

Onley, James: *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj. Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007. ISBN: 978-0-19-922810-2; 392 S.

Rezensiert von: Ulrike Freitag, Zentrum Moderner Orient Berlin

James Onley's painstakingly researched monograph constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of the British Empire in the Persian Gulf and beyond, in that he discusses the „native agents“, an often neglected but central group of agents for the British. These were usually traders in the region, of varying religious, ethnic and regional backgrounds, who became representatives of British interests while pursuing their own mercantile interests at the same time. As the system of Gulf residencies was very much modelled on the Indian Political Service, many of his conclusions reach far beyond the specific region and the case study of Bahrain which form the core of his book. It is based on meticulous archival work as well as extensive use of local private papers and interviews.

Onley's main argument is that these native agents have been utterly neglected in British imperial history, to the point that often even their names do not appear in the records, while they were the ones who until the end of the nineteenth century gave meaning to British presence in the Gulf. In the context of research on imperialism, his work thus highlights those intermediaries whom Ronald Robinson termed the „collaborators“, albeit in a much more neutral way than that usually associated with the term. While imperial histories usually focus on white British actors, and postcolonial studies concentrate on subaltern voices, Onley writes a different group into history. As their main function was for long the representation and mediation of British interests, as well as the provision of intelligence, these localised agents who blended in with the fabric of Gulf society had much better access to local notables and rulers than Englishmen could have hoped for – quite apart from the fact that the hot and humid local climate posed a major obstacle to the recruitment of Englishmen.

The book takes both a systematic and chronological approach: The relatively brief introduction (chapter 1) is followed by a wider sketch of British India's Informal Empire, including the so-called „spheres of influence“, in Asia and Africa, and their administration (chapter 2). The „Agents of Empire“ constitute his main interest and thus the large second part of the book, in which the „Native Agency System in Asia“ (chapter 3), its operations (chapter 4), as well as the rise and fall of the specific Bahraini case of native agency (chapters 5-6) are discussed in much detail. One problem deriving from such an approach is, however, that it invites a certain amount of repetition, which might have been reduced by more rigorous editing. The book concludes with an insightful conclusion (chapter 7) drawing together many of the fascinating questions raised in the course of the study.

In conceptual terms, the book contains a range of new insights beyond the aforementioned emphasis on a hitherto neglected group of (trans)local agents. By clearly including the informal Empire into British India, traditional geographical notions of the „Middle East“, „India“ and „Africa“ dissolved and open the view onto a pre-nationalist empire in the Indian Ocean world. Obviously, this went far beyond the imposition of a European power, as the prominent position of Indian merchants in Gulf ports shows. For the study of the Persian Gulf, which is often even renamed into „Arab Gulf“ to emphasise its regional position (and the Arab-Persian divide), this provides a welcome break and belies the often artificial „Arabness“ of present-day nationalist narratives.¹

The book contains much fascinating detail. Thus, it is indispensable reading for those trying to understand the intricate administrative hierarchies set up by the British in India and beyond, it gives detailed biographies of local agents as well as, in the annexes, ample documentation of rulers, residents, agents and other administrative personell. Given

¹ On the adaption by merchant families to an Arabist discourse, see: James Onley, Transnational merchants in the nineteenth century, the case of the Safar family, in: Madawi Al-Rasheed (ed.), Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf, New York 2004, pp. 59-90.

the emphasis on the native agents, however, it might have been expected to learn more about their perspective. Surely, Onley mentions their commercial as well as political and security interests, quite apart from the prestige derived from such an appointment, which swayed them to take on the posts of local agents even when expenses far exceeded the petty payment received (pp. 76, 100-103, 106-108). However, the agents' own and usually far-ranging commercial networks as well as their views of the relationship between the British and the local rulers and their perception of their own roles remain in the shadow. Obviously, one can hardly expect the British material to yield that view, but given the local sources Onley had at his disposal, the almost complete absence of this perspective is somewhat surprising. That this might not be entirely due to the sources becomes clear from comments such as the following, which comes in the context of a discussion of the Residency system from the British perspective: „A second disadvantage of the native agency system was that the agents' intelligence reports were not consistently accurate.“ (p. 98). While this was certainly true from the British perspective, where a certain underlying distrust of „natives“ prevailed, one would expect some qualifying remarks from a historian well aware of the pitfalls of any reporting and claims to objectivity.

Overall, however, Onley is to be congratulated for a very well-researched and immensely readable book which will benefit both imperial historians as well as those concerned with the Gulf Area.

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