CHAPTER SEVEN

MUSLIM HEALERS IN A HINDU CONTEXT:
A HADRAMI ARAB HEALING GROUP ON BALI

*Frode F. Jacobsen*

Hadrami Arabs in Indonesia may be conceived of as “a predominately Indonesia-oriented group with an Arab signature” (Huub de Jonge, in Ellen 1996:250). At the same time, it is also true that historically “persons and ideas [have been] travelling along genealogical networks from the Hadramawt to Indonesia” (Heiss and Slama 2010:34; cf. Manger, this volume) and that even presently, goods, ideas and people travel along those genealogical networks creating unique opportunities for Hadrami entrepreneurship in Indonesia. In the present chapter I focus on one particular instance of Hadrami entrepreneurship, providing an account of how culture works in shaping the character of a group of informal health care providers who operate in a Balinese community.

I will attempt to show how the Hadramis’ seemingly unorthodox practices are embedded in prevalent sociocultural patterns. I argue that a combination of several dimensions contribute to the cultural creativity and success of this group. Such dimensions are, beside its members’ position within a Hadrami genealogical network, the high standing and prestige that Hadramis enjoy within the predominately Muslim Indonesian society; their historical position as entrepreneurs and traders in Indonesia and beyond; and their particular situation in Bali, where they find themselves as a Muslim minority amongst a Bali-Hindu majority, and where most of their patients are Bali-Hindus. More specifically, I will argue that cultural meaning affects their informal health care work along two dimensions: First, the open, inspired form of Islam that characterises many rural milieus in Indonesia provides a rich, religiously legitimate, source of symbols and practices also for Hadrami Arabs. Secondly, these Islamic resources need to engage with the dominant Bali-Hindu symbols and meanings embraced by the population among which the Hadramis operate.
Hadrami Arabs constitute the bulk of Arabs in Southeast Asia. In general, they are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi’i school of law (Freitag 1997; Manger 1997, 2010, this volume), and they recognize the Hadramaut province in the south-eastern part of Yemen as their original homeland. Hadramaut consists of a narrow valley (Wadi Hadramaut) which includes well-known cities like Shibam where irrigated agricultural schemes provide the most important means of subsistence, surrounding plateaus north and south of the valley dominated by pastoralism, and a narrow coastal area where people engage in various enterprises such as agriculture, fishing and trading, related to a couple of significant ports. Although most of the Hadramis in this case study cannot trace their Indonesian history more than six generations back, Hadramis have migrated to Southeast Asia and areas around the Indian Ocean for several centuries. They have sought fortunes abroad due to pressure on natural resources, and wars and unrest at home (Ho 1997, 2006; Riddel 2001), and the increased international trade following colonization during the 19th and 20th centuries opened new avenues for travellers who ventured out as traders and/or missionaries (Chaudhuri 1990; Freitag 2002; Manger 1997, this volume).

Immigrant Hadramis, who were largely males, took local spouses in Southeast Asia and developed close connections to non-Hadrami families. Hadramis are often understood as a diaspora that share a “collective memory or myth of the original homeland, a feeling of marginality and alienation in the host country, and continual relating to the homeland, physically or emotionally” (Alatas 1997:26). However, the function of this common identity varies from one locality to another (Heiss and Slama 2010; Jacobsen 2007, 2009). As the anthropologist Engseng Ho has amply documented (Ho 2006), Hadramis have both managed to become locals abroad and to cultivate vital connections overseas; hence they have integrated into various kinds of host societies while retaining a sense of belonging to their homeland and to a global network of fellow Hadramis. Still, their identification and relations with Hadramaut is a matter of contestation, to the extent that the Indonesian Hadrami communities may be seen as part of a “diaspora with weak centers of gravity” (Heiss and Slama 2010:38).

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1 The word ‘Wadi’ stems from wādin, meaning river or riverbed in Arabic.