

Title—The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean

Author—Engseng Ho

Year—2006

Categories: World History, Migration, Disapora, Empire

Place: Indian Ocean

Time: 1150-1970

Argument Synopsis:

Ho's book explores the extent of Hadramawt's engagement with the wider world through a focus on its Indian Ocean diaspora. Hadramawt is a region in the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, what is now Yemen. The histories of Europeans in the Indian Ocean are the most written about because the states of Europe wanted detailed reports on what was happening in the region from their representatives there. Ho reveals that the Hadrami diaspora has a rich literature that mobilizes genealogy towards many narrative ends. Genealogy bears a heavy narrative burden, becoming itself a vehicle for the onward movement of Islam. Genealogies are not just linear narratives that point back to origins, they are transcultural languages within which translation is already taking place. Ho attempts to trace the development of the canon of Hadrami texts, which requires a movement of the diaspora through geographical space. He argues that this canon of texts seems to converge around the Hadrami town of Tarim, with a focus on its graves. The grave has become a focus of an excess, the meeting point of many journeys travelled by mobile persons and mobile texts.

The book is organized into three sections: burial, genealogical travel, and returns. The first section is focused on burial and graves. Ho argues that burial is a place-making project that tends to bend diasporic journeys. This section is situated far into the past, looking back to the twelfth century. He explores the transformation of Tarim from a destination for migrants to an origin place for them. The second section examines the canonical texts of the Alawi way that were written abroad in the diaspora. In this section, Ho follows the travels of Hadramis abroad through their texts. He argues that names become a medium in which exchanges between parties are given value and boundaries between them are redrawn. This is in reference to the spread of Hadrami names, especially sayyid, throughout the region. The final section follows the creole offspring home to Hadramawt in a return movement. He analyzes how the moralization of movement shapes the experiences and itineraries of returnees in Hadramawt. He documents how various categories of people returned from the diaspora when political regimes changed in the homeland. Mobility may be considered in terms of deliberate movements projected ahead, as trajectories with specific directions and intentions.

Ho concludes by noting how Hadrami sayyid names are distributed and recognized across the entire Indian Ocean region. He claims that pilgrimage enacts relations among different categories of people and should be seen as central to the graves of Tarim. The graves of Tarim have become tied to communities of pilgrimage by the genealogies and the mobilities of the old diaspora. According to Ho, disputes over passports brought about by the European empires in the 1930s caused the eviction of the sayyids from Hadrami from Indian Ocean historiography.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Hadrami migrations across the Indian Ocean were self-consciously linked with the propagation of Islam
- The grave as a dense object that combines the elements of place, person, name and text
- Genealogy gains meaning through time, pilgrimage gains meaning through space