

## **Hadhrami Sayyids in Malaya, 1819-1940**

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### **Abstract**

This article highlights the history of the Hadhrami Arabs of Sayyid, descent from Hadhramaut, Yemen in the nineteenth and twentieth century Malaya. The Hadhrami Arabs appertained to the Sayyid Alawiyyah and claimed themselves as the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad SAW through his grandson Hussain. In general, Malays respectably looked upon all Arabs, particularly the Sayyids, as they were believed as the inheritors of Islamic preaching. For this article, records from archives as well as academic works were used as reference. According to the archives, the Hadhrami Arabs who were the majority of the born Arabs or *Peranakan Arab* of non Arab mothers managed to do well in their lives even though they were in a small number. They had played a significant role in the society and also managed to succeed in the economy and political undertaking in Malaya. Thus, being a minority group of immigrants did not hinder the Hadhrami Arabs from prospering in Malaya and many of them were involved in trade and business ventures as well as real estate. In fact, nowadays they have become a part of the Malay community and are identified as Malays.

**Keywords:** Sayyid, Hadhramaut, Malaya, religious scholars, entrepreneurs, Arab diaspora

### ***Sayyid Hadhramaut di Malaya, 1819-1940***

#### ***Abstrak***

*Makalah ini memaparkan sejarah orang Arab Hadhrami keturunan Sayyid dari Hadhramaut, Yaman di Tanah Melayu dalam abad ke-19 dan 20. Mereka terdiri daripada kelompok Sayyid Alawiyyah dan mendakwa daripada keturunan Nabi Muhammad SAW melalui cucu baginda Hussain. Secara umum, orang Melayu menghormati orang Arab*

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*terutamanya golongan Sayyid kerana mereka dipercayai adalah pewaris ajaran Islam. Rekod dari arkib serta penulisan ilmiah menjadi sumber rujukan dalam kajian ini. Walaupun jumlah mereka tidak begitu ramai namun kebanyakan orang Arab Hadhrami terdiri daripada Peranakan Arab yang lahir daripada perkahwinan campur di antara lelaki arab keturunan sayyid dengan wanita tempatan yang bukan berdarah arab. Mereka turut berperanan penting dalam masyarakat serta berjaya dalam bidang ekonomi dan politik tanahair. Oleh demikian, walaupun masyarakat Arab Hadhrami adalah kumpulan minoriti, namun keadaan ini tidak menghalang mereka daripada berjaya di Tanah Melayu. Ramai di antara mereka menceburi bidang perniagaan dan perdagangan serta hartanah. Malah, sehingga kini mereka telah menjadi sebahagian daripada masyarakat Melayu dan dikenali sebagai orang Melayu.*

**Kata kunci:** Sayyid, Hadhramaut, Malaya, ulama, usahawan, diaspora Arab

## **Introduction**

The Arabs have been travelling to the Malay Archipelago since before the advent of Prophet Muhammad. This journey continued after the coming of Islam with their migration to distant places far from their homeland crossing the ocean to the Europe, Africa, India, and even further eastward to China.<sup>3</sup> On the eastward voyage to China, they would drop in at the Malay Archipelagos while waiting for the monsoon to change and also to replenish the supplies of food and fresh water. All these journeys were done mainly to look for business opportunities. After becoming Muslims, they also travelled in order to perform their duties as *dā'ī* or missionaries in spreading Islam.

Through this contact, they intermingled with the Malays and some would stay and build colonies scattered in several countries

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<sup>3</sup> According to J.A.E. Morley, the long distance maritime trade had long been established between seaports of Arabia, East Africa, India, Ceylon, East Indies and China. These seaports were connected to each other by the sea trade link following the changes of monsoon. This shows that the Arabs were familiar with the sea route of the Indian Ocean to China including the Malay Archipelago. J.A.E. Morley, "The Arabs and the Eastern Trade," *Journal of Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22, no. 1 (March 1949), pp. 143-176, 143. The Arab settlements were to be found in Canton, China around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. See S.M. Imamuddin, "Arab Mariners and Islam in China," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 32, no. 3 (July 1984), pp. 155-181, 168-170.

in the Malay World such as in the East Indies, Philippines, Malaya, Borneo and Sulu.<sup>4</sup> The hardship of living in the desert and struggling at sea made them appreciate life. They would also try to gain control and expand their influence wherever they went.<sup>5</sup> The Arabs, as suggested by J.A.E. Morley, would use their diplomatic skills, ability to engage with the appropriate sides of the native character, and their dignity as respected and esteemed '*ulamā*' or religious scholars as well as successful traders, to gain certain degrees of social status in the Malay World. The Arabs, either through marital bond or influence, managed to establish themselves as a class close and connected to the rulers in several states, such as in Perlis, Siak, Jambi, Pontianak and Kubu, Borneo.<sup>6</sup> Directly and indirectly, this relation has influenced the Malay culture and its form of religiosity.

### **Early Contact**

The indirect contact between the Arabs and Malays had long been established since time immemorial. The long distance maritime trade between China and Arab world, that had been established and flourished even before the advent of Islam, gave impact to the development of trade in Southeast Asia especially in Malaya. "The Arabs, controlling the ports of Aden and Sacutra and gifted with an enterprising nature, had been sailing to South-East Asia and

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<sup>4</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> century Sulu witnessed an '*ālim* or scholar named Makhдум Karim who was also called Tuan Syarif Awliya' who converted the king of Sulu and his people to the religion of Islam. Then, there was another Sayyid from Makkah known as Sayyid Abu Bakar who was appointed by the Sultan of Sulu with the title Sultan Syarif Hashim from 1450 till 1480. He was said to arrive in Sulu from Johore. Two Hadhrami Sayyids who were responsible for the conversion of the people in Mindanao to Islam were Syarif Hassan and Syarif Maraja. Muhammad Ali Zainal Abidin or famously known as Syarif Kebungsuwan also came from Johore to Mindanao. He was responsible for spreading Islam in Mindanao in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. See Najeeb M. Saleeby, *Studies in Moro History, Law and Religion* (Manila: Filipina Book Guild, 1976), 16-7, 24-5, 29. During this period, Malacca was an Islamic kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> In Malaya, some of them held important positions in the Malay states administration. They managed to place themselves among the elites and ruling classes. Through marital bond, they became part of the ruling families and some inherited the throne.

<sup>6</sup> Morley, "The Arabs and the Eastern Trade," 165-66.

China since the immemorial time.”<sup>7</sup> This long distance maritime trade had witnessed the involvement of the Arabs as middle men transporting and supplying commodities from India and even China, crossing the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. They plied from Arabia to China and vice versa and became familiar with the Malay Archipelago. The commodities were loaded at Aden before they were distributed and traded in the European markets through Damascus and Egypt.

The Arabs were masters at the sea, controlling the maritime trade with the East and dominating the eastern merchandise and spices, until at least at the end of the fifteenth century when Europeans began to discover other routes to the East.<sup>8</sup> Merchandise like pepper, cinnamon and ginger were traded from Aden to Egypt before being marketed in Europe. Moreover, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf also played an important role in the sea trade route between east and the West Asia. In Hadhramaut itself, the people produced frankincense as the source of income.<sup>9</sup>

With the emergence of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the year 610, the teaching was then widely spread in the whole Arabia and went beyond the region crossing the ocean reaching till Far East, in China and far to the west of Africa in Western Sahara. The Arab Muslim traders were now occupied with the new task as the carriers of the new faith. The early Arabs’ contact with India which was merely based on trade had changed. Ever since, the Arabs’ travel to India was not merely for business purposes but also for doing missionary activities.<sup>10</sup> The Arabs took the opportunity sailing at sea crossing the Indian Ocean, passing the Malay Archipelago and voyage up to the Pacific Ocean and

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<sup>7</sup> Affan Seljuq, “Some Muslim Geographers on South-East Asia,” *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 37, no 2 (April 1989), pp. 125-132, 129.

<sup>8</sup> S.M. Yusuf, “The Route of Arab Mariners through al-Zabaj (Further India) in the Third and Fourth Centuries H,” in *Studies in Islamic History and Culture* (Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 1989), 132. During this period of time (9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries), Arabs’ navigation was at its peak. They had travelled past the Indian Ocean and went up to China passing the al-Zabaj (further India). In due course they sailed passing the Malay Archipelago.

<sup>9</sup> Morley, “The Arabs and the Eastern Trade,” 15.

<sup>10</sup> R.B. Serjeant, “The Saiyids of Hadramawt,” in *Studies in Arabian History and Civilisation* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1981), 24. See also Mahayudin Yahaya, *Sejarah Orang Syed di Pahang* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 1984), 27.

arrived in China. Their settlements are to be found in the Western coast of India, in Ceylon, in Malay Archipelago as well as in China.<sup>11</sup>

According to R.B. Serjeant, around the twelfth to the fifteenth century in India, there were colonies of Arabs who lived in several port cities in the coastal areas such as Gujarat, Malabar, Bijapur, and Surat. This makes sense, as proposed by Mahayudin Yahaya and other scholars, that the coming of ‘Alawi Sayyids to Southeast Asia, in particular to Malaya and Indonesia, had occurred in several stages. Most probably the first phase took place around the sixteenth century. This was followed by the second phase in the seventeenth or the eighteenth century, and the third phase in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

This migration occurred directly and indirectly from Hadhramaut, Yemen with most of them following an indirect course to Southeast Asia. Many of the Hadhrami Sayyids who came to the island of Singapore, Penang and other Malay states in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were from the East Indies like Java, Palembang, and Aceh. They consisted of religious men, politicians, and traders.<sup>12</sup> Some of them came directly from India and Indo-China before reaching the Malay Archipelago.

According to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, around 1290, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad bin Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī recorded about the Arab population known as al-‘Alawiyyin in Champa (*Sanf*) living in the area or peninsula known as Jazīrah al-‘Alawiyyah. Al-Attas further says that al-Dimashqī could have referred to two separate emigrations of the ‘Alawiyyin, most probably around the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century and the second migration occurred in the 13<sup>th</sup> or early 14<sup>th</sup> century. The first migration to the area were by a group of ‘Alawiyyin from Makkah and Madinah and most probably from neighbouring cities while the second

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<sup>11</sup> Abdul Ali, “The Arabs as Seafarers,” *Islamic Culture* 54, no. 4 (October 1980), pp. 211-222, 211.

<sup>12</sup> Penzance’s Report of Proceeding for Month of March 1933, Narrative of a Visit to the Wadi Hadramaut, 4, CO 273/551/16, Enclosure No. 2, The National Archives, London. See also Mahayudin, *Sejarah Orang Syed di Pahang*, 27; Omar Farouk Shaeik Ahmad, “The Arabs in Penang,” *Malaysia in History* 21, no. 2 (December 1978), pp. 1-16, 2.

emigration was from Hadhramaut, Yemen.<sup>13</sup> Based on this record it is most likely that the migration of the Hadhrami Arabs of ‘Alawi Sayyid to the Malay Archipelago, especially to Malaya took place from Jazīrah al-‘Alawiyyah, Champa.

### **The Origin of Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya**

The nineteenth century had witnessed the expansion of British colonial rule in Malaya. The opening of Singapore in 1819 as the British base in Southeast Asia to oversee the operation of its long-distance trade in the region had opened lots of opportunities to foreign traders to trade there. Singapore then opened as a free port. The policy introduced by the British had attracted merchants and traders from all over the world including those Arabs from the Middle East countries to trade in the island.<sup>14</sup> Arabs from Hadhramaut, Yemen were among those traders who travelled to the Malay World to seek fortune in Singapore engaging in business ventures on the island.

The Hadhrami Arabs society of Sayyid descent in Malaya claimed that they were descendants of the Prophet Muhammad SAW through his grandson Ḥussin, one of the sons of Fatimah and Ali. They were also called the descendants of *al-Sadah* (plural of Sayyid). They called themselves as al-Alawiyyin, by connecting their lineage to Sayyid Alawi, grandson of Ahmad bin Isa al-Muhajir<sup>15</sup> in order to distinguish themselves from other Sayyids of Hadhramaut. They traced their genealogy back to ‘Ali, the great-

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<sup>13</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction* (Johor Bahru: University of Technology Malaysia Press, 2011), 130.

<sup>14</sup> The same approach was taken by Francis Light when he took Penang that was later on called Province of Wellesley in 1786. Light introduced a policy that attracted many foreign traders to trade in Penang. Duty tax was exempted upon traders and merchants as well as freedom of acquiring land in Penang that had attracted many foreign merchants and traders including those from Hadhramaut, Yemen, and India, as well as people of Malaya to settle there. Police force was also established to look after the safety and security of the island. See MISC 19/1 ANM, National Archive Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>15</sup> Mahayudin Yahaya, "Latarbelakang Sejarah Keturunan Sayid di Malaysia," in Khoo Kay Kim et al., ed., *Tamadun Islam di Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia, 1980), pp. 60-73, 64-66; W.H. Ingrams, *Aden Protectorate: a Report on the Social, Economic and Political Condition of the Hadramaut, Colonial 123* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1936), 36-39.

grandson of Hussin, the sixth generation of Prophet Muhammad SAW's progeny. Ali lived in Baṣrah and was called Ali *al-Qāim Bi-'l Baṣrah*. From Ali's offspring was his great-grandson Ahmad who was also famously known as Ahmad al-Muhājir, the traveller. He was the son of Isa bin Muhammad bin Ali (al-Qāim Bi-'l Baṣrah). Ahmad bin Isa then migrated from Baṣrah to Hadhramaut, Yemen. The Hadhrami Arabs of Sayyid group took their clan name from the grandson of Ahmad b. Isa al-Muhājir, Alawi, thus, they called themselves *al-Alawiyyin*.<sup>16</sup>

The descendants of Alawiyyin Sayyid emerged in Hadramaut around 512 A.H./1127 A.D.<sup>17</sup> In Hadhramaut, their clan extended and they also gained reputable status in the society as the carriers and inheritors of the faith of Islam. The *al-Sadah* held religious position and were reputable 'ulama or religious men in society and very much influential in preserving Shari'ah Law and the teaching of Islam.<sup>18</sup> Tarim was one of the most important centres in their homeland catering to Islamic learning. Many religious scholars were produced in Tarim. They became muftis and qāḍī as well as religious men. The majority of the Hadhrami Sayyids who were the descendants of Prophet Muhammad SAW lived here.

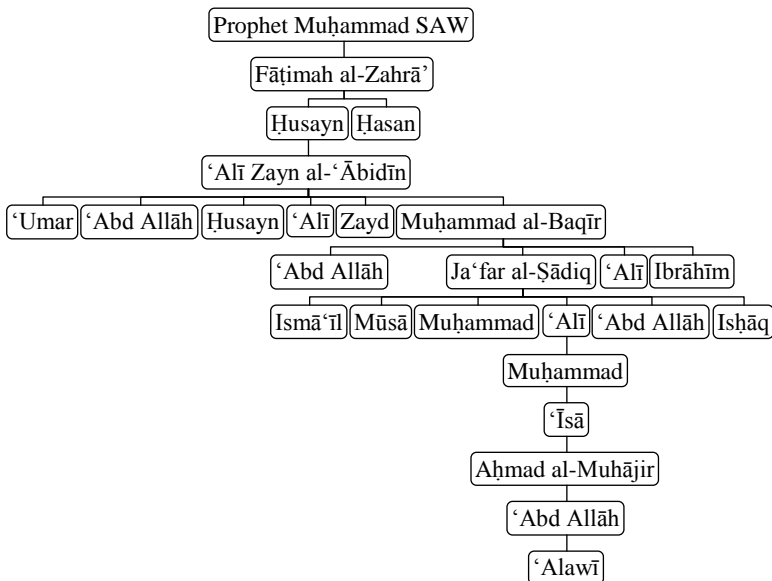
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<sup>16</sup> Report of Proceeding for Month of April, 1933, Narrative of a Visit to the Wadi Hadramaut, PRO, CO 273/551/16, The National Archives, London. Ahmad bin 'Isā al-Muhājir (the traveller) was the great grandson of 'Alī al-Qā'im bi al-Baṣrah, who was the great-grandson of Ḥusayn, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad SAW. Ahmad bin 'Isā migrated from Basra to Hadhramaut around 512H/1127. As claimed, they were the descent of Prophet Muhammad SAW.

<sup>17</sup> R.O. Winstedt, "The Hadramaut Saiyids of Perak and Siak," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 79 (September 1918), pp. 49-54. According to Abū Muḥammad 'Alī ibn Ahmad ibn Ḥazm, a famous historian in the 5H/11 century, he recorded in *Jamharah Ansāb al-'Arab* genealogy of the Prophet Muhammad SAW's progeny through his grandsons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. However, the record of the family ends at the sixth generation of the family. It is said that there had been confusion on the genealogy of Prophet Muhammad SAW since there were fake claims made by irresponsible person. However, the historiography of the genealogy of the Prophet Muhammad SAW based on the Hadhrami Sayyids' sources resumed after 10H/16 century. See Abū Muḥammad 'Alī ibn Ahmad ibn Ḥazm, *Jamharah Ansāb al-'Arab*, 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1962), 39-59.

<sup>18</sup> Ingrams, *Aden Protectorate*, 36-38.

The lineage of Al-‘Alawiyyin clan through the Prophet Muhammad SAW’s grandson, Hussain.<sup>19</sup>



Being descendants of the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W secured them special place in the Malay society. Malays looked upon them with respect and deference. Not only for their sacred connection with the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W, but also for their profound knowledge in Islam, as well as their piety. This factor in a way had helped them to be easily accepted by the people as the successors of the teaching of Prophet Muhammad S.A.W which secured for them a special place and status in the Malay society. They became the source of reference for fellow Muslims in matters related to religion. In terms of relationship, there is a little gap between the Sayyids and Malays. According to W. Linehan, Sayyids were more welcomed and free in their contacts with the royalties and

<sup>19</sup> Referred to and modified from various sources. Please refer to Winstedt, “The Hadramaut Saiyids of Perak and Siak,” 49-54; Mahayudin, “Latarbelakang Sejarah Keturunan Sayid di Malaysia,” 64-66.



aristocrats compared to the Malays. Malays respected the sayyids as much as they respected their sultans and rulers.<sup>20</sup>

In the Malay society, there are certain titles used to address respected people. The *sayyid* group also received a special title by the Malays. In Pahang, especially in Kuala Tekal, Malays would call them *engku* and in Pekan and other districts they are called *habib* ‘tuan’ or *tuan sayyid*. In Terengganu, they are called *Tukku* or *Tokku*. While among themselves they would use word *ana* and *anta* which means I and you.<sup>21</sup> Besides title Sayyid they are also called *Sharif* and *Habib*. There is another honorific title used in Hadhramaut to refer to the people of the high dignitaries of religion in society. It is normally given to teachers, scholars and men of religion that forms a group of noble men in Hadhramaut, Yemen and they are known as *Shaykh* or *Mashaikh* (plural).<sup>22</sup> In Malaya, there is another group of Arabs known as *shaykh* or *mashaikh* who came not only to trade but also actively did the missionary works propagating and spreading Islam.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Hadhrami Arab Population in Malaya**

The Hadhrami Arab society scattered in almost every state in Malaya during the period of the nineteenth and twentieth century. However, the number of the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya before that time could not be ascertained. Most of the available records were collected during the British colonial rule. Unfortunately, the censuses carried out in Malaya at that time did not classify the Arab population by clan but rather the Arabs in general, regardless of their country origin. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the exact number of the Hadhrami Arabs of Sayyid descent in Malaya since their arrival in the country. Moreover, many of the Arabs in Malaya were those of *Peranakan Arabs*, a new generation of the Arabs that mostly born out of the Arab fathers with local women. Most of the researchers and scholars in the field recorded that the majority of the Arabs in Malaya were those from Hadhramut,

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<sup>20</sup> W. Linehan, “A History of Pahang,” *Journal of Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 14, no 2 (May 1936), pp. 1-256, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Mahayudin, *Sejarah Orang Syed di Pahang*, 88.

<sup>22</sup> Ingrams, *Aden Protectorate*, 40-41.

<sup>23</sup> Syed Ali Mohamed al-Attas, *Allahyarham Syed Hassan bin Ahmad al-Attas: Seorang Mujahid dan Pembangunan Ummah* (Johor Bahru: Madrasah al-Attas al-Arabiah Johor, 1998), 6.

Yemen. There is no way for this study to ignore these censuses as these are the only available records to trace the number of the Arabs population in Malaya. These censuses are important to support the research done in order to facilitate the study. Since many of the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya were those coming from Indonesia, (a lot of its foreign population of Arabs were Hadhramis from Hadhramaut, Yemen) apart from direct migration from Hadhramaut, this would suggest that the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya were also of Hadhramaut origin. Furthermore, it is evident in their surnames that they are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W from Hadhramaut, Yemen.

The earliest census on Malaya was carried out in 1871<sup>24</sup> on the Straits Settlements population of Singapore, Malacca and Penang. From this record it shows that the total number of Arabs was 1122. Many of them were concentrated in Singapore with 465 people followed by Penang 354 and Malacca 303. Out of 1122, 605 were males and the rest 517 were females. The Singapore Chronicle record shows that in 1830, the number of Arab population was 28 out of the total population of the island 20,243.<sup>25</sup> Based on the Earl's account, the number of Arab population in Singapore in 1833 was 96. All of them were males.<sup>26</sup> Further census was conducted in 1881 in the Straits Settlements that saw the increase of Arab population in the three states. In ten years time their number had increased to 1637 with additional 515. However, the 1891 census showed a decrease with 1468 souls. The number slightly decreased in comparison with the 1881 census from every state. (Refer to Table 1.)

Whilst in the Federated Malay States, the 1891 census showed that their number was 427 with Pahang the mostly populated with 329 followed by Selangor with 27, Negeri Sembilan 20 and Perak 51 respectively. The 1901 census carried out in Federated Malay States showed the growth of the Arab population from the previous ten years with 574 in 1901. In the states of Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Perak, the number of increment was quite small compared to Pahang that saw a significant rise from 329 in 1891 to 447 in 1901. In 1911 the

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<sup>24</sup> Straits Settlement Population 1871, Microfilm no. 242.

<sup>25</sup> See *Singapore Chronicle* 165 (Thursday, 15 July 1830).

<sup>26</sup> G.W. Earl, *The Eastern Seas* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1971), 362.

number of the Arabs population in Federated Malay States decreased from 574 to 337. However, their number increased to 656 in the 1921 census with Pahang 395, Selangor 82, Negeri Sembilan 78, and Perak 101. Their number again decreased to 402 in 1931.<sup>27</sup> (Refer to Table 2) During the last quarter of the nineteenth century Malaya, There were Hadhrami Arab entrepreneurs reported to have applied license to open land for agricultural, mining as well as timber activities from the government of the State of Pahang. For example in 1890, Sayyid Hassan was awarded land for mining gold by the Sultan of Pahang.<sup>28</sup> He had a good relationship with the Sultan of Pahang, Sultan Ahmad from which he was awarded other 14,000 acres of land stretching from Kuala Pahang to Air Hitam for agricultural purposes for 99 years.<sup>29</sup> In 1921, Sayyid Mohamed Alwi al-Haddad together with his partner Ungku Abdul Rahman Ungku Abdul Majid applied for a mining license to extract gold in the area of about 2,000 acres in the District of Batu Talam, Raub, Pahang.<sup>30</sup> The Al-Sagoff and Co. was also involved in paper production in Pahang.<sup>31</sup> This possibly attracted fellow Hadhrami Arabs to move to Pahang to work there. Based on the censuses, it is found that since the first census carried out in 1871, the Arabs mostly the Hadhrami Sayyid were found scattered in almost every state in Malaya.

From the 1911 census done in the State of Kedah and Perlis, it showed that the number of Arabs was 119 and 10 respectively.

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<sup>27</sup> George Thompson Hare, ed., *Census of the Population, Federated Malay States, 1901* (Command, Colonial Office Library, 1902). See also *Federated Malay States Statistics 1906, Census Taken on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1901*, Colonial Office Library, 84-85, PRO, CO 575/3, The National Archives, London.

<sup>28</sup> Aminudin Abd Rashid, "Syed Hassan bin Ahmad al-Attas: Satu Kajian Biografi" (Bachelor Thesis, University of Malaya, 1995/1996), 48.

<sup>29</sup> See Sultan Pahang (1306H/1888), 33/1916, National Archive Malaysia, Kuala Terengganu.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from District Officer of Raub, Pahang to the District Officer, Johor Bahru regarding the application of Ungku Abdul Rahman Ungku Abdul Majid from Bukit Taram, Johore and Sayyid Mohamed bin Alwi al-Haddad for a prospecting license over 2000 acres of Land in the Mukim of Batu Talam, Raub, Pahang (14 March 1921), CLM 363/1921, National Archive Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>31</sup> See Letter from al-Sagoff and Co. to District Office of Kuantan (31 October 1923), DOK, 509/1923, National Archive Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

From the report on the censuses of Kedah and Perlis for the year 1911, it is found from Tables III and IV on races and languages, that the Arabs are classified as Malays.<sup>32</sup> “The large majority of the Arabs were practically Malays of remote Arab descent. The Syeds had usually described themselves as Arabs”.<sup>33</sup> This could probably refer to the spoken language where many of them could converse in Malay fluently. It is found that intermarriage between different races was common in Kedah and Perlis and their descendants learned to speak foreign languages aside from their mother tongue. Majority of the Arabs born in Malaya of Malay mothers speak the Malay Language. Many of them cannot speak fluent Arabic but some can understand it. Due to the assimilation with the local people they easily adapted to the Malay culture and ways of life including language, food, customs and fashions that eventually they could be called Malays.<sup>34</sup> (Refer to Table 3) It shows that the Arabs in Kedah and Perlis were categorised under Malay race due to their spoken language, Malay. Furthermore, due to the assimilation with the locals and mix-marriage, their young generation have become Malays socially and culturally despite of their Arab blood.

In the state of Johore, Onn Jaafar in his letter to the Medical Director Office of Johore on 31 January 1931, discussed about the issue of free medical treatment to the Arabs as enjoyed by the Malays. This is regarding a complaint made by Sayyid Omar and Sharifah Esah Hussein from Muar to the government asking for free medical treatment at the General Hospital Muar. In this matter Onn Jaafar considers Arabs at equal level to the Malays and they were to be treated and considered as Malays.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Colonial Office, *Report on the Census of Kedah and Perlis A.H 1329 (A.D 1911)* (Penang: Criterion Press Ltd., 10 March 1911). E.M. Merewether, *Report on the Census of the Straits Settlements taken on the 5 April 1891* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1892).

<sup>33</sup> Colonial Office, *Report on the Census of Kedah and Perlis A.H 1329 (A.D 1911)*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Colonial Office, *Report on the Census of Kedah and Perlis A.H 1329 (A.D 1911)*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> See Letter sent by Onn Jaafar to Medical Director Office of Johor Bahru, Johore (31 January 1940), GA 27/1940, National Archive Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

Table 1: Censuses of Arab Population in Straits Settlements (Singapore, Malacca and Penang)<sup>36</sup>

Year	States/ Number of Arabs		
	Singapore	Malacca	Penang
1871	465	303	354
1881	836	220	574
1891	806	95	567
1901	919	45	542
1911	1237	135	702
1921	1282	56	520
1931	1939	88	605

Table 2: Censuses of Arab Population in Federated Malay States<sup>37</sup>

Year	States			
	Pahang	Selangor	N. Sembilan	Perak
1891	329	27	20	51
1901	447	31	27	69
1911	152	73	62	50
1921	395	82	78	101
1931	189	70	88	55

Table 3: Censuses of Arab Population in Non-Federated Malay States<sup>38</sup>

Year	States				
	Johor	Terengganu	Kelantan	Kedah	Perlis
1911	699	186	17	119	10
1921	736	567	118	226	154
1931	1345	89	213	113	143

<sup>36</sup> Merewether, *Report on the Census of the Straits Settlements taken on the 5 April 1891*.

<sup>37</sup> Hare, ed., *Census of the Population, Federated Malay States, 1901*; Straits Settlement Population 1871; Morley, "The Arabs and the Eastern Trade," 175; Federated Malay States Statistics 1906, Census Taken on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1901, Colonial Office Library, 84-5, PRO, CO 575/3, The National Archives, London.

<sup>38</sup> J.E. Nathan, *The Census of British Malaya 1921* (London: Waterlow & Sons Limited, 1922), 92; see also Mahayudin Yahaya, "Sejarah Penempatan Orang Arab di Johor" (Paper presented at the Seminar Sejarah dan Budaya Johor, Johor Bahru, 3-6 May 2000), 2:4.

### **Hadhrami Arabs Migration and Their Distribution in Malaya**

The Hadhrami Arabs travelled to many foreign countries looking for better living. Their colonies were to be found in many places including in East Africa, India and in the Malay World. There were several factors that contributed to their emigration overseas particularly to Malaya and the Malay Archipelago. The nineteenth century geo-political and economic situation in Hadhramaut had forced majority of its population especially the young to consider migration to foreign countries. The internal skirmishes and uprisings against the Turk army had worsened the situation with security crash in Hadhramaut.<sup>39</sup> Hadhramaut also suffered from drought, terrible famine and constant tribal wars that made life risky, miserable and less prolific. This encouraged many of them to travel overseas as a solution to seek for better source of income and living in foreign lands.<sup>40</sup> The Hadhrami Arabs in Sayyid's group were among those Arabs who migrated to the East and many of them were to be found in Dutch East Indies, Singapore and Malaya. When Penang and Singapore were taken by British in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and opened as free ports, Hadhrami Arabs were among the earliest immigrants to settle in the islands. They came as traders and religious teachers. Thus, the ties between Arab countries and Malaya resumed.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ingrams, *Aden Protectorate*, 29- 36.

<sup>40</sup> Besides earning more income and had better life in Malaya, where many of them married and settled there, yet they never forget to send home remittances every year. With this money they supported lives of the relatives, building houses, mosques, schools etc. Many of them became successful traders in Malaya. This practice continued until the World War II broke out in 1942 when Malaya was attacked by Japanese army.

<sup>41</sup> In fact the relationship between Malaya and the Arab countries had existed ever since the early decades of the Islamic Era and even prior to the advent of Islam. The trans-ocean business venture between the East and the West had long been established. Arab merchants crossed the Indian Ocean to the Far East passing the Malay Archipelago on the South China Sea to China Ocean to get to China. While plying forth and back to the East, Arab merchants became acquainted with the Malay World and became aware of its development. Some of them stopped at these islands and build settlements. Their existence were to be found in several areas in the region such as in East Indies, Malaya, Singapore, Borneo and in the Philippines. In the early times they were focused in trade ports such as in Aceh, Malacca and Singapore. The Arabs lost supremacy over the trade venture in the East when European powers started dominating the maritime trade in the East in the sixteenth century. This

After the opening of Suez Canal in 1869, travels by steam ships became popular and faster compared to traditional ships. This made the movement of ships as well as immigrants easier, faster and their number also increased from time to time. The Arab Diaspora also spread faster to foreign lands of Indian, African and also to the Southeast Asia region including Malaya. In Malaya there were many Hadhrami Arab families of Sayyid descendants such as al-Aṭṭas, al-Saqqaf, al-Junied and al-Kaff. Many of these Sayyid families were big names in the society. They were actively involved in business and became successful entrepreneurs and businessmen. When Singapore was opened by Stamford Raffles in 1819, Hadhrami Arabs of Sayyid's group were among the earliest merchants who came to trade there. Sayyid Mohammad bin Harun al-Junied and his nephew Sayyid Omar bin Ali al-Junied came to Singapore in 1819. It was said that they were wealthy merchants from Palembang, Sumatra.<sup>42</sup>

So accordingly, majority of the Arabs in Malaya were those who came from Hadhramaut, Yemen. They were from the Sayyid clan; the descendants of Sayyid Alawi. According to Mahayudin,<sup>43</sup> the Arab migration to Malaya from Arabian Peninsula occurred in several stages that were directly and indirectly from the Arab Peninsula. He further noted that direct migration from Arabian Peninsula rarely happened compared to indirect migration that involved majority of the Arabs migrants from Hadhramaut to the Malay Archipelago. Most of them were those who came from Arabian Peninsula through East Indies; Indonesia today.<sup>44</sup> Omar

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incident had indirectly slackened the relationship between the Arabs and the Malay World, especially Malaya. When Penang was taken by Francis Light in 1786, and declared as British colony, this had attracted foreign traders to trade in Penang. Arabs were among the earliest settlers in Penang. The opening of Singapore by British in the ninetieth century was also seen as a link to the Arab-Malay connection. Hence, the ties between Arab countries and Malaya resumed.

<sup>42</sup> Ameen Ali Talib, "Hadramis in Singapore," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17, no. 1 (1997), pp. 89-96, 89.

<sup>43</sup> Mahayudin, "Sejarah Penempatan Orang Arab di Johor," 1. See also Mahayudin, *Sejarah Orang Syed di Pahang*, 27.

<sup>44</sup> According to Serjeant, the Hadhramaut Sayyids were said to arrive in East Indies just some time before the coming of the Dutch to the island in the eightieth century. However, this statement could still be argued. They could have come to the East Indies earlier than the eightieth century. Records from

Farouk<sup>45</sup> discussed about Arabs' migration to Penang in which he mentioned that it began immediately after Francis Light took Penang from the Sultan of Kedah in 1786.<sup>46</sup> This movement also involved migrated Arabs from neighbouring countries such as Aceh and Sumatera to Penang. Since Singapore was opened as free port in 1819, it became a gateway to Penang to those Arabs from the Middle East countries and also Arabs from East Indies to Penang.

Singapore was the focal point and place of attraction for the Hadhrami Arabs to invest their money and skills in trade and business ventures in Malaya. Since its opening as a free trade port by Raffles, the island managed to attract traders and merchants from all over the world. The al-Junieds were believed to be among the earliest Arabs to settle in the island when it was opened in 1819. Sayyid Muhammad bin Ḥarun al-Junīd arrived in Singapore in 1819 from Palembang, Sumatra. He was a Yemeni Arab who traded in Palembang. Sayyid Omar bin Ali al-Junied (1792-1852), the nephew of Sayyid Muhammad also came and joined him in Singapore in the same year. The Arab Street became the focal area to the Hadhrami Arabs in Singapore in the nineteenth century. They were actively involved in trading with India and the East Indies dominating spices and cloth trade. They were not only trading in Singapore but were also involved in realty business.<sup>47</sup>

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the travel's accounts of Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad bin 'Abd Allāh ibn Baṭūṭah and Marco Polo indicated that Islam came to the region since the very beginning of the thirtieth century. Even during the glorious period of Malacca in the fiftieth century, there were Arab merchants from the Arab countries trading in Malacca. Moreover, these traders would stop at East Indies islands such as Perlak and Pasai for the monsoon change before sailing back to their countries. Serjeant, "The Saiyids of Hadramawt," 24-25.

<sup>45</sup> See Omar Farouk, "The Arabs in Penang," 2-10.

<sup>46</sup> It is believed that what attracted Arab people to come to Penang during that time was the trade policy introduced by Francis Light that charged no import duties to merchants and also the freedom of right to new settlers of acquiring land in Penang. Please see R.O. Winstedt, *A History of Malaya* (Singapore: Marican, 1962), 210.

<sup>47</sup> National Heritage Board, *Singapore: the Encyclopedia* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), 28.



### **The Social Life of the Hadhrami Arabs**

In general, the Hadhrami Arab society in Malaya was of a mix-culture; of Arab and Malay. Inter-marriage between Hadhrami Arabs and local Malay women was common in the society. Since the Arab migration involved vast number of Arab men, it was very rare to hear of the Arab female migration. Many of them did not bring along their families and they would leave their wives and children in the homeland in order to seek fortune and better living overseas.<sup>48</sup> They easily adapted to local customs and cultures and became part of the Malay community. Since Arab community especially the conservative and traditional *Sadah* families are so concerned about marriage and their lineage, parents would prefer to marry their daughters to Arab men rather than to non-Arabs. They only allow marriage amongst the *Sadah* families.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to Arab men, since Arabs are so concerned on the patriarchal lineage, the mix marriage between Arab men and local women is common in the society. In the early period of their migration to the Malay World particularly in Malaya, many Arabs from Hadhramaut, Yemen married into the ruling class and royal families. Their credibility in religion and social status enabled them to be easily accepted by the Malays and were regarded as equal as to their rulers and nobility. Sayyid Abdul Rahman bin Sayyid Muhammad al-Idrus (1817 –1917) better known as Tukku Paloh who lived during the reign of Sultan Zainal Abidin III was married to Tengku Mandak, sister of Sultan Zainal Abidin III.<sup>50</sup>

Through marriage, the Hadhrami Arabs managed to acquire secured positions in the society. Their attachment with the royalties helped them a lot in getting support from the ruling class as well as in their business enterprise. An example of this is in Aceh, where there are Sayyids who inherited the throne and

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<sup>48</sup> However, they would constantly send money back home and once they accumulated enough, they would return home for good. Penzance's Report of Proceedings for Month of March 1933, Narrative of a Visit to the Wadi Hadramaut, PRO, FO 371/16852, Political Eastern Arabia, Enclosure No. 2, The National Archives, London.

<sup>49</sup> Omar Farouk, "The Arabs in Penang," 3.

<sup>50</sup> Mohamad Abu Bakar, "Ulama dan Umara: Tok Ku Paluh dan Pemerintahan Islam," in *Ulama Terengganu: Suatu Sorotan* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors, 1991), 183.

become sultans<sup>51</sup> and also in Malaya the Sultanate of Terengganu and the State of Perlis where the Sayyid Jamālullail's family managed to run the state since the early nineteenth century until today.<sup>52</sup> Through the close contact with the ruling class, the Arabs were also granted with a land of concession such as Sayyid Hassan al-Attas. He was granted with a Concession Land in Ketapang, Pahang and Sayyid Muhamad al-Saqqāf was granted with a concession land in Kukob, Johore.<sup>53</sup>

Nowadays, many of the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaysia are losing their identity of *Arabness* to intermarriage. Their intermarriage with local women and intermingling with local people have gradually diminished their cultural identity that is commonly characterised by language and culture. This phenomenon is felt even during the second and third generations of Arabs in Malaya from local mothers who do not speak Arabic. According to A. Rahman Tang Abdullah who studied the Arab society in Muar, Johor also noted that Arab society used to communicate with local people especially the Malays using Malay Arabic language, a mix of Malay Language and informal Arabic language that is also called *bahasa Arab pasar*.<sup>54</sup> Most of the Arab men who married with the Malay women do not speak formal Arabic or do not speak Arabic at all. The spoken language at home was Malay Arabic language, a mix of Malay and informal Arabic language *bahasa Arab pasar*. They only taught their children to recite Qur'an at home. This was one of the reasons why the young generations of born Arabs in Malaya could not speak Arabic. However, According to Omar Farouk, in Penang, most of the Arabs were familiar with the Arabic language; it just the matter of they can speak it or not. The

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<sup>51</sup> Cesar Adib Majul, "Theories on the Introduction and Expansion of Islam in Malaysia," *Silliman Journal* 11, no. 4 (October-November 1964), pp. 335-398, 349.

<sup>52</sup> Julie Tang Su Chin, *Sejarah Kerajaan Perlis 1841-1957* (Kuala Lumpur: The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2002).

<sup>53</sup> "Alsagoff Concession Kukup," (15 March 1906), *J/Pelb.*, National Archive Malaysia, Johor Bahru. See also Saadiah Said, "Kegiatan Keluarga al-Sagoff dalam Ekonomi Johor 1878-1926" (Bachelor Thesis, National University of Malaysia, 1979), 53.

<sup>54</sup> A. Rahman Tang Abdullah, "Sejarah Masyarakat Keturunan Arab di Muar" (Academic Exercise, Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 1991/1992), 53.

majority of the Arab parents in Penang sent their children to English medium schools and English became a common language to younger generations compared to Arabic.<sup>55</sup>

Most of the children only received formal education at the school learning Malay and English. Arabic was only taught at *madrasah* and it became medium of instruction in almost all *madrasahs* in Malaya. Though in the early days, the early generations of Hadhrami Arabs and those who could afford would send their children especially boys to be educated in the homeland, Hadhramaut. They were taught Arabic language as well as religious knowledge.<sup>56</sup> Malay was also a common language in Hadhramaut. It was also widely spoken and became a mother tongue of the children of born Arab from mixed blood of Arabs with Malay or Javanese women.<sup>57</sup>

Although J.E. Nathan's survey was done in 1921 and A. Rahman Tang Abdullah's work was carried out in 1991/92, this issue has long been noticed in a survey of census done in Malaya in the state of Kedah and Perlis in the year 1911. Since the report was based on languages and races, it indirectly has categorised Arabs as Malays. This census<sup>58</sup> shows that the majority of the Arabs in Kedah and Perlis have become part of the Malay community. They speak Malay and married to local women. The children of the Arabs born in Malaya of Malay mother, the *Peranakan Arab* also speak Malay. Moreover, they also have adapted to the Malay way of life socially and culturally so no doubt they can be called Malays.

The Hadhrami Sayyids were so concerned about their family genealogy. In order to ensure the family ties were safely guarded, they would record marriages, birth and death of the family members. In Malaya, the Arab society known as *Rabiṭah al-Arabiyyah* based in Singapore was responsible for keeping records of Hadhrami descendants in the country. They have representatives who record every birth, marriage and death within

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<sup>55</sup> Omar Farouk, "The Arabs in Penang," 12-13.

<sup>56</sup> Morley, "The Arabs and the Eastern Trade," 145, 168.

<sup>57</sup> Ingrams, *Aden Protectorate*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> Colonial Office, *Report on the Census of Kedah and Perlis A.H 1329 (A.D 1911)*, 7.

sayyid families.<sup>59</sup> The science of genealogy or *nasab* or also known as *Ilmu Salasilah* is much stressed by the older generations of the Hadhrami Sayyids.<sup>60</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Hadhrami Arabs of Sayyid descent in Malaya managed to adapt to the Malay culture and way of life. Being a minority group of Arab immigrants does not forbid them prospering in Malaya. They easily adapted to the Malaya culture and way of life that enabled them to mingle in the society and eventually become part of the Malay community. The mix marriage between and among the Arabs and local women gave birth to a new generation of *Arab Peranakan*. Many of them managed to secure good positions and status in the Malay society. Some of them have become successful traders as well as entrepreneurs. Despite their small number, the Hadhrami Arab community in Malaya had played a considerable role in bringing about change in the society through their contribution in religion and economy. Some have attained the highest level of social life, becoming a part of the ruling class in the country. The land that was once foreign to them as a sojourn destination has now become the motherland to the new generations of *Peranakan Arab* in Malaya. In fact, based on the federal constitution as stated under article 160, the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya are eligible to be called Malays.

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<sup>59</sup> In Indonesia, there is a board of Hadhrami Sayyid society known as Rābiṭah al-‘Alawiyah that is based in Jakarta keeping records of the Hadhrami descendants. It also has a branch in Singapore. The society was formed in 1927 and it was known as The Alawi Union. See Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900-1942* (New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999), 99.

<sup>60</sup> Sy. Aliedin, “Pengantar Singkat Ilmu Nasab” (Paper presented at the Seminar Diaspora Arab Nusantara: Peranan dan Sumbangan, Lembaga Muzium Negeri Kedah dan Perbadanan Perpustakaan Awam Kedah, Wisma Darul Aman Alor Setar, Kedah, 5-7 Mac 2011).

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