does not consider studies of Yemen’s mainstream Islamist party Islah, such as Jillian Schwedler’s book on Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen – the topic is far from being exhausted.

LEONIE NORTHEIDGE

1 Theo Padnos includes mention of Dar al-Hadith and the experiences there of foreign students like himself in his journalistic account of his time in Yemen (Undercover Muslim, 2011).


Aden was significant in Britain’s economy, global trade and military strategy. Its port, then the third busiest in the world, was the birthplace of its labour movement. Typically it was seen either as an outgrowth of British colonial rule and state-building and/or as a tool of proletarian opposition to British politics in the region. The author subscribes to the latter view and sees the growing tide of labour unrest in the 1950s and early 1960s, characterised by mass mobilisation, recurrent demonstrations and crippling strikes, as part of the wider Arab nationalist movement of the period.

Eisa’s book is based on a dissertation which won him an MA from Aden University in 2001. As a former member (1969–74) of PDRY’s Labour Organisation and a former General Secretary (1970–4) of the Transport and Communications Union, he is well qualified to chronicle the emergence, development and growth of trade unionism in Aden. He does this in three chapters, preceded by a prologue, in flowing jargon-free Arabic. The narrative ends with very helpful point summaries in Arabic and English marred only by the mal-positioning of scanned documents and the loss of words at the edges. A more serious loss of text arises from the fact that pages 46–64 and 69–72 are missing.

Why the brief period of study (1945–1963) and why the abrupt ending four years before independence are not explained.

Eisa utilised Arabic primary sources, Colonial Annual Reports and interviews which he conducted with five men who contributed to the early years of workers’ union formation. On British policy he used secondary sources, predominantly translated from English into Arabic.

Apart from its officially-sponsored links to the UK’s own labour movement, two major factors catalysed the development and growth of the workers’ movement in Aden: the Colony’s port and British Petroleum’s refinery which brought new technology, economic prosperity and a commensurate rise in the territory’s skilled and unskilled (mostly imported) workforce. Higher education produced Arab intellectual and political leadership and engendered heightened aspirations and a awareness of an independent destiny.

A young educated elite created and led the workers’ trade unions and labour movement in Aden. The few named leaders (Abdallah Fadhil Fare’, Ali Abdul-Rahman al-Aswadi, Muhsin al-‘Aini, Ali Abdul-Razaq and Mohammad Saeed Muswad) drafted its 1960 constitution and created an active cohesive front. In 1960 eight conglomerate unions joined and formed the Worker’s Congress. Muswad headed the Executive Board whilst Abdullah al-Asnag was General Secretary. All of the executives were Aden-based; the majority had strong links with North (Imamate) Yemen. One of the strengths of this book lies in its identification by name of leading members of the labour movement.

Despite the absence of a sister movement or political parties in Imamate Yemen, the notion of an indivisible Yemen is reflected in the composition of the movement’s leadership. Many originally hailed or had recently taken refuge in Aden from Imamate rule. The constitution of the People’s Socialist Party (PSP), the political arm of the labour movement, also considered Yemen as one. A few Aden labour executives such as al-Asnag and Muhsin al-‘Aini, went on to hold senior government posts in post-Imamate Yemen.

In solidarity with other Arab and international labour movements Aden’s unions supported demands for freedom by other Arab nations, particularly by Algeria and the Arab Maghreb. Strikes and boycotts of shipping directed against the economic interests of US and European powers were also seen as victories on the road to freedom. Yet, Eisa does not analyse the short or long-term effects they may have had on Aden and the area’s economic prosperity.

Eisa outlines the growing array of other contenders for political power in the post-colonial era. Almost all were associated with the wider Arab nationalist movement but were divided in ideology and their strategies for
winning power. A few, however, preferred to retain a direct connection with Britain with no declared aspiration to form a united Yemen.

The author does not explore the role, if any, of the movement or its individual members in the armed anti-colonial struggle or the bitter internecine conflicts of the period up to 1967. Neither does he discuss the movement’s equally interesting metamorphosis into an instrument of the post-colonial socialist establishment of which he was a senior member.

Since the workers’ movement described by Eisa reflected Adeni society of the day, not surprisingly its leadership, membership and narrative were male-dominated. The story is bereft of detail of women’s role in the independence movement, despite their active involvement in strikes, demonstrations, and in membership of the Peoples Socialist Party (PSP) and the ATUC. For enlightenment, the reader will need to turn to Asmaan Aqlan al-Asal’s *The state of Yemeni Women in Aden under British administration 1937–67*, Aden University Press, 2005 (pp. 184–190).

ADEL AL-AULAQI

Contesting Realities: The Public Sphere and Morality in Southern Yemen

‘Throughout its history, Aden has seldom left a visitor indifferent’, contends Dr Susanne Dahlgren, as she introduces the reader to the city that has also stimulated her own academic interest. And what makes Aden the focus of her study, is the fact that over the period of fifty years which her work negotiates (1950–2001) few other places in the Arab and the wider world have experienced such an array of socio-political changes in such quick succession. British colonial rule and the prolonged and painful decolonisation process gave way to the only Marxist state in Arabia, a rather short-lived political experiment, during the last years of which the author started her field research in South Yemen. And this independent state was subsequently subsumed under the more populous and traditionalist North Yemen to form what today is known as the Republic of Yemen.

Dahlgren’s work falls under the broad category of ethnography, in that she uses her interviews of no less than 311 Adeni families and her everyday observations in order to reconstruct the social dynamics, customs, behavioural norms pertaining to gender and family relations over the period of her study. She observes Adenis going about their daily affairs at university, the workplace, the courts of law (where gender and family relations are regulated by the state), social clubs, government offices, and ultimately within the household. Her study is by no means one-sided towards women, as she acknowledges the equally significant role played by men in engendering certain social norms. In this sense, *Contesting Realities* breaks new ground in South Yemeni scholarship; although historical developments and political upheavals of the second half of the 20th century in southern Arabia have been very well recorded, little emphasis has hitherto been placed on the ways in which local society responded to these changes, and the strategies of adaptation it employed.

The aim, therefore, of this book is to explore the evolving nature of social interaction in the public sphere in Aden. Thus, it attempts to conceptualise how different moral frameworks have influenced people’s behaviour, and attitudes over time. Under ‘moral frameworks’ the author groups the different sets of ideologies that dominated the political and social discourse in Aden at different periods of time; these are the local traditional customs, the revolutionary ideology of the socialist period, and Islamic morality of the post-unification era. After the initial section, which positions the book within its epistemological framework, and which might appeal less to the non-academic reader, follows a succession of very interesting and intelligible chapters on different aspects of public life in Aden during the colonial, socialist, and unification periods. The author then shares with the readers some of her characteristic case studies before pulling together her conclusions into her theoretical argument on morality and social praxis in Aden. The connecting thread of the book remains throughout the concept of *adab*, propriety, as the reserve of ‘properties one person embodies in their social interaction’. *Adab* is not only relative to one’s social position; it is rather in constant flux depending on the social context within which people find themselves during their everyday encounters, and which prescribe the appropriate moral framework from which Adenis freely borrow corresponding patterns of behaviour. In this sense, *adab* becomes an integral feature of Adeni identity; it embodies everything that distinguishes an Adeni from people from other parts of the country.

*Contesting Realities* not only fills in a void in our knowledge of Adeni society and historiography, refocusing our attention on the very people