

Scott Steven Reese. *Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839-1937.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. ix + 212 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7486-9765-6.

Reviewed by Nurfadzilah Yahaya

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Commissioned by Saarah Jappie (University of the Witwatersrand)

Scott Reese's *Imperial Muslims* focuses on the history of Aden for slightly over a century. He ties the history of Aden to that of the Indian Ocean, highlighting religious, political, intellectual, and commercial connections with Persia, South Asia, and the rest of Arabia. The sea connects rather than separates in Reese's book, and Aden is the fulcrum on which several levers turn. The book deftly balances narratives of mobility and rootedness as it highlights how Aden is an intensely dynamic place from several angles.

At times, Reese portrays the Indian Ocean as a "British pond"—for instance, in the opening vignette that focuses on a petition to British authorities for the construction of a tomb, which certainly pointed to this being the case. However, Aden had long been an ancient hub of commerce before 1837, and Reese explores this early dynamic history in chapter 1. Apart from the colonial record, Reese also examines Arabic sources to present a larger temporal lens for the history of Aden, such as the large *Tarikh al-Mustabsir* of Ibn Mujjawir, a merchant from Khurasan who visited prosperous medieval Aden under Ayyubid rule in the thirteenth century, and the *Tarikh Thaghr Adan*, by Abu Makhrama, a local Adeni who wrote of the city in the first half of the sixteenth century, when Aden's political and commercial affairs were al-

ready hemmed in by the Portuguese and Ottomans.

Aden's links with surrounding regions persisted until the nineteenth century when another power, namely the British East India Company, sought to dominate Aden. The company, however, arrived to see only a hundred houses, two functioning mosques, and a cemetery, which was vast but otherwise largely derelict and unused. Apparently, little was left of the grand medieval port and center of Islamic learning and it subsequently benefited British interests to underscore how Aden was truly rebuilt by them. Reese focuses on nineteenth-century Aden as a colonial construct literally and figuratively when he asks, "How did a place that was little more than a large village at the time of occupation transform into a major Imperial port and urban center within the space of a generation?" (p. 40). In demonstrating how the British East India Company's occupation of Aden served as an extension of historical links between Aden and India and the rest of Arabia, the narrative becomes circular at times, especially when Reese highlights the company's heavy reliance on numerous Indian merchants, pilgrims, and ships that made their way into the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea each year. Were they already there before British occupation or did they arrive afterward? In the first place, it is difficult to measure the ex-

tent to which earlier connections were harnessed on the ground. One thing is clear: the British did not rely on the emptying out of Aden as a strategy; rather, they saw the very diverse populations (Indians, Somalis, Jews, Arabs, and Persians) as an added advantage. Ultimately, the seemingly moribund sacred landscape (p. 65) served as a substrate for growth over the first decades of British settlement. However, continuing hostility on the part of local Arab tribes and the army's increasingly fractious relationship with the merchants of the bazaar remain as visible reminders of uneasiness.

Another resilient feature of Aden that Reese identifies is that cooperation, alliances, and even admiration for individuals cut across ideological lines (p. 80). Different groups of people constantly came together in specific instances and for particular causes—for example, against common enemies. This aspect of Adeni life becomes evident in chapter 3, which illuminates enduring religious links since sacred spaces such as Muslim shrines remained central to the lives of diverse Adenis including Muslims, Jews, and Hindus. Their collective retreat to the tomb guarded by Sayyid Zayn bin Alawi al-Aydarus when Indian sepoys under the command of the East India Company captured Aden in 1839 conjures up a vivid image of this. Sufism and saint veneration remained the primary expression of popular spirituality and communal solidarity through the centuries. Reese usefully maps both spiritual and patronage connections through funds given to renovate and maintain these shrines, which formed sites of festivals for the booming population of Aden as well. Often both commercial and religious networks overlapped, especially since sites of pilgrimage created markets too. Reese further demonstrates how a unique element of Aden's history was the tendency for denizens to revive ancient tombs instead of establishing entirely new shrines and mosques. These tombs were primarily funded by wealthy South Asians. On one level, this phenomenon suggests that the potency of the shrines was latent

through the years, their potential realized by local worshippers. The age of these tombs supported a drive toward an authenticity connected to earlier periods of Islamic history. Social capital takes ages to be built, after all. Moreover, these tombs formed conduits to other planes of existence that extend beyond physical death.

This desire to transcend physical and temporal boundaries was a common desire shared by many Adenis, and explains why many wished to be buried as closely to the saint as possible. Indeed, by winning the right to be near the saint, one's position as an "old" family was tacitly recognized by the state (p. 76). At the same time, the phenomenon also points towards localization since these South Asians, old denizens and newcomers alike, were possibly expressing their commitment to Aden, establishing parallel lineages of charity by financing the upkeep of tombs and renewing rituals at these sites. What does this tell us about the nature of Muslim community and belonging in the imperial context (p. 77)? At its most basic, Reese says, the construction of mosques and revival of tombs certainly signaled one's commitment to remaining in Aden long-term but of course this is also a holdover from before Aden became a British stronghold.

By focusing on Adeni qadis such as Rustom Ali and Yasin Khan, who streamlined Islamic law along colonial lines even as the number of scripturalist reformers increased, Reese effectively inserts Aden within the larger scheme of empire in the realm of Islamic law. He complicates collusion and collaboration in the appointment of Muslim elites in colonial government hierarchies. At times, it seemed to have gradually occurred, with traditional elites being transposed onto new colonial hierarchies, and at times new elites were appointed. One thing is for sure: the colonial period transformed the dynamics of Muslim power relations in Aden.

One major contribution of the book is an explication of the role of the realm of the unseen,

which is not easily articulated. The core of his book lies in chapter 5, where Reese drills down into the details of the “spiritual economy” by specifically focusing on two well-known but non-elite, marginalized groups based in Aden. The first group was the Jabarti, sweepers who were practitioners of Tambura, which was a spirit-possession cult from Sudan, while the second community consists of a group of low-status Ethiopian and Somali women who presided over the local practice of the well-known “zar” cult popular in East Africa. Their stories connected Aden even more intimately to East Africa and littoral Arabia. Their traditions had strong carnivalesque elements, and both became the targets of reformist elements in society in the 1920s. While the practitioners of Tambura succeeded in avoiding a total ban, the women who practiced Zar were entirely suppressed, prompting the women to petition the British government (pp. 124-25). Herein lies an example of the genius of Adenis in adapting to regime changes while being historically aware. Both sides of the debate invoked moral and religious precepts, as well as the concept of “tradition,” which British authorities appreciated. In other words, they characterized the disputes in ways that were legible to the new authorities.

Certainly, Reese’s book forms an important contribution to the study of the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, South Asia, and the Islamic world generally. Reese recasts Aden as a key geopolitical conjuncture embedded in several different worlds. What the book suggests is that each port city in these geographical fields could very well provide a vantage point outward to yield rich histories in their own right. His case studies that focus on marginalized groups will advance scholarship in these regions that has tended to focus on the moneyed and elite.

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