

Hadhramaut: Encountering the Familiar in a Far Away Place



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Most Singaporean Arabs originated from, or had close family ties with, Hadhramaut¹ at the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, in present-day Yemen. In March this year, my colleague Zahra Aljunied and I visited Hadhramaut with the purpose of finding materials alluding to the links between Hadhramaut and Southeast Asia, particularly Singapore.

Descended from Hadhramis Syed Mohammed Bin Harun Aljunied and his nephew Syed Omar Aljunied who came to Singapore via Palembang in the early 19th Century², Zahra's family still has strong ties with Hadhramaut.

We went to Hadhramaut with Zahra's father and his wife who were there to celebrate the festival of Prophet Mohammed's birthday. For most of our time there, we put up at Uncle Aljunied's house in Tarim, which has numerous mosques and is well-known for its religious scholarship.³

BROKEN ROADS TO DATE PALMS

On 3 March, we boarded the plane at Sana'a in north Yemen for Seiyun, the town adjacent to Tarim. Due to foggy conditions and poor visibility at Seiyun, however, the flight was re-routed to land at Mukalla which was an approximately four-hour drive from Tarim. This drive introduced me to the landscape and climate of Hadhramaut.

The mountains and valleys formed a grand view which took my breath away even as the sun beat down through the car windows and had me croaking "ma'al" (water) every so often. However, the broken roads we drove past marked the devastation left by the flash floods of October 2008.⁴ Amidst the broken roads and re-building projects, patches of green vegetation had started to grow.

Hadhramaut is an arid environment, isolated by desert and mountains from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula.⁵ It has several tributaries and oases of fertile agricultural land, and floodwater and ground water which were used for irrigation.⁶ In general, however, the environment is harsh and agriculture difficult due to the extreme heat of long summers, cold winter winds, and sparse, unreliable rainfall.⁷

During a visit to a Hadhrami gentleman, Zahra and I would come across a correspondence relating to the 1940s famine. A drought that started in 1943 (and lasted three years) caused harvest failures in Hadhramaut.⁸ The situation was exacerbated by the halting of monetary remittances from relatives in Malaya and Indonesia following the Japanese Occupation, hence leading to the loss of an important source of income to pay for food imports.⁹

It was evening as we neared Tarim; the mountainous views

gave way to stretches of sandy roads punctuated by clusters of angular mud-brick buildings and groves of date palms. The car window framed these scenes, like a pretty series of tableaux as we passed. One could not help but marvel at the stark differences between the landscapes of Hadhramaut and tropical Southeast Asia, and it is no wonder that a Hadhrami migrant in Indonesia lauded in a poem the date palms of his homeland.¹⁰

The sun had set by the time we arrived at Uncle Aljunied's house. As we entered the house and were warmly greeted by the womenfolk, Zahra managed to explain to me that we would seldom be using that entrance as the menfolk might be around that part of the house. The house was designed such that men and women could live separately from each other. Throughout my stay there, I saw Zahra's gentlemen relatives only once – when we briefly exchanged greetings on the day of our arrival.

HADHRAWI HOSPITALITY – THE HEART'S WELCOME

In Tarim, Zahra was welcomed home with much glee and enthusiasm. Trailing tiredly behind her, I was surprised to be received in the same fashion by her family members – firmly clasped by my shoulders and greeted cheek to cheek, and greetings spoken in Arabic which I did not understand but



The site of the tomb of Sayyid Ahmed bin Isa on the hillside along the road between Tarim and Seiyun.

recognised the warmth and welcome in the tone. I would soon encounter many more instances of hospitality imbued in the practices of Hadhramaut.

The next day, Zahra's relatives came to visit during lunch. I joined the cheery gathering of women and children. Amidst the smiles and friendly gestures, it was hard not to feel at home despite not understanding the conversations. A strikingly beautiful lady who looked to be in her thirties came and spoke to me in simple English. I learned that she had picked up English from Zahra's annual visits. After warmly welcoming me, she introduced me to her daughters and her grandchild. Girls in Hadhramaut typically marry quite young. When she found out that I did not have any children, she warmly wished for me to have them soon. This wish would be constantly repeated by women I met during my stay in Hadhramaut.

On 5 March, en route from Tarim to Seiyun, we visited the tomb of Ahmed bin Isa, known as al-Muhajir, "the Emigrant", which stood on the hillside next to the road. The *sada* (plural for *sayyid*) trace the advent of their lineage in Hadhramaut to the arrival of Sayyid Ahmad bin Isa in Hadhramaut in the 10th century.¹¹ The *sada* claim descent from Prophet Muhammad through the Prophet's daughter and her husband 'Ali b. Abi Talib.

As we descended the hill via the stairway, we observed a group of merry, laughing girls waving at us through a window of a building at the foot of the hill. They were a family spending a day out and our guide Ahmed Salem Blfakeeh urged us to say hello to them. As the group in the room was composed of ladies and young children, Ahmed waited outside, while we visited the group. A space was made for us to sit down next to the most senior lady in the group. While Zahra conversed with her in Arabic, she cast frequent smiles my way, and the other ladies and children would wander up with shy smiles on their faces. They served us sweet tea in small glasses, cakes and *gilak* seeds. *Gilak* seeds are somewhat similar to sunflower seeds. People there have an amazing way of enjoying these seeds. Popping one or two unshelled seeds between their teeth, they skilfully removed the kernels using only teeth and tongue. They invited me to try, which I did and failed.

Zahra turned to me and told me that the senior lady had enquired if I was married, to which I replied in the affirmative. She then asked if I had children. Informed that I did not, the lady exclaimed (Zahra translated for me): "Oh poor you! Don't you

worry, we will pray for you to have children soon!" The family pressingly invited us to stay and lunch with them. As we were due to be in Seiyun, we politely and regretfully declined while thanking them for their hospitality as we took our leave.

The Hadhrami hospitality I experienced went far beyond courtesy and friendliness. A Hadhrami welcomes the guest firmly into his or her house and care. On two occasions when we arrived in the evenings, our hosts invited us to stay the night.

One of these visits was to a family in the coastal town of Shihr, and took place on a Sunday. The daughter of the house was a schoolteacher and spoke some English. She was full of welcome, helping her mother to serve us sweet tea, ginger coffee, orange juice and cakes. She asked questions about our work and where we were from. Beaming broadly, she said that skies had darkened and insisted that we must stay with them for the night, adding that they would like us to stay until at least Wednesday. I learnt that it is customary for Hadhramis to invite guests who were in their houses in the evenings to stay overnight with them.

Another lively visit we had was with a family in Shibam. We sat with the wife of the host, his mother and his daughter in the room upstairs. They served us sweet tea, orange juice, cookies, nuts and melon seeds dyed in various hues. They thought I was from China, and Zahra helped me to explain that while my ancestors were from China, several generations of my family were born in Malacca, while I was born in Singapore. This started comparisons with how Zahra's ancestors were from Tarim and she was also born in Singapore.

Despite the language barrier, we tried to communicate with each other. We talked about how beautiful Shibam was, told them that we also like to eat melon seeds in Singapore, and asked them how they coloured their melon seeds so attractively. The host's daughter was in her early teens, and had a very friendly disposition. We both smiled immediately at each other when we met. At an awkward moment when we ran out of words, I started playing with the colourful melon seed kernels, arranging them into a pattern on the carpeted floor in front of me. The daughter was intrigued and smiled knowingly when she realised what I was trying to represent with the seed kernels – the colourful buildings of Shibam. In response, she arranged her melon seed kernels into a flower and looked at me with a huge grin.

After that, they showed us around their house; we happily scampered up the narrow stairways which opened out to small



Shibam, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

rooms, some of which were unoccupied. A UNESCO World Heritage site, Shibam is famous for its towers of tall houses and is also referred to as "the Manhattan of the desert"¹² and "the New York of Hadhramaut".¹³ The tallest house rises 29.15 metres above its entrance on street level, and the average number of storeys is five.¹⁴ We counted seven storeys in this house, atop of which was a cool, airy rooftop.

SPICED RICE, SAMBAL BELACHAN AND SARONG



Spiced rice with camel meat and chilli sauce.

The food in Hadhramaut was extremely familiar. The Hadhramis who migrated to Southeast Asia and maintained close links with Hadhramaut introduced some of the dishes of the host country to the motherland. Thus, we had rice, sauted vegetables and gravied meats similar to curry, accompanied by *sambal belachan*. Van der Meulen and Von Wissman noted during their travel through Hadhramaut in 1931 that the cooking in Tarim and Seiyun was very much influenced by Singapore and Java.¹⁵ They further noted then that Javanese and Chinese were sought after as cooks and housekeepers in Hadhramaut.¹⁶ Just as they observed then the presence of dried or tinned foods imported from Java, I enjoyed *keropok* in Tarim which Zahra informed me was from Indonesia.

Van der Meulen and Von Wissman were served yellow-coloured spiced rice with dishes of mutton and gravy. They deduced that the practice of spicing the rice and meat was introduced from Java and India.¹⁷ Like them, I also ate spiced



Fresh fish in Shahr.

rice. It tasted very much like *nasi briyani* to me.

There was one particularly unforgettable meal with spiced rice. This was a lunch we had at Do'an. We passed a truckload of camels as our car neared the eatery. Being women, Zahra and I were obliged to enter the eatery by a secondary entrance near the kitchen. On our way, our guide urged us to look down into the kitchen where we saw a man cooking a large pot of meat. The food we were served consisted of a platter of saffron-coloured spiced rice, a plate of camel meat and a dish of chilli sauce. Our guide explained that that was the eatery's specialty, and the only food it served. I ate a lot of the rice with copious amounts of chilli sauce, focusing on how much it tasted like *nasi briyani*, and tried hard not to think about the camels and the kitchen outside. I chewed and swallowed some of the meat in great haste.

The food was not all that was familiar to me in Hadhramaut. It was common for men there to don sarongs and shirts. This was the preferred attire of our guide. Our gentle, kindly driver also regularly wore a shirt over a singlet, and a sarong. We were told that the singlet was called *baju panas* in Hadhramaut.

TREADING WHERE MIGRANTS WALKED

On 8 and 9 March, we visited the port cities of Shahr and Mukalla. These are the two main ports from where Hadhramis migrated. Shahr was the main port until Mukalla superseded it in the late 19th century.¹⁸ These two ports are significant in the lives of the migrants not only because they were the places of departure. Some Hadhramis spent a year or more working in these cities to earn their onward fare, and those deciding on their migration destinations would talk to sailors and returned emigrants in these ports.¹⁹

We were taken on a walking tour of Shahr which included visiting the building which used to house the immigration offices. As we walked past the building, a briny aroma wafted by, bringing to mind images of the sea. Shortly after, some men came trundling by with a wheelbarrow filled with huge fish! The men told us through the guide that it was a fresh catch, and obligingly waited while we took photographs.

We visited Mukalla the next day. I was told it is the centre of Hadhramaut's fishing industry. As I feasted on the delectable fish with rice at a restaurant with Zahra, our host and our guide, I wondered how many Hadhrami migrants, who passed through Shahr and Mukalla, had missed the briny smell of the sea and fresh fish of these ports while in their host countries. By then, I had been away from home for more than a week and was starting to miss our tropical landscape and balmy evenings.



Building which housed immigration offices, Shahr.

LAST DAY IN HADHRAMAUT

My last day in Hadhramaut was 12 March. As my flight was in the afternoon, we started the day by visiting a mud-brick factory. Buildings in Hadhramaut are traditionally constructed from mud-bricks and the centuries-old technology of making mud-bricks has remained largely unchanged.²⁰ The mud-bricks are made in large outdoor yards. Soil is wetted and chopped straw is mixed in. The mixture is smoothed into a pre-wetted wooden mould, edges defined with a tool or finger, and the mould removed. The bricks are then sun-dried for about a week before they are ready for use.²¹ Although concrete buildings have sprung up in Hadhramaut, mud-brick structures continue to be built.

In the afternoon, I boarded the plane at Seiyun for Sana'a where I would spend two days before catching the homeward international flight back. By then, I had acquired some ability to communicate with kindred spirits who spoke a different language. I helped an over-laden lady carry her bag; she showed me how to get to the front of the crowd to board the plane. Together, we hurried on board and she negotiated for us to sit next to each other. Pointing and gesturing at the in-flight magazine, she recommended that I visit Socotra – a small archipelago of islands south of the Arabian Peninsula – the next time. The illustrations in the magazine showed it was a spectacular place with unique flora.

As the plane soared over the mountainous plateaus and valleys, I mused that I would have some interesting things to share with friends back home over a meal accompanied by *sambal belachan*.



Putting mud mixture into the mould.



Stacking dried mud-bricks.

ENDNOTES

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14. Ronald Lewcock, *Wadi Hadramawt and the walled city of Shibam* (Paris: UNESCO, 1986), p. 71.
15. D. Van Der Meulen and H. Von Wissmann, *Hadhramaut - Some of its Mysteries Unveiled* (Leyden, E.J Brill Ltd, 1932) p. 137.
16. Ibid., p. 95.
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18. Boxberger, *On the Edge of Empire*, p. 14.
19. Ibid., p. 42.
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21. Ibid., p. 41-42.

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More than 6,000 km away from Singapore, across the Indian Ocean, in a region in Yemen known as Hadhramaut, the familiar *sambal belachan* is served at meals in some families, and men in sarongs are commonly sighted.

Back here in Singapore, the names Aljunied, Alkaff, and Alsagoff are part of our landscape in building and street names. These names, and many others, belong to Arab migrants from Hadhramaut who came to Singapore from the 19th Century onwards. Some came directly from Hadhramaut; some came from other places such as Indonesia and Malaysia. This migration of people and cultural adaptations are part of the story of the Arabs in Southeast Asia. Most of the Arabs who settled in Southeast Asia were from Hadhramaut, and are known as Hadhramis.

The Hadhramis here were variously engaged in trade, shipping, plantation estates and conveying pilgrims on the *haj*. Some were prominent religious teachers. Wealthy Arab families also contributed to charity – endowing schools, hospitals, building mosques and financing religious feasts. Their homeland was also not forgotten. Besides remitting money to family members, the Hadhramis also contributed to public projects in the Hadhramaut, where they sent their sons for education.

Presenting photographs and artefacts ranging from personal documents to musical instruments and items on public display for the first time, the *Rihlah – Arabs in Southeast Asia* exhibition (Rihlah means journey in Arabic) will introduce visitors to Hadhramaut, and the history and culture of the Arabs in Southeast Asia.

The Rihlah project is an initiative of the National Library Singapore, with the support of partners such as the National University of Singapore, National Museum of Singapore, The Arab Association of Singapore, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Middle East Institute and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. It comprises the above-mentioned exhibition to be staged at the National Library Building from April to October 2010, a conference, a business seminar and supporting activities that focus on the culture and contributions of the Arabs in Singapore.

CONFERENCE AND BUSINESS SEMINAR

A seminar on doing business in the Middle East and a two-day conference on the roles of Arabs in Southeast Asia will be held in March and 10 - 11 April 2010, respectively. More details are available on the Rihlah website: <http://rihlah.nl.sg>.

PUBLICATIONS

A commemorative book and a bibliography will be published to showcase and enhance research capabilities of the National Library through partnerships with experts in the field. A compilation of research papers presented during the conference will also be published.

For conference registration and more details, visit <http://rihlah.nl.sg>.

UPCOMING PROGRAMMES

Middle Eastern Bazaar

Savour the sight, sound and taste of the Middle East in this bazaar that will showcase merchandise, food and music from the Middle East.

Saturday, 17 April 2010, 11.00am - 8.00pm
The Plaza, Level 1, National Library Building

Arabic Calligraphy

Learn the art of khat in this interactive Arabic calligraphy workshop and showcase your creativity.

Saturday, 24 April 2010, 4.00 - 5.30 pm
Imagination Room, Level 5, National Library Building

Basic Arabic Conversational Series

Learn to speak basic Arabic language. The skill could come in handy in your travels or businesses in the Middle East.

Saturday, 15 May 2010, 3.30 - 5.30 pm
Saturday, 22 May 2010, 3.30 - 5.30pm
The Mahdarah Room, Exhibition Area, Level 10, National Library Building

Heritage Trails

Discover how Arab Street got its name and the colourful history behind the centre of activities among the early Arab community in Singapore. The trail will take you beyond Arab Street to places owned or established by the early Arab pioneers.

Saturday, 12 June 2010, 3.30 - 6.00 pm
Meeting Point: Information Counter, Level 1, National Library Building

Saturday, 14 August 2010, 3.30 - 6.00 pm
Meeting Point: Information Counter, Level 1, National Library Building

"One Thousand and One Nights"

Catch this interactive drama performance based on Arabian folktales. Suitable for children aged 10 and below.

Episode 1 Saturday, 17 April 2010, 5.00 - 5.30 pm
The Plaza, Level 1, National Library Building

Episode 2 Saturday, 24 April 2010, 2.00 - 2.30 pm
Children's Section, Bedok Public Library

Episode 3 Saturday, 22 May 2010, 2.00 - 2.30 pm
Everest Room, Woodlands Regional Library

Episode 4 Saturday, 12 June 2010, 1.30 - 2.00 pm
Children's Section, Jurong Regional Library

Episode 5 Saturday, 26 June 2010, 2.00 - 2.30 pm
Children's Section, Tampines Regional Library

All information is correct at the time of printing. The National Library Singapore reserves the right to cancel or postpone any programmes without prior notice.

With inputs from Cheryl-Ann Low, Mohamad Hazriq and Wong Chew Wee