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Gabriel, T.

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India

THEODORE GABRIEL

# The Sufi Tariqas of the Lakshadweep Islands, India

The enchanting coral archipelago known as Lakshadweep comprises ten inhabited and seventeen uninhabited islands, which lie about 200 to 400 kilometres off the Indian west coast in the Arabian Sea. The islands span from north to south for approximately 350 kilometres. The inhabitants of all the islands are ethnically very similar and speak a dialect of Malayalam, the language of the neighbouring Indian state of Kerala.<sup>1</sup> The population numbering 50,000 is almost entirely Muslim, mainly Sunnites, apart from a smattering of Wahabis and Ahamadiyyas who are not very popular with the other population.

## Sufism and Caste

The islanders are devout Muslims and mainly orthodox in their orientation, but there is a substratum of Sufism underlying their faith and practice. The Sufi leaders, known as Tangals, are extremely popular and highly regarded, and their followers engage in a lot of healing, and performing of miracles. The Sufis of Lakshadweep belong to two orders, namely the Quadiyya and the Riffai. The two orders are identified with two different caste groups in the islands. Caste-like stratification is noticeable among Muslims in various parts of India, though none of them can compare in rigidity and chauvinism with the caste system of the Lakshadweep Muslims. Many attribute the caste systems among Muslims to the vestiges of their Hindu ancestry.<sup>2</sup> Modernity has attenuated the discrimination and social separatism of the caste system of the islands. However, the castes are still endogamous and caste names are often used in conjunction with Muslim names. The most prominent castes among the islanders are the Koya, the superior caste, traditionally land and sailing ship owners, and the Melacceri, who are their serfs and engaged by the Koyas in coconut tree climbing, toddy making and menial duties. The Quadiyya and the Riffai Sufi orders of the Lakshadweep islands are associated with the Koya and the Melacceri castes respectively.

The origin of the Quadiyya *tariqa* in Lakshadweep is obscure. The Hindu inhabitants of the islands are said to have been converted to Islam by Ubaid Allah, a grandson of Caliph Abu Bakr. Ubaid Allah was shipwrecked on Amini Island in 41 AH, where legend has it that he was attacked by the population, but materialized tigers and other wild animals hitherto never seen in the islands. It is said that when he stamped his foot on the western shore, the island tilted towards the West, and this is when the astounded population accepted Islam wholesale. He performed similar miracles in the other islands. These legends laid the foundation for mysticism in the islands and led to a more charismatic form of the faith. Ubaid Allah's *maqbara* (tomb) is still found at the Juma *masjid* in Androth Island and is the scene of a popular and grand festival each year.

Sheikh Mohammed Kasim Tangal (died AH 1140), whose tomb is found in Kavaratti Island, near the picturesque Ujra mosque that he built, is said to have introduced the thaumaturgical and self-mortificatory Riffai *dhikr* to the islands. The present leadership of the Quadiyya and the Riffai Tariqas in Lakshadweep are from the Aranikkat and Ekkarpally families of Kavaratti Island, both of whom are considered to be the descendants of Sheikh Mohammed Kasim.

The Mohideen mosques – after Mohideen Sheikh, by which name Abdul Quadr al Gilani is known – are the venues of the Koyas, the upper caste group. The Quadiyya *dhikr* (a remembrance ritual) performed by them is a sober affair when compared to the Melacceri *dhikr* which involves magical acts of self-mortification (see below). It is interesting that the land owning upper caste group is associated

with the more dignified Sufi ritual and the lower castes with the more lively and charismatic *dhikr*. This is in keeping with the ideology of the Riffai order that was inclined to self-mortification, a result of the belief in the ability of the spirit to overcome the flesh. Perhaps this reflects the persecution suffered by the Melacceris at the hands of the upper castes, and their quest to overcome poverty, sorrow and misery by the spiritual acts of the *dhikr*, that exemplified the transcendence of the spiritual over the worldly and the material.

Caste-based discrimination is usually only visible in social and economic affairs. The Melacceris resented its extension to religious matters when they were not allowed to participate in Mohideen ceremonies. Some Melacceri youths secretly learned their songs and in 1950 went to the Mohideen mosque at Amini and forcibly participated in the *dhikr* ceremony being performed there. The Koyas, highly incensed by this intrusion into what they considered their prerogative, complained to the Tangal, the head of the Quadiyya order. The Tangal, however, held that there was to be no discrimination in matters of faith and would not admonish the Melacceri devotees. The Koyas, taken aback by the Tangal's unexpected response, established their own mosques in each island and conducted their ceremonies separately, a practice which continues to this day. No caste discrimination is shown at the Mowlid festivals, the annual commemoration of the Sufi saints whose *darghas* abound in the islands. Huge amounts of food are prepared and distributed at these events where all the population of each island takes part.

## Dhikr

The Sufi rituals are termed *ratib* in Lakshadweep. The Quadiyya *ratib* ritual has two rows of singers, ten to sixteen in number, clad in white, with white caps, and holding tambourines in hand. They stand facing each other and sing devotional songs to Allah, the Prophet and Abdul Kadar al Gilani. The singers bow as they sing and tap their tambourines, very slowly at first, the tempo slowly increasing until it reaches a crescendo of singing and genuflecting, when the singing suddenly stops. The euphoria of the singers is clearly visible to the onlookers. The singers' movements and singing are well synchronized. The Head of the order, the Aranikkat Tangal, if present, stands at the head of the group. A copy of the Qur'an is placed on a pillow at the end of the two rows.

The Riffai ritual also includes singing praises to God, Muhammad and the founder of the order, Ahmad ar Riffai. The tambourine wielding singers are also present. However, about six or seven murids, clad only in loincloths also take part in the ceremony. Some swords, knives and awls lie piled up in front of the Tangal, the head of the order, who hands them out to the partially-clad dancers after blessing the instruments. The singing and drumming begin slowly and as it works up to a faster pace, the dancers enter the arena moving slowly at first and as the rhythm and singing work up to a furious pitch, they begin swaying from side to side as though intoxicated. They begin to slash their bellies, pierce their cheeks and throat and hit their heads with hammers, etc. The wounded dancers approach the Tan-

gal who strokes the wound areas softly. It is believed that the dancers are healed instantaneously and completely. Not a drop of blood is shed during the entire ceremony in spite of all the frenzied self-mortificatory acts.

The dancers must perform *wudu* before participating in the rituals, otherwise it is believed that they will suffer pain from their wounds. The elders recount that in former times they even used to gouge out their eyes and slice off their tongues. The islanders also say that it is impossible to photograph the *ratib* ritual and that the pictures come out blank if someone tries to photograph the *dhikr*.

## The Tangals

The Tangals of the Sufi orders are all believed to be descendants of the Prophet and are highly regarded, not only in Lakshadweep and in neighbouring Kerala but also in Sri Lanka and even as far away as Malaysia, where they are sought after for their miraculous powers and their teachings. One Androth islander is a teacher at the prestigious Al Azar of Cairo. They are known for their powers and charismatic personalities and many periodically undertake what the islanders call *sa'ar*, journeys to distant lands returning with much wealth from the gifts and donations of their admirers from distant shores.

Some have taken to secular education and secular professions. A member of the Ekkarpally family of the Riffai order Secretary for Planning in the Lakshadweep government. The oldest members of the Aranikkat and Ekkarpally families are of course the Khalifas of the two orders. The descendants of Ubaidallah, the first Muslim missionary of the islands, are mostly to be found in Androth. They are as respected as the Tangals, being charismatic and miracle-performing individuals, though they do not hold particular offices in the Sufi orders.

Legends of the wonder-working deeds of former times abound. For instance, the Sheikh Mohammed Kasim is said to have blessed the ladies of the island with painless childbearing. However, this *sans trauma* child-birth is a blessing only for the native inhabitants of Kavaratti and not for expatriate workers. Similarly, the inhabitants of Chetlat Island were blessed by a local saint with the ability to climb coconut trees without the aid of ropes or any of the usual apparatus, a fact I have observed personally.

The minority community of Wahabis in the Lakshadweep islands is extremely critical of the Sufi rituals. This is in tune with the general Wahabi opposition to Sufism, which holds that this latter abounds in allegedly heretical concepts, such as polytheism in the veneration of saints, idolatry in rituals such as circumambulation and prayers performed at tombs and shrines to saints, and syncretism such as the adoption of concepts and rituals from non-Muslim religions. The Wahabis in Lakshadweep are mostly Arabic teachers who have been in contact with the dynamic Wahabi community of Kerala. They were formerly students in the Arabic madrasas run by Wahabis in Kerala in this neighbouring state. However, unlike in Kerala, Wahabism has not been able to make much headway in Lakshadweep. Moreover, Sufi rituals are seen to be as popular as ever in the islands. The people of

Lakshadweep are devoted to Islam. Their faith is strong, as is their adherence to Islamic practice and law. This includes the youth, a mainly university-educated and professional generation. This commitment is in no small measure due to the Sufi ideology and practice in the islands which lend charisma to the practice of the faith, stimulating and attracting the population. ♦

Dr Theodore Gabriel is Senior Lecturer at the School of Theology and Religious Studies, Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, UK.  
E-mail: Tgabriel@chelt.ac.uk

## Notes

1. Except for Minicoy Island which is Maldivian.
2. See, for instance, Ahmad, Imtiaz (1978), *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India*, New Delhi, Manohar.