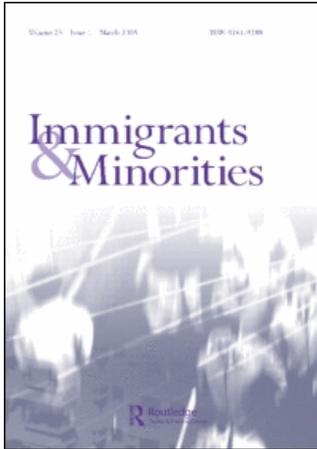


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The Role of Hadramis in Post-Second World War Singapore – A Reinterpretation

Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied

Past scholarship has tended to portray the history of Hadramis in Singapore with that of the political, economic, social and religious prominence of the diasporic community in the pre-Second World War period, followed by declining significance and disenfranchisement. This article is a revisionist attempt at documenting the crucial roles played by members of a prominent Hadrami family, the Alsagoff, in shaping the course of Malay activism from 1945 to 1965. By employing previously untapped sources, three key areas in which the Alsagoff(s) played crucial roles are unravelled: the propagation and reassertion of Islam (da' wah), Malay politics and Malay literary movement. Through such an exposition, this study hopes to provide new inroads into the study of Hadramis in Singapore.

Arabs, or to be more specific, those of Hadrami¹ descent, have played major roles in the history and development of Singapore since its founding in 1819. The earliest Hadramis to arrive on the island were two wealthy merchants from Palembang in Sumatra, namely Syed Mohammed bin Harun Aljunied and his nephew, Syed Omar bin Ali al-Junied, who alongside other families such as the Alkaff and Alsagoff², aided in the building of homes and schools, as well as other amenities for the migrants of varied backgrounds. At the same time, ties with their country of origin – the Hadramaut – were maintained by sending sons back to be educated, occasional visits to the homes of kith and kin, pilgrimages to holy shrines,

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correspondence, personal remittances and providing large amounts of funds for education and social welfare. The late nineteenth century witnessed the rise of prominent Hadramis in Singapore who took on important functions, such as Justices of the Peace (JPs), philanthropists, municipal commissioners and reformers, as well as religious leaders. On account of such varied contributions, they were regarded by the Malay-Indonesian community as “natural leaders” who represented and expressed all aspects of their needs.³ The Dutch scholar, L. W. C van den Berg, whose work represents the first serious study of the Arabs in South East Asia, reported that the late nineteenth century saw the increasing influence of Hadramis upon the Malay community in all areas of life including politics, social, economics and religious affairs. Hadramis were even revered as saints who were endowed with supernatural powers.⁴ In some cases, Ulrike Freitag observes that Hadramis “rose into the highest ranks of their host societies and occasionally even established themselves as rulers over their ‘hosts’ while at the same time maintaining internal differences.”⁵

The first challenge against the influence of Hadramis upon Malay affairs arose in the latter half of the 1920s. This happened after the setting up of the *Kesatuan Melayu Singapura* (KMS) on 14 May 1926. Implicit in the formation of this organization was the belief that non-Malay Muslims (that is, Hadramis, Indians, Jawi Peranakans (or people of mixed Indian and Malay ancestry)) were not the rightful representatives and spokesmen of the Malay community.⁶ Yet, the resistance against Hadrami and Indian dominance did not end there. In 1939, members and sympathisers of the KMS revived a Malay newspaper in the *Jawi* script, the *Utusan Melayu*, with the object of diminishing the overwhelming influence of Hadrami and Indian-owned newspapers. One of the main targets of vilification was the Alsagoff family, then the richest merchants and property owners in Singapore. In addition to that, the Alsagoff family was the publisher and distributor of a leading newspaper, *Warta Malaya*. KMS asserted that *Warta Malaya* did not, in any way, embody the opinions and aspirations of the Malays. Numerous commentaries were published in several other Malay-based newspapers and periodicals to emphasize the exploitative nature of the Hadrami economic predominance. Consequently, it has been argued that the influence of Hadramis within the Malay community upon the outbreak of the Second World War declined sharply.

To be sure, past scholarship has focussed largely on the multi-faceted contributions of the Hadramis in the pre-Second World War period, and the loss of relevance and influence in the ensuing years.⁷ Due to such emplotment, attempts by Hadramis to reposition themselves as activists and leaders who sought to address a plethora of challenges faced by the

Malay community in Singapore have been glossed over and ignored by historians. By employing previously untapped sources such as lesser known periodicals, family histories and oral interviews, this article is the first revisionist attempt to demonstrate how several prominent Hadramis, namely the Alsagoff(s) were instrumental in shaping the course of Malay activism in post-war Singapore from 1945–65. The article is divided into three main sections. The first provides an outline of the texture of Malay activism from 1945–65 with the intent of detailing various contexts in which several Alsagoff(s) operated. The second discusses three main contributions of the Alsagoff(s): the propagation and reassertion of Islam (*da' wah*), Malay politics and Malay literary movement. In the final section, I will discuss various factors which may have enabled the Hadramis to reposition themselves within the Malay community in the midst of cultural, religious and political awakenings.

Malay Activism in Post-war Singapore

For the British, the task of rebuilding Singapore in the aftermath of the war was arduous, if not, perilous. The myth of superiority had been tarnished by the Japanese Occupation which lasted from 1942 to 1945, and made worse by the rise of independence movements on the island. In view of their sacrifices during the war, members of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) were celebrated as heroes. A small group of Malays, who were inclined to leftist ideologies and were working towards freeing Malaya from the yoke of British colonialism, became ardent supporters of the party. Be that as it may, most Malays maintained a critical distance from such movements, partly due to their ideological underpinnings which were regarded by the community as opposed to the Islamic worldview. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss, in detail, the pervasiveness of Islam in the life and thought of the Malays at that time. It is sufficient to state here that, although the Malays were unsympathetic towards communism, the attachment to Islamic precepts ironically deteriorated in the three years of Japanese rule. Prayers and other basic Islamic rites were neglected and mosque attendance was relatively low.⁸ The highly acclaimed autobiographical novel, *Salina*, which is now regarded as an important source of social life in 1950s Singapore, records most vividly, the moral laxness of Muslims who were beleaguered by prostitution and other sexual vices.⁹ Syed Ibrahim bin Omar Alsagoff, as it will be discovered later, attempted to heighten such weakened ethnic identification by promoting a greater awareness of Islam and of the challenges faced by Muslims in the modern world.

A major event that had generated widespread criticism and debate in Singapore and Malaya was the Malayan Union Scheme. Made public on 1 April 1946, the scheme was introduced by the British to consolidate their hold on all Malay States. However, Singapore was excluded from the proposed set-up.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, Malays in the Peninsular regarded the high-handed implementation of the Malayan Union as an attempt to erode the powers of the Sultans and dilute Malay indigenous rights. The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) was thus registered in 1946, campaigning for an alternative power-sharing arrangement termed as the Federation of Malaya. Singapore was again excluded from the Federation due to the Peninsular Malays' fear of Chinese numerical dominance on the island. Although a segment of the Malay community in Singapore accepted the rationale of political separation, many had hoped that they would soon be incorporated into the larger mainland Malay community where many of their families and friends remained. To ensure that the rights of Malays in Singapore were equally protected, UMNO informally established its branch, the Singapore UMNO (SUMNO), in 1948.¹¹ Its influence on the island peaked in 1957. Parallel to this development large numbers of Malays in Singapore became more active in the public sphere. Hundreds of organizations which articulated a plethora of interests mushroomed in the cosmopolitan colony. It was a period of manifold awakenings. Issues of identity, politics, culture, religion and language were contested, leading to a rise of polemics and tensions between an array of ethnic, religious and ideological groups on the island.¹²

To regain the loss of public support arising from the protests encountered during the Malayan Union episode, the British introduced multifaceted policies to nurture a confirming sense of loyalty among the Malays in Singapore. Malay children were provided with free education, and even free food. Other social welfare schemes were also introduced yet by the early 1950s, unemployment was high and household income was deteriorating rapidly. Deprived of the necessary qualifications and economic networks, Malays were thus plagued by poverty and estrangement.¹³ For many radical Malays whose objective was a complete annihilation of colonial rule, these developments provided the necessary justification for the resort to violence. The Maria Hertogh legal tussle was the catalyst.

On 11 December 1950, a number of radical Malays incited crowds of young men and women at the Padang in Singapore to launch a campaign of hatred against Europeans and Eurasians. The British court's decision in restoring the 13-year-old Maria Hertogh to her Christian parents and invalidating the girl's marriage to a Muslim man was perceived by Muslims as a direct assault against Islam. Consequently, acts of violence towards

Europeans and Eurasians were carried out by scores of young Malay men. Eighteen people were killed and 173 others injured. Acting under Emergency Regulations, the British arrested hundreds of rioters and sentenced six others to death for the charges of murder and assault.¹⁴

Riots and strikes did not vanish from the scene. The Hock Lee Bus, National Service and the Chinese Middle School riots which persisted in the years that followed brought about continual damage and instability in the lives of many in Singapore. Upon witnessing the grave consequence of the Maria Hertogh incident, Malays were deterred from violent protests. Instead, Malay trade union activists, journalists, teachers, writers and middle-class professionals increasingly participated in party politics. SUMNO and The Labour Front were viewed as viable platforms for political participation and for the propagation of Malay interests. In 1954, the Peoples' Action Party (PAP) presented a more organized alternative, attracting many from SUMNO to join its ranks in the 1957 City Elections.¹⁵

By 1959, the PAP had won over the support of a majority of voters on the island and remains politically pre-eminent today. Aggressive policies were adopted by the party to upgrade the backward status of Malays in Singapore as part of a short-term political strategy to fortify the case for a merger with Malaysia. British free education policies were extended, "Malay" was formalized as the national language, an editor of a prominent Malay newspaper, Yusof Ishak, was nominated as the second *Yang DiPertuan Negara* (Head of State) in 1959 and the number of Malay schools proliferated. Even the new Singapore state flag featured a crescent moon which was perceived by Muslims then as an important symbol of Islam.¹⁶

However, the merger was doomed to failure from the onset. In response to their defeat in the 1963 Singapore elections, SUMNO implemented grass roots-based programmes to recapture the support of Malay voters. Within a few weeks, more SUMNO branches were established throughout Singapore and the neighbouring islands. Coming under the direct purview of the UMNO branch in Kuala Lumpur, *Utusan Melayu* became an ideological tool to discredit the party's opponents in Singapore. By 1964, racial politics had reached its epitome. UMNO's Secretary General, Syed Ja'afar Albar, who was a Malayan-born Hadrami, took it upon himself to champion the cause of Malays in Singapore by emphasizing, what he held as the PAP government's jaundiced policies towards the minority community.¹⁷ The PAP reacted by organizing mass meetings with the Malay populace and by setting up the Malayan Solidarity Convention (MSC) to champion a "Malaysian Malaysia" as opposed to a "Malay Malaysia". As tensions between the PAP and UMNO came to a head, in July 1964, racial riots involving Malays and Chinese broke out in the midst

of an island-wide celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday. This was followed by another major outbreak in September, which involved high numbers of casualties and damage. The Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, recognized the futility of coexistence and decided that separation was the only practical solution. On 9 August 1965, Singapore became an independent state.

Amidst such developments, Von der Mehden observes that the interactions between the Middle East and South East Asia in the post-war era were centred upon two areas: to address the dismal state of Muslim minorities and to propagate purist interpretations of Islam.¹⁸ Cognizant of developments in the Middle East and conscious of their place within a global diaspora, Hadramis in South East Asia made effective use of familial, economic and political links that had been fully revived in the aftermath of the Second World War. They acted as "middle-men" who publicized the concerns of local Muslims to the wider Muslim world. In this regard, Engseong Ho notes that the idea of an imagined community and commitment to activism among selected Hadramis in post-war South East Asia was "Janus-like", straddling uneasily the pressing demands of local politics and nationalism and the wider agendas of a transnational *Ummah* (Community).¹⁹ As will be seen in the next part of this article, by virtue of their biographical backgrounds and persona, the Alsagoff (s) were able to garner support from Muslim governments, personalities and organizations within the region and in the wider Islamic world to advance local agendas. It is to the roles of the Alsagoffs in these exciting years that one can now turn.

Hadramis within Malay Activism

Propagation and Reassertion of Islam (da' wah)

The Alsagoff(s) first major role within Malay activism was to propagate and reassert Islam (*da' wah*). A prominent figure in this respect was Syed Ibrahim bin Omar Alsagoff, more commonly known as *Datuk* S.I.O. (see Figure 1). Born to wealthy parents who travelled frequently between Singapore and Mecca, Ibrahim gained fame from his close relationship with Muslim leaders of the Arab world. By the late 1920s, he was appointed as a member of the Legislative Assembly in Mecca during the reign of King Abdul Aziz bin Saud. In 1930, Ibrahim migrated to Singapore to relieve his father of the management of properties in Singapore.²⁰ Thereupon, his contribution to the propagation and reassertion of Islam amongst Malays in Singapore evolved in three main ways. The first came through organizational activities. This was followed by his active involvement in the

publishing industry. Thirdly, Ibrahim made connections with foreign movements and personalities with the intent of publicizing the challenges faced by Malays in Singapore to the wider Islamic world. Though intertwined with one another, Ibrahim's remarkable and varied missionary activities will be treated separately for a clearer understanding of his agency within each of these spheres.

Ibrahim's involvement in the *da'wah* via organizations went back as far as the 1930s. Having volunteered for over two years as an active member of the All-Malay [Malaya] Muslim Missionary Society (known as *Jamiyah*), he was appointed as the president in 1932.²¹ Founded in 1931 by Maulana Abdul Alim Siddique (a Sufi-Indian scholar), *Jamiyah's* key objectives were to propagate Islam and to combat Christian missionary activities. Gradualism was the approach which the organization had adopted in its initial dealings with the colonial polity. On the other hand, during his term as the president, Ibrahim had elevated *Jamiyah* into a new stage of engagement with the Muslims and the British colonial administration in Singapore and mainland Malaya. As early as 1936, *Jamiyah* had, for the first time since its creation, acquired a central place within the concerns of the British intelligence services due to its intimate connections with personalities who sought to revitalize Pan-Islamism.²² Merely six years later, mass support for *Jamiyah* had grown to the extent that it was constantly made to declare its support towards the Japanese regime on policies pertaining to Islam.²³

Following the Japanese surrender in 1945, Ibrahim's administrative career was further enhanced through the re-institutionalization of the Mohammedan Advisory Board; a quasi-governmental body whose function was to articulate Muslim interests and problems to the colonial authorities. Continually wary of *Jamiyah's* Pan-Islamic links, the British uncovered a plot by Ibrahim and several others to assume key positions in the Board so as to place it under the direct control of *Jamiyah*. Members of the Board were abruptly reappointed and the organization renamed the "Muslim Advisory Board (MAB)". Ibrahim was elected as its first President and this is due partly to the support he had received from a majority of the members in the Board and the Anglophone elites in the colony. With two major organizations under his sway, coupled by the support he received from influential Malay elites, Ibrahim emerged as a formidable figure within the Singapore Muslim community. In 1949, *Jamiyah* had begun to criticize the colonial government for stunting political reforms in Singapore and Malaya. Muslims were called upon to "struggle by constitutional means for improvement and eventual full self-government".²⁴ The organization maintained that poor administration of ethnic relations had resulted to the rapid spread of communism in Singapore and Malaya. Two solutions were proposed to address this predicament. First,

Malay indigenous rights and other provisions should be formalized and made known. Secondly, *Jamiyah* urged the colonial government to attend to the depressing state of the non-Malay communities in order to mitigate the appeal of communist propaganda.²⁵

Throughout his involvement in *Jamiyah*, Ibrahim had also emphasized the need to transcend racial, class or ethnic divisions in pursuit of the universal brotherhood that Islam inculcates. Although he was in full support of the existence of communally-based parties such as SUMNO and KMS, Ibrahim held that, if left unmanaged, extremist tendencies within such parties might result in the neglect of the primacy of Islam which was a fundamental element of the Malay identity. He proposed that these parties and their supporters should widen their horizons towards campaigning for the rights of all Muslims and not just the Malays. Muslims in Singapore, according to Ibrahim, should unite towards opposing any legislation that ran counter to the Muslim Law, and should also secure the government's support for declaring the birthday of the Prophet a public holiday. He also advocated reviving the pre-war Islamic instruction in Malay schools and appealed for monetary support from the government towards the establishment of a Muslim college and scholarships for ten students.²⁶

Admittedly, *Jamiyah* was, on several occasions, criticized for its inadequate treatment of the challenges faced by the Malays in Singapore. Editorials of leading newspapers such as the *Melayu Raya*, for that matter, contended the dominance of Hadramis and Indians in the organization.²⁷ Even so, the organization retained its status as the custodian of Islam and was entrusted with determining the commencement of Ramadan (the fasting month), and the declaration of *Eidul Fitri* (the Day of Celebration which marked the end of Ramadan), and also with providing religious advice to members of the public. When viewed from a personal perspective, Ibrahim's position as the president of *Jamiyah* was left unchallenged with the exception of a brief one-year interim in the wake of the Maria Hertogh controversy. In the course of the legal proceedings, Ibrahim appealed for Muslims to avoid violent confrontation in the contest for the custody of Maria Hertogh. He aired his opposition against the British court's decision to nullify the marriage between Maria and a Malay-Muslim teacher, Mansoor Adabi. Peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims in Malaya, Ibrahim asserted, would be jeopardized by such legal pronouncements.²⁸ Ibrahim was thus sidelined by radical elements led by an Indian Muslim, Karim Ghani, who was detained upon the outbreak of riots. Following that, Ibrahim was reappointed as the organization's president and remained a highly respected figure until his formal resignation in 1964.²⁹ He then served as a Consul-General for the Saudi Arabian government to Singapore.

To augment the efforts of reasserting the place of Islam within the Malay community as well as publicizing their anxieties and challenges, Ibrahim established networks and gained assistance from several international Islamic movements. Predictably, his activities were monitored closely by the British intelligence services. Fully aware of such surveillance efforts directed towards him, Ibrahim declared that his involvements in activities beyond the scope of *Jamiyah's* main aims were based on personal and not organizational interests. Periodic meetings and discussions with Muslim leaders such as Kiyai Haji Mansoor Azahari from *Masjoemi* and even President Sukarno were organized.³⁰ On 11 February 1948, Ibrahim gave an account of his two-months' tour of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Among other things, he mentioned that:

Thousands of volunteers have been sent to Palestine and in certain places in Saudi Arabia and Egypt volunteers were being trained to be sent to Palestine. ...These views have created a favourable impression among the Muslim community in Singapore and will tend to increase the desire to form an Islamic Party to protect Muslim interests in this part of the world.³¹

In 1952, Ibrahim organized yet another controversial meeting with the leader of an Islamic movement based in Egypt, *Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn* (the Muslim Brethren). The short visit of Sheikh Said Mohamed Ramadan to Singapore was part of Ibrahim's conscious endeavour to expose Malay-Muslim elites on the island to ideas of Islamic reformism. To the British, Ramadan was a preacher of a "concentrated and rather militant Islamic propaganda". His speeches and movements were closely monitored and according to intelligence sources, whilst Ramadan's visit did "not appear to have attracted any wide-spread attention locally, it is felt that certain Muslim religious leaders have taken it (Ramadan's radical views) to heart and may seek to develop it in future".³² In an interview conducted after the independence of Singapore, Ibrahim recounted that the meetings and discussions with Muslim personalities were organized with one central aim in mind: to ensure that Malay Muslims in Singapore "feel stronger with the knowledge that they were part of the Muslim world of 800 million people".³³

In the realm of publications, Ibrahim was the prime mover of several influential journals. For a better appreciation of his unique contribution in print-related activities, it may be useful here to compare his objectives with that of Hadrami communities in other parts of South East Asia. In an insightful study entitled *The Hadrami Awakening*, Natalie Mobini-Kesheh documents how Hadramis in the pre-Second World War Dutch East Indies had published dozens of newspapers and periodicals to address

issues that were related mainly to their sense of identity and belonging. These publications served a dual function of agitating and, in the process, influencing Hadramis in South East Asia as well those in Yemen to uphold their exclusivity as descendants of the Holy Prophet Muhammad.³⁴ Ibrahim's fundamental aims were somewhat more progressive and far-reaching than that of Hadramis in the Dutch East Indies. His first foray into the publishing industry was to found a monthly journal entitled *Genuine Islam* (1936–39) which dedicated many of its pages to provide vivid updates on the plight of Palestinians prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. According to Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Genuine Islam* gained the reputation of being the first and most significant Muslim publication which focused explicitly on the dilemmas of Muslim minorities in the 1930s.³⁵ Similar to its successor, *The Muslim World* (1949–50), the journal ceased publication due to the lack of funds and other technical difficulties. *The Muslim World* was later replaced by *The Islamic World* (1958), and subsequently, *World Muslim League Magazine* (1963–68). As the title suggests, the magazine envisioned itself to be a voice for Muslims from all over the world. Its chief aim was to imbibe an in-depth awareness of the “greater” happenings in the Muslim world and to inculcate a sense of belonging among Muslims in Singapore to the *Ummah* (Global Muslim Community).³⁶

Through this magazine, Ibrahim gained the support of another prominent Alsagoff, Syed Hussein bin Ali. Hussein was the founder of the once influential *Warta Malaya*, which had ceased publication in 1941.³⁷ More popularly called “Che’ Gu” (teacher) by his peers; he was born in Mecca in October 1903. Hussein arrived in Singapore at the age of seven and was educated in the Alsagoff Arabic School and Raffles Institution. By the late 1940s he had become deeply involved in two Muslim organizations, the Muslim Trust Fund and the Muslim Orphanage. More importantly, he played an important part in raising Islamic awareness among the Malays through sponsoring several genres of publications. Foremost was the widely read periodical, *Qalam*, which featured news and commentaries on Islamic affairs and developments in the Muslim world. The periodical also featured the religious writings of a leading Malay literary figure and nationalist, Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad (Za’ba).³⁸ On several occasions, the editors of *Qalam* vocalized their dissension towards colonial mismanagement and insensitivity towards Islam. A notable case in point was the opposition against the screening of a Hollywood film, *David and Bathsheba*. The principal objections voiced by religious leaders were that the film contained a visual representation of David, a prophet of Islam, attributing him to the sin of adultery. This was

regarded as contrary to Quranic teachings. After strong protests by *Qalam* and other Muslim leaders in Singapore, the film was subsequently banned by the Board of Film Censors. The British maintained that *Qalam* had sought “to exploit every incident such as the Hertogh case, the case of those convicted in the subsequent riots and the showing of the film *David and Bathsheba* to move major Muslim pressure upon Government policy”.³⁹

Malay Politics

Whilst Ibrahim and Hussein were aggressive in advocating a return to Islam, other prominent Alsagoffs left their mark on Malay politics and became well-respected for their commitment to that end. A case in point was that of Syed Ahmad bin Mohammed who was born in Singapore on 5 July 1896 and later migrated to Mecca and other parts of the Middle East. Upon his return to Singapore in 1919, Ahmad had joined the Boy Scouts Movement, rising to the rank of Assistant Chief Commissioner of Scouts. He was also a popular figure among Malay inhabitants of villages in eastern Singapore and for that reason was appointed as the Chairman of SUMNO’s branch within that vicinity. On 24 December 1951, he was elected as the party’s first president upon the formalization of SUMNO as a sub-branch of its Johore Baru counterpart. Through his able leadership and strategic acquaintances with other prominent Malays such as Mohd Shah and Sardon Zubir, SUMNO’s influence and popularity widened to a point that it succeeded in shifting Malay support away from the Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS).⁴⁰

SUMNO’s main aims in the early 1950s were to alleviate Malay poverty, improve the poor state of Malay education and upgrade the living conditions of the Malays. Like its parent body in peninsular Malaya, SUMNO demanded full independence from British rule and promoted the development of a multiracial society in Singapore. According to Syed Esa Almenaar who was one of the SUMNO’s Secretary-Generals, by the early 1950s, the party had established 80 branches on the island with over 7,000 members and sympathisers.⁴¹ By 1953, SUMNO had become a fully-fledged state branch under the direct purview of UMNO headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.⁴²

Indeed, it was during Ahmad’s term as the president that SUMNO entered into direct confrontation with British dominance in Singapore’s politics. In 1954, SUMNO initiated a joint effort with other political parties to campaign for the increase in the number of non-Europeans in the Legislative Council. In April 1955, an alliance between SUMNO and

the Singapore Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) was formed to contest seats in the Legislative Assembly elections in the same year. SUMNO candidates won all three seats that were contested, thus attaining a place in the first locally elected government led by the Labour Front.⁴³

In devoting his energies to the cause of Malay politics, Ahmad was assisted by Syed Ali Redha Alsagoff. The latter was the son of an *alim* (Islamic religious scholar), Syed Abu Bakar bin Taha Alsagoff, who had married in 1911 in Singapore and returned to Hadramaut to administer the An-Nahda Islamic school in Seyun. Born in Singapore on 28 January 1928, Ali Redha was educated at Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah. At the young age of 24, he became a member of SUMNO and was involved in laying the essential foundations of the party. By the early 1950s, Ali Redha was charged with representing SUMNO in Telok Belangah and had developed a strong following. It is thus not surprising that he, along with another SUMNO member, Darus Shariff, won the seats they had contested during the 1957 city council elections. It was a resounding victory for SUMNO but the aftermath of elections was marred by the rise of divisions within the party. A handful of SUMNO's members proposed close collaboration with the Peoples' Action Party (PAP) but were rebuked by SUMNO's Central Committee and UMNO headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. This difference led to a major split in the party and the resignation of a large number of SUMNO's members. A fraction of these dissenters became PAP stalwarts and campaigned against SUMNO in the following elections.⁴⁴ Ali Redha stood his ground. In 1958, he was appointed deputy chairman of a party that was plagued by internal strife and monetary scandals. Nevertheless, he played an important role in assuaging racial tensions caused by the riots that broke out in July and September of 1964. Upon the separation of Singapore from Malaysia, he retained his leadership of the party amidst a spate of resignations of SUMNO loyalists who protested against UMNO politicians in Kuala Lumpur.⁴⁵

It is pertinent to note here that Ali Redha, was above all else, concerned with the socio-economic conditions of the Malays. To him, politics was a means towards achieving a more essential end, that is, to alleviate the downtrodden and marginal status of Malays in Singapore. This strategy is best reflected in his relentless services to the community which persisted well after the separation of Singapore from Malaysia.⁴⁶ For services rendered in the realm of politics and also in other areas, such as education, social work, philanthropy and the management of religious endowments (*waqf*), Ali Redha is eulogized in Singapore today.

The Malay Literary Movement

Aside from Islam and politics, Malays in post-war Singapore witnessed a resurgence of interest in the study of their language and culture. In point of fact, the island became a nucleus of literary activities that influenced other forms of creative expressions in the Peninsula.⁴⁷ On 6 August 1950, a group of poets and writers formed the *Angkatan Sasterawan 50* (The Association of the 1950 Writers) also known as ASAS 50. Driven by the motto of *Seni Untuk Masyarakat* (Arts for Society), ASAS 50 championed literature as a means of gaining independence from British colonial rule. Furthermore, through their writings, they hoped to reform the Malay way of life via a dual-pronged approach. First, they sought to free Malay society from those elements of its culture which they regarded as obstructing the pursuit of modernity and progress. Second, the group set out to advance the intellectual awareness of the Malay masses, in accordance with the ideals of social justice, prosperity, peace and harmony.⁴⁸ In the words of Keris Mas who was one of the ideologues of ASAS 50:

In the field of literature, the proponents of ASAS 50 adopted a new breathe of style, employing a mode of language that is fresh and different from the preceding genre of writers, propounding the themes of societal awareness, politics and culture with the aim of revitalizing the spirit of freedom, the spirit of independence of a people (*bangsa*) of its own unique sense of honour and identity, upholding justice and combating oppression.

....

We criticized societal backwardness and those whom we regard as the instruments responsible for the birth of such backwardness. We criticized colonialism and its instruments, that is, the elite class, those whose consciousness has been frozen by the influence of feudalism and myths, and superstition that has been enmeshed with religion (my translation).⁴⁹

A prominent Alsagoff who became an integral, albeit auxiliary, part of the literary movement was Syed Omar bin Abdul Rahman. He was born in Singapore on 8 October 1932, and as had Ali Redha, received his early education at Madrasah Aljunied. Unlike the former, Omar was provided with an English-based education at Monk's Hill Secondary School and subsequently at Victoria Secondary School. From 1957 till 1958, he was the vice-president of the Liberal Socialist Party, which contested unsuccessfully in the 1957 city council elections.⁵⁰ Seeing the futility of delving in party politics, Omar dedicated much of his wealth and time

to literary movements. His own house at 16 Nassim Road, became an established meeting place for literary activists from organisations such as the *Persatuan Penerbit-Penerbit Melayu* (Association of Malay Publishers), ASAS 50 and the *Majlis Pelajaran Melayu* (Malay Education Council, also known as the MEC), all of which had a large following in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵¹ The MEC, for example, consisted of 32 Malay-Muslim bodies, which included political parties such as SUMNO and the KMS. The formation of the Council was a critical juncture in the evolution of Malay education in Singapore, especially in agitating for the preservation and subsequent establishment of Malay vernacular schools that flourished in 1950s and 1960s Singapore.⁵² Omar served as a Treasurer in several of such literary organizations and funded a large part of their activities by utilizing his contacts and established position in the Malay Chamber of Commerce.

Going further, to promote the study and inculcation of the Malay language and culture in Singapore, Omar established a publishing house called Geliga Limited in 1956 through which a notable number of Malay educational textbooks, magazines, comics and novels were produced. Some of the most popular were those written by Haji Buyong Adil (real name Yusof bin Adil) who was a famous writer, teacher and Malayan nationalist.⁵³ Additionally, Geliga had also published the novels of members of ASAS 50 such as Hamzah, Insan Haji Ali, Abdullah Hussein, Rusmera and Masuri S. N. According to Ismail Hussein, by the end of the 1950s, Geliga Limited was one of the biggest presses in Singapore renowned within the Malayo-Indonesian literary world.⁵⁴

Conclusions

I have provided a revisionist account of the roles of several Alsagoff(s) in shaping the course of Malay activism in post-war Singapore. Their agency in areas pertaining to the propagation and reassertion of Islam (*da'wah*), Malay politics and literary movements exposes the inherent limitations of current scholarship which depicts the waning significance of the Hadramis during that era. Accordingly, it may be useful to postulate various factors which had enabled the Hadramis to reposition themselves within the Malay community in the midst of a resurgence in identity, politics and culture. An important hypothesis by Judith Nagata in her article, "What is a Malay?", may prove to instructive in this regard. Having observed the ambivalent relationship between Malays and members of other ethnic groups in the Penang of the 1970s, Nagata asserted that Islam provided a "form of institutional linkage

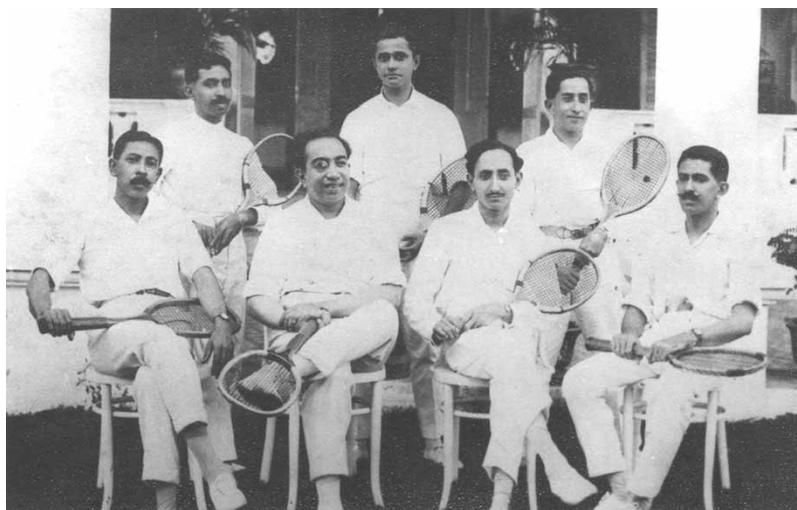


Figure 1 Hadramis and other Muslim elites having a game of tennis in Singapore. Back Row: Third from left is Syed Ahmad bin Mohammed Alsagoff. Front Row: Third From left is Syed Ibrahim bin Omar Alsagoff.

which cross-cuts” the perceived ethnic difference between Malays, Hadramis and even Chinese. In other words, the line that differentiates the Malays from other ethnic groupings on the island became blurred through the adherence to a shared faith – Islam.⁵⁵

In the context of the Singapore of the 1940s up until the 1960s, such an assertion holds true, as is clear from the Malays’ acceptance of Hadrami leadership within several realms. Although it is to be admitted that there were instances of Malay opposition towards Hadrami leadership within parties and organizations such as SUMNO, the Muslim Advisory Board and *Jamiyah*, such voices did not reflect the views of the Malay majority. Ibrahim, Ahmad and Ali Redha’s leadership were never seriously contended by the Malays, mainly due to the accepted notion that these personalities were fellow Muslims – who, even though from different ethnic backgrounds, – were working towards a common end.⁵⁶ On the part of the Hadramis, as Almenoar observed, immersing themselves within Malay activism such as SUMNO was equivocally perceived as fulfilling their duties as part of a common religious brotherhood; whilst not forgetting subconsciously their historical origins as essentially, “Arab”.⁵⁷

Secondly, a weak adherence to a unique culture was also another factor that had further diluted the extent of differentiation between Hadramis and Malays. Most Hadramis in Singapore of the post-war era had adopted the Malay language and ways of everyday living. Such a process has had the

effect of easing their assimilation into the Malay community in general. The almost total adoption of the Malay language may also explain why vigorous participation within Malay-based platforms did not pose as an obstacle for the Hadramis. In fact, as the case of Omar Alsagoff underlines, some Hadramis took the bold step of positioning themselves as leading proponents of Malay language and literature and took up important positions within organizations committed to such efforts.⁵⁸

Last but not least, it is important to state that the acceptance of the Hadramis within the Malay community was related partly to the shared predicament of being minority-Muslims within a secular state.⁵⁹ Both communities shared similar anxieties of having to assert their socio-economic and political influence within the evolving Singapore society, which was numerically dominated by the Chinese. It could be argued that the Hadramis would often initiate alliances with the Malays as part of a conscious strategy to garner their resources and cohesively operate within a context where ethnic politics was the order of the day.⁶⁰ To stretch the argument further, having been dispossessed of their socio-economic influence due to governmental policies such as the Control of Rent Ordinance (1947), the Hadramis chose to identify themselves as “Malay” so as to capitalize upon the benefits and opportunities that were linked to such ethnic identification. Among the benefits that were endowed by the British and subsequent governments was free education from primary to the tertiary level. As a result, a majority of Hadramis in Singapore then classified themselves under the category “Malay” instead of “Arab” or “Others” when the identity card system was introduced in the early 1960s.⁶¹

In conclusion, it is imperative for future scholars to be cognizant of the various strategies which Hadramis adopted to sustain their relevance and to effectively coexist with other ethnic groupings within a constantly shifting environment. This article has provided new inroads into the history of Hadramis in Singapore and the prospect of further study is, to say the least, promising. Indeed, by re-examining the contributions of other prominent Hadrami families such as Alkaff, Aljunied and Bin Talib, more could be learnt about Singapore and its transformation into a cosmopolitan city-state.

Notes

- [1] Hadrami is a term used to denote a person belonging to a sub-grouping within the current wider racial/ethnic term “Arab”. Originating from Yemen in a region called Hadramaut, Hadramis were known for their adventurous trait of establishing business networks and propagating Islam in parts of Africa,

- mainland Asia and South East Asia. For details of the origins and roles of Hadramis in the Malay world, see al-Aydrus, *Penyebaran Islam di Asia Tenggara*.
- [2] Alkaff, Alsagoff, Aljunied, Aljufri, Basharahil are “surnames” of various Hadrami families in Singapore. The spelling of such surnames differs in various texts. Alsagoff, for example, is also spelled as “Alsagof” and, in accordance to the Arab original, “Alsaqaff”. Throughout this essay, I will maintain the usage of “Alsagoff” to standardize such terminological variants.
- [3] See Mandal, “Natural Leaders of Native Muslims,” 185–98.
- [4] See Van Den Berg, *Le Hadhramout et Les Colonies Arabes Dans l’Archipel Indien*, 127–39. For a discussion of Arab influence upon Malay society at an earlier period, see Aljunied, *Rethinking Raffles*, 24.
- [5] Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in Hadhramaut*, 5–6.
- [6] See Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 191–92.
- [7] See Ameen, “Hadramis in Singapore,” 89–96; Mattar, “Arab Ethnic Enterprise in Colonial Singapore,” 175–76.
- [8] For an illuminating account of the declining adherence towards Islam during the Japanese Occupation, see Abu Talib, *Malay-Muslims, Islam and the Rising Sun: 1941-1945*, 176–96.
- [9] See A. Samad Said, *Salina* and Hooker, *Writing a New Society*.
- [10] PRO, CO 537/1528, Dominions Office to High Commissioners, 21 January 1946. For insights into the Malayan Union scheme and subsequent reactions by various groups in Malaya, see Stockwell, *British Policy and Malay politics during the Malayan Union Experiment 1945-1948* and Lau, *The Malayan Union Controversy 1942-1948*.
- [11] The exact date of the founding of the Singapore UMNO is still a matter of contention. Some of its members asserted that SUMNO was promulgated in 1952 yet had existed as an informal organization since the late 1940s. See for example, “Interviews with Buang bin Junid on 1 April, 1987”.
- [12] Ungku Maimunah, *Modern Malay Literary Culture*, 33–42.
- [13] Ismail, *Problems of Elite Cohesion*, 37; Chan, *Singapore: The Politics of Survival, 1965-1967*, 18.
- [14] PRO, CO 537/7246, Singapore Riots: Commission of Enquiry. See also *The Straits Times*, 19 December 1950.
- [15] Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore*, 202.
- [16] For insights on strategies of dominance through symbolism and other methods by the PAP government, see Bellows, *The People’s Action Party of Singapore*.
- [17] *Utusan Melayu*, 18 July 1964.
- [18] von der Mehden, *Two Worlds of Islam*, 54.
- [19] Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, 305–309.
- [20] *The Sunday Times*, 19 February 1936 and “Interviews with Rajabali Jumabhoy on 6 July, 1981”.
- [21] See *World Muslim League Magazine* 4, no. 3, (1968): 54–60. It is interesting to note that Ibrahim’s varied and relentless contributions to Jamiyah are scarcely featured in any of its official publications after 1968. See *Jamiyah*’s official website: <http://www.jamiyah.org.sg> (cited 29 June 2007).
- [22] Mohamed Redzuan, “Conflicting Political Loyalties of the Arabs in Malaya before World War II,” 49.
- [23] Yoji, “Japanese Military Administration in Malaya,” 102.

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- [24] *The Muslim World* 1, no. 1 (1949): 20.
- [25] *Ibid.*, 87
- [26] *The Straits Times*, 31 March 1955.
- [27] See for example, *Melayu Raya*, 24 November, 1952.
- [28] *The Straits Times*, 10 August 1950.
- [29] See Shahril, "Jamiyah," 102.
- [30] PRO, CO 537/3751, Malayan Security Service, *Political Intelligence Journal*, No. 3/1948, 15 February 1948.
- [31] PRO, CO 537/3751, Malayan Security Service, *Political Intelligence Journal*, No. 3/1948, 15 February 1948.
- [32] PRO, CO 1022/434, Muslim Affairs in the Federation of Malaya and Singapore, 1952.
- [33] Shahril, "Jamiyah," 38. See also, *The Straits Times*, 5 December 1969.
- [34] Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening*.
- [35] Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 144.
- [36] *World Muslim League Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1963): 1.
- [37] The press was however taken over by the Japanese and used for propaganda purposes. See "Interviews with Raja Haji Mohammad Shafik Bin Raja Haji Omar on 22 December, 1986".
- [38] Sulaiman and Abdul Ghani, *Aktivis Melayu Di Singapura*, 404. Also, see the introduction to Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad, *Mencapai Ketinggian Dunia Akhirat*.
- [39] PRO, CO 1022/206, Singapore Political Report for January 1952.
- [40] Elinah, "Malay Political Activities in Singapore 1945-1959," 52-94. See also "Interviews with Mohammad Anis bin Tairan (Haji) on 4 November, 1992".
- [41] "Interviews with Tan Sri Syed Esa Almenoar on 11th January, 1984". Syed Esa Almenoar had been an active member of SUMNO since the mid-1950s. He was later appointed as the Secretary-General of the party in 1961.
- [42] Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore*, 100.
- [43] *Utusan Melayu*, 7 April 1955.
- [44] *Utusan Melayu*, 13 January 1958.
- [45] "Interviews with Tan Sri Syed Esa Almenoar on 11 January, 1984". For details on this, see Lau, *A Moment of Anguish*, 161-279.
- [46] See <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/data/pdfdoc/wks19860902s.pdf> (cited 29 June 2007). STARS is a web-based system by National Archives of Singapore (NAS) that provides public access to ministerial speeches: see "Speech by Mr Wong Kan Seng, Acting Minister for Community Development and Minister Of State (Communications & Information) at the Bursary Certificates Presentation Ceremony Organised by the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board, 02/09/1986".
- [47] Ismail, "Singapura Sa-Bagai Pusat Kesusasteraan Melayu Sa-Lepas Perang," 539-56.
- [48] ASAS 50, "Memoranda Kumpulan Angkatan Sasterawan '50"; and Ungku Maimunah, *Modern Malay Literary Culture*, 35.
- [49] Keris Mas, *30 Tahun Sekitar Sastera*, 131.
- [50] "Interviews with Tan Sri Syed Esa Almenoar on 11 January, 1984".
- [51] For details on Omar's other commitments in Malay-Muslim activities, see Alsagoff, *The Alsagoff Family in Malaysia*, 40.

- [52] Kamsiah, "Sekolah Menengah Melayu Di Singapura." For a discussion on the politics of Malay education see Zahoor, "Politics and Policies in Malay Education in Singapore, 1961-1965," 118–20.
- [53] Buyong Adil is also remembered in Malaysia today for several state histories which he authored. One of his most cited book is on the early history of Singapore. For a selection of his books published by Geliga Limited, see Haji Buyong Adil, *Bukit si Guntang*; Haji Buyong Adil, *Batu belah batu bertangkup* and Haji Buyong Adil and Mahmud Ahmad, *Geliga Bacaan Buku Pertama: Bagi pelajaran Orang Dewasa*.
- [54] Ismail, *Problems of Elite Cohesion*, 540.
- [55] Nagata, "What is a Malay?," 346.
- [56] "Interviews with Mohammad Anis bin Tairan (Haji) on 4 November, 1992".
- [57] "Interviews with Tan Sri Syed Esa Almenoar on 11 January, 1984".
- [58] According to Ameen Ali Talib, a small number of Hadramis in the 1940s to 1960s maintained links with Hadramaut and thus some aspects of their culture and language. However, signs of cultural dilution were already apparent due to the disruptions caused by the Second World War. The identity of Hadramis, however, diluted rapidly as the members of the community were deprived of their economic resources to keep up with changes in the educational system in the 1970s. See Talib, "Hadramis in Singapore," 93.
- [59] Husain and Atiku, "Muslims in Singapore," 85–86.
- [60] Talib, "Hadramis in Singapore," 92.
- [61] Talib, "Hadramis in Singapore", 94.

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