

Indonesian Hadhramis and the Hadhramaut
An Old Diaspora and its New Connections

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Introduction

In comparison with more recent phenomena of diaspora formation, Hadhramis in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, can be considered as an “old” diaspora, since migration on a large scale started already in the middle of the 18th century and lasted until the 1950s (see Clarence-Smith 1997a: 2). In this paper, I will give a brief overview of this main phase of diaspora formation. Then, I want to proceed to discuss the diaspora and its development in postcolonial times, especially after the end of the Cold War. Focusing on



Indonesian Hadhramis' relations with and views of the Hadhramaut, I will compare the main phase of diaspora formation with more recent developments.¹

Today scholars tend to link the study of diaspora societies with the analyses of phenomena of globalisation (see e.g. Vertovec 1999, Tambiah 2000). In a similar vein, I also rely on concepts developed for the study of transnationalism. Following anthropologists like Appadurai (1996) and Hannerz (1996, 2002), I see Southeast Asian Hadhramis' connections with the Hadhramaut consisting of various "flows". This concept urges the researcher to identify the connections influencing or even producing phenomena at the local level as well as to follow them across national borders (Appadurai 1996: 33). Three kinds of flows seem of particular relevance in this respect, they are: flows of people, capital and ideologies.

Diaspora Formation

In spite of various forms of discrimination by the colonial authorities (see de Jonge 1997), Hadhramis in Indonesia could partake in an expanding colonial economy. They traded mainly within the region and not with the Arabian peninsula or the Hadhramaut in particular (Clarence-Smith 1997b: 304). However, a considerable amount of their fortunes flowed back to the Hadhramaut in the form of remittances and consumer goods (Lekon 1997). One example for the way Hadhramis spent their wealth in Hadhramaut is the founding of the Riyad mosque in Sayun and its *ribat* (lodge) in the year 1878 initiated by Ali bin Mohammed al-Habsyi, the most prominent Sufi mystic of his time in the Hadhramaut (Freitag 2003: 280). Yet this was not only for the benefit of

¹ Field research in Indonesia was conducted in the years 2003 to 2005 on the islands of Java and Bali.



local Hadhramis, since it was not unusual among those in the diaspora to send their sons back to the Hadhramaut for religious education (Ho 1997: 141).

At the beginning of the 20th century one of the key developments in the Southeast Asian diaspora was the founding of modern institutions that were mainly concerned with the education of young Hadhramis. Progressive Hadhramis of all social backgrounds supported this step, yet it led also to the questioning of their society's traditional stratification. As a result, in 1914, a new organisation was founded: the Jam'iyyah al-Islah wa al-Irshad al Arabiyyah, the Arabic Organisation for Reform and Guidance, shortly: al-Irsyad (as it is spelled today in Indonesia). Irsyadis, as the members of this organisation are called, criticised the Alawiyin, those Hadhramis who claim descent from the prophet Mohammed², for their traditional religious practices (Mobini-Kesheh 1999).

Since the Alawiyin, usually considered as the top stratum of this highly hierarchical society (see Camelin 1997), are the bearers of religious authority in the Hadhramaut, Irsyadis were determined to replace their supremacy with a new interpretation of Islam promoting egalitarianism and individual interpretation of the holy scriptures. Scholars usually refer to this new current as Islamic reformism or modernism due to its approach to break with the immediate past and to build a modern Islamic society inspired by the early Islam of the prophet (see Hourani 1962/1983).

² In the literature the Alawiyin are usually called *sada*, the plural of *sayyid*, a title generally used for the descendants of the prophet Mohammed. The first *sayyid* who came to the Hadramaut was Ahmad bin Isa al-Muhajir, an eighth generation grandson of Fatima, the daughter of the prophet. After Ahmad bin Isa's grandson Alwi the Hadhrami *sada* are also called Ba'Alwi or Alawiyin, the most common terms for this group in Indonesia. The Alawiyin are known for their emphasis on genealogy. They usually are strictly endogamous.



In al-Irsyad schools the spirit of the new age could be felt. This implied the introduction and the fostering of nationalist sentiments, an essential item of “the cultural program of modernity” (Eisenstadt 2003: 501). Students learned patriotic songs and poetry about their *watan*, their homeland, imagining the Hadhramaut while living on the other side of the Indian Ocean (Mobini-Kesheh 1999: 84). When the schools opened in the 1910s, coinciding with the rise of Indonesia’s first nationalist mass organisations (Shiraishi 1990), it became also a common practice for Hadhramis to show affection for their homeland, a typical trait of diaspora societies (see Vertovec 1999), which can be fuelled by nationalism, but usually exists well before modern times. To show a new interest in the Hadhramaut was particularly common among al-Irsyad members who held the opinion that those reforms, already on the way in the diaspora, should also be carried out in the Hadhramaut itself. However, Alawiyin used their much stronger influence in the Hadhramaut to prevent Irsyadis gaining ground. Once, in 1920, the Qu’ayti sultanate, controlling the entry points to the Hadhramaut, even banned the organisation from its territory (Mobini-Kesheh 1999: 121). Thus, Mobini-Kesheh (ibid.: 124) concludes, “it seems that the sayyids [sic!] were the victors of the Alawi-Irsyadi conflict in the homeland”.

Postcolonial Conditions and Post-Cold War Developments

No later than nation states were established, Hadhrami migration to Southeast Asia came to a halt. Indonesia closed its borders due to nationalistic immigration policies.³ In addition to that, political developments during the Cold War made the

³ My data show that the last migrants managed to settle in Indonesia in the 1950s.



maintenance of relations between Indonesia and the Hadhramaut even more difficult. At a time Indonesia was already fiercely anti-communist, in South Yemen a socialist regime sympathetic to the Soviet Union took over (in 1968). From then on, Hadhramis were divided along the borders of the Cold War. Although migration to Indonesia virtually came to a standstill which lasts until today, after the breakdown of the socialist regime of South Yemen in 1989 Southeast Asian Hadhramis started to establish new relations with the Hadhramaut. Here, again, we have to distinguish between Alawiyin Hadhramis and those centred around al-Irsyad.

Concerning the Alawiyin, connections were relatively quickly revived. Prominent Alawiyin *habaib*, like those of the al-Habsyi family in Solo, travelled to the Hadhramaut and renewed their family ties. In turn, the annual *haul* in Solo in honour of Ali bin Mohammed al-Habsyi is now attended by al-Habsyis from Sayun. Alawiyin started also to send their sons to the Hadhramaut for religious education, where in the middle of the 1990s a new Islamic boarding school led by local Alawiyin opened in Tarim. Today, this *pesantren* has as many students with Indonesian passports as with Yemeni ones.⁴ The head of the school is a young, charismatic *habib* who travels to Indonesia every year. Meanwhile he is extremely popular among Alawiyin Hadhramis in general. Even though he is still in his forties I could see posters of him in almost every Alawiyin household I visited during my field research. At the end of the 1990s the first alumni of his boarding school returned to Indonesia and some of them managed to open their own *pesantren* modelled after the Tarimi example. Despite of their relatively young age the alumni of Tarim are usually held in high esteem in the Alawiyin community. In addition to being

⁴ Interview in Solo, 2004-02-17.



entrusted with establishing boarding schools, they are often granted important positions within the community, for instance running local mosques.

Religiously motivated travelling represents a common feature of Muslim societies (see e.g. Eikelman/Piscatori 1990). In Indonesia, the hajj is basically organised by the government; nevertheless, it issues licences to private travel agencies, which compete for costumers. Hadhramis are also active in this business offering a new tour they call “haji plus”, that is travelling through the Hadhramaut first and then performing the pilgrimage in the Haramayn. A travel agency owned by Alawiyin organises also a tour guided by a *habib* in the month of *syahban*, when there is a big *haul* at the tomb of *nabi Hud* near Tarim.⁵

Yet Hadhramis not belonging to the Alawiyin community also started to offer tours to the Hadhramaut. An owner of a travel agency close to al-Irsyad told me about his first trip to the Hadhramaut in 2004 preparing to arrange a tour. At this opportunity he was able to visit the home village of his family. He told me enthusiastically that he was warmly welcomed there and that his family still owns a genealogical record he could update, the communication between the two family branches having been disrupted for such a long time. This trip to his family’s home village eventually made him change the itinerary of the tour, giving Hadhramis one or two days to visit their relatives.⁶

It seems that among wealthier Irsyadis there is also a growing interest to make a trip to the Hadhramaut. The director of the private hospital in Solo’s *kampung Arab* admits: “I’d like to know. This is the land of my ancestors. Maybe I’ll go there in August

⁵ Interview in Jakarta, 2005-03-03.

⁶ Interview in Jakarta, 2005-12-17.



with one or two friends.”⁷ A relative from Hadhramaut studying in Malaysia recently visited this Solonese Hadhrami inviting him to attend the marriage of his brother in Hadhramaut. Until then he had had no contact with the family branch in Hadhramaut.

These examples, which show that Hadhramis are able to revive family relations relatively easily despite long periods of interruption, confirm Farid Alatas’ thesis that after all their identity was “... neither national nor ethnic, but was based on kinship. The locus of Hadhrami identity was not so much language but *nasab* (lineage) ...” (Alatas 1997: 29). I think this is particularly true for the Alawiyin community.

Despite all these new relations and flows, most Indonesian Hadhramis are not (yet) in contact with their relatives in Hadhramaut. Consequently, economic flows are rather weak. At least as far as Indonesian Hadhramis are concerned (for Singapore see Freitag 2002), the flow of remittances seems to have stopped a long time ago. Yet perhaps different times require different forms of capital flows. In fact, a high functionary of the East Javanese al-Irsyad branch, who is also a successful businessman, opened a fish factory in Mukalla. However, investments, as I was told, enter Mukalla rather from Saudi Arabia, home to another wealthy Hadhrami business community, than from Southeast Asia.

Unsurprisingly, in the collective imagination of Indonesian Hadhramis, the Hadhramaut is not associated with economic activities. One of the Tarim alumni informed me that, when he was young, stories about the Hadhramaut circulated in the Alawiyin community of Solo; tales about the dry climate in Hadhramaut and – above all

⁷ Saya mau tahu, itu tanah leluhur saya. Mungkin bulan Agustus saya kesana, dengan teman satu, dua orang. (Interview in Solo, 2004-02-25)



– about the pious life of former generations there. Thus, he was not disappointed when he came to the Hadhramaut for the first time: “The atmosphere there is supportive for learning. There is not any sinful behaviour ... no television. The girls cover their whole body; they wear the *cadar*, and leave the house very seldom. It is the head of the household, the father, who goes to the market and the vendors are also men ... there is no cinema, no café at all.”⁸

Supported by the accounts of those who were already there, Alawiyyin imagine the Hadhramaut as the land of piety largely unaffected by modern developments. Exactly because of these unmodern conditions, in striking contrast to Alawiyyin judgements, Irsyadis show much less affection for the Hadhramaut. When I asked a former al-Irsyad official, who visited the Hadhramaut in 1994, whether he would send his son there to school, he answered resolutely: “They are fifty years behind. Why should I send my child there?”⁹ This is in line with the accounts of those who experienced life in Hadhramaut when they were young. In Pekalongan a man born in 1936, who was sent to the Hadhramaut at the age of seven and had to stay there for eleven years, told me: “It’s not good in the Hadhramaut, there is no electricity, no water”¹⁰; he never returned to the land of his ancestors.

Conclusion

⁸ Suasana mendukung untuk belajar, tiada maksiat ... tiada televisi. Pakaian wanita, tertutup semua, pakai cadar, jarang sekali keluar rumah. Ke pasar yang pergi kepala keluarga, ayah, yang jual juga lelaki ... Bioskop, kafe sama sekali tidak ada. (Interview in Solo, 18-02-2004)

⁹ Mereka tertinggal 50 tahun. Buat apa kirim anak saya kesana. (Interview in Pekalongan, 2003-05-08)

¹⁰ Enggak bagus di Hadramaut, enggak ada listrik, enggak ada air. (Interview in Pekalongan, 2003-05-07)



The establishment of nation states and the advent of the Cold War have reduced the flow of people between the Hadhramaut and Indonesia dramatically. In terms of migration this holds true until today. Yet if we consider limited stays for studying, travelling, visiting relatives, participating in religious rituals and the like, the flow of people between the diaspora and the homeland seems on the rise again. Particularly the Alawiyin show strong sentiments for their home country, almost regarding it as what might be called in the Abrahamic tradition a “promised land”. They also revived Alawiyin scholarliness in Hadhramaut with the objective of educating the young generation, especially from Southeast Asia, a project resulting in the strengthening of Alawiyin religious institutions in Indonesia. In the Alawiyin context, the new flow of people from Indonesia to the Hadhramaut and back has an ideological bearing on the community in Indonesia, since the religious and societal life in the Hadhramaut is regarded as exemplary.

Quite contrary to that, al-Irsyad as an organisation seems to have written off the Hadhramaut as a field for their activities. They recently opened branches in Saudi Arabia and in other Gulf countries as well as in Australia, places where Irsyadis like to study or where entrepreneurs with an al-Irsyad background develop their businesses.¹¹ The drive to reform the Hadhramaut, a central goal of al-Irsyad’s founding generation, has long been lost and there are no indications so far of a revitalisation. Indeed, mainly Alawiyin show sentiments for the homeland so characteristic for diaspora societies; sentiments, Irsyadis also once cultivated in the heyday of Hadhrami nationalism. Nevertheless, today the latter are rediscovering the Hadhramaut too, though on a much more individual basis.

¹¹ Interview in Jakarta, 2004-10-27.



Thus, the flow of ideology once promoted by Irsyadis is no longer of any importance for their current relations, quite contrary to the Alawiyyin case. Yet this might change with the intensification of contacts in the future.

Due to the rise of connections between Indonesian Hadhramis and the Hadhramaut, capital flows might also increase. In times of global capitalist expansion, what once were remittances mainly used for religious purposes and consumption might now become business investments. Yet up until now, capital flow seems to be the weakest of all flows linking Indonesian Hadhramis and the Hadhramaut.

At a time when major parts of the world enter into a new phase of globalisation, under conditions radically different from pre-colonial and colonial times, Indonesian Hadhramis establish connections to their ancient homeland anew, sending their children to school over there, going on guided pilgrimages, visiting relatives or even establishing business connections. The return of these practices, once interrupted by nationalism and the Cold War, indicates that the “old” Hadhrami diaspora is currently reinventing itself.



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