

Research Approaches

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Situated halfway between Aden and Oman, the Yemeni province of Hadhramaut is considered by most fleeting visitors a backwater, notable only for the highrise mud-brick houses of the former trading centre of Shibam and the extravagant but decaying palaces of neighbouring Say'un and Tarim. Little is known, however, about the people who built these remarkable constructions, and about their far-reaching connections in the areas bordering on the Indian Ocean. However, their story, if recovered, sheds light on a number of questions pertinent to current interests in Middle Eastern and Islamic history. Let us consider the biography of one such trader, whose cosmopolitanism in entrepreneurial, political, and intellectual terms is quite typical for a wider group of Hadhramis, as well as probably for members of other such groups in the Indian Ocean and beyond.¹

Sayyid 'Ali b. Ahmad b. Shihab al-Din was born in August 1865 in Pekojan, the Arab quarter of old Batavia (present day Jakarta). His father, Ahmad b. Muhammad was a native of Tarim in Hadhramaut and came from a family which claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Around 1849, at the age of twelve, he travelled to Batavia. There he made a fortune in trade which he invested in real estate. He also acquired and managed land for relatives in the eastern Javanese town of Gresik. At the same time, Ahmad b. Muhammad made a name for himself by donating large sums to charity and endowing it to the building of mosques. He married the daughter of another immigrant family from Hadhramaut, who later gave birth to 'Ali. At the age of seven, his parents sent 'Ali to Hadhramaut, where he studied for six years with some of the most famous ulema of his time. After spending three years in Jakarta, he returned to Hadhramaut in 1881 for a subsequent period of study. In 1886/87, Sayyid 'Ali travelled once more to Jakarta where he became manager of the family's real estate. The father returned to his native Tarim where he died around 1890.

Part of the real estate which 'Ali b. Ahmad managed,² and eventually acquired in 1911, was situated in the relatively new and fashionable European quarter of Menteng. It soon became the basis of the growing wealth of the 'landheer van Menteng', as Snouck Hurgronje called him.³ Having established himself, Sayyid 'Ali took once more to travelling. Between 1893/94 and 1896/97 he visited Egypt and possibly Istanbul, performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, visited Ottoman Yemen, Aden and Hadhramaut, and finally returned via Bombay and Singapore to Batavia.

As a wealthy Hadhrami trader and landowner, 'Ali b. Ahmad continued the family tradition of charitable commitments by becoming, in 1905, a founding member and first chairman of a charitable organization (Jam'iyat al-Khayr) which founded a new type of Arab school combining Islamic with Western knowledge. These schools form the nucleus of what is considered the Hadhrami 'renaissance'.⁴ The commitment to reform included opposition to the Dutch colonial power by trying to rally support from Istanbul, where one of his sons studied, and by publishing anti-colonial articles in Egyptian newspapers. As a result, Sayyid 'Ali spent a fortnight in jail in 1908. It is less clear, however, whether it was also Dutch intrigues or rather his extravagant life-style which lost him much of his land in Menteng just before World War I.

After the war, and possibly as a result of his political and economic troubles, 'Ali b. Ahmad turned to new pastures. He participated in a fishing company, headed by his brother, which attempted to develop the fishing industry in the Arabian Sea, drawing in capital and know-how from Singapore, Penang, Madras, Bombay, Aden and Hadhramaut. Although this project failed, he also contrived a large agricultural project on the Hadhrami coast. His passion for politics continued: In Hadhramaut, he

became involved in an attempt to negotiate an agreement between the Imam of Yemen and the coastal Qu'ayti sultanate. At the same time, he strongly lobbied in Hadhramaut and Batavia against a new reformist group which had been formed among Indonesian Arabs to challenge certain privileges of the Sayyid stratum to which 'Ali b. Ahmad belonged.⁵ This should not be understood as a move against reform per se; on the contrary, Sayyid 'Ali spurred not only the educational movement in Southeast Asia but also urged the Hadhrami sultan to open a school in the coastal capital of al-Mukalla at a time when education in Hadhramaut was still scarce and limited in scope.

One could write more about this remarkable man, who also published a number of books, and about his offspring who played an important role in Arab and Indonesian publishing and in the Indonesian independence movement, as well as in perpetuating the contacts between the Arab world and Muslim Southeast Asia. However, this one life story suffices to point to a number of fascinating themes, the exploration of which sheds light on Islamic developments beyond the confines of the immediate group involved.

Most obviously, the history of Southern Arabia in the 19th and 20th centuries cannot be adequately understood without a closer examination of the influences of the emigrant community in Southeast Asia, India and East Africa. In a wider perspective, this might contribute to a better understanding of the role which migrants played in bringing about changes in conservative societies. Sayyid 'Ali b. Ahmad invested some of his money in the Hadhramaut. Perhaps even more importantly, he tried to initiate entrepreneurial projects on a scale not known in Hadhramaut until his time. Even if his initiatives, like those of a number of his contemporaries, failed, they helped to create a climate in which, in the 1920s and 30s, hitherto having shunned economic initiatives, new technologies became acceptable. Beyond the impact of the migrant entrepreneurs on their homeland, their study also could – if the necessary source material could be made accessible – contribute to a better understanding of early capitalist Muslim business culture, which for a long time was a major economic factor in the Indian Ocean economy.

The political and cultural influences of the diaspora on the homeland, exemplified by Sayyid 'Ali's political plotting and his support for educational institutions of a new style, can be considered in a similar way to the economic ones, as can the effect these migrants had on their host communities. Investigating such contact between non-European cultures in the imperial age can contribute, among other things, to a better understanding of the spread of modernity. While this is commonly attributed to the interaction of Western societies with non-Western ones, a closer investigation of the Hadhrami diaspora reveals a far more complex picture. The Jam'iyat al-Khayr, which Sayyid 'Ali chaired, was modelled on the Batavia Chinese Association, a branch of the Confucian renewal movement.⁶ In turn, the Hadhrami schools influenced the educational and thereby also the religious orientations of the local population.

While many of these issues will to some extent be explored in forthcoming monographs by scholars in the Netherlands, the UK, Norway and the US, I would finally like to draw attention to a topic which would require widespread international cooperation. Sayyid 'Ali b. Ahmad b. Shihab was not only an entrepreneur and supporter of the Hadhrami 'renaissance', he was also, through correspondence as well as personal contact, in touch with a wide network of like-minded scholars and politicians. While Pan-Islam as a movement has been explored quite thoroughly for the period starting in 1876, when it came to designate the policies pursued by the Ottoman sultan,⁷ scholarship has very much focused on its ideological and organizational side. Colonial archives are primarily concerned with the 'dangers' constituted by this type of internationalism. Our knowledge about how and to what extent Muslims of different cultures and speaking numerous languages communicated, and to what extent they developed cooperation either in order to pursue common goals or oppose colonial expansion remains, however, quite limited, particularly for the 18th and 19th centuries.

In other words, can we find out more about the types of networks which existed? While Sufi orders, one important form of such networks, have found some attention, the networks of the numerous trading diasporas which played a crucial innovative role, and their interconnections, have not been investigated systematically. This, perhaps, is partly because it involves the study of countless biographies in many languages, which surpasses the capacity of individual scholars. However, it was not just the famous Jamal al-Din al-Afghani who spread anti-imperialist and modernist ideas and called for common Muslim action by travelling the Islamic world. Sayyid 'Ali tried to obtain Ottoman support for the Arabs in Southeast Asia. Sayyid Fadl b. Sahl, another Hadhrami, was in 1852 expelled by the British from the Malabar Coast for being a Muslim propagator against Hindus and the British. He later made an appearance as self-proclaimed Ottoman governor of Dhofar in southern Arabia.⁸ From the East African town of Lamu, 'Abdallah Ba Kathir al-Kindi (1860/61-1925), a scholar of Hadhrami extraction, was called to South Africa to mediate in a conflict among Cape Muslims. He also travelled to Mecca, Hadhramaut and Southeast Asia in pursuit of knowledge and scholarly contacts.⁹

While it is relatively easy, although enormously time-consuming, to reconstruct the networks within one such diaspora, it is much more challenging to investigate the interaction between a number of different networks. However, if we want to understand the transmission of ideas, the creation of political alliances and perhaps even the mechanics of Indian Ocean trade beyond national and linguistic borders, such an investigation would be well worth a large international research project. ◆

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Notes

1. The following biographical information was obtained from 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mashhur (1984), *Shams al-Zahira*, Jidda, pp. 160-5 and during research in Jakarta, May-June 1997. For a number of similar family histories, cf. Ulrike Freitag, 'Arab Merchants in Singapore: Attempt at a Collective Biography', in H. de Jonge & N. Kaptein (eds), *Arabs in Southeast Asia*, Leiden (forthcoming).
2. The Arabic term used is *tawakkala*. It may well be that he obtained the commission to develop this area. On the growth of these new quarters, cf. Susan Abeyasekere (1987), *Jakarta. A History*, Singapore etc., p. 90.
3. Snouck Hurgronje (1959), *Ambtelijke Adviezen, 1889-1936* (ed. E. Gobée and C. Adriaanse), Vol. 2, 's-Gravenhage, p. 1573.
4. Cf. Deliar Noer (1973), *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, 1900-1942*, Singapore etc., pp. 58-61.
5. He became one of the foremost advisers to the British on the reformist Irshadi movement which he denounced full-heartedly. Ulrike Freitag, 'Hadhramis in International Politics', in U. Freitag & W.G. Clarence-Smith (1997), *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean*, Leiden, pp. 124-6, on the Irshadi movement Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900-1942*, unpubl. PhD thesis, Monash University 1996.
6. Mobini-Kesheh, p. 43.
7. Jacob M. Landau, chqn, Reinhard Schulze (1990), *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert*, Leiden etc., Martin Kramer (1986), *Islam Assembled. The Advent of the Muslim Congresses*, New York, to name but a few.
8. Tufan Buzpinar, Abdülhamid II and Sayyid Fadl Pasha of Hadhramawt. An Arab Dignitary's Ambitions (1876-1900)', *The Journal of Ottoman Studies* 13 (1993), pp. 227-39 and Stephen Dale, 'The hadhrami Diaspora in South-Western India: the Role of the Sayyids of the Malabar Coast', in Freitag & Clarence-Smith, pp. 175-85.
9. A short biography by 'Abdallah b. Muhammad al-Saqqaf is contained in the introduction to 'Abdallah b. Muhammad Ba Kathir (1939), *Rihlat al-ashwaq al-qawwiyya*, Zanzibar.