Contents

List of Illustrations ix
Acknowledgments xi
Note on Dates, Abbreviations, and Transliteration xv
Preface: Hadrami Society, an Old Diaspora xix

I. BURIAL

1. The Society of the Absent 3
2. Geography, a Pathway through History 27
3. A Resolute Localism 63

Conclusion to Part I: Making Tarim a Place of Return 92

II. GENEALOGICAL TRAVEL

4. Ecumenical Islam in an Oceanic World 97
5. Hybrid Texts: Genealogy as Light and as Law 116
6. Creole Kinship: Genealogy as Gift 152

Conclusion to Part II: Local Cosmopolitans 188
III. RETURNS

7. Return as Pilgrimage 195
8. Repatriation 223
9. The View from the Verandah 244
10. Evictions 294

   Concluding Remarks: Names beyond Nations 321

Bibliography 329
Index 359
In a society of migrants, what is important is not where you were born, but where you die. This, if nothing else, makes a diaspora entirely different from a nation, both in concept and in sentiment. Persons belong to nations by virtue of being born into them. Individuals claim entitlement issuing from place of birth. The *nation* itself takes its name from the act of giving birth, *nasci*.

For migrants, by contrast, place of death is important because it often becomes the site of burial. Tombstones abroad acknowledge the shift in allegiance—from origins to destinations—that migrants take whole lifetimes or more to come to terms with. Where shall I be buried? Did the deceased leave instructions? In the old days, when migration was a journey to one’s fate, that locational shift within individual consciousness marked the larger turn of the generations, from ancestors to descendants. Graves, while they are endpoints for migrants, are beginnings for their descendants, marking the truth of their presence in a land. For many diasporas, then, graves are significant places. Abroad, migrants who could no longer be close to their parents can be visited by their own children. Graves provide a ready point of return in a world where origins keep moving on.

A gravestone is a sign whose silent presence marks an absence. In this, the idea of a grave comprehends the many experiences of migration much better than that of “globalization,” which loudly shouts its presence everywhere. Devices for speed allow persons to appear in many places at once: as voices in telephones, faces on the Internet, and bodies hurtling along in supersonic jets. In contrast to globalization’s industrial instantaneity, diaspora is of long duration. Migration takes place over aeons.
Its time is reckoned in generations, with only four or five generations per century. How long do immigrants take to be assimilated? Some never are. Those who do, disappear. Absence, rather than presence, everywhere shapes diasporic experience.

While globalization denies absence by rushing around to cover it up, diasporas do the opposite. They acknowledge absence and chronically explore its meanings and its markings, such as at the grave. Is the absence of the dead forever? Will they come back, or will we join them? Is the absence of emigrants permanent? Will they come back, or will we join them? In old diasporas, questions of absence never go away; they continue to provoke responses each generation. Indeed, the sharing of such questions, and arguments over them, create and demarcate a society that one might call a diaspora. In this sense, a diaspora is not unlike a religion.¹

For diasporas, as for religions, absence can be highly productive. Absence may make the heart grow fonder, but it also licenses new vices away from knowing eyes; teaches new skills; generates letters and poems; sends money, ideas, spouses, children, and novelties home; and plots triumphant returns. Death and departure cause obituaries and genealogies to be written, as they do tombstones. Etched on paper, names become mobile and acquire new lives, circulating beyond the grave. Like religions, diasporas act more slowly than globalization. But that may be because they expand the time and space of social life, rather than compress them. This is particularly true of diasporas of long standing.

The idea of time-space compression has been developed by David Harvey as a distinctive feature of capitalist postmodernity (Harvey 1989). Since the early 1990s, a revamped interest in diasporas has cast them in this hypermodern light, emphasizing an ease of mobility and omniscience approaching what used to be said of saints and gods. Such views of diaspora ride on the wave of a U.S.-dominated international order and technology regime that has been declared triumphant since the breakup of the Soviet Union. In this sense, the recent multiplication of diasporas, as

¹ Judasim, the quintessential “religion of the book” is usually thought of as a diaspora as well, one founded specifically on exile. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term Diaspora was adopted into English in the late nineteenth century from the Greek of Deuteronomy (28:25), referring to the dispersal of the Jews after the Captivity. Diaspora in the sense of exile entered the English language in a moment of high nationalism and has been associated with its sentiments ever since. As exile, diaspora has been thought of as an abnormal condition. Nevertheless, a number of recent works argue for thinking of diaspora as a normal state of affairs in a Jewish tradition shaped by vital interchanges with others over millennia (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002; Ezrahi 2000; Gruen 2002).
registered in scholarship, should be seen not as the demise of the nation-state, but as a loosening of the post–World War II U.N. settlement, which sought to insert nations into a fixed configuration of mostly new, independent states polarized across the Yalta Line between the United States and the Soviet Union. Since the dismantling of the latter, scholars have studied diasporas as part of a larger, contemporary phenomenon called globalization, the economic *nom de guerre* of American triumphalism (Schivelbusch 2003: 291). In this presentist mode, problems of absence often find solutions in the products of Microsoft and Boeing. As Ong’s guerilla transnationalist overseas Chinese capitalist quips, “I can live anywhere in the world, but it must be near an airport” (Ong 1993: 41). Less optimistic observers see American-led neoliberalism as creating the problem by impoverishing nations (Johnson 2000; Stiglitz 2002), and emigration to America becomes one solution. Because America provides both the problem and its solution, aspiring nations seek America, and new diasporas thereby come into being. The puzzle for theory becomes one of finding sources of autonomy, diasporic or otherwise, within the tight American embrace. In this compressed world, the dreamy aspirations of diasporic emigrés somehow mutate into nasty chauvinisms. The earnings of Indian millionaires in California’s Silicon Valley and Irish working men in Roxbury, Massachusetts, fuel intractable ethnic conflicts back home. Recidivist long-distance nationalisms may travel far, but they hardly expand the time and space of social life (Anderson 1998; Schiller and Fouron 2001). In the global village, they narrow rather than expand the space for internal debate. In old diasporas, in contrast, the space for internal debate is often a large one, as the case below suggests.

A Case of Grave Destruction

In the early morning hours of 2 September 1994, some two thousand men armed with shovels, pickaxes, assault weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, and explosives descended on the grave complex of Abū Bakr al-‘Aydarūs in Aden. Al-‘Aydarūs is commonly held to be the patron saint (*walṭ*) of...
Aden, and the pilgrimage to his tomb is one of the largest festivals in the annual life of the city, drawing tens of thousands. So closely is he identified with Aden that he is commonly referred to simply as al-ʿAdani, “the Adeni.” The Adeni died in 1508, and his tomb rests with those of companions under a cupola in Crater, the old center of the city nestled within the rim of an extinct volcano. Arriving at the Adeni’s sanctuary, the armed men found themselves unopposed and set to work in groups. Graves were exhumed and their bones burnt. Into the flames went the wooden ark built over the saint’s grave, together with the elaborate, five-hundred-year-old wooden doors to the sanctuary. When I saw the place a few weeks later, the old doors had been replaced by plywood and were secured with deadbolt and padlock. All that remained of the ark was a small lattice window with the words “In the Name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate” carved into its lintel. Now restored to the foot of the Adeni’s grave, it stood there precariously balanced, a delicate testament to the affections the saint still commands.

The destruction was not a rampage; it showed every sign of systematic action. The sanctuary’s keepers recounted how the attackers had examined the books in the sanctuary one by one, separating out for burning those inscribed as gifts in perpetuity (waqf) to the sanctuary. Even copies of the Qur’an were consigned to the fire in this way. Outside, the desecrators did not spare the graves of the common people. The headstones of tombs in the large graveyard out front were broken, giving the impression of a field of decapitated bodies strangely arrayed in rows. A smaller graveyard in one corner resembled a rubbish dump, littered with broken stones and planks. A bulldozer had apparently been brought in and put to work there, leveling the graves. The object of destruction was not only the saint but the community that had gathered around him.

The attack on the Adeni’s grave had an electric effect elsewhere in the country. In Hadramawt, armed guards were immediately posted around the clock at the graveyards and tombs of other saints. Nevertheless, further incidents of tomb desecration occurred, leading to fatal clashes in the town of Tarim half a year later. The visiting of graves was obviously a matter that engendered violent debate. Why? We will not try to say that

immigrant diasporic minorities distort (T. Smith 2000) or promote (Shain 1999) American national interests abroad.

the destruction of graves was about something else, such as political disputes or economic interests. Rather, we will begin with what is seen and heard and assume that it was about the graves themselves.

These graves are, above all, sites of pilgrimage (ziyāra, hawl). As such, they lie within circuits of movement. First is the movement of persons. People move for many reasons; their itineraries are numerous and so are the durations of travel. Subsequent chapters trace the curves of these movements of persons. Second, pilgrimage sites are located within the movements of texts. These texts may be pilgrimage manuals and prayer litanies compiled from other texts—such as the Qur’an, poetry, genealogies, and biographies—that connect the names of the saints to others. At the graves, these names of persons dead and gone become embodied in the voices of reciters and ring forth again in prayers and poems. Subsequent chapters follow the movements of these texts as they travel through countries, genres, and representational media. The graves of saints are places where these mobile persons and mobile texts meet. A pilgrimage is a return to a place. Each return is different because the events of each journey away and back are different. Each pilgrim brings new experiences to a place. These pilgrimage centers do not reveal their secrets when reduced to the usual rea-

Figure 2. Community of pilgrimage. Mosque-domed tomb complex of the Adeni, with graves in foreground denuded of headstones after 1994 desecration. Photo by B. Haykel and the author.
sons of politics or economics. They are better approached as places of increase. While tombstones are mostly signs of absence, and mostly silent, at times of pilgrimage they are noisy with the sounds of many presences. Movement makes all the difference. We cannot understand the grave, the destination, without paying attention to the journey beyond it.

The controversy over the graves may thus be viewed with profit, more generally, as having to do with issues of mobility. This book presents the results of research on one field of mobility, that of the Hadrami diaspora across the Indian Ocean. The material focuses on three moments—burial, travel, and return—that are conceptually separate yet are parts of a continuously connected process of movement.
Scholars often see mobility as an attribute of modernity and tend to associate it with the rise of the West (Asad 1993; Braudel 1992; Hegel and Hoffmeister 1975; Lerner 1964; McNeill 1963). Thought by westerners to be open, adaptable, and dynamic, Western societies and Western individuals were, in Lévi-Strauss’s terminology, historically “hot.” Non-Western societies, in contrast, were historically “cold.” Anthropologists since Lévi-Strauss have sought to show that societies outside the West also had history (Sahlins 1985; Wolf 1982). More recently, they have also sought to show that non-Western societies are mobile as well (Appadurai 1988). But in doing so, they have largely documented the mobility of

**Figure 4.** The Adeni’s tomb after the desecration in 1994. Photo by B. Haykel and the author.
non-Western societies only in recent times, and in Western-pioneered vehicles that are overwhelmingly technological and modern (Appadurai 1996; Augé 1995; Bauman 2000; Clifford 1997; Hannerz 1996). For reasons yet to be explained, the new anthropology of mobility has reintroduced a teleology of progress that had previously been derided and, so it seemed, discarded. Like the early-twentieth-century Italian Futurists, this technological mobility of modernism is again obsessed with speed. Its compression of time creates a bias away from absence toward presence. It ignores absence and has difficulty recognizing ways of effecting presence that take time. Yet societies, cultures, and religions have been mobile for a long time. Before modernism, experiences of mobility involved complex and subtle interplays between absence and presence in many dimensions: tactile, visual, auditory, affective, aesthetic, textual, and mystical. Beyond the urban sway of modernism, they still do (Helms 1988; Munn 1986; Myers 1986; Rosaldo 1980; Tsing 1993).

To understand why violent controversy erupted at the grave of the Adeni in Aden in 1994, we need to explore how mobility—how absence as well as presence—is experienced in these dimensions. The Adeni’s troubles are especially instructive for us because they are rooted in presences that developed over long stretches of time. They are “hot” historically, politically, and discursively. They are rooted in the presences and absences of a diaspora that arose in the past half-millennium, in Arabia and the Indian Ocean. This diaspora was mobile before Columbus went to America. It was present in Calicut on the pepper coast of India, before Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope and arrived there to find a wealthy, vibrant community of transregional Muslim merchants. In the next section, let us consider a number of spaces and times through which explanations for the Adeni’s troubles might move.

Explanations
The visiting of graves is a common legal and ritual site on which boundaries between Sufis and their fundamentalist detractors take shape in Is-

5. Theorists of media have long recognized that each medium of communication produces a bias toward one of the bodily senses (Innis 1950; McLuhan 1964; W. J. Ong 1982). The printed text effects a profoundly visual orientation, for example, while electronic media create a virtual aural sensorium. Anthropologists of postmodern mobility, who have an interest in all media, exhibit a bias toward the whole body itself, a sort of writ of ethnological habeas corpus, which, as happens, has been a hallmark of the Malinowskian tradition all along.
Islamic societies. The divisions grow up around questions such as: Can a dead person hear a supplicant? Does she/he have power to benefit a supplicant? If we attribute this power to humans, and dead ones at that, are we usurping what belongs to God alone? What is the maximum height to which a tombstone can be raised—to prevent its becoming an idol?

Disagreement about such issues creates the divisions we see within one discursive tradition. The process gives rise to standard accusations and standard rebuttals. The question of mediation, *tawassul,* for example, asks, Is it legitimate for a person to mediate between God and someone else? Close on the heels of *tawassul* usually comes another question, that of *istighāthā,* seeking assistance: Can one legitimately seek assistance from the dead? The answers that people develop for these questions stand within one discursive tradition in the sense that they draw on the same texts, authorities, and assumptions to a degree that is seldom acknowledged.

The vandals who smashed the gravestones in 1994 answered a resounding No! to these questions by their actions. In reply, partisans of the saint, although traumatized by the physical force accompanying that interdiction, motioned to other, less visible forces to prove their point. They said that the vandals had rigged the dome with explosives, but the explosives had mysteriously failed to detonate. They pointed out that the desecrators who had a hand in exhuming the graves died within those graves in subsequent battles with government troops. And a final triumph was that one of the fundamentalists was injured and paralyzed in the violent course of events, and his mother now came to the saint seeking forgiveness and assistance for her son.

The division can be expressed within a textual world, as one between those who read literally (thus the term *fundamentalists,* *uzūl,* to describe those who narrow and pare down to fundamental sources, *uzūl,* the number of texts and their meanings) and those who provide wide latitude for interpretation, including “auditions,” *samāt,* of the rhyme and musical performance of texts, such as Sufis. At one level, then, the violence at the Adeni’s tomb complex is part of a common and widely staged debate with textual referents (Haykel 2003; al-Ḥibshī 1976; de Jong 1999; Knysh 1997; Memon 1976; Peskes 1999; Sirriyeh 1999).

The extraordinary feature of the attack on the graves was the scale of the destruction and its organization, inviting historical comparisons (El Amrousi 2001: 174–75; de Jong and Radtke 1999: 1). In the early nineteenth century, as northern Arabians imbued with the literalist, fundamentalist ideas of Wahhabism conquered Arabia and created a state, they smashed tombs and sacred places in Hadramawt (bin Ḥāshim 1948: 120;
al-Kindi 1991: 321), as well as in Iraq and the Hejaz (El Amrousi 2001: 10–54; Ibn Bishr 1982: 280, 288; Dahlan 1887: 278–79), just as the early Muslims had smashed idols in the time of the Prophet. While the contentious discourse of grave visitation is generic and everyday, individual utterances may be loud enough to register as historical events. In the Saudi-Wahhabi case, the destruction of tombs of saints and prophets was a speech-act that inaugurated a state.

So why Aden 1994? Because the destruction of the Adeni’s grave in that year essentially buried a state, the Democratic Republic of Yemen, which had seceded from a united Yemen during the Yemeni civil war of 1994. Apart since the British occupation of Aden in 1839, northern and southern Yemen had remained separate states after the independence of the South in 1967. A Cold War border divided the northern, U.S.-leaning Republic of Yemen from the southern, Soviet ally, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen. The two fell into uneasy unity in 1990, after the fall of the Berlin wall. This unity was disrupted when civil war broke out in May 1994, and southern leaders formed a separate state, with the “People” expunged from the old name. They thereby repudiated socialism and sought entry into the fold of the bourgeois democracies. In the final stages of that war, Aden suffered a prolonged siege, which lifted in early July when northern tanks rolled into the city, ending the fighting. The Adeni’s tomb was destroyed two months after southern capitulation and seemed like a final act in the hostilities. This impression was plausible given that northern tanks had made a special effort to blast the unusual, oversized graves of socialist martyrs, each topped by a prominent red star, on the way south to Aden. In the fighting, northern forces had the help of auxiliaries from fundamentalist groups, including the veteran “Afghan Arab” fighters home from their victory over the Soviets, so the Adeni’s tomb was thought to be spoils for them. In this reading, the specifically historical scale and timing of the Aden tomb destruction resides within the politics of states and Cold War borders.

Yet the shapes of those states and their borders are hardly clear because they are porous to religious debates and sectarian rivalry. The Adeni’s partisans noted that some sermons in Riyadh, such as those of one Sulaymân Fahd, supported the attack on the Adeni’s tomb. In northern Yemen, Muqbil al-Wâdi’î, the influential leader of a fundamentalist movement in Yemen and beyond (Haykel 2002), had voiced his support for the action on cassette tapes, which were widely circulated. In response, the head (mansab) of the Adeni’s sanctuary, one of his descendants who stood as surrogate (qa’im bi-l-maqâm) for him, issued a written response; north-
ern Zaydis, who themselves opposed Muqbil al-Wâdî‘î, published this response. The mansâb received great expressions of support from individuals and organizations in Saudi Arabia, and from the governments of Abu Dhabi, Oman, and Kuwait. The foreign minister of Oman offered to finance the rebuilding of the complex.

In its moment of vulnerability and exposure, something of the transregional reach of the Adeni’s grave was revealed. Persons absent and far away showed their interest in the events surrounding it. The grave became a site of contention among constituencies whose power and reach were transregional, even international. Among these social actors, states and religious movements were visible and easily recognized players. Less easy to see was the constituency of the saint, the Adeni, the absent actor at the center of events. His grave was able to play host to such wide-ranging rivalries only because it projected some sort of power, influence, or meaning over equally large geographies. What, then, was and is, the nature and extent of the Adeni’s constituency?

The Adeni is, in the first instance, a migrant. He was born in Tarim, Hadramawt, in a family of sayyids, descendants of the prophet Muhammad. Tarim houses the largest population and graveyard of sayyids in Hadramawt and southern Yemen and is a center of sayyid activity. Collectively, these sayyids descend from one person, Ahmad bin ‘Isâ, who arrived in Hadramawt from Basra in Iraq in the tenth century. This founder of sayyid presence in Tarim, in Hadramawt, and in southern Yemen more generally, is known by the epithet al-Muhâjir, the Migrant. The term resonates in Islamic discourse because the Prophet himself founded the original community of believers when he emigrated from his hometown, Mecca, to safety. The Muslim calendar begins with this migration as its Year One.

When the Adeni went to Aden in 1484, the city was a burgeoning port hosting transregional trade between Europe and Asia. The commercial activity was accompanied by heightened religious activity in the region (al-Hibshi 1976; al-Khazrajî 1914a; Knysh 1999b). The Adeni traveled around the region—to Ethiopia, Mecca, Medina, and northern Yemen—and became well known throughout. He is credited with converting communities of Ethiopians to Islam. When he died and was buried in Aden, his grave became a point of ritual focus for a growing city of Muslims who had come from elsewhere. Weber has defined a city as a place whose residents come from elsewhere. This description has fit Aden over long periods of its history. Even the rulers in the Adeni’s time, the Rasulid sultans, were foreigners. That the annual pilgrimage to the Adeni’s grave takes
place on the thirteenth day of the Islamic month Rabī’ al-Thānî seems fitting. This date is not the day he died, which is the normal day of celebration at saints’ festivals, but the day he entered Aden.

The Adeni’s migration to Aden, then, echoes the migration of Aḥmad bin ʿĪsā the Migrant to Tarīm. The two men’s lineage and graves provide a Prophetic focus for a new community. Following the Adeni, other members of his lineage migrated across the Indian Ocean, to East Africa, western India, and Southeast Asia. Throughout this region, the graves of members of this lineage have become pilgrimage destinations. They are explicitly connected to each other by elaborate genealogical books and charts prominently displayed at the tombs and in homes. The graves share common rituals and liturgical manuals, and some of their annual pilgrimages—such as those of Ḥabīb Ṣāliḥ in Lamu, Kenya; Ḥabīb ʿAlī al-Ḥabší in Saʿūn, Hadramawt; and Ḥabīb ʿAlwī bin ʿAlī al-Ḥabší at Masjid Riyāḍ in Solo, Indonesia—are synchronized on 20 Rabī’ al-Thānî annually. The Adeni’s grave is the first of such pilgrimage destinations outside of Hadramawt and thus has become a point of return for subsequent pilgrimage centers across the ocean.

The Adeni was born in Tarīm but died in Aden. It was at the place of death and burial that he became famous, the focus of pilgrimage and controversy. The same is true of those who followed him across the Indian Ocean. In all these cases, what is important is not where they were born but where they died and were buried. Seen in this way, the Adeni, his saintly colleagues, and their graves were not simply like a diaspora but indeed gave representational shape to one.

In 1994, this diaspora included a majority of the cabinet of the southern secessionist state. When leaders announced the new state of the Democratic Republic of Yemen during the war, with its capital in Aden, observers noted that nine of the sixteen cabinet members were from Hadrami sayyid lineages, including the president, his deputy, the prime minister, and holders of the all-important finance and oil portfolios. The northern media took this array of Hadramis as proof that the secession was run by a narrow cabal of ancien régime elements who harkened to the days of British colonialism. Darker, more muted mutterings saw a contemporary Saudi hand behind this fragmenting of Yemeni territorial integrity. The League of the Sons of Yemen, the secessionist vice president ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣuflī’s party, was a direct resuscitation of the preindependence League of the Sons of South Arabia, which had comprised pro-British elites such as sultans, sayyids, and urban notables. Indeed, the party was commonly referred to as “the League” (al-Rābiṭa), eliding the distinction
between old and new. Despite having spent a quarter century in exile in Saudi Arabia in opposition to the socialist government of South Yemen, al-Jufrī mysteriously surfaced in Aden from Saudi Arabia during the war and took charge of its defense. The very idea of this staunchly antisocial- ist businessman barking out orders to armed socialist cadres was one of the eye-openers of the war and strengthened the perception of a Saudi hand at work. The secessionist president, ‘Alī Sālim al-Bīḑ, had abruptly abandoned the capital of Aden to sit out the war in Hadramawt, inexplicably leaving the defense of the capital city to al-Jufrī. It was widely believed that Saudi Arabia had always coveted an outlet to the Arabian Sea, from the time H. St.-John Philby embarked on a long trek to the southern coast of Hadramawt from Riyadh in colonial days. A deal must have been cut between the secessionists and the Saudis, with al-Jufrī as the point man. Furthermore, in this view, al-Jufrī did not act alone but had behind him the Hadramis of Saudi Arabia, the largest and wealthiest concentration of Hadramis in the diaspora today. The separation of South from North Yemen, then, was not so much a secession as an annexation of the Hadrami homeland by its diaspora. This reunion of Hadrami people and land amounted to a plan for the fragmentation of the South, with Hadramawt going its own way as a newly minted province of Saudi Arabia. The idea was not entirely far-fetched because some individuals abroad, such as the foreign ministers of Oman and Indonesia, were in a position to help secure international ratification. Like the secessionist leaders, both ministers were of Hadrami sayyid descent, the latter even being a cousin of the secessionist prime minister. On the ground, bedouin and other Hadramis on the border between Saudi Arabia and Hadramawt had already been receiving Saudi identification papers for years. In a remote place like Kharkhīr, a desolate sand dune near the Empty Quarter, the Saudis had set up a bedouin chief with a building, gas station, and tents. For ten thousand shillings one could get a ride there and apply for Saudi papers, upon answering questions such as where the local watering holes for goats and camels were and who owned them. The word was that if and when a border dispute were to arise, a plebiscite would reveal the residents to be Saudis, having possession of Saudi papers.

There were other, less alarmist theories about the composition of the secessionist cabinet. It was all easily explained: the core of the secessionist leaders was those who had run the country before unification with the North in 1990. They were simply picking up where they had left off when unity became untenable. They had emerged as the leaders of South Yemen
only because the Yemeni Socialist Party, which ruled the South until unification, had been rent by regionalist factionalism. Throughout the southern state’s postcolonial history, its leadership had mostly been in the hands of a dominant region. A series of internal purges and struggles in 1969, 1972–73, 1978–79, and 1986 (and 1993–94, forming a curious, seven-year cycle of bloodletting) had successively lopped off the heads of the party, replacing one regional elite with another. In socialist parlance, “the revolution eats its own.” Never unified before independence (no road even connected the whole country; the British administration made do with comparatively cheap air-force transport), the country was most united immediately after independence. Subsequently, each region whose leaders were defeated in national contest fell away. The Hadramis ascended to rule in the last bloody putsch, of 1986, simply because they had not stuck their necks out throughout the history of southern power struggles. Hadrami sayyids in the cabinet were there not because they were sayyids but because they were well-qualified members of a generation who had received a modern education. They had been bright young students sent to Cairo to study in the 1960s and had returned to take part in building the new, independent state, serving party and country until they were thrust into leadership positions in 1986.

Other theories emerged as well, more conspiratorial, ambitious, nuanced, confused, and complicated—more cycles within cycles. What concerns us here is that regardless of the comings and goings of factions, interests, elites, and cliques—and of genealogical, sectarian, regional, ideological, or generational groupings—a common front appeared to line up at the critical moment: southern, separatist, sayyid. In this sense, the Adeni lying in his grave under a cupola could easily have been one of them as well. The attack on his tomb, the questions about who he was, what he stood for, which side he stood on, and the ambiguities surrounding these questions, were launched into discourse. These questions deepened, intensified, and added to the talk about sayyids, about strange absences and presences, about socialism, religion, morality, and about relations between North and South. Such talk was already making southern Yemen in general, and Hadramawt in particular, a very “hot” place. The attack on the Adeni was an “incitement to discourse” (Foucault 1990: 17), one in a string.

The pilgrimage to the Adeni’s tomb that year was carried out on schedule on the thirteenth of the month of Rabī’ al-Thānī. In 1994, this day was 16 September, two weeks after the attack on the tomb. The victorious president of Yemen, the northern ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ṣālih, personally
guaranteed security for the event and commanded that it proceed. About three thousand pilgrims showed up, far fewer than the usual number. But the city of Aden was grateful for the little mercies after the war, siege, and defeat. The saint’s surrogate thanked the president for his magnanimity. Pilgrims thanked the saint for surviving the president’s guns, or the quarter century of socialist rule, or the armed fundamentalists, depending on whom you talked to.

Though the Adeni had been dead for five hundred years, he could command a contemporary following and stand at the center of a swirl of violent conflicts. His was an absence of monumental proportions, one that resounded across countries and centuries.

Diaspora and Experiences of Absence

There are smaller absences as well. While the grand absence of someone like the Adeni commands pilgrims once a year in large numbers, the smaller absences of commoners and one’s family members are chronic, everyday affairs. Yet they too can be highly significant. This simple mat-
ter is often overlooked. Contemporary studies of diasporas seldom appreciate the degree to which absence shapes diasporic experience. To be in one place is to be absent everywhere else. Moving between places, mobility leaves in its wake a trail of absences. Important persons in one’s life may be far away and hard to reach. When a mobile person leaves behind dependents, his or her absence may loom large in their daily existence.

The following story illustrates the power of such absences. Every day, Muḥammad wishes his two brothers were in Hadramawt. Muḥammad came to his father’s hometown in Hadramawt from Uganda when his father died, killed in Idi Amin’s purges. His Swahili mother had remarried, and he took advantage of free air passage provided by the South Yemeni government for its nationals when Idi Amin began expelling Indians and Arabs from Uganda. He knew his father had sent money home to Hadramawt. The family had used this money to buy pumps and open up farmland, and Muḥammad hopes to claim his inheritance. His father’s brother, who runs the affairs of the family back home, was welcoming when he came, even arranging for him a marriage to a particularly lovely cousin. But try as he might, Muḥammad has not been able to redeem his inheritance from his uncle. The old man’s reasoning is impeccable. He cannot divide the land until Muḥammad’s two brothers return and everyone can agree on the terms. Otherwise, if the brothers quarrel after the division of the land, they will all blame the uncle. What could he do then? In the meantime, Muḥammad has to wait. Getting the three brothers together is more difficult than one would suppose. One of the brothers, born in Kenya, has obtained Saudi papers and is working in the police force in Saudi Arabia. He either cannot get leave or is fearful of being unable to return if he leaves Saudi Arabia. The other brother is working in a part of Yemen where the phones seldom work.

The continued absence of his two brothers has left Muḥammad in limbo, unable to move away for fear his uncle will sell the land in his absence and unable to settle and build a house. The absence of others keeps Muḥammad from setting down roots in Hadramawt, his father’s hometown, and from true repatriation, even though he has been living in the vicinity for a good number of years now. If Muḥammad’s problem appears to be insurmountable so far, it is actually a relatively simple one, for it rests on the inability to get three brothers, or one generation, to be jointly present.

‘Ali, who was born in Hadramawt, faced a more complicated problem but has found a more happy outcome than Muḥammad has. In his case, property and the intertwining of rights and obligations have involved
three generations spanning three countries, not to mention three changes of governmental regime in South Yemen. The absences of those dead or distant have created problems that ‘Alī could overcome only when a number of presences were effected simultaneously, by chance and cunning.

Unlike Muhammad, ‘Alī is doing well and just had a little triumph. He escaped from Kuwait, where he was working, when Iraq invaded in 1990, and even was able to bring his car, which he now uses as a taxi. His mother owned some houses in Singapore, which her father left her when he died there. As she had no one there, she put the property in the hands of an agent in town, who arranged for the collection of rents in Singapore and paid her in Tarim. After independence in 1967, however, when the socialists came to power, the agent absconded to Saudi Arabia and died there after some years. Many people had placed their property in his hands, and they saw neither the income from their houses nor the titles with which they could have sold the houses. One day, after the reuni-fication of the Yemens, when people began to return from exile, ‘Alī heard that the deceased agent’s son was in town. He initiated a court case against the son for restitution. The son claimed that his father was only an employee of the investment company that managed the Singapore houses, not an agent. ‘Alī however had a record of the document that had granted the agent powers of attorney and found the document, complete with relevant numbers, registered at the local court, in a ledger from the time of the sultans and the British. Furthermore, he acquired a list of local property owned by the original agent, of which his son had inherited a quarter. The property included some of the largest mansions in town. The agent’s son was shocked when he saw the list. The court could seize this property in lieu of restitution. While the case was being heard, the agent’s son tried to abscond, like his father, but was stopped at the airport until one of his relatives stood surety for him.

As these examples intimate, invisible hands play a big role in the economy of the Hadrami diaspora, namely in inheritances from the dead and remittances from the distant. The absent continue to be present in their effects, for good or for ill. Inevitably, then, the absent stimulate talk, speculations, and theories. The diaspora is a society in which the absent are a constant incitement to discourse about things moving. We may call the diaspora “the society of the absent” as a convenience and a theoretical position because in it, discourses of mobility appear as both cause and effect and are inseparable from diasporic life, saturating its internal social space.

In the society of the absent that is the Hadrami diaspora, one sees a
great hustle and bustle of movement. Persons flee war and famine, agents abscend with assets, parents die, orphans travel to distant relatives, migrants move to seek fortune elsewhere. People travel through countries with such varying national histories that one would be hard put to speak in any systematic way of an “international economy” in which they make a living. Life trajectories appear as so many outcomes of unpredictable external events. One often comes away from ethnographic fieldwork feeling that the great organizing nouns—culture, society, or life—are simply heaps of mishaps artificially sorted out by the priests of science, and not very convincingly at that. Should a researcher want to participate in such an enterprise? The question really is an artificial one, and the choice an illusion, for the ethnographic field yields no raw data. In doing field research, living among people, the researcher inevitably participates in discourses that objectify, systematize, and interpret the things seen by all.

The examples above describe attempts to gather the patrimony of patriarchs, which is scattered for various reasons. Such descriptions can be seamlessly augmented with narratives from the point of view of patriarchs, injecting reasons into incidents. The disrupted incomes, failed investments, and recovered inheritances of a fragmentary, unsystematic international economy can be embedded in a systematized discourse of mobility. Historians are producers of such discourses. Consider how situations such as those above might appear in the words of a contemporary Hadrami historian:

Because of their love for the homeland, and desire to raise and educate their sons in it, and to provide them the leisure to pursue a life of study and Sufism and a comfortable existence, they preferred investing in real estate—as if they had pensioned themselves and their inheritors off, by this means. Thus there came to be, after a time, a generation idle on account of inheritance, and unprepared to follow what their forefathers had laid out for them in the way of a life of learning and knowledge, except for a very few. (al-Shāṭīrī 1983: 417–18)

In this rendition, geographically mobile wealth was plowed into the ground, whether abroad in Singapore or at home in Hadramawt, and rendered immobile, in order to transform value into something that moves more securely through time instead: spiritual value embodied in offspring pursuing a life of study and Sufism. In the historian’s discourse on mobility, land has unique properties precisely because it is immobile, and it thereby contains the potential for moral transformation. Yet in the historian’s judgment, such transformations were not easy to effect and
could just as well digress into channels that were purely monetary, list-
less, and corrupting—“as if they had pensioned themselves and their in-
heritors off.”

The discourses of historians mix and mingle with yet others of inde-
pendent provenance, such as the words and deeds of the prophet Muḥam-
mad, known in Arabic as the hadīth. The hadīth may be translated as “Tra-
ditions” or “discourses and practices” of the Prophet. Not to be confused
with the words of God, which are set forth in the Qur’ān, the discourses
of the Prophet have been systematically compiled by a number of ency-
clopedic titans into collections that bear their names, such as the famous hadīth compilations of Bukhārī, Muslim, and Tirmidhī. Passed on from
person to person as unit texts since the time of the Prophet himself, these
discourses are only as reliable as the chain of human transmitters. The en-
cyclopedists stand by the robustness of each act of transmission in their
compilations. Their specialized knowledge represents systematic, method-
ologically self-conscious arrangements of the Prophet’s discourses sys-
tematized to a degree matched by few narrative historians.

The discourses of the Prophet suﬀuse and inform social practices com-
mon in Hadramawt. Available to the learned in multiple volumes with
indices and concordances, they are also passed around in common talk,
as pious homilies or ironic explanations. The historian al-Shāṭi’ī’s unflat-
tering view of the inheritors is a common one throughout the Hadrami
diaspora. The view is generally an ironic one, for it acknowledges the gap
between intentions and consequences. The intentions of those who pen-
sioned oﬀ their sons cannot be faulted, for they are pious ones guided by
Prophetic discourse. A hadīth of the Prophet states, with variations, that
“when a person dies, nothing of him or her remains except for three
things: beneﬁcial knowledge, a pious son praying for one’s soul, or con-
tinuing good works.”6 The Prophet’s hadīth are words and works to be
emulated, and this particular hadīth allows for variations in personal
circumstance. Scholars who apply themselves writing books produce
beneﬁcial knowledge, even if they are without progeny or wealth. But
few are or can be scholars. Those with money build mosques and leave
gardens, lands, religious books, and income for coffee and dates in per-
petuity to further the cause of pious practice. These objects perma-

6. Commonly quoted and referred to as the hadīth of ʿamal jārī, continuing good works,
this hadīth is found in a number of authorities: Abū Dāʻūd (Kitāb al-waqaya), Ahmad (Bāqī
musnad al-mukaththirin), al-Nisāʾī (Kitāb al-waqaya), Muslim (Kitāb al-waṣīya), and al-
Tirmidhī (Kitāb al-ahkām).
serve the cause of piety because as endowments (waqf), they are immobilized, literally stopped from the onward movement of economic exchanges. These endowments are good works whose effects continue to be present. Tarim alone has three hundred and sixty endowed mosques (BuKayr Bā Ghaythān 1973). The mosques are commonly held up as a dramatic sign of the hold that Prophetic discourse enjoys over this community and of the ways in which such discourse guides social practice. Beyond the circles of the scholarly or the wealthy, each Muslim has the organic capacity to create progeny and the moral will to bring up a pious son praying for one’s soul. The words of the Prophet speak not to the elect but to all, if only they would listen.

In this light, the investments in real estate that al-Shāṭirī mentions aimed to produce all three enduring presences—knowledge, pious sons, and endowed buildings to house and feed the scholarly offspring—even if they hardly succeeded. In this way, the absent planned to continue shaping the present, thereby securing their place in it. Prophetic discourse provides one theoretical or normative perspective from which we may clarify and evaluate the investments judged by al-Shāṭirī, or the movements described in the ethnographic examples above.

A Theoretical Opening

The discourses of mobility that are part of pilgrimages such as those to the Adeni’s tomb—of the social experiences of absence in a diaspora and that combine so easily with the discourses of the Prophet—are not obstacles, prohibitions, interdictions, or similar edicts of negative compulsion. Neither are they backed by any kind of institutional state power. Rather, they are spurs to action, encouraging people to provide for, build, create, and travel on the right path. They are perhaps in the same spirit as the saying in English “God helps those who help themselves.” One hears a similar message as a constant rhyming refrain: ‘alayk al-baraka, wa-‘alā Allāh al-baraka (“it is yours to move, and God’s to bless”). Mobility is to be encouraged, not repressed. The point at issue is not movement as such but its moral direction.

There are many reasons why this might be so in the diasporic society of Hadramawt. Mobility widens the field in which people can engage and amass resources and powers. At the same time, forces from a distance may disrupt established accommodations in any locale. Power, domination, and rulers have long come from the outside. The discourses of mobility,
by their pervasiveness, are ways in which movements are represented and objectified. This creates the conditions of possibility for movements to be channeled, controlled, diverted, and argued over. As the Hadrami diaspora developed across the Indian Ocean over the past five centuries, a powerful discursive tradition developed across this space as well and helped give it shape.

The *hadith* of the prophet Muḥammad exemplify how both reverent emulation and contention attach to tradition in Islamic discourses. A number of traditions hold that just before the Prophet died, he asked his community to hold fast onto two things: the Book of God and the family of the Prophet. Other traditions maintain that the two things were the Book of God and the Prophetic examples (*sunna*), as found in the *hadith*. The different implications of these two sets of traditions constitute a long-running argument between Sunnis and Shia in Islam since the seventh century (Mottahedeh 1980). They also fed into the conflict over the Adeni’s tomb that opened this chapter. The Adeni is one of the family of the Prophet. Pilgrimage to his tomb can thus signify that one is holding fast to the family of the Prophet and thereby keeping faith with one of the Prophet’s traditions. But this interpretation is not the whole story, for in 1994, the Adeni also became associated with socialists, secessionists, Sufis, and Saudi ambitions. How these associations emerged is not obvious. Nonetheless, they could be made and were worth making precisely because the Adeni was already a powerful figure—one who, while stationary, stood at the junction of a number of paths and projects.

In the terms of Sufi discourse, the Adeni is described as a *qutb*, an “axis” around which others revolve (al-ʿAydarūs 1985; Bahraq al-Ḥaḍramī 1988; al-Ṣhillī 1901). In systematized versions of this discourse, the axis is the highest station of spiritual attainment. Below him are four surrogates (*abdāl*), then a larger number of pegs (*awtād*), and so on. This hierarchy of states receives systematic elaboration in the writings of Sufi theorists such as Ibn al-ʿArabī but are looked on with suspicion by legists for pretensions to forming a rival cosmology to that of the Qur’an (al-Ḥibshī 1976; Chittick 1994; Chodkiewicz 1993; Knysz 1999b). I have neither the qualifications nor the intention to comment on such theological disputes. What I would like to do here, at the end of this chapter, is to outline the elements of a discursive tradition that imbues graves such as the Adeni’s with great significance as part of a larger, transregional world. The terms of my analysis are anthropological. They derive from a Western tradition of social analysis that is by no means Islamic or Sufi, and they thereby in-
ject into an already contentious discursive arena yet another set of terms, terms shaped in their own troubled history with Christianity (Asad 1993, 2003). While conducting field research, I have been both berated and shown much kindness in carrying out this enterprise. Both treatments are acknowledged here, and in apology—for one has to apologize for an intrusion—I can say only that these terms and their use have no doctrinal or normative ambitions. Their purpose is neither to fish in muddy waters nor to clean them up. Rather, they seek to present the results of observations of movements in the large space of the Hadrami diaspora. Those movements themselves are constituted in and through discourses of mobility that are rich in terminologies and teleologies. At places, these terms meet with those I introduce, and it is to be hoped that the resulting encounters be mutually intelligible and rewarding. One arranges such points of contact by embedding them in extended narratives, hoping that they become so many doors through which others may pass to different worlds, in both directions. It is for the sake of greeting, exchange, and self-transformation that an anthropologist prefers translation to voyeurism, shows up without an invitation, and seeks open doors rather than windows.

One such door is the grave. The grave is a productive starting point because it is a particularly dense semiotic object, a compound of place, text, person, and name. Subsequent chapters follow these categories as they move through diasporic Hadramawt and its discursive tradition. Put in motion, these categories trace extended historical itineraries and fill out social landscapes. To conclude this chapter, I offer a capsule outline of how these categories relate to each other in a dynamic of signification.

Within the grave is a person. Very close by is a tombstone inscribed with text, representing the name of the grave’s inhabitant. By means of writing, the name is attached to a rugged material object, stone, and thereby made durable in time. The person in the grave and the engraving on the tombstone point to each other in a silent spatial relationship of proximity that exists independently of visitors and reciters. The person who

7. Eickelman and Piscatori’s *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination* is a pioneering volume that uses the concept of travel to explore interconnections among semantic fields in Muslim traditions (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990; also, Shari’ati 1980, on the significance of migration in Islam). In a similar spirit, studies of Christian pilgrimage have been pushing away from place-centered theories to explore broader fields of meaning and action through concepts of motion (Coleman and Eade 2004), travel narrative (Coleman and Elsner 2003), and combinations of place, text, and person (Coleman and Elsner 1995; Eade and Sallnow 1991). History plays an important role in creating these semiotic complexes and is particularly germane to the practice of Mormon traditions, where it is part of theology (Davies 1989, 2000; Mitchell 2003).
was nameless at birth becomes known as a name attached to a specific body for his or her lifetime, and is known forever as a name inscribed on the tombstone at death. The act of burial fixes this terminal relationship of metonymy in a place. The relationship of place and named person that a grave and inscribed tombstone represent is a base or foundation on which to create potentials. As a compound of place, person, name, tombstone, and text, the grave enacts a passage from silence to vocalization. The Prophet is said to have greeted the dead when passing by their graves, and the practice is encouraged even by critics of grave visitation (Ibn Taymiyya 1998: 177–78). Writing enables visitors to greet the dead by name. Here, inscription acts as an agent of transformation. Writing is a visual signifier; itself silent, it can provoke meaningful speech. Present on the surface of the tombstone at one end of a chain of signification, it enables the dead and silent person within the grave to be launched into discourse. Reading the name on a tombstone, a Muslim passing by can greet the dead within. Writing is an inert switch that converts the grave from a silent to a sonorous state when activated by the approach of a living Muslim person. In this sense, writing is a foundational step in the creation and realization of potentials for signification. It is precisely to cap the further development of such potentials that some Islamic jurists have specified limits on the structures built above graves, and the kinds of utterances allowed there, such as prayers and supplications. Otherwise, graves may be aggrandized and become mosques, congregations that are God’s alone (Ibn Taymiyya 1998: 184–86). They may become famous and gain an expansive constituency on grounds other than the authorized one of revelation.

Ibn Taymiyya, the fourteenth-century jurist often cited to denounce the cult of graves, is clear on this point. He opposes the cultivation of graves not because such action is driven by superstition (khurāṣa), as modern opponents allege. Superstition is the misunderstanding of true causality; it does not work. Grave visits are to be opposed because they do work. They create powerful dynamics of signification with the potential to create communities based not on revelation but on something autochthonous and incipient in the grave complex. The idols that pre-Islamic Arabian communities worshipped were created by such processes: “It was veneration of a pious man’s grave that eventually gave rise to the worship of al-Lāt,” says Ibn Taymiyya, referring to one of the most famous pre-Islamic divinities, whose following preceded and rivaled that of Allāh’s Muslims (Ibn Taymiyya 1998: 191; Memon’s translation, 1976: 264). Even after the triumph of Islam, the possibility remains that new religions may originate from the cultivation of graves:
If, however, one intends to pray at a prophet’s grave or of a pious man, hoping that prayer offered in such an area would bring him beatitude, this is, then, exactly departing from, and opposing, the religion of God and His Messenger. It, moreover, amounts to originating a religion without divine sanction. (Ibn Taymiyya 1998: 193; Memon’s translation, 1976: 265)

“Originating a religion”: my purpose here is not to press on a delicate point of dispute as to whether rivals to God are being cultivated in the cult of graves. It is rather to point to the common ground of agreement: that graves and their visits are meaningful semiotic complexes that can set in motion powerful and expansive dynamics of signification. Not only are graves taken up in discourses of mobility, they frequently become the object of movement itself, the destination of pilgrimages. On this common ground, disputes over the moral consequences of such dynamics play out.

The next chapter moves back in time to Hadramawt, where the Adeni came from. We take in a view of the social geography of the country, where the moral qualities of persons have to do with the way they move through its landscape.