

**The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?** Edited by Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk and Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim. Leiden: Brill, 2009. pp. 300. ISBN: 978-90-04-17231-9.

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This book is the outcome of a conference held in Kuala Lumpur in 2005, entitled “The Arab-Yemenis of Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?” The editors have chosen to retain this title on the collective published volume, which reflects well on both the contributions to this volume and earlier research done in the field. The study of *Hadhrami* migration to the Indian Ocean region over the past decade and a half has produced a series of studies, reflecting the *Hadhrami* practice of viewing the Indian Ocean as an “oyster in which they cultivated the pearls of wealth” (see, Clarence-Smith, Entrepreneurial strategies of *Hadhrami* Arabs in Southeast Asia, c. 1750-1950, in the present volume). These studies have tended to veer between the perspective of original identity and assimilation, represented geographically by a focus on the homeland or the diaspora. In the past decade, several works have been published that take a translocal perspective, bringing out the reciprocal and changing relationship between *Hadhramaut* and the various lands of settlement, and the impact of this relationship on both (see Freitag, U. [2003] *Indian Ocean migrants and state formation in Hadramaut. Reforming the homeland*. Leiden: Brill; & Mobini-Kesheh, N. [1999]. *The Hadhrami awakening. Community and identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900-1942*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press). Others have viewed the *Hadhramis* in the Indian Ocean as hybrid (or creole) communities, emphasising the exchange of genes and culture that follows migration (see following: Feener, M. [2004]. Hybridity and the ‘Hadrami Diaspora’ in the Indian Ocean Muslim networks. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 32, 353-372; & Engsang Ho [2006]. *The graves of Tarim: Genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press). In these studies, the *Hadhrami* community is

seen as one group whose influence on– and by– their lands of settlement as well as *Hadhramaut* should be viewed in light of their transnationalism, hybridity or creoleness rather than directly by their “Hadhraminess.”

In the introduction, the editors bring up the concept of *‘asabiyya* (bond/solidarity), and it is a useful one as it frees the discussion from ethnic and linguistic limitations and opens for alternative sources of identity formation. In various ways, the contributors to this volume approach the questions of identity in the context of migration, integration and in relation to the homeland. The contributions draw from a variety of sources and discuss trade, cultural exchanges as well as the religious impact of *Hadhramis* in Southeast Asia (and vice versa).

In the first chapter, Ulrike Freitag raises the question of “Hadhraminess” in specific historical periods. As much of the research on *Hadhramis* in Southeast Asia has focused on the colonial era, she brings a timely analysis of *Hadhrami* presence – and identity – in pre-colonial times. The discussion is on empirical evidence, but more importantly on the specific historical circumstances both in *Hadhramaut* and the Diaspora and how it produced specific communities, where “Hadhraminess” was emphasised in various ways and to various degrees. Freitag argues for viewing the *Hadhramis* as a translocal community (rather than hybrid or creole), encompassing *all* the lands of settlement as well as the homeland, through all historical phases of migration. As a theoretical approach, this opens new and wider comparative studies.

Nico J.G. Kaptein documents the career of precisely such a translocal (alternatively hybrid or creole) person, the famous Sayyid Uthmān b. Aqīl b. Yaḥyā, known for his co-operation with the Dutch orientalist, C. Snouck Hurgronje. Kaptein’s analysis focuses on the efforts made in Indonesia by both Sayyid Uthmān and the Dutch colonial officers to curb the influence of the *tariqas*, especially the Naqshbandiyya. As Kaptein points out, Sayyid Uthmān’s motives were reformist, whereas the Dutch operated to prevent what they saw as potential social unrest. The corresponding objectives of the coloniser and members of a minority/diaspora is an important theme

that needs to be explored in other contexts, as it follows the *Hadhrami* diaspora throughout the Indian Ocean in the colonial period.

Referring explicitly to the overall theme of the book, Abdul Rahman Tang Abdullah views the *Hadhrami* experience in Malaysia as one of assimilation. Abdullah's referent point is specifically the modern Malaysian system of classifying Malaysian citizens into ethnic categories with certain sets of rights. In this system, *Hadhramis* would qualify as "Malays" (with the exception of Johor). From the perspective of rights and ethnic labels, the experience of the *sāda* of Malaysia, caught between the urge to distinguish themselves from the Malays and the wish to enjoy Malay rights, gives a good example of the complicated web of circumstances that surround the simple question that form the title of this book.

Nurfadzilah Yahya focuses on the Arab elites of Singapore during the inter-war period and their contacts with the British. Focusing on the fields of education, charity and welfare, Yahya raises the question whether this contact really served as British surveillance or if the Arabs really used it as a "lobbying" channel for their interests both locally and in relation to the *Hadhrami* homeland. As wealthy business families and real estate owners, the al-Kāfs, al-Saqqāfs and their fellow *Hadhramis* wielded considerable economic influence in Singapore. As Yahya points out, this community had too much vested interest in Singapore to risk alienating the British colonial authorities over issues such as political developments in Arabia. Instead, they interacted closely with the British, and here Yahya gives a series of fascinating examples from the world of philanthropy and entertainment circuits that also became issues for negotiation with the British. More surprising are the cases of intermarriage and the employment of British personnel in Arab businesses. The perspective of who-influenced-whom adds further dimensions to the on-going discussion of the social, political and cultural connections between homeland and diaspora in the colonial era.

In the next chapter, Christian Lekon deals with the issue of remittances from Southeast Asia to *Hadhramaut* in the 1940s. Drawing on Gidden's notion of "time-space distancing," he points out the potential of various groups in *Hadhramaut* to operate translocal connections and of *Hadhramis* in Southeast Asia to do

the same. Lekon focuses on the *Hadhramaut* of the 1940s and points out the differences between various strata/groups in this regard, as well as the economic and social interdependencies between the groups. When turning to Southeast Asia, Lekon draws comparisons between the Asian context of migrant *Hadhramis* and that of the homeland and assesses the impact of shifting social structures in both places on the flow of remittances. Lekon traces how the flow was interrupted and makes the point that changes in Southeast Asia blocked off connections and remittances to *Hadhramaut*. One might ask what *Hadhramis* did to strengthen or re-activate their transoceanic links as a consequence of being blocked by war, and later by colonial and national regulations.

In the next contribution, the focus is on Southeast Asia. Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown asks why the Arab capitalists in Southeast Asia failed in the transition to decolonisation. Seeking answers in a comparison with practices before decolonisation, the author provides a thorough account of Arab trading in colonial Southeast Asia. These activities are mainly compared to the activities of Chinese merchants in the same region. One interesting conclusion which plays into themes of the two previous contributions is that the Arab merchants, despite their social and cultural affinity to the colonial power, were marginalised from state economic initiatives. A question for further research is *why* were such contacts not developed?

The contentions of Brown are challenged by Wililam Gervase Clarence-Smith. By taking a wider view encompassing the larger Indian Ocean region, and by viewing the *Hadhramis* distinctly as a diaspora, Clarence-Smith interprets the perceived “defeat” of the *Hadhramis* to the Chinese rather as a case of partial relocation. Clarence-Smith focuses on shipping, real estate, other commercial activities as well as factories and publishing. The author demonstrates that the *Hadhrami* businessmen from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century struggled more with the restrictive colonial context than with their Chinese rivals.

The next three chapters deal with various religious and intellectual developments, and implicitly with their links to the Middle East,

most notably to the reformist movement centered on the journal *al-Manār*.

Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk discusses the intellectual impact of *al-Manār* on the *Hadhrami* elite in the Malay-Indonesian world. Abushouk takes the reformist programme of *al-Manār* as his starting point, and seeks resonances of this programme in the intellectual debates among *Hadhramis* in Southeast Asia. As Abushouk points out, the debate led certain *Hadhrami* groups in Southeast Asia to question traditional authority, which in turn led to outright power struggles, for example, over the office of mufti. On the issue of education and the ensuing reformist organisation known as *al-Irshād*, Abushouk provides a detailed analysis of the teachers of the *Khayr* reformist schools. While these processes have been outlined in earlier research, Abushouk brings a new, comparative perspective by including Malaysia and Singapore into the analysis. Drawing comparisons to Indonesia, Abu Shouk points to the close connections between the *Hadhramis* and the British in Malaysia and Singapore to explain why an outright rift did not occur in these colonies.

William R. Rolff focuses more directly on *Hadhrami* journalism in Malaya between 1900 and 1941. Rolff is one of the few contributors who tackles head on the issue of assimilation versus identity maintenance, and suggests that shades of both can be found in *Hadhrami* published materials during the period. From the first publication (the journal *al-Imām*), Rolff traces the history of *Hadhrami* publishing activities to the emergence of large-scale metropolitan newspapers and their role in emerging Malay nationalism. Rolff dates the 1930s as a turning point where *Hadhramis* turned away from assimilation and developed instead a strategy towards identity maintenance. Rolff's discussion is enlightening as it takes into consideration both developments in *Hadhramaut* and in Malaysia, thus bringing to the fore the dilemmas faced by the *Hadhrami* community on both sides of the sea.

Hafiz Zakariyya locates the analysis more directly in the Malay context and focuses on one of the key founders of *al-Imām*, Ahmad al-Hādī. Interestingly, Zakariyya also locates al-Hādī's efforts for women's right within the framework of Malay society as well as that of Middle Eastern Islamic modernism. This is a topic which is

understudied in the field of Indian Ocean Islam (and the important role played by *Hadhramis*). Zakariyya's contribution in this regard is a welcome one.

Sayyid Muhd Khairudin Aljunied's contribution focuses on Singapore, and here, the tension between assimilation and identity maintenance is implicit in the topic. As Malay nationalism emerged, how might have the *Hadhramis* placed themselves? The chapter focuses on *Hadhramis* who joined and influenced Malay activism in the period after World War II.

On a related theme, the last chapter focuses on the play "Fatima" which in the late 1930s exposed and discussed the problems faced by the *Hadhramis* in Indonesia as a community. Huub de Jonge analyses the play, its reception and its onward history from a liberation perspective, and argues that the play caused the *Hadhrami* community not only to reflect on its role in Indonesia and its own misdeeds but also over the community's possibilities in what was becoming modern Indonesia.

Overall, this volume takes a wider view of the Malay-Indonesian world and this brings out new comparative perspectives between the *Hadhrami* experience in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. A function of this and a clear strength of the volume is that groups and individual actors are analysed from different perspectives, for example the al-Kāf family on the commercial side and Sayyid Aḥmad al-Hādī on the intellectual side. Another strong aspect of the volume under review is the wealth of empirical detail contained in the individual studies, which will prove a point of reference for researchers. One could wish for a more consistent discussion throughout the chapters on the main issue (and indeed the subtitle of the book) of assimilation versus diasporic identity. On the discussion of intellectual influences from the Middle East, the conclusion remains open as to whether the *Hadhramis* acted mostly as "interpreters" of reformist ideas to fellow Malay Muslims, or sought reforms on Malay terms. Nonetheless, this volume adds welcome new knowledge and perspectives to a topic that has been the subject of several studies.

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