

**Title—Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community, and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839-1937**

**Author—Scott S. Reese**

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Categories: Islam, Colonialism, Migration, Diaspora

Place: Indian Ocean

Time: 1839-1937

Argument Synopsis:

Reese's book explores the dynamics of the relationships between Muslims within the context of colonial Aden during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Aden was a colony located on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. He begins by noting how by the end of the nineteenth century the British Empire was demographically the largest Muslim state in the world, and there existed connections from the shared imperial subjecthood across the Muslim world. Most of the histories of the British Indian Ocean Empire tend to focus on the political, legal, or economic consequences of empire, and do not pay too much attention to the political and social consequences. In particular, Reese is focused on the development of a local community within the spaces created by imperial rule from the mid-nineteenth century up through 1937. Reese aims to remedy a gap in the literature of the Indian Ocean because he claims that there are no Indian Ocean histories that were focused on the impact of the empire on the Muslims of the region. He chose Aden for his study because it is a case of a community actually created by the colonial moment, not just shaped by it. One theme underlying his study is the importance of the unseen, or spiritual cosmos, of Islam—he argues that the metaphysical could serve as the basis of one's authority, outweighing scholarly achievement and human recognition.

The book is organized into six thematic chapters, arranged roughly chronologically, that examine various aspects of Aden's history critical to its development as a Muslim community during the colonial period. The first chapter provides an overview of Aden's long history as an important hub of Indian Ocean commerce in the centuries before British occupation that places the colonial history into a larger transregional context. He highlights an imagined connectivity between South Asia and Arabia. The second chapter is focused on the development of Aden as an outpost of the British East Indian Company, exploring the company's concerns for the security of Indian merchant capital in the region and the localized political instability that warranted such concerns. The third chapter examines Aden's evolution with a focus on the creation and organization of sacred spaces. In this chapter, he argues that the town's most important cemeteries became identified as conduits to unseen metaphysical space. The fourth chapter explores religious law, theology and authority, examining the tensions between Islamic court judges and imperial bureaucrats. The fifth chapter argues that the defense of tradition and the unseen were critical to how individuals engaged with the unseen in ways that impacted their daily lives. The sixth chapter explores dynamics of religious mobilization, reform and discourses of authority among the Muslims in Aden. In creating a community, the Muslims of Aden drew on more than the networks of empire, the Islamic discursive tradition was more important. In other words, the empire may have brought people together, but Islam made them a community.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The negotiation of community in Aden centered on religious ideals and the common, if contested, template of belief created by the discursive tradition
- Patronage of a tomb could invest an individual or group with prestige and claims to belonging
- Associations with the state enabled certain individuals to exert influence over the moral direction of society