Sayed Ali b. Ahmad b. Shihab al-Din was born in August 1865 in Pekojan, the Arab quarter of old Batavia (present day Jakarta). His father, Ali b. Ahmad b. Muhammad was a famous Hadhrami trader and landowner of the famous family of al-Dawleh van Menteng, who were one of the richest and most powerful families in the city. He was their head, traveling to Batavia. There he made a fortune in trade which he invested in real estate. He also acquired and managed land for relative-poor Families, who had important connections in the building of mosques. He married the daughter of another immigrant family from Hadhramaut, who later gave birth to Ali. At the age of seven, his parents sent Ali to Hadhramaut, where he studied for six years with some of the most famous ulama of his time. After spending three years in Jakarta, he returned to Hadhramaut in 1881 for a subsequent period of study. In 1886/87, Sayyid Ali travelled once more to Jakarta where he became manager of the family’s real estate. The father returned to his native Timor where he died around 1890. Part of the real estate which Ali b. Ahmad managed and eventually acquired in 1911, was situated in the relatively new and fashionable European quarter of Menteng. It soon became the basis of the growing wealth of the family of the dawleh van Menteng, as Snouck Hurgronje called him. Having established himself, Sayyid Ali b. Ahmad continued the family tradition of charitable commitments by becoming, in 1905, a founding member and first chairman of a charitable organisation (Jam‘iyyat al-’Ashwaq al-qawwiyah) which founded a new type of Arab school combining Islamic and Western knowledge. These schools form the nucleus of what is considered the Hadhrami ‘renaissance.’ The commitment to reform included opposition to the Dutch colonial power by trying to rally support from Islamic scholars, especially from their publishing anti-colonial articles in Egyptian newspapers. As a result, Sayyid Ali spent a fortnight in jail in 1908. It is less clear, however, whether it was also Dutch intrigues or rather his extravagant lifestyle that lost him much of his land in Menteng just before World War I. Ali b. Ahmad could not have been more up-to-date and possibly as a result of his political and economic troubles, Ali b. Ahmad turned to new pastures. He participated in a fishing company, headed by his brother, which attempted to develop the fishing industry in the Arabian Sea, drawing in capital and knowledge from Singapore, Penang, Madras, Bombay and Hadhramaut. Although this project failed, he also continued a large agricultural project on the Hadhramaut coast. His passion for politics continued in Hadhramaut, he became involved in an attempt to negotiate an agreement between the Imam of Yemen and the coastal Quray’i sultanate. At the same time, he invested some of his money in the Hadhramaut. Perhaps even more importantly, he tried to initiate entrepreneurial projects on a small scale not known in Hadhramaut or the Middle East. Even if his initiatives, like those of a number of his contemporaries, failed, they helped to create a climate in which, in the 1920s and 1930s, Ulrike Helmers had found an environment in which she could live. New lives, new technologies became accessible. Beyond the impact of the migrant entrepreneur on their homeland, their story also could—if the necessary source material could be made accessible—contribute to a better understanding of the early capitalist Muslim business culture, which for a long time was a major economic factor in the Indian Ocean economy.

The political and cultural influences of the diaspora on the homeland, exemplified by Sayyid Ali’s political plottings and his support for an educational movement in a new style, can be considered in a similar way to the economic ones, as can the effects these migrants had on their host communities. Investigating such contact between non-European cultures and the imperial age can contribute, among other things, to a better understanding of the spread of Islam. While this is commonly attributed to the interaction of Western societies with non-Western ones, a closer investigation of the Hadhrami diaspora reveals a far more complex picture. The Jam‘iyyat al-’Ashwaq, which Sayyid Ali chaired, was modelled on the Batavia Chinese Association, a branch of the Confucian renaissance in China. Hadhramaut schools influenced the educational and thereby also the religious orientations of the local population. While many of these issues will also remain to be explored in forthcoming monographs by scholars in the Netherlands, the UK, Norway and the US, I would like to draw attention to a topic which would require wide-spread international cooperation. Sayyid Ali b. Ahmad b. Shihab was not only an entrepreneur, but also an intellectual, who was interested in the policies pursued by the Ottoman sultan. Scholarship has much more focus on its ideological and organizational side. Colonial archives are clearly a serious challenge in the examination of the influences of the emigrant diaspora on the homeland, exemplified by Sayyid Ali. He was also, through correspondence as well as personal contact, in touch with a wide network of like-minded people of similar families, all involved in the interaction of Western societies with non-Western ones, whose cosmopolitanism in entrepreneurial, political, and intellectual terms is quite typical for a wider group of entrepreneurs around the world.”