieftains as *nauvazhis* or *desavazhis*. Frenz strengthened her argument by claiming that 'in this way the *little king* is left with a far greater scope for political, ritual and military action, the struggle for power is more pronounced and the order of precedence is continually being rearranged'.²⁰ But her attempt to form a three-tier political hierarchy to introduce the 'little kings' in Kerala forced Frenz to discover a 'great king' who actually was not present in the political context of the region. In the absence of this 'great king'; the concept of 'little kings' is simply nullified. As Dirks argued, 'little kingship could not be attained without *great kings*'.²¹ In her effort to solve this problem, Frenz introduces a 'virtual' 'great king'—the legendary 'Cheraman Perumal'—who occupies the apex in the ritual hierarchy of Kerala. It appears that Frenz was trying to 'fit' the 'little kingdom' model into the medieval Kerala political situation rather than to find a model to suit the polity she was dealing with.

It is true that most of the Kerala rajas putatively traced their authority and their legitimization to rule over their respective territories to the legendary Cheraman Perumal. But this was a common process throughout India where almost all the ruling dynasties tried to trace their origin to *puranic* figures or dynastic lines such as *surya vamsa*, *chandra vamsa* and the like. The purpose remained the same—to legitimize and to enhance the prestige of the ruling authority in society—whether it is a matrilineal or a patrilineal society. Hence, introducing Cheraman Perumal as 'great king' does create 'little kings'. However, as a model, it fails to explain the social dynamics in pre-colonial Kerala in relation to socio-economic changes or even fails to explain the different levels of power relations among the 'little kings' or between the 'little kings' and the *nauvazhis* or *desavazhis* of Kerala. Instead of finding a place for a functionally inactive 'virtual' 'great king' in pre-colonial Malabar political system, it would, perhaps, be better to look at the ruling houses of Kerala in their historical contexts. It is more feasible to examine those known as rajas of Kerala as 'rajas' in their own right, whatsoever the term meant in the political context of pre-colonial Kerala.

The svarupam polity

After the disappearance of the Perumals or the Cheras of Mahodayapuram in the twelfth century, the political formation in Kerala took a different turn from the other parts of South India. The emergence of the institution known as the '*svarupam*' as the focus of political power in Kerala after the twelfth century was a significant development in the history of Kerala. However, in spite of its importance in the political economy of pre-colonial Kerala, only a limited number of studies are available about the *svarupam* polity.²² The literal meaning of the term *svarupam*—'self-figure or self-

²⁰ Ibid. 43.

²¹ Dirks, *Hollow Crown*, 70.

²² M. R. Raghava Varier, 'State as Svarupam: An Introductory Essay', in R. Champakalakshmi, Kesavan Veluthat, T. R. Venugopalan, *State and Society in Pre-modern South India* (Thrissur: Cosmobooks, 2002), 120-30. Also see the sections written

form’—does not seem to have any explicit political connotation and does not help us to expound this unique political system in any satisfactory way. The title *swarupam* was attributed to such major political houses of Kerala as the Kolaswarupam (Cannanore), the Nediyrrippu Swarupam (Calicut), the Perumpadappu Swarupam (Cochin), the Venadu Swarupam (Travancore) and the like.²³ It is probable that some of these houses had already attained political prominence during the Chera period. The Chera inscriptions mention the ‘governors’ (*utaiyavar* or *vazhunnavar*) of such *nadus* as Kolathunadu, Venadu (Travancore), Eralanadu (Calicut) and the like.²⁴ Gradually, after the disappearance of the Cheras of Mahodayapuram, the houses of these *nadu utaiyavars* appeared as independent political houses or *swarupams*. This shows that some of the *swarupams* of Kerala had a long history of political standing, which may have strengthened their claim to political supremacy among the other minor *swarupams* after the twelfth century. This may also indicate the possibility that the term ‘*swarupam*’ was coined for these houses only after the Chera period. Besides those prominent *swarupams* which can trace their histories back to the Perumal period, new *swarupams* also came into existence in Kerala in the course of time.²⁵

In spite of their differences in the period of origin, all of these *swarupams* had a specific trait in common. They were powerful matrilineal joint families claiming hereditary political authority. In this respect *swarupam* closely resembled a *taravadu*. The *taravadu* is also a matrilineal joint family headed by a *Karanavar*. The *Karanavar* was usually the eldest male member of a *taravadu*, who succeeded to the position through the matrilineal line of succession. Property was owned jointly by the family members under the supervision of the *Karanavar*. Even though proprietary rights were traced through the female line, it does not seem that the women members enjoyed any crucial control over the actual use of the property.²⁶ Bigger *taravadus* controlled extensive landed properties which helped them to gain political and judicial control over their vicinities. It is noteworthy that a *taravadu* which succeeded in establishing its dominance in a region could eventually claim the status of a *swarupam*. For instance, as revealed in a Mackenzie manuscript, the prominent land-owning Kudali Taravadu in North Kerala

by M. R. Raghava Varier and K. N. Ganesh respectively in, P. J. Cherian (ed.), *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium*, vol. II, part II (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Gazetteers, Government of Kerala, 1999), 62-78, 222-7.

²³ According to the *Keralolpathi* Kolathunadu tradition, the above-mentioned four *swarupams* were the most prominent ones, although there were other *swarupams* in Kerala. Varier, *Keralolpathi Granthavari*, 38.

²⁴ *Nadu Utaiyavar* or *Nadu Vazhunnavar* literally means owners or rulers of the *nadus*. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, 90. Haridas V. V., ‘The rise and growth of the kingdom of Kozhikode’, *Indica* (37), 123-36 at 126-7.

²⁵ K. N. Ganesh, ‘Structure of Political Authority in Medieval Kerala’, in P. J. Cherian, *Perspectives on Kerala History*, 222-7 at 225.

²⁶ However, it seems, women were also allotted particular properties in each *taravadu* for their maintenance. G. Arunima argues that it was only under the colonial rule that women’s property right in a joint family was degraded. G. Arunima, ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Woman? Families and Legal Change in Nineteenth-century Malabar’, in Michael R. Anderson and Sumit Guha (eds.), *Changing Concepts of Rights and Justice in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 114-39. Also see, Id., ‘Multiple Meanings: Changing Conceptions of Matrilineal Kinship in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Malabar’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 33/3 (1996), 283-307.

claimed the status of a *swarupam*.²⁷ This intimates that the political structure in pre-colonial Malabar was essentially flexible and that the demarcation between the status of a *swarupam* and a *taravadu* was very narrow.

Here it seems that the role of Brahmanism was crucial in delineating the superior political status of the *swarupams* in comparison with that of the other powerful *taravadus* in Kerala.²⁸ The heads of the *swarupams* were generally honoured as 'rajas', mainly in Brahmanical narratives. It is also true that the consecration ceremonies of many of these 'rajas' of the Kerala *swarupams* were presided over by Brahmin 'priests'. Although, these factors indicate that Brahmanism influenced the conceptualization of *swarupam* kingship in Kerala, my argument is that, conceptualizing the state form in pre-colonial Kolathunadu cannot be drawn solely from the Brahmanical notion of 'ritual kingship'. It is also necessary to take the regional notion of cosmic power or *sakti* into consideration.

The concept of sakti

While analysing the indigenous cultural matrix of northern Malabar in his in-depth study on *Teyyam* worship in this region, J. R. Freeman noticed the existence of three distinct value-systems co-existing within the cultural matrix of the region. Firstly, there was the Brahmanical strand recapitulated in its purity-impurity dichotomy. The second was the political or 'royal' system which was founded on martial and material power. And thirdly, the strand drawing its strength from magical powers. All these three streams coalesced in or were absorbed into the regional cosmos of *sakti* (sacred power) embodying the local Dravidian culture and consequently formed an integral and indissoluble part of the regional cultural matrix.²⁹ Freeman noticed the spatial factor which limited the ideological influence of Brahmanism over Dravidian ritual centres (temple/*kavu*). Therefore, the local worship centres lying closer to Brahmin temples tended to be more heavily influenced by the 'purity-impurity' concept, whereas this influence diminished in proportionate to the increasing spatial distance between the two.³⁰

Although there are indications of a compromise between these streams, Brahmanism never succeeded in dominating or substantially transforming the indigenous world of beliefs and

²⁷ T. V. Mahalingam (ed.), *Mackenzie Manuscripts: Summaries of the Historical Manuscripts in the Mackenzie Collection*, I (Madras: University of Madras, 1972), 287. For a history of this house see, K. K. N. Kurup, *Kudali Granthavari* (Malayalam) (Calicut: Calicut University, 1995).

²⁸ K. N. Ganesh also indicates the importance of Brahmanism in attributing political power to the *swarupams*. He commented; 'Thus the ritual power of the Brahmanas and the secular power of the non-Brahmanas who evolved into the Nayar caste were the two arms of political authority of the *swarupams*'. Ganesh, 'Structure of Political Authority in Medieval Kerala', 227.

²⁹ Richardson Freeman, 'Purity and Violence', 35-6.

³⁰ Ibid. 348-63.

practices.³¹ Instead, what we notice is a complex process in which various cosmological concepts interpenetrated to form a complex social ideology. What I have in mind is that the Nambutiri Brahmins in Kolathunadu gradually had to ‘internalize’ the local Dravidian *sakti* cults if they were to co-exist in the local social structure, instead of completely altering the existing systems after their perceptions.

Even in the case of the political elites of the region, the influence of Brahmanism and its emphasis on ritual purity were limited. This absence is conspicuous in the ritual practices which follow in the royal temples of the Kolaswarupam. For example, Maday Kavu, the oldest ritual seat of the Kolaswarupam, till recently performed blood sacrifices.³² The situation is no different in the cases of the *bhagavati* (goddess) worshipping centres like the Nileswaram Kavu (Mannanpurathu Kavu) and the Kalarivatukkal Temple, linked to the royal houses of the Alladam Swarupam (Nileswaram) and the Kolaswarupam respectively. Here animal sacrifices were carried out regularly as a part of *sakti* worship. There seems to have been attempts on the part of the Kolaswarupam to create a ‘royal’ priesthood, by reproducing the equivalent of the priestly class in Brahmin temples to serve in these temples. *Pidarar*, who served in these temples, followed the same ritual life as the Brahmins, except that they were regarded as *sakteya* Brahmins, practising blood sacrifices and drinking toddy as a part of their daily *pūja*. Analogous to the Brahmin temples and different from the common local *kavus*, these *swarupam* temples performed daily *pūjas*. It is probable that the Kolaswarupam was trying to create its own ritual system rooted in the local notion of *sakti* by appropriating some of the features of the functioning of Brahmanical temples.

This indicates that assuming ‘ritual’ authority as a separate entity is not enough to do full justice to the conceptualization of political power in Kolathunadu.³³ In another sense, there was no real segregation of power into ‘ritual’ and ‘political’ realms. Both of them were the constituents of the concept of *sakti*. As Shelly Errington has commented, the presence of invisible cosmic power was inferred by people through visible *signs* such as wealth, status, influence and the like.³⁴ The Zamorins, rulers of the nearby Calicut, carried *pallimaradi*³⁵ in front of their army marching against Vellattiri, the rival ruler, because it visualized the presence of goddess ‘Tirumandhamkunnu Bhagavati’, which assured their victory over the enemy.³⁶ Hence, the marching column resembled a ritual procession in honour of the glory of their goddess and the victory of the king over the enemy was the

³¹ The appropriation and ‘brahmanization’ of local gods and goddesses into the Nambutiri Brahmin’s pantheon of worship was an ongoing process. These local deities were worshipped mainly as *upadevatas* or lesser gods/goddesses in the Brahmin temples. Their images were consecrated and placed around the main Brahmin deity of the temple. On the other hand, the local Dravidian society also incorporated *vedic-puranic* concepts after modifying them to suit its cultural concepts.

³² Interview with K. V. Kunjikrishnan, 24 Apr. 2005.

³³ For a similar view see, Dirks, *Hollow Crown*, 5.

³⁴ Shelly Errington, *Meaning and Power in a Southeast Asian Realm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 10.

³⁵ This is a door-panel draped in silk. It is the characteristic emblem of the Zamorins. Krishna Ayyar, *Zamorins of Calicut*, 36.

³⁶ For the legend related to the *pallimaradi* of the Zamorins see, *Ibid*.

manifestation of the *sakti* of the goddess. A raja who controls material wealth and achieves military victories would implicitly mean that he possesses *sakti* or cosmic power. He embodies the invisible *sakti* through his material achievements. Accordingly, physical power and material affluence designate the presence of the invisible cosmic power which consequently legitimizes political power. Loyalty was gained and sustained through material means. The material prosperity of a *taravadu* or a *swarupam* was an expression of the cosmic power or *sakti*.

There was no fundamental difference between the *sakti* emanating from a raja or a god/goddess. Both of them were expressed through actions in the real world. Vanquishing the enemy and attaining material benefit were the two 'blessings' which a devotee expected from his/her *tampuran*—a term used to denote both a god and members of the local elite. Attaining *swarga* (heaven) or escaping from the cycle of births and attaining *moksha* (salvation) did not figure largely in the spiritual tradition of Kolathunadu. The *sakti* inherent in a man/woman was visible through earthly deeds; before and after death. After their death, they could be transformed into a *teyyam* (corrupted form of the Sanskrit *daivam*, which means 'god') and manifest their *sakti* through material means and express their visions and blessings through human medium (*velichappadu*). In this sense, ritual legitimation of political power in Kolathunadu and in Kerala generally was not very much different from the legitimation attained through material power.

It is true that there were attempts on the part of the Nambutiri Brahmins to exalt the political dignity of the rajas of Kerala. The Kolathiris were praised as 'Vadakkan Perumals' (Perumals of the North) by the author of the *Keralolpathi*.³⁷ However, unlike the neighbouring Chola kings who were able to manipulate the Brahmanical ideology to construct a royal cult in which the king, replicating such *puranic* deities as Shiva, were transformed into the embodiment of power and the centre of authority, the royal cult creation in Malabar, particularly in Kolathunadu, achieved only limited success.³⁸

There appears to have been a significant discrepancy between the ideal type of polity presented in Brahmanical texts such as the *Keralolpathi*, where the Kolathiri 'raja' is presented as the custodian of legitimized political power, and the actual working of power relations in the region. Conversely, there does not seem to have been a sharp distinction between the various power levels in Kolathunadu. The 'kingly' status attributed to the Kolathiris remained more or less a nominal one. The Kolathunadu society did not seem to have conceived of the position of the Kolathiris as being a fundamentally different entity from that of other 'men of prowess' in the region.³⁹ The Kolathiri was

³⁷ Varier, *Keralolpathi Granthavari*, 51.

³⁸ This development was conspicuous during the reigning period of Rajaraja I (985-1012) and Rajendra I (1012-44). Yasushi Ogura, 'The Changing Concept of Kingship in the Coḷa Period: Royal Temple Constructions, c. A.D. 850-1279', in Noboru Karashima (ed.), *Kingship in Indian History* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999), 119-41.

³⁹ The term 'men of prowess' is used by O. W. Wolters to denote 'big men' in Southeast Asian polities whose legitimacy was not traced through lineages, but it 'depended on their being attributed with an abnormal amount of personal and innate 'soul stuff', which explained and distinguished their performance from that of others in their generation and especially

usually referred to in local folklore as *tampuran*—a common term used to designate both local gods and members of the regional elite, including the Ali Rajas, indicating that they were thought to from the same cosmic category in the regional cosmos.⁴⁰

An examination of the state-formation process in medieval Kerala reveals that it did not present a picture of a homogeneous development throughout the region.⁴¹ Historical forces which shaped the fortunes of *swarupams* varied considerably in time and space. While Calicut presents the features of an ‘early state’ with perceptible centralization impulses and a successfully developed its own control mechanisms embedded in ritual practices, it was only by the middle of the eighteenth century that a kingdom (Travancore under Marthanda Varma) succeeded in organizing a state with a powerful centre and elaborate administrative and ideological apparatuses.⁴² In contrast, Kolathunadu presented a loosely knit political structure, in which the concept of ‘rajaship’ retained more of the nature of a ritual façade. Although there were attempts by the Brahmins to construct an ideological framework within which the political systems in medieval Kerala hypothetically functioned, in fact the region witnessed the development of state forms which were distinct from each other in many respects.

Houses by the sea

The interpretation of the pre-colonial Malabar political organisation as ‘houses by the sea’ by Dilip M. Menon seems to show a close resemblance to the reality of the situation in Kolathnadu.⁴³ Menon envisages a politically and economically decentralized state structure in pre-colonial Malabar which seems to have been far more loosely organized than the ‘segmentary state’ model of Burton Stein. While for Stein at least there was a royal court at the ‘core’ to symbolize the ‘ritual’ function of the state, Menon posits that *taravadus* or large households in the interior of Malabar functioned as independent politico-economic units without any ‘ritual core’. Therefore, Menon does not make any

among their own kinsmen’. He also explains that after their death such ‘men of prowess’ could be reckoned as ‘ancestors’ of the land and eligible for worship. The *teyyam* worship in Kolathunadu can be considered as a form of worship of such ‘men of prowess’. O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspective* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), 5-7.

⁴⁰ Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 357.

⁴¹ Narayanan, *Foundations of South Indian Society and Culture*, 16.

⁴² Hermann Kulke proposes three successive phases in the state formation process, such as: ‘local’; ‘regional’; and ‘imperial’. The ‘Early State’ model is attributed to the second stage of development, when the pristine state form of ‘chieftaincy’ extends its area of influence beyond its ‘nucleus’. Generally accepting his formulation of state development, it may be safe to label Marthanda Varma’s Travancore Kingdom as an ‘Imperial State’. However, accepting the ‘ritual’ nature of kingship as an important feature of ‘early kingdom’- an idea taken from the controversial ‘segmentary state’ model of Burton Stein- Kulke made his formulation of ‘early state’ more rigid, thereby making it difficult to see the possibility of change within this categorization. Consequently, I would not like to apply this term to Kolaswarupam. Hermann Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 262-93.

⁴³ Dilip Menon, ‘Houses by the Sea’, 161-86.

distinction between the *swarupams* and *taravadus* in Malabar. It is likely that he does not assume such a distinction to be significant in the actual functioning of political relations in Malabar. This transforms his rendering of Malabar polity as 'houses by the sea' into a useful model from which to analyse the political relations in Kolathunadu.

He argues that the concept of kingship in Malabar actually developed around large household formations on the coast, such as that of the Zamorins, which depended entirely on the 'flows of trade from the interior to the coast and beyond'.⁴⁴ Menon pursues his thesis by arguing that in Kerala 'monarchy was the story of an ever-shifting coalition of merchants, naval powers and the emergent court' and assumes the existence of a political equilibrium in Kerala during the pre-Portuguese period. He states that, 'based on access to a wide frontier such as the ocean, centralizing impulses had never arisen' and logically the impulse for a drive towards political centralization in medieval Kerala arrived late, becoming visible in the wake of the European impact. The Zamorins of Calicut and the Travancore kingship were the products of conflicts with the Portuguese, Dutch, and the English commercial powers. In a nutshell, a full-fledged concept of kingship never developed in medieval Kerala and 'in northern Kerala kingship remained a failed experiment'.⁴⁵

Although I agree with Menon that the state structure in pre-colonial Malabar was far more fluid compared to other parts of the Sub-Continent, it should not be assumed that there were no centralizing forces before the arrival of the Europeans.⁴⁶ Nevertheless it cannot be denied that the possibilities of maritime trade played an increasing role in shaping the process of state formation in the region. This particularly holds true in the case of the political system as it developed in early modern Kolathunadu.

As discussed elsewhere, the geographical features of Kolathunadu did not guarantee a large-scale agricultural surplus.⁴⁷ Shaped by the limited agrarian economy in Kolathunadu, the possibility of a centralized political structure to emerge was limited. The constricted opportunity to exploit the limited agricultural surplus obviously restricted the chances of the Kolathiris to exercise considerable influence over the people of the region. Instead, there emerged a fluctuating field of powerful *taravadus* exercising control over the resources from their respective landed properties and the dependent labour-service classes. The insufficiency in rice production may also have assisted the

⁴⁴ Ibid. 166. As always to prove the rule, there were exceptional cases. For example, the powerful kingship of Kottayam did not have direct access to the coast and did not maintain any port under its control. Nevertheless, importantly Kottayam also benefited from maritime trade as a large quantity of the spices exported from Cannanore and its satellite ports were harvested in the Kottayam region. Even in the case of the Calicut kingdom there is an argument that, in spite of the commercial importance of Calicut it was the inland centre of Ponnani which formed the epicentre of the Zamorins' political power with its ritual and administrative importance. N. M. Namboodiri, *Mamamkam Rekhakal* (Malayalam) (Sukapuram: Vallathol Vidya Peedam, 2005), 35-6.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 183.

⁴⁶ The Zamorins of Calicut are an explicit example for this phenomenon. The emergence of the Nediyrrippu Swarupam has to be traced in its close connection with the West Asian Muslim trade networks.

⁴⁷ See the first chapter.

evolution of ‘communities of subsistence’,⁴⁸ under the command of influential *taravadus* controlling the limited wet-land paddy fields during the pre-colonial period in the region.⁴⁹ The peculiar state structure in Kolathunadu in the seventeenth and the eighteenth century has to be analysed against this background of the economic and concomitant social relations in Kolathunadu.

The maintenance of political dignity through the orchestration of ritual practices and commanding obedience and loyalty by the exercise of force required control over substantial economic resources. The income derived by the Kerala rajas depended on various sources such as income from royal estates, tolls and taxes on trade, *kazcha* (gifts), *ankam* (dual), *purushantaram* (succession fee), *changatam* (fee for special protection), fee on conferring titles and other covert ‘taxes’.⁵⁰ The *swarupam*’s landed property was called *cherikkal*. These *cherikkal* lands were divided among the different lineages (*taivazhis* or mother’s lineages) and lineage segments (*kovilakams*) of each *swarupam*. The income from a particular *cherikkal* was allotted to a person occupying a particular position (*stanam*) in the *swarupam*. This *stanam* was decided according to the *muppu* (eldership) within the *swarupam*, encompassing its various lineages and lineage segments. Therefore, the order of seniority (*muppumura*) was crucial not only to determine the *stanam* of a person within the *swarupam*’s power hierarchy, but also to control the income from a particular *cherikkal*.

The ‘right’ of a *stani* (one who occupies a *stanam*) in a particular *cherikkal* was limited only to collecting a share of the produce of the land. The *cherikkal* lands were usually leased out to cultivators (*pattam*).⁵¹ The actual cultivators of the land were known as *adiyalar*. In this system, the right to collect a share of the produce, at least among the higher ranks, was usually given to ‘officials’ appointed by the raja, who were entitled to a monthly allowance and a certain amount for their personal expenses.⁵² A share of the income from *cherikkal* was also spent on religious purposes. Consequently, the income from the *cherikkal* was distributed at different levels of production relations and the ruling members enjoyed only a limited share of the income from *cherikkal*. This is particularly important

⁴⁸ Dilip Menon uses the term ‘community of subsistence’ to refer to a sort of social group formation centred on big land-owning *taravadus* in the northern regions of British Malabar in the early twentieth century. He uses the term in the context of developments in the agricultural sector of the region, when large *taravadus* began to control wet-land paddy cultivation there which led to the increasing dependence for food of the semi-independent cash crop farmers, service castes and labourers on *taravadus*. Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁴⁹ It is important to remember that, when comparing with the earlier periods, the colonial rule which defined and systematized the land-property system by introducing land laws in the region, empowered land-owning *taravadus* to obtain more control over the land and their dependents. Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism*, 14-16. For more details about the land relations in the northernmost part of Kerala under the colonial rule see, K. K. N. Kurup, *Land Monopoly and Agrarian System in South Kanara with Special Reference to Kasargod Taluk* (Calicut: Calicut University, 2000).

⁵⁰ For more details about the source of the income of the Zamorins see, Krishna Ayyar, *Zamorins of Calicut*, 264-6.

⁵¹ M. R. Raghava Varier (ed.), *Sthanarohanam: Chatangukal* (Malayalam) (Sukapuram: Vallathol Vidya Peedam, 2004), 79-83.

⁵² Ibid.

considering the fact that there was no systematic, centralized system of land revenue in Malabar until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when this region came under Mysorean control.⁵³

Kerala rajas did not enjoy any kind of ideological support to promote themselves as the supreme owner of the land (*bhupati*).⁵⁴ Even from the Nambutiri Brahmanical point of view, it was they, not the rajas, who were the ultimate authority on the land. In the *swarupam* kingship, the raja did not appear as the supreme head of a land system in which the land derived its political value from which the state could systematically extract the revenue. Instead, he was an embodiment of authority which bound various power centres through such accoutrements of sovereignty as receiving gifts, conferring titles on influential personalities and nobles, punishing violations of customary practices and the like. The raja exercised control over a network of power relations, operating through various people of stature, by a combined strategy composed of ritual and authoritative instruments.⁵⁵ Obviously, under such a construction the raja derived only a limited income from the agrarian surplus. Likewise, the other sources of income to which the raja were entitled such as *ankam*, gifts, *purushantaram* and suchlike, albeit of crucial importance to the realm of political and ritual relations, were invariably inconsistent and unreliable. In this context that income from trade and commerce acquired paramount importance for the raja.

Given the culmination of all these circumstances, it is natural that the *swarupams* in pre-colonial Kerala appear as 'houses by the sea', as many of them depended on maritime trade as an important source of income. Consequently, maritime centres, such as Maday and later Cannanore appear as the political centres of the Kolaswarupam. However, the Kolathiris and other kingships of Kerala never succeeded in establishing a decisive control over the commodity movements within their realm.⁵⁶ Toll (*chunkam*), levied on commercial goods, was collected by 'men of prowess' sitting at different nodes of inland trade routes.⁵⁷ Available evidence points to the fact that *swarupam* lineages also participated in this sharing of the trade income from inland commodity movements.⁵⁸ The upshot was that the rajas had to be content mostly with the tolls derived from the maritime trade centres. Invariably, fluctuations in maritime income had a significant influence on the political fortunes of maritime trade-oriented *swarupams*.

The economic resources of the rajas of Kerala did not permit them to maintain a regular standing army of their own. Employing the Nairs in military service placed a heavy economic burden

⁵³ C. K. Karcem, *Kerala under Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan* (Cochin: Kerala History Association, 1973), 143-55.

⁵⁴ Buchanan, *Journey from Madras*, II, 360.

⁵⁵ Given the availability of royal records, this composite character of power exercised by Malabar kingship is more conspicuous in the case of the Zamorins of Calicut. See, Varier, *Sthanarohanam: Chatangukal*. Also see, Nicholas B. Dirks, 'From Little King to Landlord: Colonial Discourse and Colonial Rule', in id., *Colonialism and Culture* (Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 175-208.

⁵⁶ John, 'VOC and the Prospects of Trade between Cannanore and Mysore', 205-30.

⁵⁷ Dilip Menon, 'Houses by the Sea', 166.

⁵⁸ Buchanan, *Journey from Madras*, II, 434-5.

on the shoulders of the rajas. During military operations, which demanded large-scale deployment of the Nairs, these people were paid on a daily wage basis.⁵⁹ It was not an unusual occurrence that Nairs who had not been paid by their employers for a long time would take service under other lords.⁶⁰ It is probable that there was a military labour market in Malabar, constituted mainly of the traditional Nair militia plus other armed groups as Tiyyas and Mappilas. This easy availability of armed service and the inability of the Kolathiris to monopolize the use of force in the realm on account of their weak economic position meant that the outward appearance of regal authority remained more or less nominal. The *swarupam* polity in Kolathunadu exhibited the character of a political authority with limited access to economic resources which they had to share among different echelons of the political elites of the society. The Kolathiris had to sustain their political dignity within the constraints set by the limits of their economic resource base. The logical consequence of this was a limitation in the scope of political power in Kolathunadu and a diminished chance of developing a centralized state form in the region.

Compounding the inadequate resource base, the organization of political power within a *swarupam* also weakened the possibility of the growth of a strong centralized power. Political power in a *swarupam* was diffuse in nature. As mentioned earlier, the *swarupams* of Kerala were branched into lineages and lineage segments. Theoretically, each of these small political units of a *swarupam* was qualified to make a claim to the 'rajaship' on the basis of *muppumura* or eldership.⁶¹ The eldest male member from the various lineages/lineage segments of a *swarupam* assumed the 'rajaship', but even in such a position he did not enjoy full command over political authority in a *swarupam*. Within a *swarupam*, the authority was divided into and conferred on different members according to *muppu*, that is, in a descending order. This was known as *kuruwazcha*. Usually the eldest member of the reigning house (*muttakuru*) assumed the 'rajaship', and the next junior the *elamkuru* was designated as the immediate successor to the 'rajaship'.⁶² In this fashion, the entire line of succession was organized in a *swarupam* according to *muppumura*.

The politico-economic powers within lineages and lineage segments of a *swarupam* were also divided in a similar manner. When the segmentation of a *swarupam* into lineages and lineage segments grew more complex, the determination of *muppu* concomitantly grew more complex. The almost inevitable consequence was the power struggles among various lineages and lineage segments.

⁵⁹ Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 52.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 51-2.

⁶¹ In practice there were differences among the various *swarupams* in relation to the succession to the 'rajaship'. In Venadu, which was divided into various *swarupams*, only the Chiravay Swarupam had the right to assume the 'rajaship'. But this rule was not always strictly followed. In Kolathunadu, both the Palli Kovilakam and the Udayamangalam Kovilakam enjoyed the right to become the Kolathiri during the period of discussion in this thesis and later it seems that the Palli Kovilakam monopolized the right of succession. There were incessant competitions among the five *taivazhis* of Cochin to assume the 'rajaship'. It was only in Calicut that the succession issue did not generate much tension. This may indicate that there were no 'laws' which systematized the succession issue within the various *swarupams* in Kerala.

⁶² 'Memorandum of Van Reede to Commander Jacob Lobs', in s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 110.

Therefore, in pre-colonial Kerala, kingship never appeared as the ultimate, single source of power. Instead, political authority remained a collective entity and was unevenly distributed within the *swarupam*. This fragmented character of political authority in Kerala in general and in Kolathunadu in particular, was the main obstacle to the emergence of a powerful king.

The co-sharers of Kolathunadu

By the seventeenth century, the Kolaswarupam had to share its political authority with two other lineages in North Kerala. The Nileswaram (Alladam) Swarupam and the Arackal Swarupam claimed independent political identity. Moreover, political power within the Kolaswarupam was also disseminated into different *kovilakams*. In the *Keralolpathi* there are four *kovilakams* sharing the political authority of the Kolaswarupam namely: Talora Kovilakam; Arathil Kovilakam; Muttathil Kovilakam; and Karipathu Kovilakam.⁶³ According to the *Keralolpathi* Kolathunadu tradition, the Karipathu Kovilakam claimed some sort of superiority over the others. However, it was the Palli Kovilakam and the Udayamangalam Kovilakam, as apparent from the Dutch records, which dominated the political scene of Kolathunadu.⁶⁴ Both these *kovilakams* had again branched into various *kovilakams*, thereby, creating a network of 'political houses' within the Kolaswarupam.⁶⁵ This testifies that the Kolaswarupam was not an exception to the general situation that existed among the other ruling houses of Kerala. Power, consequently was not embodied in the raja, but appeared in its collective form—the *swarupam*.

The *taravadu* appears as the basic unit of political and economic life in Kolathunadu. Beyond its spatial existence as a household with control over landed property, the *taravadu* was a ritually significant unit.⁶⁶ Each *taravadu* had its own family deity or *paradevata*. Ancestral worship was a part of the ritual life of a *taravadu*. This reveals that each *taravadu* turned out to be a micro-reflection of the cosmic power, *sakti*, exhibiting its own unique identity in the social order. In Kolathunadu these dynamic autonomous *taravadus* were not organized hierarchically, on the basis a systematized holistic socio-political ideology.⁶⁷ Although the Kolaswarupam maintained a distinguished status among these *taravadus*, political power was not confined exclusively to it. Powerful *taravadus*, sharing cosmic

⁶³ Varier, *Keralolpathi Granthavari*, 52-3.

⁶⁴ For more details see, Chapter Six and Chapter Seven.

⁶⁵ Madras Board of Revenue Consultations (1801) gives a list of *kovilakams*, including the extinct ones. According to it, the Palli Kovilakam was comprised of eight houses and the Udayamangalam of three. Oriental India Office Collection, British Library (IOC), Mackenzie Collection, General, vol. 50, Madras Board of Revenue Consultations, 1801, fos. 7245-6.

⁶⁶ Melinda A. Moore, 'A New look at the Nayar Taravad', *Man*, New Series, 20/3 (Sept., 1985) 523-41.

⁶⁷ It is possible that the new *taivazhis* created through agricultural expansion and internal dissensions maintained ritual relations with each other and with the parent *taravadus*. M. Kelu Nambiar, *An Epitome of the Malabar Law and Land Tenure* (Madras: Higginbotham and Company, 1880), 8-9. Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism*, 13.

energy with the Kolaswarupam, enjoyed political power in the respective territories under their control.

The Kolaswarupam appears to have been nothing more than a complex form of *taravadu*, having greater control over the landed properties and other sources of affluence. It seems that Kolathunadu was constituted of numerous *taravadus* sharing different levels of political power in the realm and their difference was only in dimensions of power or *sakti* expressed through their social relations. Consequently, the nature of the relationship between the Kolaswarupam and the *taravadus* in Kolathunadu and the relationship among each other were determined by the *sakti* or power they possessed. The political picture of Kolathunadu during the seventeenth and the eighteenth century in a way resembled the South-East Asian polity described by Shelly Errington as a form of unevenly distributed energy field with various nodes of concentration.

The energy exists everywhere in the field, but it is unevenly distributed: in some places it is quite thin; in others, densely concentrated. The energy is continuous—there are no boundaries and no empty spaces, but only thinner and thicker concentrations. The energy in this field is distributed not only unevenly, but unstably. It is continually moving, waxing and waning from particular locations. Its flux is usually, though not always, gradual. In addition to currents of energy, numerous visible objects occupy this field. One of the differences between the objects and the currents of energy is that the objects are discrete: they have boundaries and surfaces. Thus houses have walls, and humans have skin. But if we could see the energy, or if we were in the habit of thinking of the world in this way, we would understand that the boundaries or surfaces of these objects are the least important things about them. The objects provide locations and nodal points at which the energy collects, though in differing degrees of concentration.⁶⁸

In this model, a boundary oriented conceptualization of the state gives way to a disseminated political structure in which the concept of ‘space’ or ‘territory’ is relatively unimportant.⁶⁹ This model is able to contain individuals, institutions, houses and palaces as a part of this power field, but, with variations in the concentration of power. The potency of the individuals and institutions is invisible and it is, as seen earlier, manifested through such *signs* indicating its presence as material wealth and the numerical strength of the people under its command.⁷⁰ Neither the raja nor the Brahmins had a

⁶⁸ Errington, *Meaning and power in a Southeast Asian Realm*, 58.

⁶⁹ Though there were natural boundaries, such as rivers, as the borders of the *swarupams*, it is more probable that these ‘frontiers’ had more of a symbolic importance. Raghava Varier has pointed out that the cultural geography (*nadu*) was more concretely conceptualized than the political geography (*swarupam*) in Medieval Malabar. M. R. Raghava Varier, ‘Naduvazhiswaroopangalude Valarcha’, in V. J. Varghese, N. Vijaya Mohanan Pillai (eds.), *Anjooru Varshatte Keralam: Chila Arivadayalangan* (Malayalam) (Kottayam: Current Books, 1999), 51-8.

⁷⁰ Errington, *Meaning and Power in a Southeast Asian Realm*, 285.

monopoly on this potency, but it was unequally distributed. However, the rajas, powerful households, Brahmin *gramams* certainly did manifest their potency through their wealth and entourage which differentiated them from the less potential majority of society.⁷¹

The concentration of power was not fixed but was in an incessant state of flux, with the inherent possibility of the emergence or expansion of new nodes of power and waning or contraction of others.⁷² However, the total disappearance of the power nodes does not appear to have been a common phenomenon in the *swarupam* polities of Kerala, since the prevalent practice of adoption helped save the *swarupams* and *taravadus*—at least nominally from total extinction—on many occasions.⁷³ Besides, establishing a ‘territorial’ authority through conquest was not the ideal of political power in Kerala.⁷⁴ Instead of total annihilation, it was considered fair to merely reduce the *sakti* of the opponent.⁷⁵

The Kolaswarupam attained a special status of power in the realm through a gradual process of transformation over centuries with considerable fluctuations in its fortunes. It appears that the Kolathiris never exercised a monopoly of authority in the realm. Authority was a decentralized, shared, and pluralistic entity. Though Brahmanism envisaged a highly structured idea of political power, this ideology never figured prominently in the *swarupam* polity of Kolathunadu. Crucial

⁷¹ In this context it is important to note that powerful Brahmin *gramams* in North Malabar claimed an independent political status by attributing royal status to their deities. According to one story, the attempt of the Kolathiri to force the Nambutiri Brahmins of Taliparamba (Perumchellur) to perform a sacrifice for him was refused by the Brahmins by stating: ‘Kolathiri had no right to ask them to perform a sacrifice since in the jurisdiction of *perumtrikkovilappan* (the deity of the Rajarajeswara temple of Perumchellur, Taliparamba) the order of any king would not be valid’. The epithet of the deity *rajarajeswara* (king of the kings) blatantly indicates the royal status assumed by the deity. This Siva temple not only assumed kingly dignity; it also carried out such royal functions as promoting literary activities, bestowing honorary titles to men of merit and the like. Similarly, ‘Payyanur Perumal’, the deity of Payyanur *gramam*, also resembled the legendary rulers of Kerala, even bearing the same title of ‘Perumal’. According to the legend related to the establishment of the Nileswaram Alladam Swarupam, the area which was later conquered by the Kolathiri-Zamorin combined force was under the authority of ‘Payyanur Perumal’, who received tribute from there. V. Govindan Namboodiri, *Srauta Sacrifices in Kerala* (Calicut: Calicut University, 2002), 98; Freeman, ‘Purity and Violence’, 527-8.

⁷² Ganesh, ‘Structure of Political Authority in Medieval Kerala’, 225.

⁷³ The disappearance of the Porlathiri Swarupam after the ‘conquest’ of Polanad by the Zamorins of Calicut is the only prominently cited incident which can be taken as an example for such a development in Malabar. The reappearance of the Porlathiri Swarupam after centuries based at Kadattanadu is as intriguing as its disappearance. Varier, ‘Naduvazhiswaroopangalude Valarcha’, 55; Panikkassery, *Keralam Pathinanchum Pathinarum Noottandukalil*, 64; Herbert Wigram, *Malabar Law and Custom* (Madras: Higginbotham, 1882), 4-5.

⁷⁴ In his *Tuhfat-ul-Mujabidin*, Sheikh Zain-ud-Din states that the rajas of Malabar did not conquer each other and the Zamorin usually left the conquered rajas’ political status unaffected, albeit keeping them under his control. Panikkassery, *Keralam Pathinanchum Pathinarum Noottandukalil*, 56-7.

⁷⁵ This is conspicuously illustrated in the reply given by Prince Unnithiri to the question posed by the English about why he was not ready to storm the house of the ‘rebellious’ lord Kunji Nayar and make an end to the conflict. The Prince deemed it not fair to do this to anyone who was his equal but, ‘to drill out time and make him spend his money, and destroy his lands to humble him’. OIC, Orme Collections, vol. 169, Letter from Tellichery to Bombay, 10 Nov. 1711, fos.189-190.

political decisions pertaining to the realm were, in all probability, taken not by the Kolathiri alone, but in a 'council' of influential persons. They later even played a significant role in succession issues in the *swarupam*.⁷⁶ Judicial and political decisions at the micro-level were taken independently by local 'men of prowess'.

The Kolaswarupam claimed a kind of titular sovereignty over Kolathunadu. The Kolathiri was the *primus inter pares* among the members of his own *swarupam*. Similarly, the Kolaswarupam enjoyed a premier status among the other *taravadus* in Kolathunadu. Indubitably in such a system, there was no concentration of power within a single entity. Instead, power remained fragmented and dispersed throughout the realm. These micro politico-economic units in the form of religious institutions, powerful *taravadus*, royal lineages and suchlike performed under a loosely knitted umbrella composed of personal loyalties. These power centres remained as floating entities either recognizing Kolathiri or some other ruler as their titular sovereign, maintaining varying degree of relations, or claiming independent political status. The actual power, however, remained with them in their respective territories. In other words, Kolathunadu and the Kolaswarupam were neither identical nor interchangeable identities. Kolathunadu remained a geo-cultural zone with loose, open borders of identity, consisting of numerous power centres. It was not unusual at any given time that more than one *swarupam* claimed authority over Kolathunadu, ineluctably casting the concept of a 'kingdom' in Kolathunadu with fixed political borders and a central authority in perpetual doubt.⁷⁷

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Kolaswarupam became a more or less authoritative symbol without power when new power centres claiming political clout began to emerge. Canter Visscher portrayed eighteenth-century Kolaswarupam as follows.

The royal family consists of four branches, of which the present representatives, both male and female, are so numerous that they live in great poverty for the most part, though it is true that the State is well managed and that it possesses a good army.⁷⁸

At first glance, this statement in which the rulers of a well-organized state are portrayed as poor and underprivileged may appear paradoxical. In spite of its segmentation into various *kovilakams* through the course of centuries, the resource base of the Kolaswarupam did not expand proportionately to sustain the growth of the house. It is probable that the landed property (*cherikkal*) did not expand on

⁷⁶ See the fifth chapter.

⁷⁷ Kudali Swarupam also claimed some sort of authority over Kolathunadu. Mahalingam, *Mackenzie Manuscripts*, I, 287.

⁷⁸ Canter Visscher's indication to the existence of a 'good army' in Kolathunadu was obviously a reference to the Nair militia rather than an organized military under the state. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, II, 10. In his memoir of 1677, Van Reede also expressed the same opinion about Kolathiris. He remarks; 'Het Stamhuys bestaet uyt vier tacken, waerin tegenwoordich noch een groote menichte mannen en vrouwen in 't leven sijn, en die door haer vermenichvuldiging oock tot armoede vervallen, alhoewel het landschap seer magtig is van nayros en lantheren, maar de vorstelijcke domeynen en erfgoederen sijn niet genoeg de kinderen en het geslagt te voeden en onderhouden.' s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 152.

a considerable scale either. The economic position of the Swarupam became precarious because it did not enjoy any sort of control over the resources of Kolathunadu. The new venues of resource accumulation provided by Indian Ocean trade was appropriated by the newly emerging Mappila trading communities and other petty 'men of prowess' along the coast. Gradually, by the end of the seventeenth century, the Kolathiri transformed into a muted symbol of authority, reduced to virtual impotence in Kolathunadu.

The scope for applying a centre-periphery concept in the political order in Kolathunadu seems fairly limited. As we have already seen, the authority of the Kolaswarupam was diffused throughout its lineages. Even if we consider the Chirakkal Kovilakam as a sort of 'centre', the influence exercised by the 'centre' on the peripheral area was not directly proportionate to the distance between them. The Arackal Swarupam, though spatially very close to the 'centre', enjoyed independent political status. Ritual relationships between different political nucleuses were also not determined by spatial factors. The Alladam Swarupam (Nileswaram), which was politically closer to the Kolathiris, maintained ritual relations with the spatially more distant Zamorins of Calicut.⁷⁹ In spite of this, from a modern perspective, seemingly 'chaotic' political situation, Kerala society appears to have developed its own system of balance based on some 'codes of conduct' known under different titles as *maryada*, *margam*, or *acharam*. These codes of social ethics determined the social behaviour of the people in the group, including its political elites. Dutch observers interpreted this phenomenon in their own terms. In 1743 Commander Stein van Gollenesse commented,

Although the king and princes exercise great authority over their subjects, affairs are so regulated by the laws of Cheraman Perumal that their rule can in no way be called despotic. Subjects obey their king ungrudgingly as long as he remains within the limits of the law, and even if a chief were to wrong a few individuals, the whole community would not take up the quarrel. However, if he were to issue orders calculated to injure the interests of the whole community, they would not be obeyed.⁸⁰

Van Reede found the Kerala polity neither democratic, nor monarchic, nor oligarchic, but a combination of all of three. He deemed it an ideal type of polity where the weak were protected

⁷⁹ Mahalingam, *Mackenzie Manuscripts*, I, 283.

⁸⁰ It should be borne in mind that the general reports made on the Kerala polity by Dutch officials were greatly influenced by their close contact with Cochin, where a more structured kingship was in place than in Kolathunadu. Moreover the Dutch obviously tried to comprehend the functioning of the local polity through European intellectual idioms in which written laws played an important role in controlling civic life. The 'laws' of Cheraman Perumal have to be seen from this perspective. Galletti, *Dutch in Malabar*, 51. Mark Vink, 'The Dutch East India Company and the Pepper trade between Kerala and Tamilnad, 1663-1795: A Geo-Historical Analysis', in K. S. Mathew (ed.), *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans: Studies in Maritime History* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 291.

against the strong.⁸¹ However, these codes of conduct or as they were known the 'laws of Cheraman Perumal', should not be interpreted as a fixed constitution or a social contract but merely as a highly contingent description of the rules and objectives of the political game.⁸²

Therefore the fluctuations in the political fortunes of *swarupams* need to be explored not in the 'ritual' realm, but in terms of the economic forces which shaped and re-shaped these political forms. Economic forces determined their position in the political hierarchy of Kerala in relation to other rajas or 'feudal lords' such as *naduvazhis* and *desavazhis* and other power nodes. The cause of the success or failure of these ruling houses has to be sought in their success or failure to accumulate resources to support their claims. It was in this context that maritime trade attained such overwhelming importance in the regional political economy.

Lords of the horses

As discussed earlier, the political power and the limited economic resources of the Kolaswarupam were dispersed among its lineages and lineage segments. Though the land of Kolathunadu was not suitable to extensive paddy cultivation, geo-climatic features combined to help it to produce high quality pepper and such other spices as cardamom, ginger, and wild cinnamon, which were in great demand throughout the Indian Ocean. The emergence of a number of port towns along the coast of Malabar was one of the most palpable consequences of this great demand for Malabar spices throughout world markets. Pertinently, Kolathunadu covered the extensive coastal belt of North Malabar which was suited to the development of a number of maritime trade centres. Spices produced in the hinterland were mainly shipped across the seas from these coastal port towns of Kolathunadu. The possibilities to accumulate income from maritime trade, supplementing the land-based returns would have been the main attraction for the local political elites. From this point of view, it is not surprising that the political seat of the Kolaswarupam was transferred, moving with the shift in the focus of maritime trade in the region.

Ezhimala, which was the original seat of the Kolathiris, was an important hub of maritime trade from an earlier period. The ancient sea ports of the region, such as Ilangopatanam,⁸³

⁸¹ 'Memoir of Van Reede to Jacob Lobs, 1677', In s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 106. William Logan has also expressed a similar view about Kerala Society-an egalitarian one-though a people with 'little or no history in one sense to record.' Logan, *Malabar*, vol. I, pp. vi-vii.

⁸² In this context it is interesting to note Van Reede's comment on the ongoing struggle among the different power groups of Malabar. He stated that, in course of time, the old laws were ignored and different interest groups were trying to change old practices to achieve their own interests which created problems in the society. s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 110.

⁸³ The literary and inscriptional evidence from these areas supports the existence of these earlier port towns of Kolathunadu. Ilangopatanam appears in the Ramantali stone inscription. *Annual Report on South Indian Epigraphy* (Madras: Government of India Press, 1932), 86-7.

Achalapatanam,⁸⁴ and Kachilpatanam,⁸⁵ were located in and around the general area of Ezhimala. It would be logical to assume that the disappearance of these old trading centres and the silting up of the old royal port city of Maday contributed to the emergence of Cannanore as the main port of the kingdom.⁸⁶ The loss of status of Ezhimala as a maritime commercial hub might have been the deciding factor in the shifting of the political centre from Ezhimala to Cannanore—an emerging port town in the kingdom.⁸⁷

The name of the port city of Cannanore emerged from obscurity to the limelight of history only by the end of the fifteenth century, when the Portuguese appeared on the scene.⁸⁸ The rapid growth of this port city was probably linked with the developments in Vijayanagara State during the fifteenth century. The expansionist thrust of the Vijayanagara rulers all over South India and their concomitant continuous conflicts with the Bahmani Sultanate compelled the former to search for an easy access to the horse trade of the Arabian Sea. Cavalry played a vital role in the military successes of the Vijayanagara rulers. Saletore commented; ‘the foreign policy of the [Vijayanagara] rulers was to a large extent governed by the necessity of securing for themselves a continuous supply of horses from Ormuz’.⁸⁹ Firishtah claims that the Vijayanagara army in 1443 was constituted of no less than 80,000 horsemen.⁹⁰ Because these horses which were imported from West Asia had a short span of life, a continuous supply of horses to the Empire had to be maintained in order to keep the cavalry force up to strength.⁹¹

During the second half of the fifteenth century, the Empire suffered great setbacks at the hands of the Bahmani Sultanate. Their control over the Konkan Coast gradually slipped from the hands of the Vijayanagara rulers. The massacre of Muslim traders at Bhatkal—the most important port in Konkan which supplied horses to the Vijayanagara kings—carried out on the orders of King

⁸⁴ Achalapatanam appears in the *Mushikavamsa* of Athula. K. Raghavan Pilla, *Mushikavamsam*, 219. M. G. S Narayanan traces the period of the composition of this *kavya* back to the first half of the eleventh century. Narayanan, ‘Mushikavamsa as a Source of Kerala History’, 65.

⁸⁵ Kachilpatanam, another disappeared port town, appears in the ‘Payyannur Pattu’ which belongs to thirteenth or fourteenth century. Anthony, *Payyanur Pattu*, 3.

⁸⁶ According to the *Mooshikavamsam*, the Mooshaka king Vallabha II established the town of Madai. Raghavan Pilla, *Mushikavamsam*, 301. By the time of the arrival of the Portuguese, this port town has lost its commercial significance.

⁸⁷ Chirakkal T. Balakrishnan Nair says that the Kolathiris had had a fortress (*Kadalayi Kotta*) and a Krishna temple on the coast of the Arabian Sea where the Ali Rajas later set up their establishments. Gradually this fortress fell into ruin and the temple was removed to Chirakkal, the seat of the royal family, in 1828. Balakrishnan, *Theranjedutha Prabandhangal*, 67.

⁸⁸ In his travel account, Ma Huan mentions the country of Hen-nu-erh, which bordered the Calicut kingdom. If it can be identified as Kannur (Cannanore), the date of the earliest reference about Cannanore goes back to 1433. Ma Huan, *Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan: The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, ed. J. V. G. Mills (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1970), 138.

⁸⁹ B. A. Saletore, *Social and Political Life in the Vijayanagara Empire (A.D. 1346-1646)*, I (Madras: B. G. Paul and Co. Publishers, 1934), 424.

⁹⁰ Mohamed Kassim Firishtah, *History of the Rise of the Mahomedan Power in India, Till the Year A.D. 1612*, II, tr. and ed. John Briggs (Calcutta: Editions Indian, 1966), 266.

⁹¹ Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, I, 211.

Virupaksha in 1469 and the subsequent loss of control over Konkan and Goa greatly curtailed the direct access of the Empire to the ports along the south-west coast of the Indian Sub-Continent where horses from West Asia were disembarked.⁹² Varthema reported horses were very expensive in Vijayanagara, 'because those kings who hold the seaports do not allow them to be brought there.'⁹³ This political condition favoured the prospects of Malabar ports, which were free of the political turmoil in the rest of South India. There is cogent evidence to back the claim that, exercising its influence on a large portion of peninsular India, the Vijayanagara State was an important hinterland of Malabar ports.⁹⁴ The thriving presence of West Asian traders along the Malabar Coast made it easier for the Vijayanagara rulers to gain access to the West Asian horses imported into Malabar ports.

The geographical features of the port of Cannanore made it suitable to the disembarkation of horses. In contrast to the earlier ports of Kolathunadu, the location of this port was not located on a river estuary. This saved it from the dangers of silting up and it also favoured the close anchorage of ships which were hauled ashore by elephants.⁹⁵ Of course, the trade in these war horses was a lucrative one. Each stallion, Barbosa reported, cost 'from four to six hundred *cruzados*, and some specially chosen for his own [King's] use he buys for nine hundred or a thousand *cruzados*'.⁹⁶ Prior to the Portuguese success in transferring this money-spinning trade to Goa by the second decade of the sixteenth century, Cannanore had been reaping the profit from the horse trade for some considerable time and had served as the main port where the Persian horses were disembarked for the Vijayanagara monarchs.⁹⁷

The importance of the horse trade in the prosperity of this port town is also conspicuous from another point of view. On the eve of the arrival of the Portuguese, pepper, the most important commodity of maritime trade—produced in the hinterland of Cannanore—was usually transported to the port of Calicut for export.⁹⁸ The success of the Zamorins in attracting the pepper supply from the hinterland of Cannanore with the help of the wealthy West Asian Muslim traders settled in Calicut deprived the Cannanore the most profitable branch of Malabar maritime trade. Nevertheless, Cannanore maintained its importance probably because of its strategic importance as the supplier of

⁹² M. H. Rama Sharma, *The History of the Vijayanagar Empire: Beginning and Expansion (1308-1569)*, I, ed. M. H. Gopal (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1978), 74-5.

⁹³ Varthema, *Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema*, 51.

⁹⁴ Barbosa mentions about the supply of pepper to the capital city Vijayanagara, 'that was brought from Malabar on oxen and asses'. Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, I, 203.

⁹⁵ Varthema, *Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema*, 52.

⁹⁶ Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, I, 210.

⁹⁷ Varthema, *Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema*, 50.

⁹⁸ The Portuguese officials mention that the pepper of Dharmapatanam, an important satellite port of Cannanore, was sent to Calicut rather than to the Cannanore port. 'Gaspar Pereira to D. Manuel, Cochin, 30 Dec. 1505', in *Cartas de Affonso de Albuquerque Seguidas de Documentos que as Elucidam*, II, ed. Raymundo Antonio de Bulhao Pato and Mendoca (Lisboa: Academia Real das Sciencias, 1898), 361.

horses to the Vijayanagara monarchs.⁹⁹ This is a cogent explanation of why the Vijayanagara ruler responded sharply to the problems between the Mappilas and the Portuguese at Cannanore in 1505, which could have affected the ongoing horse trade at the port.¹⁰⁰

Beyond this imperial interest, the horse trade constituted one of the main sources of the income of the Kolathiris before the Portuguese takeover of the trade in the sixteenth century. It earned them the nickname of 'lords of the horses'.¹⁰¹ Each horse, which was disembarked at the Cannanore port, provided an income of 25 ducats in port tax to the Kolathiri.¹⁰² These horses were taken via the inland trading routes across the Ghats to Vijayanagara. Considering the weak resource base of the Kolathiris, who depended on the rather meagre incomes from their private estates and customary payments from their subjects, this additional income must have certainly strengthened their political legitimacy. It is not surprising that the attempts of the Portuguese *Estado* to divert the horse trade from Cannanore to Goa elicited a vigorous protest from the Kolathiris.¹⁰³

The expropriation of the income from the horse trade, which had directly enriched the Kolathiris' exchequer, may have had an impact on the existing power relations in Kolathunadu. It was precisely at this juncture, contemporary Portuguese travellers noticed the gradual emergence of local Muslim traders as an influential factor in regional politics¹⁰⁴ and indeed Cannanore witnessed the emergence of a Mappila royal family, known as the 'Arackal Swarupam', by the middle of the sixteenth century.¹⁰⁵ It is noteworthy that the increasing clout of the Arackal Swarupam in the political sphere of Cannanore ran in a reverse with the waning economic position of the Kolathiris.

The Arackal Ali Rajas

The reinvigoration of political and economic conditions in West Asia after the emergence of Islam in the ninth century AD triggered remarkable changes in the pattern of the Indian Ocean trade.¹⁰⁶ The Islamic trade diaspora established at various port cities across the Indian Ocean world intensified the trade relations between West Asia and India. This gradually brought about the emergence of

⁹⁹ The specific interest of the Vijayanagara rulers in the horse trade of Cannanore may have been the reason why the Zamorins did not try to force this profitable trade to divert to Calicut.

¹⁰⁰ Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea*, 80.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 19.

¹⁰² Varthema, *Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema*, 50.

¹⁰³ 'Kolathiri to D. Manuel, Cannanore, 6 Dec. 1507', in *Cartaz de Affonso de Albuquerque*, II, 401.

¹⁰⁴ Tomé Pires, who visited Cannanore in the second decade of the sixteenth century wrote, 'If Your Highness had not taken this kingdom [Cannanore] under your rule, it would be Moorish by now, because a certain Mamale Mercar was beginning to be very powerful'. Pires, *Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, 79.

¹⁰⁵ The political and economic background to the development of this Muslim royal family of Cannanore is meticulously analysed by Genevieve Bouchon. Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea*.

¹⁰⁶ 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), 34-6.

Islamic trade settlements in different parts of the Indian Ocean regions. The presence of Muslim traders along the coast of northern Kerala can probably be traced back as far as the emergence of Islam in West Asia itself. Since Kerala had commercial contacts with West Asia long before Islam entered the stage, it is not at all surprising that the religion newly sprung in Arabia should gain an early foothold on the Malabar Coast.¹⁰⁷ At an early date, the temporary marriages (*mu'ta*) entered into by these Arab traders with the local women and the 'conversion' of the lower strata of the Malabar society gave rise to an autochthonous Muslim community along the coast—the Mappilas.¹⁰⁸

In due course, the growing Islamic commercial presence stimulated the proliferation of a number of new trading centres along the Malabar Coast. Indeed, on the eve of the Portuguese arrival in Malabar, they were so powerful that 'if the King of Portugal had not discovered India, Malabar would already have been in the hands of the Moors, and would have had a Moorish King'.¹⁰⁹ Although the commercial power of these Muslim traders (who were mainly West Asian Muslims) had somewhat abated by the second half of the sixteenth century because of the Portuguese attempt to control the pepper trade in Malabar, the Mappila Muslims remained the driving force behind the commercial prosperity of Cannanore, even during the Dutch period. One of the most important developments in the history of the Muslim community in Kolathunadu during the seventeenth century was the solid establishment of the Arackal Swarupam as one of the prominent *taravadus* in the political economy of the region.

Some scholars trace the origins of the Arackal Swarupam back to an earlier period.¹¹⁰ However, the available evidence does not allow an origin earlier than the sixteenth century. Ibn Battutta, who visited Malabar during the fourteenth century, gives a detailed description of the kingdoms and Muslim settlements along the Malabar Coast, but does not refer to the Arackal family.¹¹¹ Also Duarte Barbosa, who lived in Cannanore as a Portuguese official for a long period, keeps silent about it. The earliest indigenous source which provides information on the origin of the Ali Rajas is the Arabic text *Tuhfat-ul-Mujahidin* written by Sheikh Zain-ud-Din in 1583. Zain-ud-Din, describing the political incidents during the Portuguese period, says that:

In the year 952 A.H. [1526-7], 8 Muharram, Farangis [Portuguese] killed Abu Bakr Ali and his nephew Kunji Supi who were the leaders of the Muslims in Cannanore. Abu Bakr Ali is the uncle of Ali Adiraja of Cannanore and Kunji Supi is the father of Ali Adiraja.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ The accounts given in the 'Periplus of the Erythrean Sea' substantiate the existence of pre-Islamic trade relations between West Asia and India during the early Christian centuries. See, K. A. N Sastri, *Foreign Notices of South India: From Megasthenes to Ma-Huan* (Madras: University of Madras, 1972), 57.

¹⁰⁸ André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic world*, I (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 71-2.

¹⁰⁹ Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 74.

¹¹⁰ Banerjee, 'A Wedding Feast or Political Arena', 83-112. Kurup, *Ali Rajas of Cannanore*.

¹¹¹ Battuta, *Rehla of Ibn Battuta*.

¹¹² Panikkassery, *Keralam Pathinanchum Pathinarum Noottandukalil*, 109.

It may appear remarkable that in this source a Muslim chief is styled 'raja'. Although we can see similar attempts to attain royal dignity on the part of some other Muslim trading magnates in Calicut during the sixteenth century, they failed to establish their authority as they were unsuccessful in overriding the established political power in the region.¹¹³ Whereas they failed, the Arackal Ali Rajas succeeded in evolving as an independent power centre within the traditional political set-up of Kolathunadu.

The authority in the Arackal Swarupam, as that of other *taravadus*, was organized along the matrilineal line in which the *muppu* was the criterion by which to ascend in the power hierarchy within the house and become the Ali Raja.¹¹⁴ The immediate second *stanam* or position in the hierarchy was that of the *Karanavar*. Similar to other *swarupam* polities, power was not concentrated in the hands of the Ali Rajas, but disseminated within the Arackal Swarupam and was shared by various 'men of prowess' in the Bazaar. The *Karanavar*, who was the immediate second to the Ali Raja in the line of succession in the Swarupam, also wielded considerable influence in the commercial and political life of Cannanore.¹¹⁵ The account of Alexander Hamilton incontrovertibly reveals that other influential Mappilas of the Bazaar shared power alongside the Ali Raja.¹¹⁶ This indicates the inner working of a 'bazaar government' run by various co-operating merchants.

However, in comparison with the other *swarupams* in Kerala, the distribution of authority within the Arackal Swarupam appears to have been less complex, pointing towards the comparatively recent origin of the house. One of the peculiar customs of this Swarupam which differentiated it from other *taravadus* was that women known as the 'Arackal Beebis' were not excluded from *muppumura* making them free to attain the highest position in the hierarchy. Unlike other *taravadus*, the Arackal Swarupam attained its legitimacy in the regional power system not through its control of landed properties, but through maritime trade. Nevertheless, its limited control over the land does not seem to have adversely affected the legitimacy of the Arackal Swarupam in asserting its status in Kolathunadu, as controlling 'land' did not necessarily imply the possession of *sakti*. It was the control over people which counted more in this regard.¹¹⁷ The Arackal Swarupam successfully

¹¹³ See for example the attempt of the Kunjali Marakkar of Calicut who rebelled against the Zamorin and the Portuguese. Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 350-2.

¹¹⁴ Jacobus Canter Visscher, *Mallabaarse Brieven: Bebelzende eene Naukeurige Beschryving Jacobus Canter Visscher van de Kust van Mallabaar: Den Aardt des Landts, de Zeden en Gewoontens der Inwoneren, en al het Voornaamste dat in dit Gewest van Indie valt aan te Merken* (Ferwerda: Leeuwarden, 1743), 362.

¹¹⁵ See the third and the fifth chapters.

¹¹⁶ Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies: Giving an Exact and Copious Description of the Situation, Product, Manufactures, Laws, Customs, Religion, Trade etc. of all the Countries and Islands, which lie between the Cape of Good Hope, and the Island of Japan*, I (London: C. Hitch and A. Miller, 1744), 294.

¹¹⁷ The concept of controlling people was considered as important in agricultural societies where land was plenty and population pressure was less. Anthony Reid indicates that a similar situation existed in South-East Asia where there was an ample supply of land and manpower was scarce. Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680: The Lands*

exercised control, albeit of varying intensity, over a large number of people who were associated with the maritime enterprise of the house in Malabar. The surplus accumulated through trade undoubtedly helped the Swarupam to expand its influence over people, who subsequently became integrated into the extensive redistribution system functioning under the Ali Rajas.

Consonant with the postulated state of flux in the region, which can be associated with the waxing and waning of *sakti*, the dependent groups were constituted of fluctuating circles at different levels. While the Swarupam effectuated its direct, that is, more stable sway over an inner circle consisting mainly of the Cannanore Bazaar, its influence became more dissipated towards outer circles. Obviously such control was essentially fragile and inconsistent. It entirely depended on the success or failure of the Swarupam in maintaining its control over the regional maritime trade and hinterland trade networks. The political strategies adopted by the Arackal Swarupam in its dealings with both the European companies and local elites in Cannanore during the pre-colonial period have to be analysed from this perspective.

Moreover, the significant role of the Ali Rajas in the coastal rice trade gave rise to a 'community of subsistence' under the Arackal Swarupam. Given the failure of the region to produce surplus rice to support its entire population, the rice trade with Canara was crucial to the day-to-day life of Kolathunadu. The nearly complete dependence of the Cannanore Bazaar and its vicinity on this supply significantly strengthened the legitimacy of the Arackal Swarupam.¹¹⁸ It seems that the Arackal House worked along the same line as the wet-land controlling *taravadus* in Kolathunadu which were supposed to provide subsistence for the dependent communities of labourers and service classes.¹¹⁹ Succinctly, the Arackal Swarupam replicated the regional political *taravadus* in all aspects. It evolved into the embodiment of *sakti* exercising control over a significant resource base and a widespread community of dependents across the region. This formed the essence of the political legitimacy of the Arackal Swarupam in Kolathunadu. The folk traditions of the region also locate the political status of the said Swarupam within the cultural matrix of Kolathunadu, in which the Arackal Swarupam is depicted as a nodal point of *sakti* within the regional cosmic order.¹²⁰

below the Winds, I (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 26. Also see, Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980), 24.

¹¹⁸ In 1698 the Dutch reported the introduction of control over the sale of rice in Cannanore by the Ali Raja, who tried to limit its distribution among his own dependents because of its scarcity. VOC 1627, Missive from Cannanore to Cochin, 11 Aug. 1698, fo. 278v.

¹¹⁹ Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism*, 30-5.

¹²⁰ The popular narrative song 'Murikkanchery Kelu' and the story which connects the Arackal Beebi with Andallur *Kavu* clearly point towards the popular conceptualization of the Arackal Swarupam as a regional power centre. M. V. Vishnu Namboodiri, *Murikkanchery Keluvinte Pattukatha* (Malayalam) (Kottayam: Current Books, 1999). Vanidas Elayavoor, *Katha Parayunna Kolathunadu* (Malayalam) (Trissur: Current Books, 1984).

Legitimacy and sakti

As in the case of other political families of Kerala, the origin of the Arackal House is entangled in various ‘myths’ and ‘legends’. As there were with the history of the Kolaswarupam, there were attempts to rationalize the influential political status attained by the Arackal House from both Brahmanical and regional perspectives. Here we find various traditions linking the Arackal House either to the Kolaswarupam or to the legendary Cheraman Perumal depending on the viewpoint of the narrator. While some of these ‘legends’ explain the origin of this family as an offshoot of the Kolaswarupam, thereby pointing its right to share the political dignity of the latter, the Arackal Swarupam itself traced its origin directly to Cheraman Perumal.¹²¹ However, the first legend seems to have been more popular than the latter in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries. This is conspicuous from the reports sent by VOC officials concerning the Ali Rajas.

They [the Ali Rajas] have their origin from a princess of Kolathiri who was made pregnant by a prominent Moor or Arab and who in due course was reconciled with the King, and had the honorary title of *Crau* or prince bestowed on him and with the power over the Muslim bazaar [of Cannanore], the Lakkadive Islands and many other good lands.¹²²

With a little deviation, in his Memoir the Dutch chief Adriaan Moens also refers to this story:

He is of Kolathiri extraction. A certain princess of this dynasty, on account of having to do with a person of lower standing, had lost her caste or nobility, and in order to cover up the disgrace, she was given in wedlock to a rich Arabian Moor on whom was conferred the title of prince and the general name of Ady Ragia, in that country indicating that he was the head of the Moors of that kingdom.¹²³

Whatever the authenticity of this story may be, the permeation of it in the society indicates that it attained a sort of historicity among at least a segment of the people, allowing them to come to terms with the powerful presence of the Ali Raja in the political economy of Kolathunadu. In spite of such a strong articulation of the legend in the society, there is no evidence to show that the Ali Raja depended on it to legitimize his political power in Kolathunadu. The available correspondence of the Kolaswarupam and the Ali Rajas with the Dutch Company in Kerala does not refer to this

¹²¹ In this ‘legend’, the origin of Arackal family is traced to Sri Devi, the sister of Cheraman Perumal, thereby justifying its royal dignity through the matrilineal line. Kurup, *Ali Rajas of Cannanore*, Appendix II, pp. 99-100.

¹²² VOC 2601, ‘Mallabaarse Woorden Boeken’, fo. 161r.

¹²³ Galletti, *Dutch in Malabar*, 147.

relationship between the two *swarupams*. This indicates that the actual power relations in Kolathunadu were not articulated essentially through such ‘legitimacy’ claims, but through *sakti*.

Interestingly, the Brahmin view articulated through the *Keralolpathi* legend tried to delineate the Ali Rajas as pure traders without any political and nuptial relations with the Kolaswarupam.¹²⁴ This could be considered a deliberate ideological move on the part of the Brahmins to explain the powerful presence of the Arackal family in Kolathunadu within the *varna* order, in which the Ali Rajas were attributed the status of a Vaisya. Whatever the ideological overtones of such a story, the very appearance of the Ali Rajas in this Brahmanical narrative itself proves the incontrovertible position attained by the former in the power structure of Kolathunadu.

Theoretically, the Ali Raja derived authority from the Kolathiri.¹²⁵ In practice, at least by the seventeenth century, the claim of the Kolathiris to political superiority over the Ali Rajas did not have any actual relevance in determining the power status of the Ali Rajas in Kolathunadu. The endeavours of the Dutch Company to grasp the inner workings of the power relations in Cannanore often met with difficulties and its officials had a hard time comprehending the dynamics of the local society. Van Reede, who showed a special interest in understanding the Kerala body politic, did discern the peculiarity of the regal status enjoyed by the Arackal family. In his attempt to interpret the political status of the Ali Rajas in Kolathunadu, he was confronted with the task of explaining the title ‘raja’ attached to them. He observed that the title ‘Ali Raja’ does not mean that ‘he wields a regal or sovereign authority over the other Muslims, as it was meant [by the Dutch] in the beginning’ of their establishment in Cannanore.¹²⁶ Van Reede qualifies this title only as an honorary epithet bestowed on the Ali Raja by the ‘real’ raja—the Kolathiris. He felt it a mistake on the part of the Company to make its earliest commercial dealings in Cannanore with the Ali Raja after adopting the misconception that was he ‘an independent lord of the Muslims’.

Nevertheless, undeniably this new realization of the ‘actual’ political status of the Ali Rajas had to do more with the recognition of the Ali Raja as the main commercial competitor of the Company in Cannanore, whose power was completely dependent on trade and shipping.¹²⁷ In spite of this, Van Reede’s remarkable observation made clear the limited scope of ‘rajaship’ in Kerala—at least in the case of the Ali Rajas. The Arackal Swarupam, as did the other *swarupams* of Kerala, did not exercise any sort of territorial sovereignty over a well-defined ‘kingdom’. Its political status and consequently its authority were characterized by a network of personal relations transgressing spatial limits. The Arackal Swarupam maintained control over a group of dependents, operating as a part of a commercial network which blurred regional concepts and social identities. The nucleus of this

¹²⁴ Varier, *Keralolpatti Granthavari*, 25.

¹²⁵ Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, II, 55.

¹²⁶ ‘Memorandum of Hendrik Adriaan van Reede to Jacob Lobs’, in Hugo s’Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 154.

¹²⁷ ‘... haar [Mappilas] eygen welvaart, die geheel in de negotie en scheepvaart bestaat...’. Ibid.

maritime kingdom was in Cannanore from where the control mechanism was operated. In brief, the Arackal Swarupam was a 'house by the sea', which attained its regal status through maritime trade.

Many of the foreign travellers who visited Kerala during the sixteenth and the seventeenth century did not fail to observe the contradiction between power and status. This indicates the inherent tension within the socio-political set-up of Kerala. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Tomé Pires commented; 'There are great *kaimals* in this country, some of whom are greater than many of these kings, though they have not the title of king'.¹²⁸ His concept of 'greatness' was concomitant with military power.¹²⁹ Barbosa also mentioned the great lords of Malabar 'who wish to be called kings, which they are not'.¹³⁰ In his interpretation, kingship in Malabar was something expressed through special privileges from which others were barred, such as minting coins and roofing houses with tiles. Nevertheless, he was not blind to the fact that these prerogatives could have been achieved by force. Barbosa attributes kingship to only three political powers in Kerala, such as 'Venattadikal' (the king of Travancore); Kolathiri; and the Zamorin of Calicut. The subtle differences between a 'king' and a 'lord' emerge more explicitly in the narrative of Pyrard of Laval. He noticed the existence of 'petty kings of petty territories' enjoying sovereign power in their own lands, albeit vaguely subordinated to a greater king.¹³¹ He makes only a subtle difference between these little lords and 'great king'—a difference in power.

The narrowing difference in the resource base of the old royal houses and the newly emerging power centres is visible in these foreign observations. The subtle differences among the various lords of Malabar who were striving to develop new resource bases, especially through maritime trade, created a complex socio-political situation in which incessant conflicts and ever-changing power relations became a common feature. This development was apparent in Kolathunadu, where the Kolaswarupam was gradually losing its political claims to newly emerging power groups. In this context, it is noteworthy that the rise of the Arackal family to the position of a royal lineage was not merely attributable to its 'ritual' relationship with the Kolaswarupam. The political status of the Arackal family in Kolathunadu was elevated by its success in achieving power or *sakti*, which ineluctably legitimized its position within the traditional power concept of Kolathunadu. This is conspicuously apparent in the account of Pyrard of Laval who visited this region in the first decade of the seventeenth century.

The people of the country [Cannanore] have told me that it is not long since the Malabars [Muslims] of Cannanore were in like condition with the rest of their race, and obeyed that

¹²⁸ Pires, *Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, 74.

¹²⁹ Pires describes these 'Kailmals' as, 'They are called Kaimals in the same way as we say dukes, marquises, counts and other titles, because thy are lords possessing much land and vassals; and there are some Kaimals in Malabar with ten thousand Nayar [vassals], and there are others with a hundred or two hundred Nayars'. Ibid. 82.

¹³⁰ Barbosa, *Book of Duarte Barbosa*, II, 6.

¹³¹ Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 370.

Nair King [Kolathiri], but that they became so strong that they made a king for themselves, and no longer recognised the Nair king nor paid him any tribute: he resides far in the interior, and is often at war with the king of Cannanore.¹³²

By the end of the sixteenth century, the control exercised by the Ali Rajas over the Laccadive and the Maldive Islands made them the unassailable merchant magnates of Cannanore.¹³³ It is interesting to note that although the relationship between the Muslim traders of Cannanore and Calicut was very cordial throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in particular in their mutual struggle against the Portuguese, in 1599 the Ali Raja held himself aloof from the final struggle of Kunjali Marakkar IV against the Portuguese-Zamorin alliance. In fact, it appears that he was on the most amicable terms with the Portuguese at Cannanore.¹³⁴ Here the Ali Raja's conduct was first of all that of a pragmatic commercial leader rather than that of an Islamic leader, which bought him political success. In spite of its close contact with the Islamic world around the Indian Ocean rim, the Arackal Swarupam did not introduce a new concept of kingship into Malabar or perhaps it was not able to do so in the existing economic-cultural environment of Kolathunadu. Its power was deep-rooted in the traditional socio-cultural milieu of Kolathunadu. The Arackal House was only a facsimile of the existing Malabar kingship—a *swarupam* kingship brought about and nourished by the traditional ideology of power in Kolathunadu.

Conclusion

Pre-colonial Kolathunadu presents the picture of a political system in which power was disseminated in numerous socio-political components or *taravadus*. The Kolaswarupam claimed a *primus inter pares* status among these power groups, which it justified by its superior control over the resources derived from landed properties and maritime trade. This obviously helped the Kolathiris to maintain a larger dependent populace within the bounds of their distributive system.

However, the gradual hiving off of the Kolaswarupam in the course of time into various lineages naturally resulted in the segmentation of the resource base of the Swarupam, which undermined its superior claims in the social hierarchy. Over and beyond this, new nodes of power began to emerge by successfully appropriating a chunk of the limited resource base of the region. The emergence of the Arackal Swarupam by the middle of the sixteenth century effectively closed off the possibility for the Kolaswarupam to extract fiscal surplus from the Indian Ocean trade. The only possibility open to it to extract fiscal surplus was through agricultural expansion. This was its Achilles' heel as

¹³² Ibid. 444 -5.

¹³³ The control over the Maldives Islands was the continuation of that exercised by the Ali Rajas' predecessors, especially Mamale Marakkar, during the sixteenth century. For more details about Mamale Marakkar, see, Bouchon, *Regent of the Sea*, 110-83.

¹³⁴ Pyrard of Laval, *Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, I, 445.

Kolathunadu is a narrow strip of land lying between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea and could not provide sufficient space for the development of an extensive agricultural sector. The unfavourable demographic concentration also adversely affected the agricultural expansion in the region. The limited scope in the economic sphere prevented the Kolaswarupam from developing into a centralized political system with a strong resource base. Instead, by the seventeenth century, it had faded into a weak symbol of authority, deprived of any actual power.

In the peculiar socio-economic atmosphere of the region, the locally entrenched concept of *sakti* seems to be more relevant than the Brahmanical conceptualisation of kingship. Power, manifested through such *signs* as material wealth, political momentum, charisma, and the ability to sustain a dependent community under control, was well suited to encompassing various emerging power groups within its frame.¹³⁵ There seems a good case to argue that the acceptance of the Arackal Swarupam as an intrinsic part of the local socio-cultural system was made possible by the open, ideological premise of *sakti*. By the seventeenth century, the Arackal Swarupam successfully emerged as a power centre in the regional cosmos through the accumulation of wealth from oceanic trade by the seventeenth century. Control over a trade network and the resultant formation of a dependent community facilitated the Arackal Swarupam in entrenching its political status in Kolathunadu. This decisive importance of maritime commerce in determining the socio-political status of the Mappilas in general and the Ali Rajas in particular in Kolathunadu call for an analysis of the emergence and expansion of a maritime trade network under the Ali Rajas in a long-term perspective.

¹³⁵ A similar view is expressed by Barbara Andaya in her study on south-east Sumatra. She points out that the ultimate measure of a king's success was the numbers of his followers. Barbara Watson Andaya, *To Live as Brothers: Southeast Sumatra in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawai Press, 1993), 35.