

## SRI LANKA LECTURE SERIES

### Preaching to the Island of Lanka: Colonial Lankan Sufism and its Indian Ocean Context

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In many ways, the study of Lankan Muslims has been dominated by a concern for Muslims' relation to the other Lankan ethnic groups, especially Tamils and Sinhalas. This question arose in the late-nineteenth century when Tamil politicians began to lay claim to Muslims as 'Muslim Tamils' and therefore to include them in the 'racial' category of 'Tamil', itself a rather recent political construct. In the eyes of Muslim elites, the Tamil politicians making that claim were primarily interested in enlarging their own constituencies while showing little interest to include Muslims in any meaningful way. Consequently, Muslim elites began stressing their own supposed original descent from Arabs, thus 'racially' and politically distancing themselves not only from 'Tamils', but also from Tamil-speaking Muslims of southern India settled in Lanka, who were increasingly defined as a separate community labelled 'Coast Moors'. The popular and academic preoccupation with the highly politicized question of Muslim belonging in Lanka has therefore tended to sideline the interlinkages between Lankan Muslims (or 'Ceylon Moors') and a wider world of Indian Ocean Muslim community, barring a few strategic references to contacts with the Arab world. Especially, it has meant marginalization of the close interaction between Lankan and South Indian Muslims and their place in the wider Indian Ocean world. In this talk, I intend to highlight the importance of these connections by focusing on the importance of Sufi networks in the nineteenth century that connected Lankan Muslims to South India, the Arab Peninsula, and Southeast Asia, in order to broaden and re-contextualize our understanding of Muslim history on the island in the last two centuries.

**Date:** Tuesday, 24.11.2015  
**Venue:** South Asia Institute, R 316  
**Time:** 4 pm / 16 Uhr c.t.

All interested persons are cordially invited!