Chapter 5

The Islamic and Cultural Ethos of Hadhrami Businessmen

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is intended to shed some light on a group of businessmen (known as the Hadhramis) who achieved commercial success outside and inside Yemen (their country of origin) and to gain insights into the factors behind this success. Very little has been written about these people. Moreover, most of what has been said about them was written by Western academics, historians, or politicians. As such, very important Hadhrami characteristics were missing from those writings. This chapter focuses on some of those characteristics. Most interestingly, it draws, in the authors’ view, important conclusions of their implications for the success that many Hadhramis were able to achieve in business in some of the countries to which they migrated. The chapter takes a historical perspective by relying on secondary literature to record stories of Hadhrami commercial achievements as well as a small case study involving three highly successful Saudi businessmen of Hadhrami origin.
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INTRODUCTION

Most of the current and recent economic and social literature on Yemenis, as people, tends to focus more on the negative and/or struggling aspects of their lives. They were often portrayed as “deprived”, “struggling”, “uneducated” and “unskilled”, whether as rural or urban dwellers in their own country or as migrants living in the oil-rich neighbouring Gulf countries. Very little has been written on the entrepreneurial “credentials” of successful Yemenis with any serious investigation or analysis. By conducting this research we seek to shed some light on this particular issue and bridge this gap in research. In doing so, we chose to concentrate on the Hadhramis of Yemen. The Hadhramis are the inhabitants of the region of Hadhramaut which is a large tract of land to the east of the country (Yemen). Many Hadhramis migrated to various parts of Asia, Africa and Middle East and managed to build successful businesses and fortunes in their new homelands.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Our motivation for this research was also driven by our desire to establish a connection between the success of Hadhramis and their conservative Islamic upbringing and way of life. We argue in this chapter that many of the examples of successful Hadhrami business people might be the product of the values (such as trust, ethics, humility, social justice, hard work and charity) that they had gained from the intertwined relationship of their conservative Islamic upbringing and way of life. This claim is informed by our review and understanding of the literature of Hadhramis and by personal experience gained through living in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

The idea of associating religious beliefs and ethics to financial success is not new. Indeed, this idea was conceived decades ago through the writings of scholars such as Max Weber and Richard Henry Tawney. However, this belief (as will be explained in this chapter) is experiencing resurgent practitioner interest and scholarly research in modern times.

METHODOLOGY AND PLAN

To substantiate this claim, we rely on historical accounts and adopt a qualitative research methodology based on a small scale case study that is presented in this chapter which represents its empirical component. The use of case studies in research is a widely accepted methodology due to the fact that they offer insights that might not be achieved with other approaches. Much of what we know today
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