

*The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean.*  
By Engseong Ho. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. xxvi  
+ 380 pp.

Engseong Ho's *The Graves of Tarim* continues a pattern within certain circles of scholarship that has, paraphrasing Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1999), delinked the notion of “modernity” and “mobility” from a European trajectory. This text focuses on the peripatetic early modern and modern world of the ‘Alawi *sayyids* (collectively known as *sada*) from Hadramawt who are patrilineal descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through Ahmad bin ‘Isa, “the Migrant” (d. 956). Instead of reproducing “autonomous” histories of regions, as evident in parochial area studies literature, Ho focuses on an Indian Ocean world involving an itinerant Hadrami *sada* that travels from Surat in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and Mecca in the seventeenth century, to the Malay archipelago from the eighteenth to twentieth century. *The Graves of Tarim* is also a narrative of the “expanding, transregional, cosmopolitan Muslim ecumene” that formed along the Indian Ocean trade routes from the thirteenth century onwards — an ecumene that Ho enters through his subjects, the Hadrami *sayyids* (p. 49).

Ho emphasizes that Hadrami *sayyids* participated in the Indian Ocean world through distinct and superior techniques to their European counterparts. Keeping the example of the Malay archipelago “uppermost in mind”, he concludes that within diasporic societies, these *sayyids* entered into “more intimate, sticky and prolonged [relationships with the locals] than the Europeans could countenance” (pp. xxi, 155). Borrowing a concept used by Subrahmanyam and Chris Bayly, Ho suggests that in various contexts such as seventeenth century Surat and nineteenth century Singapore, the East India Company had to rely on these more established “portfolio capitalists” (pp. 269, 276). The book also refers to Hadrami *sayyids* as “local cosmopolitans” because of their histories of simultaneously integrating into local (diasporic) societies and maintaining a translocal (‘Alawi *sayyid*) identity. Here, readers can benefit from a discussion of the

idea of “cosmopolitanism” as a historical category of analysis. Indeed, while the term “cosmopolitan” has been used to describe a plethora of non-western “globalizing” practices in works such as Ho’s, in both its etymology and programmatic activism, which the word embodies, the term is problematic. *The Graves of Tarim* is concerned with describing first, an early modern and modern, or pre-colonial and colonial, Indian Ocean world wherein Hadrami *sayyids* profited from mediatory roles as “local” and “cosmopolitan”, and second, the turning point — the Second World War — which destroyed this world through a “universal lockdown” of “cosmopolitans” into nation-states (pp. 305–306).

*The Graves of Tarim* is a compelling read for diaspora studies, particularly because of its notes on symbolic and corporeal forms of remembering within a prominent segment of the Hadrami diaspora. Ho refers to this diaspora of Hadrami *sayyid* emigrants as a “society of the absent” because “invisible hands”, such as dead saints buried in the city of Tarim, are a “constant incitement to discourse” (p. 19). While Ho’s anthropological argot obscures at times, this should not impede world historians and diaspora scholars from the text’s significant subject matter. For example, he leads readers into how Tarim, which was a destination of ‘Alawi *sayyids* from Iraq in between the tenth to twelfth century, has been transformed into a “place of origins” for a far-flung Indian Ocean diaspora. This transformation has involved diverse processes through time and space ranging from the burials of prominent *sayyid* saints and elaborate shrine-based rituals to diasporic literature. Special attention is given to diasporic literature. Indeed, Ho traces this Indian Ocean diaspora through the regular records inscribed and circulated by the hyper-literate “Alawi Way”, an “institutional complex” that unites two Islamic themes rooted in Tarim: the Prophetic patriline, and the Sufi *tariqa* (pathway) instituted by descendants of “the Migrant” in the thirteenth century (p. 28). Ho focuses largely on two canonical texts: first, *The Travelling Light Unveiled* completed by a creole *sayyid*, ‘Abd al-Qadir al-‘Aydarus (d. 1628) in Gujarat in 1603; and second, *The Irrigating Fount: Biographical Virtues of the ‘Alawi Sayyids*,

composed by Muhammad al-Shilli (d. 1682) in late seventeenth-century Mecca.

Ho points out that the aforementioned Hadrami texts had been inadequately “trawled and plundered for data by positivist researchers” (p. 118). Instead, he suggests ways to read such texts in order to understand the formation of a textual canon or how genealogy emerged as a genre of writing in the Hadrami diaspora, and appreciate their hybridity. In terms of the formation of a canon, Ho elaborates on how genealogies were carried to, and inscribed and circulated in, the diaspora by Hadrami *sayyids*. A major contribution of Ho’s book lies in its survey of elaborate genealogical chronicles which preserved the distinct identity of Hadrami *sayyids* in the diaspora through interconnecting individuals and texts in the ‘Alawi diaspora, and tracing family branches to the graves of the “*sayyid* center par excellence” in Tarim (p. 57). Ho’s method may, hopefully, inspire more enthusiasts of Muslim communities’ histories to work closely with oft-ignored valid historical sources such as hagiographies and genealogies. In discussing the textual canon of the Hadrami *sayyid* diaspora that came to resemble a sophisticated genealogy, Ho accentuates that texts and even canons of the *sada* were neither unilinear nor autonomous. On the contrary, *The Graves of Tarim* refers to texts of the *sada* as “hybrid texts” to account for their creole natures, and the fact that they were interwoven with the diasporic, multicultural experiences of Hadrami *sayyids* (pp. 116–51). For example, Ho convincingly argues that the foremost use of “global metropolitan frames of scientific geography” to describe the semi-fantastical “homeland” was by the creole author of Gujarati matrilineal descent, al-‘Aydarus (p. 132). Furthermore, al-‘Aydarus’s multicultural experiences were evident in *The Travelling Light Unveiled*. As a text preoccupied with the peripatetic nature and educational careers of Hadrami scholars of both *sayyid* and non-*sayyid* descent, it described the “cosmopolitan” and “ecumenical society of trans-regional Sunni scholars and Sufis in the Red Sea/Indian Ocean” (pp. 147, 117).

*The Graves of Tarim* cautions readers against assuming that genealogy for Hadrami *sayyids* was a mere symbolic reckoning

of lineal descent, suggesting instead that it facilitated travel and settlement in the diaspora. This was particularly apparent in how the 'Alawi genealogy operated as a "precious gift", helping peripatetic Hadrami *sayyids* attain careers in Malay courts (p. 152). Indeed, the Prophetic genealogy which set these *sayyids* apart from normal Muslims led to a context wherein eighteenth century religious adepts travelling from Tarim via Malabar were welcomed in Malay courts as "prestigious figures descending from superior cosmopolitan centers to parochial backwaters" (p. 168). Throughout this discussion, Ho details how Hadrami *sayyids* and their genealogies combined various roles which scholars, perhaps influenced by European teleology, have tended to view as irreconcilable. In particular, there seems to have been no sharp dichotomy between their lives as scholars, religious adepts, Sufis, courtiers, and (occasionally) rulers.

In discussing genealogy as a "guide to moral action", Ho highlights how descent determined whom a *sayyid* could marry, visit or aid, and the distribution of inheritance (p. 152). In particular, he studies how Hadrami multicultural, diasporic experiences interacted with canonical texts like al-Shilli's which prescribed the "correct" practice of the law: "*sayyids* could be wife takers but not wife givers" since non-*sayyids* did not possess *kafa'a* or "sufficiency" in terms of hierarchical rank to marry a *sharifa* (female descendant of Muhammad) (pp. 139, 150). This *sada* marriage privilege preoccupies Ho for a number of reasons including its formation of a category of "creoles", *muwallads*, whom he employs as his primary informants. Indeed, it is clear that Ho views the *muwallads* as ideal "local cosmopolitans" as he laments the fact that the "Javanese-Hadrami, the creole *muwallad*" was being dismantled after the Second World War (p. 306).

At various points throughout his book, Ho expresses his concerns about assuming that Hadrami history consisted of a unidirectional flow of *sayyids* from Tarim outwards. While mentioning various other movements into the *sayyid* "center", Ho particularly explores regular movements of *muwallads* into Tarim through surveying an array of sources including personal accounts from late nineteenth and early twentieth century written travelogues (*rihla*) and the oral testimonies

of *muwallads*. Ho is also concerned about an experiential history being written from the individual's point of view, and he achieves this through shifting from a "historiographic to ethnographic mode" (p. 62). For instance, Ho balances the idea of "homecoming" in canonical textual sources with the almost opposite experiences of creoles repatriated to the "homeland". On the one hand, canonical texts reflected the way Hadrami patriarchs arranged the geographical return of their creole sons to the homeland through journeys which partook the "language of pilgrimage" (p. 223). Alternatively, Ho's *muwallad* informants provide an experiential account of their supposed homeland; indeed, even Ho appears surprised that a society "so fundamentally and continuously shaped by migration" is rampant with prejudice against *muwallads* (pp. 223, 238).

*The Graves of Tarim* has already been criticized for appropriating a version of history that was written and disseminated by the 'Alawi *sada* wherein Hadrami *sayyids* were represented as the primary makers of Hadrami history (Knysh 2008). Indeed, Ho's work does not even have a passing reference to alternative versions of Hadrami history written by non-*sayyids*. Even the intra-Hadrami theological confrontations in early twentieth century Java and Singapore, that Ho records, are between egalitarian *sayyids* and *sayyids* defending their *sada* marriage and socio-religious privileges. Readers are left perplexed over why Ho almost re-presents what he criticizes in al-Shilli's work: the "missionary telos of the Hadrami *sayyids*" which deletes non-*sayyids* from the "universal concourse trafficking in scholars of all origins [the Indian Ocean]" (p. 147). Another issue that is faintly confusing is how Ho's discussions of more recent Yemeni politics are related to his main thesis. In spite of this, *The Graves of Tarim* is a comprehensive account of the Hadrami *sada's* successes through the pre-colonial Indian Ocean world, and increasingly difficult phenomena ranging from Dutch and British colonial restrictions to attacks by the socialist regime of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the 1970s. In the case of the ideological and physical assaults upon the *sada* in the 1970s, Ho states that the *sayyids* amazingly rose from the ranks of being "*ancien regime* elements" to

the higher echelons of the governing politburo (pp. 14, 321). Ho's text begins and concludes with the destruction of the tomb of the patron saint of Aden, Abu Bakr al-'Aydarus (d. 1508), in 1994; this event followed an allegation that 'Alawi *sayyids* had been instigating a southern secession from the north. Contemporary developments such as tomb destructions and the transformation of "local cosmopolitans" to "archlocals" or hyper-nationalists (pp. 306–307) may appear to have marginalized the *sada*. However, we now witness a resurgence of *sada*-dominated institutions in both Hadramawt and Southeast Asia and creole "pilgrimages". Given these developments, readers can anticipate a future edition of *The Graves of Tarim*.

#### REFERENCE

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