CHAPTER ONE

REFLECTIONS ON THE LONGEVITY OF THE HADHRAMI DIASPORA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Introduction

This chapter raises a number of issues regarding a comparatively small, but very resilient Indian Ocean diaspora, the Hadhramis. Compared to other groups which have participated in the Indian Ocean trade, it would seem that Hadhramis are amongst those whose presence was perhaps not of particular numerical importance, even if they at times managed to dominate particular trades in certain areas. Nevertheless, they were visible in one way or the other most of the time, at least from the eleventh century. Arguably, this can be compared to such communities as the Armenians and the Jews, with the notable difference, however, that the Hadhramis formed a far less exclusive diaspora than the other two groups mentioned, both in terms of belonging to a faith that was to become the majority faith in much of the Indian Ocean rim (not least due to their efforts) and in terms of their exogamous marriage strategies.

By assembling what is known about this diaspora’s early history, as well as about its later development, the chapter raises questions about notions of shifting roles and identities, creolisation and devices of status affiliation in the longue durée. Recent research has raised special questions on the story of a continued and arguably increasing Hadhrami success until at least World War II. This is partly due to a questioning of the historiography of the Hadhramis themselves, i.e. to a confrontation of Hadhrami historical narratives with conflicting accounts. This type of criticism is directed against a tendency in some Hadhrami literature to retrospectively claim a major role in the Islamisation, notably of Southeast Asia, which was earlier ascribed to Muslims of Indian and Persian origin. Martin van Bruinessen has raised this issue with regard to the Javanese wali songo by confronting narratives about their origin.
from different historical periods. Others have started to debate the notion of a sustained Hadhrami-Arab identity of the diaspora, pointing to different historical phases in which people defined themselves in different terms, and rooting the dominance of ethnic categories firmly in the colonial age.

This chapter is fully sympathetic to this scholarship in that it appreciates the need not to impose modern categories and representations on earlier historical periods, at least not without reflection. While returning to the question of the “Hadhrami-ness” of the Hadhramis at the end, it thus needs to be made clear from the outset that the intention is by no means to reify any particular ethnicity or to construct anything like an “eternal” (or near-eternal) Hadhrami presence in the Indian Ocean region. Nevertheless, the historical data, which will be briefly summed up in the first part of the chapter, point to a noteworthy resilience of a group which linked itself, entirely or in part, to a particular region of the Arabian Peninsula. Obviously, the changing historical circumstances, be they economic or political, at times favoured, at other times disadvantaged migrants of Arab origin who engaged in trade and religious teaching. As Clarence-Smith rightly argues in his chapter, diasporas can show great flexibility in their economic strategies, and this is all the more true for one as widespread across the Indian Ocean as the Hadhrami one. In addition, Hadhramis chose very different strategies to coexist with, or integrate into, their respective host societies, strategies, moreover, which were adapted to a host of different circumstances. Thus, it is absolutely clear that not all migrants, or their descendants, continued to consider themselves as “Hadhrami”.

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4 One expression of this can be found in the explicit debate on this issue in Singapore in the 1990s, as well as in a resurgence in the interest in history. See for example *Al-Shoroq*, vol. 1/4, 1992, 1–6 (English. Part), *al-Mahjar*, vol. 1/1, 1996, 3f. and *al-Mahjar*, vol. 6/1, 2001, 4–7.