

A Matter of Morals: Writing about Yemen in the Late Ottoman Empire (1908–1912)

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Submitted to the University of Oxford in 2024, this master's thesis situates three publications on the province of Yemen, penned in the early years of the Second Constitutional Period, in the context of moral discourses in the late Ottoman Empire. Based on an analysis of the accounts of military official Rüşdi, civil administrator Abdülgani Seni, and military doctor Hasan Kadri on their respective service and experiences in Yemen, the study suggests that the provincial periphery formed part of public discussions taking place in the imperial centre about the characteristics, attitudes, and emotions that should characterize the moral Ottoman subject. Bridging existing scholarly accounts on governance in the Ottoman provinces, which predominantly consist of place-based analyses, and the historiography of intellectual developments emanating from the imperial capital, the thesis lays out how these phenomena intersected. It concludes that the increasing representation of the provinces in works published in Istanbul by individual state officials from the late nineteenth century complemented, but also demonstrates the inherent conflicts of, the administrative and ideological project of forging an overarching territorial and identity-based cohesion advanced as part of the empire's extensive reform and centralization project.

I suggest that Yemen held a distinct place in Late Ottoman public and official discourses as a frontier region fraught with emotional meaning. This was not only the result of the administrative and military difficulties the empire faced in the province which cost the lives of thousands of military recruits, drained the imperial treasury, and exhausted state officials. Militarily reconquered as a province in the early 1870s, Yemen was also a fairly recent territorial addition after the region had had little to no exposure to Ottoman rule during the preceding two and a half centuries. The reincorporation of the province is therefore indicative of the Ottoman state's ambitious partaking in the competition over territory in the context of late nineteenth century imperialism and, as such, was important for imagining the late Ottoman state not as a 'sick man' but a capable political actor on the global stage. At the same time, the province was unique in presenting the state with several administrative challenges at once: A religiously diverse local population, successive armed uprisings, as well as its peripheral location, proximity to French, Italian, and British colonial territories, and its status as a buffer zone to the holy cities in the Hijaz all increased Ottoman stakes in the region. In public discourses, especially after the events of 1908 had sparked new optimism among the empire's intelligentsia, the region figured as a proving ground for the vitality of the constitutional state and previous administrative failures as a vignette for the alleged stolid and corrupt nature of Hamidian 'despotism' which had to be overcome, both structurally and morally, in order for the empire to maintain its sovereignty.

Employing a microhistorical approach based on subjective, narrative, and, most importantly, published sources, rather than administrative documents, I analyse the public representation of the Ottoman Empire's Arab periphery in the imperial centre. Perceptions of peripheral populations were influenced by the publications of imperial administrators who, as a social class shaped by similar experiences in the state system and united by its association with said system, understood and represented themselves as morally different from local populations. The officials' perception of this moral difference was further encouraged by the emergence of a deontological understanding of Ottoman citizenship formulated in the context of nineteenth century reforms and the sense of anxiety accompanying the Ottoman state's quest for survival in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prompted by the Ottoman reform project, whose edicts tied subjecthood to moral expectations which were spread among the public in the context of the ensuing expansion of state-sponsored education, moral discourses revolved around the importance of a patriotic commitment to the Ottoman state which should find expression in individual productivity, obedience, manners like hygiene and moderation, and, crucially, emotions, such as compassion and love for fatherland, family, and fellow Ottomans. The reinstatement of the constitution in 1908 gave further impulse to the debate on morality. On the one hand, the (re)introduction of participatory politics corresponded and contributed to the focus on the individual ingrained in the deontological notion of citizenship. On the other hand, new freedoms of expression in the press and political associations unleashed discourses about morality and enabled a growing author- and readership to partake in debates about the future of the constitutional state.

Deontological discourses about Ottoman citizenship were embedded in and synchronic to public discussions addressing moral degeneration among administrators and the Ottoman public. These debates measured individual subjects' usefulness to the state's quest for sovereignty in terms of their commitment to patriotism and productivity and sought to overcome the moral decadence that had supposedly characterized the Hamidian regime. The expression and embodiment of certain emotions, which feature in the analysed sources as compassion with officials deemed inefficient and uneducated peripheral populations, sadness in the face of mistreated military recruits or territorial losses, as well as love for family and fatherland, were perceived by concerned state officials and intellectuals as an integral part of displaying one's commitment to and identification with the state and its struggle for survival. The administrators' resulting intimate understanding of their relation to the state, which I highlight in this thesis, tends to be overlooked by scholarship on the Ottoman provinces which seeks to reconstruct local realities in detail while neglecting to equally qualify and pay attention to individual governing officials.

Peripheral populations were one among several societal groups made the object of moral criticism and argued to be in need of moral correction because they fell short of the moral and emotional commitment to the empire which was so central to the self-perception of state officials. Despite their different professional backgrounds, Rüşdi, Abdülgani Seni, and Hasan Kadri concurred in their assessment of Yemen's population as lacking the willingness to productively contribute to the prosperity of the Ottoman

state and its society as well as its quest to ward off European encroachment. Rather than understanding the moral difference outlined in the analysed publications as merely serving to exclude the periphery, they similarly contributed to drawing Yemen's population into the moral and emotional imaginary of the Ottoman reading public, and thus closer to the imperial centre, by presenting the province as a locale in which moral expectations surrounding Ottoman citizenship were challenged and thus had to be negotiated. As such, according to the three state officials, Yemenis' moral difference was not irredeemable but could be corrected by a constitutional state apparatus staffed with zealous individuals committed to the empire's survival and dedicated to violently enforcing local populations' moral correction and re-education.