A diaspora-for-others: Hadramis in the world

By Iain Walker

The south coast of the Arabian peninsula is a distant, inaccessible place, the stuff of legends. The Queen of Sheba, frankincense and myrrh, the lost city of Iram, Ali Baba and Sinbad the Sailor: myth and fact intertwine in a harsh land caught between the sands of the Rub' al Khali and the waters of the Indian Ocean. Much of this region is part of Hadramawt, an ancient land that claims a mention in the Book of Genesis (10:26); others say that Hadramawt means 'land of death'. Certainly, until 'pacified' (principally by the RAF) in the early twentieth century, the largely justified reputation enjoyed by the warring local tribes meant that few Westerners visited, and even those who arrived in one of the coastal ports had great difficulty penetrating the *wadi*, the long, fertile, canyon-like valley almost 200 kilometres from the coast across harsh terrain, but where the bulk of the population lives.

Yet despite this reputation for isolation and wariness, the people of Hadramawt – Hadramis – can be found all over the Indian Ocean, and beyond; and they are not simply found in small numbers and in isolated pockets: there are substantial and influential communities of Hadrami origin from Timor to the Comoro Islands, from Jeddah to Hyderabad. The Raja of Perlis and the Sultan of Brunei both trace their ancestry back to Hadramawt. The second wealthiest African, Mohammed Hussein Ali Al Amoudi, is an Ethiopian of Hadrami descent. The Bin Ladin and Bin Mahfouz families of Saudi Arabia are of Hadrami origin, as are religious leaders on all shores of the ocean. Hadramis themselves (with a touch of hyperbole) will tell you that they number 50 million in Indonesia.

The reasons for the geographical spread of Hadramis on the shores

of the Indian Ocean are fairly prosaic: although productive when the rains were generous, the homeland often suffered long periods of drought. Famine and disease were frequent and emigration often the only alternative to death. Ships frequenting the Hadrami ports of Mukalla and Shihr were ready to carry passengers as far as their coins would take them: a dollar to Mombasa, a few more to Surabaya. A long history of emigration meant that a Hadrami arriving in almost any port on the Indian Ocean littoral could find a compatriot ready to assist. Some of these compatriots were kin – where possible emigrants headed for places where they knew that others of the same tribe had gone before them; but others disembarked almost at random. 'Are there any Hadramis here?' was the only real question upon arriving in a port; the answer was generally yes.

The newcomer could usually place the locally resident Hadramis in their social 'map' of the homeland and its relationships, and thereby establish their own relationships with the individuals in question almost before meeting them. The hierarchical structure of social systems in Hadramawt combined with the segmentary character of tribal affiliations meant that the relationship between newcomer and resident was already established: a *masakin*[1] meeting a *sayyid*?[2] Respect would be required in one direction and an obligation to protect and assist in the other. Two members of the Al Attas tribe? They will be able to map out a reasonably close relationship. A Bin Mafouz meets a Basweid? They are both Kindah tribes. What is notable about the relationships between Hadramis is that the strength of social structures in the homeland are carried into and underpin relationships in the diaspora, and they are enduring. There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, of how one of the wealthiest men in East Africa, a Hadrami of *masakin* origin, came across an impoverished *sayyid* sitting in the street in Zanzibar. The *sayyid* commented on the man's success and how he had risen in the world; the millionaire replied: yes, but I still have to kiss your hand.

These pre-existing social hierarchies and networks permeate all relationships both in Hadramawt and outside the homeland. That this is so has become particularly noticeable with the growth of the virtual world. If I come across another Walker as I trawl the internet, I barely give our common family names a second thought. If a Tamimi comes

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across another Tamimi they will immediately recognise a pre-existing relationship and may well develop it further; if a Hadrami comes across another Hadrami and their relationship is not immediately obvious then some genealogical and geographical exploration will soon reveal one. This sort of thing, so my informants tell me, is increasingly common on social media and now allows Hadramis in (for example) Abu Dhabi to establish or renew links with kin in Indonesia, and so on.

However, these Hadramis in diaspora also discover and/or maintain links with Hadramis in the homeland. Genealogies are retained in exile and the names of ancestral villages passed from generation to generation. Emigrants who sailed away came back to visit wives and families left behind. Others discover their 'roots' on Facebook and decide to visit their grandfathers' villages. Many of these returnees bring influences – some of which are incorporated, others resisted – and money, which is rarely refused. The fact of these relationships maintains a very real awareness of the diaspora in the homeland and the desire to maintain the engagement of members of the diaspora in the affairs of the homeland is strong, even at the risk of undesirable foreign cultural practices – young men wearing jeans instead of the customary wraparound *futa*, for example. As a result the home society and the diaspora are bound into a single global Hadrami ecumene.

In 1998, Nick Van Hear ('paraphrasing Marx') distinguished between the 'dormant, latent or avoided' diaspora that exists 'in itself'; and the diaspora that is 'actively maintained and [in which] migrants actively engage', that exists 'for itself' (Van Hear 1998: 250). This is a useful distinction, but in the light of the phenomenal growth in diasporic activities – and in the number of diasporas – over the almost two decades since those words were written, I suggest there is call for a further distinction. While the characteristics described above – the maintenance of homeland social structures outside the homeland, the rights and responsibilities accorded or imposed by these structures, the social cohesion not only maintained but reinforced by these relationships through time and space – all accord the Hadrami diaspora the status of a diaspora 'for itself', these characteristics are shared by an increasing number of diasporas.

Such diasporas are often localised – the Moroccan diaspora

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in Belgium, the Mexican diaspora in the United States – and the relationships that they maintain are usually bilateral links with the homeland. Few diasporas exhibit the sort of transnational cohesiveness that the Hadrami diaspora exhibits. Not only do different localisations of the Hadrami diaspora maintain relationships with the homeland, they also maintain relationships with one another. This accords the Hadrami diaspora a dimension that is both global and reticulate.

As noted above, members of the Hadrami diaspora are generally, if to varying degrees, aware of their relationships with one another, throughout the Indian Ocean and, increasingly, the rest of the world. While relationships in the homeland frame those in diaspora, acts in diaspora may affect relationships not only with the homeland but between groups in different locations in diaspora. The two groups – and here the diaspora is the collective community in a variety of places outside the homeland – are inextricably bound. Van Hear's definition of a diaspora 'for itself' as one 'where diasporas are actively maintained and where migrants actively engaged in them' (loc. cit.) neatly distinguishes these diasporas from what might be also called passive or latent diasporas; but within the category of the diaspora 'for itself' there are diasporas that are more deeply networked across a transnational diasporic space, actively engaging their members wherever they may be; following Van Hear, therefore (and paraphrasing Sartre (1957), perhaps), I suggest that a further distinction is required, that of the diaspora 'for others'.

The distinction is important, since while the 'diaspora for itself' requires a socially cohesive homeland which provides the underpinnings for a reproduction of social relationships in diaspora which in turn feed back into the homeland, the 'diaspora for others' extends these interactions to intra-diasporic relationships, allowing for diasporic practice to structure relationships between different places in diaspora usually, but without necessarily, involving the homeland. These inextricably intertwined and all-pervasive relationships within and between diaspora and homeland accord the 'diaspora for others' – such as the Hadrami diaspora – a special quality that distinguishes them from other diasporas. The 'diaspora for others' is a whole, a social unit that is transnational, multi-sited and interlinked and greater than the sum of its parts. □

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Endnotes

1. This historic policy no longer holds and the MOD's official position is that recruitment today is ethnicity-blind.
2. One of the lower strata in the social hierarchy.

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References

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