

On the Edge of Empire: Hadhramawt, Emigration, and the Indian Ocean 1880s-1930s

Linda Boxberger

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In the preface of her *On the Edge of Empire: Hadhramawt, Emigration, and the Indian Ocean 1880s-1930s*, the author explains that a westerner could conduct research in the Hadhramawt region only after the unification of North and South Yemen in May 1990. Hence, we can conclude that Boxberger's work is an effort to add to our knowledge of this under-researched area. I have seldom read such a wonderfully detailed book, clearly written and polysonic in its application of diverse research methodologies, such as archive studies and oral stories collected from anthropological fieldwork. It gives several important insights into a complex history of one of Arabia's most fascinating regions.

One often encounters the notion that Arabia has been isolated from foreign influence, and thus left alone with its own traditions and lifestyles. This understanding particularly applies to Yemen, as being a mythical land that has not changed since ancient times. However, this is far from the truth. Since Yemen could be viewed as what the rest of Arabia would have been without oil, one could conclude that petrodollars have actually conserved certain cultural values and social organizations. Yemen, on the other hand, has experienced communism, civil war, and recently democratization, unlike other parts of the Arabian peninsula.

Boxberger's study covers Hadhramawt's Qu'ayti and Kathiri sultanates during 1880-1930, a period that is crucial for understanding modern Yemen. Her study focuses on the British influence, as these sultanates became British protectorates; the emigration of natives to other parts of the Indian Ocean region; and the development of modern communication

technologies. The traditional culture is discussed in relation to the change caused by all of these new influences.

Arabs have a long history of traveling throughout the Indian Ocean region, and these migrations shaped the Hadhrami identity “back home” to a great extent. Boxberger analyzes the phenomenon of emigration, which creates conservatism and nostalgia for the homeland, and with which, I believe, one can find apparent parallels with the global Muslim diaspora today. Referring to anthropologists’ observations of this phenomenon, she writes: “Hadhrami literary production also extolled the homeland for its moral purity, contrasting it with the temptations and corruptions of the outside world . . . the austere pure homeland was the abode of pious and worthy spiritual leaders, living and dead, who provided the anchor to the Hadhramis’ ancestral and religious roots. The outside world, on the other hand, was a corrupt place where the quest for material wealth led to the abandonment of ancestry and religion” (p. 45).

This view is applicable to many migrating Muslim groups. What is also of great interest is Boxberger’s thorough account of how the emigrants established religious and cultural organizations, as well as schools, in their new places of residence. Their incitement and motivation for doing so, along with their internal debates and power struggles, resonates with much of what we see today among Muslims in the West.

One of the major problems with Muslims today is that they lack an understanding of historical processes in the Muslim world. They might have a good knowledge of the Islamic scriptures, but they are often totally unaware of how these texts have been interpreted in various contexts throughout history. Therefore, Boxberger’s book is important not only for those with an interest in the region, but also for Muslims in general, in order to understand previous Islamic debates. The discussion on equality among all Muslims versus such traditional, privileged, and tribal groups as the *sadah* (sing. *sayyid*) was discussed within reform-oriented groups in the early twentieth century (p. 53). Various political aspects of Islam were also widely debated during the First World War, such as questioning the legality of signing treaties with non-believers and jihad (i.e., Muslim solidarity and unity against foreign imperialism) (pp. 198-207).

Having studied the contemporary situation of guest workers in oil states, I find another interesting analogy in Boxberger’s study: the emigrants’ display of their new riches and luxury upon their return to Hadhramawt. She says: “Competition in the ostentatious display of material wealth forced men to migrate in search of fortune and caused the

homeland to suffer the lack of the emigrants' contribution to society at the same time that their wives and children suffered the absence of their husbands and fathers" (p. 139). I think that this is still going on in many parts of the Muslim world. The difference may be that the sultans at that time were more progressive than Muslim leaders today, because in the early 1920s attempts were made to limit the display of material wealth in order to protect the poorer native population. For instance, silk and decorated clothing and certain pieces of jewelry could be worn in public only on special occasions. They even regulated the wedding parties and the number of celebration parties that the returning emigrants could hold!

In summary, Boxberger has provided us with an exemplary piece of history from a dynamic part of the Muslim world. And, as we all know, without history the future will be much more complicated.

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