



**Dying of Enforced Spinsterhood: #a#ramawt through the Eyes of #Al# A#mad B# Kath#r (1910-69)**

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**DYING OF ENFORCED SPINSTERHOOD: ḤADRAMAWT  
THROUGH THE EYES OF ‘ALĪ AḤMAD BĀ KATHĪR  
(1910–69)<sup>1</sup>**

BY

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*London*

*Introductory remarks*

A young widow of a noble although impoverished family meets a young man. They fall in love and want to marry, but her family prevents this from happening. Thereupon she falls ill and dies of broken heart. Upon hearing these news, her suitor in turn takes to the bed and dies shortly afterwards.

This basic plot of *Romeo and Juliet* could be situated almost anywhere in the modern world. As it stands, *Romeo* is called *Muḥammad*, his *Juliet* is named ‘*Alawīya*, and the setting is not in medieval Italy but in twentieth century *Say’ūn*, the main town of *Wādī Ḥadramawt*.<sup>2</sup> Until independence in 1967, *Say’ūn* was the capital of the *Kathīrī* sultanate of the interior, while the coast as well as the Western *Wādī Ḥadramawt* were controlled by the *Qu‘aitī* sultanate.

Situated more or less halfway between *Aden* and *Oman*, *Wādī Ḥadramawt* forms a deep, fertile valley, running parallel to the

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first given as a paper at the seminar for Middle Eastern History at SOAS. I would like to thank those present at the presentation for their comments. Furthermore, I would like to thank Ms *Zekra Zahawy* for help with the translation, *Christian Szyska* for generously sharing his materials on *Bā Kathīr*, and *Sylvaine Camelin*, *Gerhard Dannemann*, *Sabri Hafez*, *Christoph Herzog* and the editors of the *WI* for their comments. The research for the article was supported by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, *Bā Kathīr* translated—or rather adapted—“*Romeo and Juliet*” into Arabic in 1936. *Muḥammad Amīn Tawfīq*, ‘*Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr: a Study of Islamic Commitment in Modern Arabic Literature*. PhD Dissertation, Manchester 1980 (typescript), p. 206.

coast ca. 150 km (90 miles) inland. Until recently the Wādī was connected with the outside world mainly through the two ports of al-Shiḥr and al-Mukallā on the Indian Ocean. These links with other areas bordering the Indian Ocean have been historically as strong, or sometimes even stronger than those with other parts of Yemen which were linked to Ḥaḍramawt, besides the shipping routes through the Red Sea, by caravan routes through the desert of the "Empty Quarter" (*al-Rub' al-khālī*).

Since the 1880s, the connection with Southeast Asia, notably Singapore and Java, gained in importance, and in the 1920s many Ḥaḍramī emigrants had become so rich that their remittances allowed for the construction of enormous palaces in the major towns and villages of Ḥaḍramawt, the two most important ones being Say'ūn and Tarīm. But it was not only money which the emigrants sent—there was also a steady stream of visitors going back and forth, merchants, 'ulamā' and children whose concerned parents wanted them to become acquainted with the traditional Arab lifestyle and, since their mothers were usually of non-Arab origin, to learn the language. One such boy was 'Alī Aḥmad Bā Kathīr, born in Sourabaya in 1910 (1328), who, at the age of 10 (1919/20), travelled with his father to Say'ūn, where he was to live with an uncle, "a man of religion and literature".<sup>3</sup> It is the criticism of the situation in Ḥaḍramawt expressed by him, through his activities as well as through a play which form the topic of this article. The play is called "*Humām aw fi 'āsimat al-Aḥqāf*"—which translates as "Humām (name of main hero, meaning "the high-minded", "generous") or: In the capital of Ḥaḍramawt"<sup>4</sup>—that is Say'ūn.

In Sourabaya, Bā Kathīr had been attending a school run by a society called "*Jam'iyat al-islāh wa-l-irshād*" (Society for Reform and Guidance) and was one of its first graduates. Upon his arrival in Ḥaḍramawt, he started to attend the newly opened (1919)

<sup>3</sup> 'Abdallāh al-Tantāwī, *Dirāsa fi adab Bā Kathīr*, 1977 (no place or publisher), p. 5. Other biographical information can be found in Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir Bā Maṭraf, *al-Jāmi'*, vol. 3, Aden 1984 (2nd ed.), p. 63f. and Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-A'lām*, vol. 4, Beirut 1984 (6th ed.), p. 262f. On the custom of sending children to Ḥaḍramawt, c.f. van den Berg, *Le Hadhramout et les Colonies Arabes dans l'Archipel Indien*, Batavia 1886, p. 214.

<sup>4</sup> Saqqāf 'Alī al-Kāf, *Ḥaḍramawt 'abra arbā'a 'ashar qarnan*, Beirut 1990, p. 9. al-Aḥqāf is the name of the 46th sura of the Qur'an.

*Madrasat al-nahḍa al-ʿilmīya* (“School of scientific renaissance”), where he studied religion and Arabic.<sup>5</sup> After graduating, he became an administrator of the school, while continuing his education in traditional fashion in the *zāwiya* of his uncle, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Bā Kathīr.<sup>6</sup> Characteristically for the reformist milieu in which Bā Kathīr grew up, here again he was exposed to modernist thought, reading, besides such *salafī* classics as Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Taimīya, also the writings of the Yemeni reformist qāḍī al-Shawkānī with his emphasis on *ijtihād* and rejection of *taqlīd*, which is considered to be an unlawful doctrine (*bidʿa*).<sup>7</sup>

This interest in education which is exemplified in Bā Kathīr’s career can be seen as typical for Ḥaḍramī society in Indonesia and Ḥaḍramawt in the early 20th century. Although Ḥaḍramawt was famous for its religious learning, schools were—in spite of attempts in the 19th century to revive and adapt the traditional institutions and to establish new ones—rather few and far between and tended to be limited to a traditional type of religious instruction. Therefore, the impulse for a renewal of education had to come from Ḥaḍramīs abroad. This has been linked to their exposure to the colonial society in Southeast Asia with its quite different traditions, as well as to their close interest in developments in other Arab-Muslim countries such as Egypt, which was experiencing the development of Islamic modernism since the 1880s. By setting up their own system, instead of sending their children to Dutch schools or continuing the traditional type of Quranic schools, Ḥaḍramīs intended to combine some of the more “modern” subjects, such as mathematics, science, geography and languages with the teaching of religious sciences. A number of Ḥaḍramīs were also concerned that their children, growing up in

<sup>5</sup> Ahmad ʿAwād Bā Wazīr, “ʿAli Ahmad Bā Kathīr, sanawāt fi Jāwah wa-Ḥaḍramawt 1910–1932m.”, in *Wathāʾiq mahrajān Bā Kathīr*, Beirut 1988, p. 51–59, here p. 56. *Madrasat al-nahḍa* was founded in 1339/1919 according to Saʿīd ʿAwād Bā Wazīr, *al-Fikr wa-l-thaqāfa fi ʿl-tārīkh al-ḥaḍramī*, Cairo 1961, S. 165, c.f. p. 38 in ʿAbd al-Qādir Muḥammad al-Ṣabbān, *Madīnat Sayʿūn fi sutūr*, typescript, Sayʿūn 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmad ʿAwād Bā Wazīr (*op. cit.*), p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* and ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-ʿAshmāwī, *al-ittijāh al-islāmī fi āthār Bā Kathīr al-qiṣāṣiya wa-l-masrahiya*, Riyadh (?) 1409/1988–89, p. 32f. About al-Shawkānī, c.f. Bernard Haykel, “al-Shawkānī and the Jurisprudential Unity of Yemen”, in *REMM* 67 (1994), p. 53–65 and Husayn ibn ʿAbd Allah al-ʿAmri, *The Yemen in the 18th and 19th centuries, a political and intellectual history*, London 1985.

another culture and usually coming from mixed marriages, should learn the Arabic language.<sup>8</sup> This movement had started in Indonesia in 1905, but on the eve of World War I, it had spread to Ḥaḍramawt.<sup>9</sup> Mandal has pointed out that this interest in education of Ḥaḍramīs in Southeast Asia should be linked to the Dutch policy in the Netherland's East Indies discriminating against Ḥaḍramīs who were seen as economic competitors. This in turn induced the Ḥaḍramīs to re-define their own identity in terms of their ethnic, that is Arab, origin.<sup>10</sup>

As a consequence of migration, the rigid Ḥaḍramī stratification system was challenged for the first time on a larger scale. In Ḥaḍramawt, strict social divisions had existed between various groups, the most important being the one between the religious aristocracy, formed by *sāda* (sing. *sayyid*) or descendants of the prophet, and non-*sāda*, who in turn were subdivided into a number of other groups.<sup>11</sup> Group boundaries were mainly upheld through a complex system of symbols, and although the hierarchy did not reflect, for example, the economic position of status group members or their political power (*sāda* were, for example, at least theoretically barred from bearing arms, although they fulfilled the role of mediators in the war-ridden Wādī), it was overwhelmingly accepted as a moral ideal. By contrast, in the Netherlands East Indies political and concurrent social recognition was bestowed by the Dutch according to different criteria, including economic success. Thus, the highest position of *sāda* in traditional Ḥaḍramī society did not guarantee that they were recognised by the Dutch

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<sup>8</sup> According to Ahmad 'Awad Bā Wazīr (*op. cit.*), p. 55, Ḥaḍramī children in Indonesia were, until 1900, regularly ignorant of Arabic for lack of schools.

<sup>9</sup> This is the background of the appearance of the *Jam'iyat al-Ḥaqq* in Ḥaḍramawt in 1912/13, c.f. India Office Records, R/20/A/1409, Report of Sayyid 'Alawi b. Bubakr El Jifri and Say'un Archives, 3rd cat., Doc. no. 1330 (*Dustūr Jam'iyat al-ḥaqq*). Ahmad 'Awad Bā Wazīr (*op. cit.*), p. 55, gives as foundation date for the *Jam'iyat al-khayr* in Indonesia 1903, not 1905.

<sup>10</sup> C.f. Huub de Jonge, "Dutch Colonial Policy Pertaining to Hadhrami Immigrants", and Sumit Mandal, "Natural Leaders of Native Muslims: A Perspective on the Emergence of Arabs in Colonial Java". In Ulrike Freitag and William Clarence-Smith (eds): *Hadhrami traders, scholars and statesmen in the Indian Ocean, c. 1750s to 1960s*, Leiden 1997 (forthcoming) [henceforth quoted Freitag & Clarence-Smith].

<sup>11</sup> For details, c.f. Robert B. Serjeant, *The Sayyids of Ḥaḍramawt*, London 1957 and Abdalla S. Bujra, *The Politics of Stratification. A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town*, Oxford 1971.

as community leaders. For example, non-*sāda* such as Shaikh ‘Umar Manqūsh became headman of the Ḥaḍramīs in Batavia and Shaikh ‘Awad Sunqār obtained the same position in Solo.<sup>12</sup>

In time, Ḥaḍramīs abroad began to challenge the symbols of their old order. Umar Manqūsh, for example, refused to kiss the hand of a *sayyid* from the al-‘Aṭṭās family, causing public uproar. This conflict eventually created deep rifts in the community which was reflected in the reform movement’s split into ‘*Alawī*-s (named after their organisation, *al-rābiṭa al-‘alawīya*), who wanted to uphold this symbolic order, and *Irshādī*-s who criticized it. It should be added that although the ‘*Alawī* camp was led by *sāda*, and the *Irshādī* camp by non-*sāda*, both managed to rally support from other groups, that is, some *sāda* supported the *Irshādī* movement, and some *qabīlī*-s (tribesmen) the ‘*Alawī*-s.

### *Social conflict in Ḥaḍramawt*

The conflict in exile, during which both sides tried to rally support from the British and Dutch colonial powers, as well as from other sources, is well documented and has received much attention in recent scholarship.<sup>13</sup> What has been much less thoroughly discussed, is the social and religious criticism which had developed in Ḥaḍramawt itself in the wake of the Indonesian discussions.<sup>14</sup> Certainly Ḥaḍramawt was not in the forefront of the international Islamic reformist debate, not least due to its comparative geographical remoteness. Whatever movement there was, was further hindered by the local rulers as well as the British colonial authorities in Aden who both feared the upsetting effects such a

<sup>12</sup> Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900–1942*, Singapore 1973, p. 61, n. 85.

<sup>13</sup> Huub de Jonge, “Discord and Solidarity among the Arabs in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900–1945”, *Indonesia* 55 (1993), p. 73–90, and Joseph Kostiner, “The Impact of the Ḥaḍramī Emigrants in the East Indies on Islamic Modernism and Social Change in the Ḥaḍramawt during the 20th Century”. In: Raphael Israeli/Anthony H. Jones: *Islam in Asia*. Vol. III: *Southeast and East Asia*. Boulder, Jerusalem 1984, p. 206–237.

<sup>14</sup> Notable exceptions are Alexander Knysh, “The Cult of Saints and the Reformist Discourse in Ḥaḍramī Islam”, Freitag & Clarence-Smith, and Abdalla S. Bujra (*op. cit.*).

conflict might have on the already fragile balance of power, and therefore their rule. Consequently, local articulations of dissatisfaction were not widely reported beyond the borders of Ḥaḍramawt and the Ḥaḍramī diaspora communities, although a correspondent of the Cairene reformist journal *al-Manār* reported already in 1906 that reformist views regarding the dubiousness of the visitation of tombs had reached Ḥaḍramawt via merchants in Java.<sup>15</sup> Because of the scarceness of evidence, Bā Kathīr's career, as well as his early work, bears witness to the type of social activism that did exist in the late 1920s and early 1930s, that is before the onset of formal British control through advisers in 1937.

While the religious dimension of the conflict and the underlying social tension between *sāda* and non-*sāda* has received much attention from contemporary and current local authors of both sides, and has been the focus of works by Serjeant, Bujra and Knysh,<sup>16</sup> this discussion has tended to disregard the more practical or secular concerns. However, they seem to have been very much of an issue amongst the educated at the time. Around 1930, handwritten journals and political societies became popular mediums for these debates.<sup>17</sup> An example of such a journal was the monthly *al-Taḥḍīb* (edification) in Say'ūn, founded by Bā Kathīr and a certain Muḥammad b. Ḥasan Bā Rajā' in 1349/50 (1930/31). *Al-Taḥḍīb* aimed

"to serve the fatherland [*waṭan*] and instruct the Ḥaḍramī people [*sha'b*], to enlighten the growing ideas and to instill the spirit of science and literature [*adab*] in them, to direct the nation towards noble morals, to criticise negative traditions which gnawed at the body of the Ḥaḍramī nation [*umma*], weaken her and undermine her strength, causing her menfolk to leave the country, completely alienating them and ignoring the painful feelings when they think back about their specificities".<sup>18</sup>

It ceased publication after ten months, presumably because of its

<sup>15</sup> Ḥusain b. 'Abdallāh al-'Amrī, *al-Manār wa-l-Yaman 1315-1354/1898-1935*, Damascus 1987, p. 56f.

<sup>16</sup> Serjeant, *The Sayyids of Hadramaut* (*op. cit.*) and Knysh (*op. cit.*).

<sup>17</sup> For a list of such societies and journals in Say'ūn, see 'Abd al-Qādir al-Ṣabbān, *Madīnat Say'ūn fī sutūr* (*op. cit.*), p. 39-41.

<sup>18</sup> Aḥmad 'Awaḍ Bā Wazīr (*op. cit.*), p. 58, quoting from the first issue of *al-Taḥḍīb*.

reformist stance, which led to *sayyid* opposition against an article on the veneration of the saints of Ḥaḍramawt.<sup>19</sup> It might well have been in the context of this conflict, as well as because of the death of his young wife,<sup>20</sup> that Bā Kathīr decided in 1932 to leave Ḥaḍramawt for Aden. After travelling in Ethiopia and Somalia for some time, Bā Kathīr moved on to Mecca in the same year.

A closer examination of the journal which was in 1350 (1931/32) printed in Cairo at the expense of the well-known philanthropist Abū Bakr b. Shaykh al-Kāf, is still outstanding.<sup>20a</sup> However, many of the issues raised in Bā Kathīr's play are corroborated by the statutes of a local association, one of its founder members being Bā Kathīr. This confirms also his early and wide-ranging political activism. The "Justice Society" (*Jam'iyat al-'adl*) was established in Say'un in 1931.

The statutes of the society are typical for its concern to spread the Islamic *da'wa* and promote education, but also for its wider social concerns, which it did not hesitate to formulate in clear terms, demanding

- the elimination of discord, if possible through flexible negotiation (*'alā layyin al-qawl*), else, if all efforts fail, through use of force,
- that consideration be given to the lot of guildmembers and craftsmen. In particular, the society demanded the imposition of a just ceiling to exorbitant wages without, however, harming either side [in the conflict over wages],
- improvement of the alimentary situation through added attention for agriculture, old style handicrafts and modern type industries,
- establishment of a municipal administration and arrangement of customary laws with regard to traders, carriers and those in charge of long distance trade [beduins] in a just way on which the notables (*shuyūkh al-balad*) and traders agree.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. and Bā Maṭraf, *al-Jāmi'*, vol. 3 (*op. cit.*), p. 63.

<sup>20</sup> Muḥammad Abū Bakr Ḥamid, "Bā Kathīr wa-ṣafāḥāt sa'ūdiya majhūla tun-shar li-awwal marra min adabih fi 'l-malik 'Abd al-'Azīz", *al-Ḥaras al-waṭāni*, March-April 1995, p. 17-29, here p. 21.

<sup>20a</sup> I only obtained this information, and a copy of the journal, after the present article was finished.



– establishment of an administration for specific taxes (*al-khalāʾ wa-l-kharaja*) and reforms for the peasants in a just way appropriate to the spirit of the current age.<sup>21</sup>

While the demand for peace was a long-standing concern of Ḥadramī urban and rural dwellers who were plagued by constant inter-tribal warfare,<sup>22</sup> the document also provides us with a rare glimpse of economic conflicts between employers and employees which otherwise have to be conjectured.<sup>23</sup> It would be highly interesting to learn more about this issue, particularly, to what extent the high wages were linked, directly or indirectly, to migration—a problem from which contemporary Yemen clearly suffers. However, such information remains very scarce. The *Jamʿiyat al-ʿadl* seems at least to have achieved its aim of a limitation to wages, as the issuing of the decree by the Kathirī Sultan (15. *Ṣafar* 1351 = 20.6.1932) suggests.<sup>24</sup> Since not much is known about its other activities, sources such as the play provide a welcome addition for the historian.

### *Bā Kathir's choice of a new literary genre*

Many of the concerns voiced in the statutes of this society are very closely reflected in Bā Kathir's play, which can therefore be taken as a rather thinly disguised document of social criticism, or, in the words of Serjeant, as a "documentary of social attitudes before the Second World War".<sup>25</sup> This reading seems particularly justified by Bā Kathir's introduction to the play, which provides a partisan account of the Ḥadramī conflict in Indonesia. It aimed at giving non-Ḥadramī readers "a general idea about the circum-

<sup>21</sup> 'Abd al-Qādir al-Ṣabbān, *Nushū' al-ḥaraka al-ʿummāliya wa-tatawwuruhā bi-Wādī Ḥadramawt*, Say'un 1982 (typescript), p. 11–12.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the writings of the *Jamʿiya al-Kathiriya*.

<sup>23</sup> For a comment on this issue, c.f. al-Ṣabbān, *Nushū' al-ḥaraka al-ʿummāliya wa-tatawwuruhā bi-Wādī Ḥadramawt* (*op. cit.*), p. 22, and for the document issued subsequently by the Sultan together with local notables, see Michael Rodionov, "The Labour Code of the Sultan 'Alī b. al-Manṣūr al-Kathiri: 1351/1932". *Papers*.

<sup>24</sup> 'Abd al-Qādir al-Ṣabbān, *Nushū' al-ḥaraka al-ʿummāliya wa-tatawwuruhā bi-Wādī Ḥadramawt* (*op. cit.*), p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> R.B. Serjeant, "Historians and Historiography of Ḥadramawt", BSOAS 25 (1962), p. 238–261, here p. 250.

stances which inspired me to write this rhymed story”, thus pointing to a close link between the play and Ḥaḍramī realities.<sup>26</sup>

As a literary work, the play was no great success, in stark contrast to the popularity of Bā Kathīr’s later plays and novels which were enthusiastically received in Egyptian popular circles and amongst the Muslim Brotherhood, of which he became a member.<sup>27</sup> The play, written in traditional Arab metres, has been characterized by literary critics as weak with regard to the plot and is, by the author’s own admission, “no more than poems attached together”.<sup>28</sup> It can, he claims, “be called a play only when stretching the term because it lacks the basic ingredients of a play in terms of structure, movement, dialogue and character”.<sup>29</sup>

These literary weaknesses are not surprising. Bā Kathīr only came across the literary genre of plays in the Ḥijāz. He was pleased to discover in the work of the Egyptian poet and playwright Aḥmad Shawqī “that the poetry which I knew was used to express the self of the poet or any other topic in an objective way. [...] I was amazed to realize that poetry could be transformed into a dialogue or discussion between two or more persons so that each person expressed his own personality and views”.<sup>30</sup> *Humām* was written in the summer of 1933 during a holiday in Tā’if, and presents Bā Kathīr’s first experiment with the new genre.

It is, however, highly symbolic that Bā Kathīr chose literature, and in particular the new genre of drama, to express his revolutionary feelings towards the situation in Ḥaḍramawt.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, he felt that a liberation from a tradition which was perceived as oppressing would go hand in hand with a literary revolution. Not surprisingly, therefore, the young Ḥaḍramī author who had just

<sup>26</sup> ‘Alī Aḥmad Bā Kathīr, *Humām aw fi ‘āšimat al-Aḥqāf*, Cairo, 2nd ed. 1965, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, Oxford 1969, p. 292f. names him as an author with close links to the Muslim Brotherhood, c.f. al-‘Ashmāwī (*op. cit.*), p. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Muḥammad Amin Tawfiq, ‘Alī Aḥmad Bā Kathīr: A Study of Islamic Commitment in Modern Arabic Literature (*op. cit.*), p. 210.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Alī Aḥmad Bā Kathīr, *Muḥādarāt fi fann al-masraḥiya min khilāl al-shakhsīya*, Cairo 1958, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> On the use of literature to express social criticism of Islamic practices, c.f. Jamal Malik, “The Literary Critique of Islamic Popular Religion in the Guise of Traditional Mysticism, or the Abused Woman”, in *WI* 35 (1995), p. 70–94.

discovered himself a new medium, mocks in his play traditionalist poets: “al-Hāmīdī truly describes tea in an ingenious fashion [...]. We have really had a literary revival [*nahḍa*] which cannot be denied. It has civilized [*‘amarat*] our Wādī [...]” (p. 37).

Incidentally, Bā Kathīr’s approach to the new genre, combining the traditional form of poetry with the dramatic form, is not only interesting as far as the process of literary development is concerned. It also is significant with regard to the play’s value as a historical source since poems are, in general Ḥaḍramī opinion, a highly treasured store of collective historical memory.

### *A typical Ḥaḍramī saga*

Humām, the main hero, shows many similarities with the author, not only with regard to his reformist zeal, which further emphasizes the realism if not of the play then of the issues addressed. Like the author, who travelled to Indonesia in 1927–28,<sup>32</sup> he spends some time in Indonesia—although Humām is not depicted as having been born there. Thus, Humām is presented as the prototypical Ḥaḍramī of the interior who sets out to earn money although he, in contrast to most of his compatriots, returns after two years to his homeland. However, Humām is depicted as having travelled to Egypt and Syria and having turned into a good reformer prior to the actual onset of the play (p. 55). This is a rather plain hint at the influence which Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā had among Ḥaḍramī reformers at home and abroad, mainly through al-Manār, but also through teachers brought to the newly founded Ḥaḍramī schools in Java.<sup>33</sup> And indeed, towards the beginning of the play, Humām has a meeting with a number of people of letters, during which he exclaims “Today a renaissance (*nahḍa*) has started in the Islamic world which revives it, and returns to the true religion its original strength (p. 41), it

<sup>32</sup> “‘Ali Aḥmad Bā Kathīr ... fi suṭūr”, in *Wathā’iq mahrajān Bā Kathīr*, Beirut 1988, p. 5–7, here p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> It is no accident that the play was first printed by the Cairine *al-Maṭba‘a al-salaḥīya* which was run by Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb, the well-known Syrian neo-*salaḥī* writer, al-Tantāwī (*op. cit.*), p. 13. Incidentally, al-Manār is among the items preserved in the Bā Kathīr museum in Say‘ūn.

has declared a fierce war on arbitrary opinions and innovations (*bidaʿ*) including those which are associated with the *shīʿa*" (p. 42). With this statement, which we can safely take as Bā Kathīr's personal credo, Humām sets the tone for his reformist stance along *salafī* lines. Interestingly enough, it seems to confirm the conclusion of some scholars that there were *shīʿī* tendencies among certain Ḥaḍramī theologians and scholars of *sayyid*-descent.<sup>34</sup>

Later, after having returned from Indonesia to South Arabia and married his beloved Ḥusn ("beauty" or "perfection"), Humām leaves for Mecca to thank God for the fulfilment of his wishes, while his wife is plagued by forebodings of death. While in Mecca, he learns of the death of his beloved wife as well as that of his best friend and the latter's love, Muḥammad and ʿAlawīya. This is a further autobiographical reference as Bā Kathīr left Ḥaḍramawt, although under somewhat different circumstances, after his first (Ḥaḍramī) wife had died in childbirth, which left a deep impression on the author.<sup>35</sup> Humām, upon receiving the news, breaks down and is only comforted by a visit to the Kaʿba and the Zamzam fountain. The play ends with Humām's appeal to God to let knowledge, moral behaviour and guidance prevail in Ḥaḍramawt over ignorance and folly (p. 126). This can be interpreted as a reference not only to the author's own hopes for enlightenment in Ḥaḍramawt but also to his resolution to combat ignorance. Bā Kathīr pursued this goal by continuing his education in Egypt from 1934 onwards, first through the study of Islamic law (*fiqh*) at al-Azhar. He then became a student of English literature, and eventually a teacher and playwright. In his literary works, on which his fame is based, he further developed the reformist agenda which characterizes his first play.

The main story, that of Humām, has already been roughly outlined above, without, however, mentioning the obstacles he encounters. Humām first has to bribe the corrupt patron of a shrine (*wāli*), in order to convince Ḥusn's guardian—her paternal

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<sup>34</sup> See Werner Ende, "Schīitische Tendenzen bei sunnitischen Sayyids aus Ḥaḍramaut: Muḥammad b. ʿAqīl al-ʿAlawī (1863–1931)", in *Der Islam* (Berlin, New York) 50 (1973), p. 82–97 and Azyumardi Azra, *Hadhrami Scholars in the Malay-Indonesian Diaspora: A Preliminary Study of Sayyid ʿUthman*, in Freitag & Clarence-Smith.

<sup>35</sup> ʿAli Aḥmad Bā Kathīr, *Muḥādarāt* (*op. cit.*), p. 2.

uncle—to allow her marriage with Humām. In the context of his marriage plans, he then has to travel to Indonesia, presumably to earn the required money for the dowry and bribery before reaching his goal.

The unhappy love-story of ‘Alawīya, a *sayyida* and Muḥammad, Humām’s best friend and fellow reformer, sketched out roughly at the beginning of this article, runs parallel to the main plot. ‘Alawīya was a friend of both Humām’s sister Zahra (“Flower”)—who spreads the reformist message in women’s gatherings—and Ḥusn. Muḥammad met her when she spent two days at his house caring for both his sister and maternal aunt who had fallen ill. She showed great sympathy for the plight of Muḥammad’s family and Muḥammad happened to catch a glimpse of her face through the veil, upon which he fell in love.

#### *The symbolism of gender*

Let us consider ‘Alawīya’s fate somewhat closer. She has lost both of her parents, as well as her husband, at young age. Due to her poverty, which even forced her to help out in another household and thus to pursue a certainly very un-*sayyidly* occupation, she could not find another suitor in spite of her high moral qualities and beauty (p. 28–30). Zahra, relating this tale to her brother, explains the situation thus:

“The young men of this region do not celebrate beauty, but look for money, and the money is their bride to which they become engaged.” (p. 30).

However, when Muḥammad appears as a suitor, ‘Alawīya’s relatives do not consent to the proposed marriage. Although they themselves had never cared for ‘Alawīya or provided for her, they start to mingle in her affairs and threaten her in case she pursues the idea of marriage to Muḥammad. Although it is not spelt out very clearly, they seem to contest Muḥammad’s *kafā’a* or eligibility to marry ‘Alawīya, presumably because he is held to be of non-*sayyid* stock. The situation might have been exacerbated because ‘Alawīya came from a family of ‘*ulamā*’ and *imām*-s. Because of the principle of patrilineity, *sayyid* men were not confronted with simi-

lar problems. As already discussed, 'Alawīya falls ill, confirming, before her death, that Muḥammad was more than her equal in terms of his noble principles. The deeply saddened Muḥammad tells us on his deathbed, that he found death easier to bear than to boast of his noble origin (implying that he was, after all, fulfilling the criteria of *kafā'a*). However, he wanted to be recognized for his convictions and deeds, rather than be venerated on the grounds of his noble descent (p. 119). This passage plays out in dramatic form the conflict between a stagnant tradition which bestows honour on the grounds of genealogy, regardless of individual merit, and the *salafī* approach which is based on the reform of each individual's morality, and accords recognition exclusively on these grounds.

At the same time, Muḥammad's family seems to have been poor, which in itself caused problems due to the moral prescriptions for *sayyid*-ly behaviour. At one point, Muḥammad relates that they did not have any food in their household, because the only breadwinner, his uncle, had been forced to leave Ḥaḍramawt (p. 102). Apparently, that uncle had been a trader, and as such attacked by his brothers and relatives for threatening their high standing in society by trading and doing business in the market. Ḥaḍramī *sāda*, as well as their relatives in North Yemen, were not supposed to enter the market, and even less to trade there.<sup>36</sup> The way this episode is presented makes it a very clear attack on precepts which do not conform to reality. Anecdotal evidence obtained in Ḥaḍramawt in the summer of 1995 suggests that indeed economic pressures of this kind forced many *sāda* to emigrate. I was told that, while *sāda* had been limited to rather few professions in Ḥaḍramawt, which actually had caused the poorer families among them severe hardships, abroad they had felt free to take up any occupations, and therefore chosen to leave.

With the story of 'Alawīya and Muḥammad, Bā Kathir touches upon the very heart of the 'Alawī-*Irshādi* conflict mentioned above.

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<sup>36</sup> C.f. Serjeant, *The Saiyids of Ḥaḍramawt*, London 1957, p. 21 and Muḥammad b. Ḥāshim, *Tārīkh al-dawla al-kathiriya*, Cairo (place not indicated in book, according to Serjeant, *ibid.*, p. 17, n. 2 it was published in Cairo) 1948, p. 128. For the North Yemeni *sāda*, c.f. Gabriele vom Bruck, "A House turned inside out: Space and gender relations in Sana'a", Paper presented at the SOAS conference "Yemen: Process of Change" 1990.

After all, it was the issue of a *sayyida* marrying an Indian Muslim of controversial *sayyid* descent which brought about, in 1913, the split of the reform movement into 'Alawī-s and *Irshādi*-s. It is significant that it was the issue of (supposed) hypogamy—and not the other grievances such as kissing of the hands or the fight for the use of the title *sayyid*<sup>37</sup>—which caused the original split. This seems to indicate that the very roots of the social system were perceived to be in danger, because marriage eligibility is one of the most significant markers of community boundaries.<sup>38</sup> In Ḥaḍramawt today most of the symbols of *sayyid* authority have lost their compelling character: One may nowadays, but does not have to kiss the hand of a *sayyid*, *sāda* work in most occupations, they may, but need not be addressed with the honorific titles *ḥabīb* or *sayyid*, the latter of which has come to mean simply “sir”, dress codes have fallen etc. However, the marriage of *sayyida*-s to non-*sāda* has remained an absolute exception, at least in the Wādī. *Sāda* still relate cases of such marriages, which occurred during socialist times, with unabated disgust.

Interestingly enough, Bā Kathīr follows the historical case in so far as there are doubts about Muḥammad's *kafā'a*. By pointing to the fact that Muḥammad actually is of noble descent, he avoids to alienate *sayyid*-readers who might take offense at the suggestion of such a marriage in spite of subscribing to Bā Kathīr's views in principle. Instead, he depicts in Muḥammad a young *sayyid* who is just as enthusiastic a reformer as the non-*sayyid* Humām and quite voluntarily gives up the emphasis on his status. In a similar vein, Humām, who is at one stage accused by some 'ulamā' of being a partisan of the *Irshādi*-movement, responds categorically: “I don't know the *irshādiyya*, nor do I know the *rābiṭa* (*al-'alawīya*, the 'Alawī organisation), I know only *islāmiyya*” (p. 44). This *islāmiyya* is explic-

<sup>37</sup> C.f. de Jonge, *Discord and Solidarity* (*op. cit.*), p. 82–84 and Say'ūn Archives, 1st cat., doc. no. 193 and 194.

<sup>38</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, *Woman – Nation – State*, Basingstoke 1989, Introduction, p. 1–15, here p. 7. The problem of the ban on hypogamy in economic and social situations, which seem to favour this practice seems to be a widely spread problem, although somewhat underresearched. For the North Yemen, see Gabriele vom Bruck, “Heiratspolitik der ‘Prophetennachfahren’”, in *Saeculum* 40 (1989), p. 272–295. An interesting way of dealing with such a conflict is described by Nancy Tapper, *Bartered Brides, Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society*, p. 58–60.

itly linked to the Egyptian reform movement in the following continuation of Humām's confession of faith: "I do not know anything but the call of Jamāl al-Dīn [al-Afgānī]" [*anā lā a'rif illā da'watan (li-Jamāl al-Dīn)*] (p. 44). This confirms Knysh's reading of Bā Kathīr as a reformer who tried to surmount the descent divide between the reformers, not least by depicting the *sayyid* Muḥammad and his non-*sayyid* friend Humām struggling side by side for the same reformist aims.<sup>39</sup>

Although Bā Kathīr most likely had this historical precedent—which lends itself so readily for literary adaptation—in mind when writing his play, the problem of *sayyida*-s to find a suitable husband seems have been a real one. The following episode recorded by Bujra in the aftermath of the (North)Yemeni revolution in 1962 may serve as an indicator. In the revolution, the Zaydī Imām, himself of course a *sayyid*, was overthrown. Bujra describes the increasing polarisation in the Ḥaḍramī town of Ḥurayḍa following the spreading of news about the revolution, which clearly set the local *sāda*, all from the well-known 'Aṭṭās family, against the rest of the population, and particularly the lowest status groups. However, there was a notable exception: "It was even said", Bujra reports, "that some 'Aṭṭās widows were heard muttering a welcome to the Revolution, because when it came to Ḥuraidah"—and now he quotes the rumors literally—"it will bring freedom to marry",—that is"—explains Bujra—"to marry non-'Aṭṭās".<sup>40</sup>

By letting both Muḥammad and 'Alawiya die, Bā Kathīr emphasizes that this problem is one which concerns both, women and men, with equally grave consequences. It is, however, not only with regard to this particular issue that Bā Kathīr shows a concern for gender-related issues. Rather, this is a theme which runs not only through this play but through his entire oeuvre, and is constantly interwoven with other topics of reformist concern.<sup>41</sup> This phenomenon is in line with the attention which was given to the "woman question" by many of the reformist and nationalist move-

<sup>39</sup> Knysh, (*op. cit.*), p. 19f. and Bā Kathīr, *Humām*, introduction, p. 14–19.

<sup>40</sup> Bujra (*op. cit.*), p. 181.

<sup>41</sup> Muhammad Amin Tawfiq, *al-Islām wa-l-iltizām*, London (Network Arabic Publishing & Printing 1987), p. 114, emphasizes that Bā Kathīr regularly depicts women as active members of the Muslim society. C.f. al-'Ashmāwī (*op. cit.*), p. 151–166.



ments in the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> Women are, in their role as mothers and thus as the main socialisers of children, perceived as important carriers and transmitters of social meaning,<sup>43</sup> or in the words of Bā Kathīr's hero, "the right guidance of a people comes from the right guidance of their mothers" (*hudā al-sha'b min hudā ummahāt al-sha'b*) (p. 27). The discussion of women's ideal social role is a regular topic of movements for social change, quite independently of the ideological outlook of these movements and thus their concrete positions (secularists in Turkey evoked the "woman question" as much as the leaders of the Iranian revolution).<sup>44</sup>

*Migration and its consequences for family life*

Bā Kathīr emphasizes two more points which are relevant to gender relations. The first concerns the controversial issue of migration. Although Ḥaḍramī society was largely dependent on remittances on an economic level, migration was seen as something of a mixed blessing. Not surprisingly, therefore, it has been taken up in Ḥaḍramī literature, mainly poetry, particularly since the 10th century of the *hijra* (16th c. A.C.). Migration has been discussed under various aspects, covering, among other things, the reasons of emigration, feelings of estrangement, the religious impact, the problems of returnees etc.<sup>45</sup> Often Ḥaḍramīs ended up torn between two worlds, as the poet Aḥmad 'Abdallāh al-Saqqāf (1881/82–1948/49) describes, who himself died on the boat that was meant to take him back to Ḥaḍramawt. He conjures up the image of memories, only to add that "they tear my heart involuntarily, half of it is abroad, and half at home, the *mahjar* [exile] has turned sour, and in the Wādī there is poverty".<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> C.f. Deniz Kandiyoti, "End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey", p. 22–47 and Margot Badran, "Competing Agenda: Feminists, Islam and the state in 19th and 20th Century Egypt", p. 201–236, both in Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Women, Islam & the State*, Basingstoke, London 1991.

<sup>43</sup> Yuval-Davis and Anthias (*op. cit.*), p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> C.f. Ja'far Muḥammad al-Saqqāf, *Lamahāt 'an al-aḡānī wa-l-raqaṣāt al-sha'biya fi Muhāfazat Ḥaḍramawt*, Aden (o.D.), p. 35–74, Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir Bā Maṭraf, *al-Hijra al-yamaniya*, Mukalla 1970 (typescript), p. 39–43, Eng Seng Ho, "Ḥaḍramīs Abroad in Ḥaḍramawt: The Muwalladīn", in Freitag & Clarence-Smith.

<sup>46</sup> Aḥmad 'Abdallāh al-Saqqāf, *cit. after* Ja'far al-Saqqāf (*op. cit.*), p. 49.

The Ḥaḍramī *hijra* or emigration was almost exclusively a male affair, because embarking on a lengthy journey in rather crowded circumstances would almost inevitably have endangered the separation of the sexes which was generally observed in Ḥaḍramī towns. The only noted exceptions to this rule seem to have been some tribeswomen, who occasionally accompanied their husbands to East Africa.<sup>47</sup> Over the last two or three decades, this pattern (as well as the destination of migrants and the means of travel) has changed markedly and now many women follow their husbands abroad.<sup>48</sup> In the 1920s and 30s, when Bā Kathir observed Ḥaḍramī life, this would still have been unimaginable. The plight of the migrant, very often newlywed young men, is vividly described in Humām's journey to the coast, from where he embarked on his journey to Indonesia. "Slow, oh slow, my donkey, you remove me from my loved one! ... I see you as a bier that moves with my slight body, but to a destination other than the graves of the loved ones!" (p. 78). On his way, he passes deserted villages which give him ample occasion to embark on a long monologue about how agriculture could be revived if only the population was willing to cooperate, share out water evenly and care for the land (p. 79f.). Although this touches on the issue of agricultural reform more than on migration, the context implies that with such reforms, migration would become less compelling. Equally, Humām's joy upon his return to the coast of Ḥaḍramawt is overwhelming—he cannot wait to reach the Wādī. And significantly it is again when he is absent from Ḥaḍramawt—this time in Mecca—that he learns of the death of Ḥusn, Muḥammad and 'Alawiya.

But it is not just the migrants who are shown to be suffering from their economically motivated departure, but also their families who were left behind. Frequently, migrants stayed in the *mahjar* for very long periods of time, or even until their death, establishing new families abroad. This holds particularly true for migrants to Southeast Asia, who, due to the high costs of the journey, were often prevented from returning.<sup>49</sup> If they did return,

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<sup>47</sup> C.f. R. Serjeant, "Sex, Birth, Circumcision: Some Notes from South-West Arabia". In A. Leidlmaier (ed.), *Hermann von Wissmann-Festschrift*, Tübingen 1962, p. 193–208, here p. 198; and Doreen Ingrams, *A Time in Arabia*, London 1970, p. 82.

<sup>48</sup> Bā Maṭraf, *al-Hijra al-yamaniya* (op. cit.), p. 60.

<sup>49</sup> Ja'far al-Saqqāf, (op. cit.), p. 49.

however, they often brought their new wives along. Van der Meulen and von Wissmann, travelling through Ḥaḍramawt in 1932, noticed Chinese and Javanese women in the towns of Ḥurayḍa and Tarīm.<sup>50</sup> Presumably, this did not always cause great joy among the Ḥaḍramī wives who had been eagerly waiting for their husbands to return.

Husn's father seems to be one of these long-term migrants, which is why her paternal uncle has been appointed her legal guardian. The above described situation thus lies at the root of her problems in obtaining the permission to marry Humām. As for herself, Husn states in a letter to Humām before his departure that "I am a girl, and my affairs are not in my own hands" (p. 77). She refers Humām to her mother who however, for the same reasons, is also at the mercy of the uncle's decisions. Explaining the situation of Zahra, who acts as a go-between for Humām and Husn, the mother gives vent to her frustration as follows:

"Oh, if only Sa'd was with us, he would have taken a decision to do the right thing where we have failed. But he has been away from us for nine years, four of them in the land of Java, which eats the men, it swallows them up. He went to gather money for us, so that we may enjoy it. Oh misfortune, what was amassed kept him away, and how much he has amassed!! What good does riches if one loses the family and home. I married off (my oldest daughter) Mazana and she returned to my house without her dowry [in order to be able to obtain her divorce] (65). She was asked: Where is your father? and would not answer, and cried. And now here is her sister (Husn) going to be married. Oh, what a miserable life in which the heart is torn." (66)

### *Gender equality and female education*

The above selection of situations and quotations demonstrates clearly that Bā Kathīr can be called a fervent advocate for women's equal rights.<sup>51</sup> This raises, however, another issue: Bā Kathīr's conviction that equal rights need to be informed by a proper education. Humām's sister Zahra as the exemplary Muslim woman is introduced in the very first scene, describing both the ideal con-

<sup>50</sup> D. Van der Meulen/H. von Wissmann, *Hadramaut, Some of its Mysteries Unveiled*, Leiden 1932, p. 96, 121.

<sup>51</sup> C.f. al-'Ashmāwī (*op. cit.*), p. 162-166.

duct of women and how she spreads the message. Although at that stage certainly not knowing about her, Bā Kathīr depicts in Zahra a woman with close similarities to such contemporary Egyptian Muslim activists as Zaynab al-Ghazālī.<sup>52</sup> This is Zahra's description of her activities:

"Yesterday a group of us assembled at a wedding gathering in the house of our father's neighbour, and a *sharīfa* joined us [most likely a reference to 'Alawīya] who was both beautiful and friendly, calm and intelligent. She had heard me—I had not noticed—giving a lesson to those present, in which I spoke of the *akhbār* [history] of the famous women in Islam. What they [the audience] answered to me was noteworthy. They were pleased by the talk about the ladies who excelled men in terms of knowledge [*'ilm*] and religion. Then I urged them that they should come close to these shining examples, and follow them. I said that men are not worthier than we are, as far as religious learning is concerned, but on our level. It is knowledge by which we understand the religion, and we were not barred from it. The most important thing is the education of the children, to teach them discipline in order to make them capable workers. We are the leaders of our time. The life of the people of our generation, and their death, is in our hands! If we want, we can make mankind happy, and we can spoil their lives, if we wish. We have duties towards our creator [...]. How can we, if we remain ignorant, ever obtain God's trust? They shouted into the ears of the men: Is learning [*'ilm*] not clearly a duty [*ḥard*] of women? How did you abandon the girls to ignorance, and only educated the boys? Did you open schools for the girls, when you opened schools for the boys?" (p. 27f.)

Once more, Bā Kathīr hints at existing practices and shortcomings that can be substantiated from other sources. Freya Stark reports that during her visit in Say'ūn in 1934, she met a widow who lived along with her children and regularly read religious texts to a group of other women. She also is reported to have written poetry.<sup>53</sup> According to Doreen Ingrams, this was a *sharīfa* (or *sayyida*) called 'Alawīya,<sup>54</sup> combining in her person the characteristics of Bā Kathīr's 'Alawīya with those of Zahra. Travellers also mention incidents where young women taught girls reading and writing.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> C.f. Miriam Cooke, "Zaynab al-Ghazālī: Saint or Subversive?", in *WI* 34 (1994), p. 1–20.

<sup>53</sup> Freya Stark, *The Southern Gates of Arabia. A Journey in the Hadhramaut*, London 1971<sup>9</sup>, p. 198, 201.

<sup>54</sup> D. Ingrams, (*op. cit.*), p. 23.

<sup>55</sup> Freya Stark, *A Winter in Arabia*, London 1940, p. 152.

While this teaching in informal circles seems to have existed on a small scale, formal education for girls and women did not—which causes Zahra's outburst.

There is a second incident in which Bā Kathīr makes, in the context of his play, his case for active participation of women in the life of the Muslim community. When Humām is on his way to the coast, he is, as was the custom then, accompanied by a beduin guide. They rest at the beduin's house, where Humām meets the beduin's sister. Although the girl, Nāhiya, is described as "veiled, one does not see but her eyes" (p. 82), this does not prevent her from engaging Humām in a friendly conversation and catering for his needs. In a way, this is a scene similar to the one in which Muḥammad meets 'Alawiya: the interaction of men and women, even the involvement in serious personal conversation, as in the case of Muḥammad, or in jokes and even flirtation, as in the case of Humām and the beduin girl, is portrayed as something not endangering the moral order, as long as the women remain veiled. On the contrary, the encounter of Humām and the beduin girl has a distinctly positive flavour due to its instructive content. Bā Kathīr suggests, that such encounters are perfectly natural, which constitutes a drastic departure from the stricter rules of separation upheld among high class urban dwellers. It should be noted, however, that not only Bā Kathīr's fictional account of the encounter between Muḥammad and 'Alawiya, but also anecdotal evidence suggests that such meetings, however much they contradicted (and contradict) the moral order, have occurred to some degree. Thus, it might be suggested that Bā Kathīr argues merely for the normalisation and acknowledgement of generally hidden and morally outlawed social behaviour.

When prayer time approaches, Humām calls the beduin to join him, and then turns to the young women: "Come on, perform your ablutions, and pray, all of you, behind us." The beduin's sister asks back: "Alas, so this is a duty [*fard*] upon women? We don't know to pray, do you want us to pray like the men? Here it suffices if the girl fastens the month of Ramadan." (88) In addition, her brother adds that even the beduin men do not pray regularly. Humām is, not unexpectedly to the reader, not amused: "By God, does the prophet's mission [*da'wa*] extend to China and the fur-

thet Maghreb [Morocco] only to miss the land of the beduins [*al-‘arab*]?” (p. 89). The conversation clearly emphasizes Bā Kathīr’s call for an active participation of all, men and women, city dwellers and beduins in Islam. The explanation of the current, clearly unsatisfactory situation follows immediately, taking up a topos among Muslim reformers and critics of various orientations, with the beduin exclaiming “Humām, it is not the fault of the Arabs, it is the fault of those who read (and interpret) the book”. According to the beduin, those people do not bother to spread the message among the beduins, who thus remain “*ahl al-jahl wa-l-ḡilāb*”, the people of ignorance and strife (p. 89). The true responsibility for the disruptive feuds is here clearly shifted from the beduins to the ‘*ulamā*’, showing that Bā Kathīr firmly shared the belief of many reformers in the positive effects of enlightened elite leadership.

### *Shrine cult*

At this point, Bā Kathīr turns to another one of his favourite themes, giving Humām an occasion to criticize the religious establishment and, in particular, the shrine cult along the lines of *salafī* and, more specifically, *wahhābi* ideas;<sup>56</sup>

“Their shrines and graves distracted them from the *da‘wa* [mission-work] or from taking leadership, they see everything in their asceticism. Why do they retreat in such a way?” (89)

Not only are the guardians of such shrines depicted as corrupt individuals—an example being the one who was crucial in helping Humām to win the approval of Ḥusn’s guardian. His room is described as “decorated with all the most expensive available cushions and precious objects.” The *wālī* was “leaning against a mass of cushions, extending his feet towards a man who was massaging them” (p. 59). This rules out any doubts about the possible real use to which the money paid by Ḥusn’s suitors is put—in spite of the *wālī*’s pretension that “we threw it into the money box for

<sup>56</sup> It should not be forgotten that Bā Kathīr wrote the play while living in Saudi Arabia, and shortly after the Wahhābi conquest of the Hijaz. For parallels in Urdu literature, c.f. Malik (*op. cit.*).

entertaining the stranger or poor or orphan” (p. 61).

Similarly, the visits to the shrines are described as a hoax by Muḥammad, who reports to Humām on one such event, the annual pilgrimage (*ziyāra*) to the tomb of Shaykh Sa‘īd b. ‘Īsā al-‘Amūdi in Wādi Du‘ān.<sup>57</sup> While the people start to lose their consciousness, moving “like donkeys” (p. 50), the result is judged to be sobering: “The religion and the regard of the people [for religion] are the losers. Nobody gains from these occasions except for the merchants. As for the guardian of the shrine, he is the greatest winner. Bags of grain and dates are brought to his house, and to the money box [for charitable purposes] paper and gold” (p. 49). Such is the true nature of the distinguished Sūfi saints who present themselves as “God’s people, who have crossed the boundary of good and evil. They are kings, who rule supreme over land and sea!” (p. 51).<sup>58</sup> Besides many other things, it was such religious people who were responsible for banning public drumming and piping during marriages by non-*sāda*, making it a further symbol of stratification, as Muḥammad finds out when he arranges for Humām’s wedding. The drummers, he reports back to his friend, “agreed only after long consideration [to play at Humām’s wedding], fearing from those who prohibit them to play” (p. 100), that is, the *sāda*. Incidentally, this custom is reported to have been broken in Say’ūn for the first time in 1964.<sup>59</sup>

### *Economic concerns in the play*

While gender issues and criticism of existing religious practices can be regarded as standard topics of Muslim reformers, Bā Kathīr’s play also takes up some of the economic concerns which clearly preoccupied at least educated and reform-oriented Ḥadramīs in the early 1930s. Humām’s reflections on agriculture have already been mentioned. Another vital issue for Ḥadramīs, particularly of the interior, was transport, which not only occupied the *Jam‘iyat al-‘adl*, but which is also taken up by Humām upon his

<sup>57</sup> C.f. Knysh (*op. cit.*), p. 21f. for a translation of the critical passages.

<sup>58</sup> The last passage is quoted after Knysh (*op. cit.*), p. 22.

<sup>59</sup> al-Ṣabbān, *Madīnat Say’ūn fī sutūr* (*op. cit.*), p. 65.

return from Java, when he once again travels from the Ḥaḍrami coast to the interior. Lack of co-operative spirit, already criticized with regard to agriculture, also led to the decline of the trading sector, if one follows Bā Kathīr's argument:

"Our merchants [...] compete with each other in hate and spite. They increased in numbers, and lost riches. Their efforts were forfeited through their divisions. Each one sends their own mail. What is wrong with them that they do not unite [at least] the mail service?" (95)

Mail, one should add, was sent before the onset of road traffic by messengers across the Jol or high plateau that separates Wādī Ḥaḍramawt from the coast, not only a lengthy and costly, but also a dangerous exercise considering the threat of the messengers being caught up in one of the numerous beduin raids. According to Bā Kathīr, merchants not only lost money on such matters of internal organisation, but had through their refusal to co-operate also forfeited the chance of regaining a share in the sea transport which they once controlled. Thus, while formerly sailing from the Persian Gulf to India and Indonesia, they now had become dependent on foreign merchant companies (p. 95).

Bā Kathīr does, once again, combine more theoretical or historical discussions, such as the issue of shipping, with the tackling of very contemporary and real problems. Humām, anxious to reach the Wādī and Ḥusn as quickly as possible, kept urging the beduin forward, and the following conversation ensues:

"Humām: Forward, my guide, forward, hurry up. No further night stop, or rest.

Beduin courier, mockingly: Hurry up, oh guide, hurry up!! Do you think I am an airplane, or do you see me as an automobile?

He points to the autoroute the improvement of which had started between the coast and the interior, where he sees workers extending its width. 'Watch your way, or you will die!' (95)

Humām: I wish the road was functioning. Tonight I would reach the outskirts of Say'ūn."

After the courier grumbles, Humām asks:

"Humām: Tell me, why do you hate something made of iron [cars]? What harm did it to you, that you consider it your opponent?

The courier: It will, in the near future, cut off my small income, and the good of many camels and donkeys, and it will take over the mail. Do you want me to live like the sedentary?" (96)

Indeed, a very contentious issue in Ḥaḍramawt roughly between



1930 and 1937 was the construction of a motorroad between the Wādī and the coast. The works had been started at the initiative of the already mentioned merchant of Tarīm Sayyid Abū Bakr b. Shaykh al-Kāf, whose family had made a fortune in Singapore. They had already imported a number of cars into Ḥadramawt, transporting them in pieces on the back of camels into the Wadi. However, the road construction had been halted by the opposition of beduins, who feared, as Humām's guide points out, that their livelihood in transport would be endangered. In the end, the demonstration of British airpower, together with a more general move to impose peace, allowed for its opening, not without further troubles until the 1960s.<sup>60</sup> Bā Kathīr's hero shows compassion for the beduin's concerns, lamenting that all groups fight against each other instead of co-operating—however, he does not, for once, seem to have a clear concept for a suitable solution to this particular dilemma.

Besides the practical issues involved, the road should also be regarded as another symbol in the struggle between tradition and reform, stagnation and modernity, opening the Wādī not merely for new goods but also for new ideas and developments. In this instance, modernity is less couched in terms of religious change than seen as a technological development.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, I would like to point once more to the particularly wide range of issues which were raised by Bā Kathīr, and discussed in educated circles in Ḥadramawt in the early 1930s. They show that Ḥadramawt was, after all, not as far removed from the wider Islamic reformist discourse as commonly assumed, and that Ḥadramī intellectuals were intensely engaged in a search for remedies to the economic and social problems of their time. It also reminds us, however, that they were still a minority in a sternly conservative society at that time, this being exemplified by the play's tragic end as well as Bā Kathīr's emigration. The positioning of the grim picture of the death of Humām's wife and friends at

<sup>60</sup> Van der Meulen and von Wissmann (*op. cit.*), p. 31, 114, 133; Harold Ingrams, *Arabia and the Isles*, London 1942, p. 282–284 and 312–316, interviews in Ḥadramawt, summer 1995.

the very end of the play serves to give special emphasis to Bā Kathīr's plea for reform and modernity, in intellectual as well as in technical terms: its absence, he tells his readers, causes death. This death is contrasted with the romantic, hope-inspiring mood of love earlier in the play, a mood which is clearly associated with individuals working to promote "true", reformist Islam against the tradition.

"Humām" points to a noteworthy development in the Islamist discourse. Knysch, drawing on Clifford Geertz's concept of religion, has, with regard to the criticism of the cult of saints in Ḥaḍramawt, pointed to the fact that religion was chosen as the idiom of criticism because it was "the socially available 'system of significance' through which its (i.e. the religion's) adherents tend to order, formulate and interpret their individual experiences".<sup>61</sup> Bā Kathīr's play certainly serves to confirm this view. However, a clear line of distinction can be drawn between the type of Islamist discourse Bā Kathīr suggests, and the one found in current Islamist writings. The latter would like us to believe that Islam provides an all-encompassing system (*nizām*) which contains provisions and solutions for any possible situation. The Ḥaḍramī reformer in the early 1930s apparently did not feel this same need to couch everything in "Islamic" terms. For example, Bā Kathīr could still discuss his agricultural and economic suggestions without having to justify them as specifically "Islamic"—presumably because, in the Ḥaḍramī context of the early 1930s, he had not yet to write against a colonial discourse which perceived itself—and was perceived by the reformers—as distinctly inimical and secular at the same time. Ḥaḍramī documents of this time do, however, start to betray an increasing nervousness about foreign influence and its potential effects. Therefore, one might assume that a process was already under way which in other areas of the Islamic community had already set in around 1870 and which positioned Islam and Islamic identity as the main line of demarcation between "West" and "East",<sup>62</sup> thus leading to a crescendo of increasingly defensive voices regarding the compatibility of Islam and modernity.

This notwithstanding, the present article agrees with Schulze's

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<sup>61</sup> Knysch (*op. cit.*), p. 33.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29f.

argument regarding the role of “Islamic” discourses in the 20th century as an articulation of modernity.<sup>63</sup> The impact of this discourse remains a matter of dispute. It is certainly true, as Malik has observed with regard to India, that the *salafi* call for a return to the “pure”, pre-*bid‘a* Islam has led to the destruction of “traditional” institutional and communicative frameworks which served large parts of the population, as exemplified in the shrine cult.<sup>64</sup> It also clearly had a unifying—and thus simplifying and impoverishing—effect on Islamic practice.<sup>65</sup> However, the particular *salafi* vision expressed by Bā Kathīr seems, in the Ḥaḍramī context, to contain undeniable elements of liberation and individualisation, the impact of which is shown for women and men alike. Bā Kathīr leaves us in no doubt about his conviction that modernity, defined in terms of Islamic modernism as well as not specifically “Islamic” economic reform, was the only solution for his homeland. The story of Muḥammad and ‘Alawīya can be read as a metaphor for this conviction: ‘Alawīya might be identified with Ḥaḍramawt, her first husband with the traditional religious scholarship. After its death, a revised type of religious understanding is required, personified by Muḥammad, a new-style *sayyid*. Deprived of such a resource in form of the denial of her remarriage, ‘Alawīya/Ḥaḍramawt has to die. Emigration, the choice of Bā Kathīr, is presented as only a short-term solution which might ensure survival (as Humām’s case demonstrates), but only at enormous human costs as well as the eventual loss of identity, as experienced by Humām in Mecca when learning about the death of his beloved ones.

The author does, however, at the same time take account of traditionalist reservations (i.e. regarding marriage) and insists on the preservation of the identity of the Ḥaḍramī *watan*. It can of course only be conjectured, but seems more than likely, that he would have been disgusted by the violent forms which the dispute between *salafi*-s and traditionalists has taken in present-day Ḥaḍramawt with the destruction of tombs and shrines, as well as with the at times bloody confrontation between adherents of the two religious currents.

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<sup>63</sup> Reinhard Schulze, *Geschichte der islamischen Welt im 20. Jahrhundert*, München 1994, p. 17.

<sup>64</sup> Malik (*op. cit.*), p. 93.

<sup>65</sup> I owe this idea to Christoph Herzog.