

The Social Strata of Arab Immigrants at Stone Town in Zanzibar:

A Study of Hadhrami Identity and Family Networks

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Fieldwork location: Tanzania

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Research background

The purpose of this study was to investigate the networks that Yemeni immigrants have maintained beyond national borders and to discuss them from the viewpoint of Islamic values, pedigrees, and identity.

The interchange of people, goods, and culture has been active since ancient times in the Indian Ocean region, due to the influence of maritime trade. Such trade enabled Arabs to leave Yemen for East Africa, using dhows. Since these immigrants came from Hadhramaut in eastern Yemen, they are called Hadhramis. They have dispersed throughout the Indian Ocean World, but their communities are tightly interconnected. The focus of my research is these networks of Hadhrami immigrants.

Historically, there have been social strata in Hadhrami communities, but this structure is changing in Zanzibar, due to the revolution that occurred in 1964, the modernization of local societies, and a resurgence of Islam. I hope to clarify how various influences and turmoil have affected Hadhrami networks.



Picture 1: A little dhow, sailing the Indian Ocean.

Fieldwork results

I conducted fieldwork in Stone Town, Zanzibar, from October to December 2011, and obtained the following three types of findings.

The first type of findings was archival materials. Hadhramis travelled to East Africa by dhows even after the 19th century, when steamboats were introduced to the Indian Ocean region. I acquired written reports concerning the arrival of dhows in Zanzibar, which record dates, ports of departure, and passenger numbers.



Picture 2: Listening to the life history of a Hadhrami immigrant.

The second type of findings consisted of information acquired during interviews. Informants in my past fieldwork were the children and grandchildren of immigrants, but this time I discovered that first generation immigrants are still alive, so I was able to glean information about the background of Hadhrami immigration journeys directly from participants. I learned that it was quite dangerous to travel 2500 km across the ocean in small dhows, but the people I talked with said they were more likely to survive a perilous journey than be able to remain safe in Hadhramaut. Life histories told by Hadhramis who actually immigrated have a vivid reality which written documents can hardly convey.

The third type of findings I acquired was maps. For a long time, the only available maps of Zanzibar were old copies that lacked precision, but digital maps, based on the latest office of urban planning surveys, are now available. I obtained copies of all the plots in Zanzibar.



Picture 3: The din and bustle of the largest shopping district in Zanzibar.

Future study

The results of this fieldwork will be used as the main elements of a doctoral dissertation, together with my past research. Though it will take time to classify and analyze data collected during my 2012 fieldwork, I hope to also make the results public at academic meetings.

In this research I limited the discussion on the Hadhrami network in Zanzibar, so the further direction of this study would be to include comparisons with cases in Yemen and Southeast Asia.