

## Becoming Arab

Sumit K. Mandal uncovers the hybridity and transregional connections underlying modern Asian identities. By considering Arabs in the Malay world under European rule, *Becoming Arab* explores how a long history of inter-Asian interaction was altered by nineteenth-century racial categorisation and control. Mandal traces the transformation of Arabs from familiar and multi-faceted creole personages of Malay courts into alienated figures defined by economic and political function. The racialisation constrained but did not eliminate the fluid character of Arabness. Creole Arabs responded to the constraints by initiating transregional links with the Ottoman Empire and establishing modern social organisations, schools, and a press. Contentions emerged between organisations respectively based on Prophetic descent and egalitarianism, advancing empowering but conflicting representations of a modern Arab and Islamic identity. Mandal unsettles finite understandings of race and identity by demonstrating not only the incremental development of a modern identity, but the contested state of its birth.

SUMIT K. MANDAL is an Associate Professor in the School of Politics, History and International Relations at the University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus. A historian interested in the transregional architecture of Asian societies, Mandal does research on Muslim societies in the Malay world – in relation to the Indian Ocean – as well as contemporary Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. His writing has appeared in *Modern Asian Studies*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, and *Citizenship Studies*. Previously, he worked at the National University of Malaysia and Humboldt University in Berlin and held fellowships at New York University and Kyoto University. He is on the editorial board of *Philological Encounters*.

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# Becoming Arab

*Creole Histories and Modern Identity  
in the Malay World*

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Sumit K. Mandal

*University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus*



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*For Siew Lyn*

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This book is the culmination of a long journey. It had its beginnings as a doctoral dissertation submitted to Columbia University in 1994 that I put aside following my return from the United States to Malaysia to start my first full-time academic job. For many years I carried the thought of revising the dissertation for publication. This became burdensome after a while and effectively disappeared eventually. I seemed to have started a new journey, a second life of sorts, and no longer believed it was practically and intellectually possible to return to the project. This was true until I was inspired by the friendship and scholarship of a handful of friends. The prospects of a book materialised again. Many people and institutions have to be remembered in this journey.

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don't study history any more'. Although they are no longer around to see the book, thankfully they appreciated my life as a historian before they died.

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## Note on Transliteration

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This book concerns creole Arabs whose names typically represent the localisation of different transregional influences. I have thus retained the transliteration in Roman letters of names as they appear in the original Malay or Dutch rather than render them in their Arabic equivalent. Names are spelled in different ways as a result. For instance, ‘Ḥasan’ appears as ‘Hasan’ in the names of some individuals and ‘Hassan’ in others. However, I have used a standardised transliteration of Arabic terms that appear across materials in different languages. I also have retained in their usual Roman letters terms and names in Malay/Indonesian and place names with established English renditions.





Map 1. Old and new (colonial) port-cities of the Malay world, and Roman letters, respectively



Map 2. Old cities and regions of the Indian Ocean against an outline of the states. New (colonial) port-cities are indicated by diamond-shaped markers.

## Prologue

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A descendant of the Prophet Muhammad died in Batavia sometime in the 1790s and was entombed on a strip of land adjacent to the bustling harbour of the Dutch-ruled city. Sayyid Husein Alaydrus, as he was called, was a learned Muslim from the Hadramaut in Yemen who, like many of his compatriots, had travelled across the Indian Ocean to its eastern shores. His gravesite came to be regarded as a *keramat* or Muslim shrine as a result of the great reverence many had for him, and became synonymous with the area of Luar Batang on the northern shoreline of Batavia, or Jakarta as it is known in its present manifestation as the capital of Indonesia. It appears that the site was already known for a reputable gravesite before Sayyid Husein's time, as a Chinese traveller leaving Batavia in 1736 writes of departing from the 'harbour of the sacred tomb'.<sup>1</sup> Today, more than two hundred years later, Sayyid Husein's tomb, and the mosque in which it is found, is one of the most well-known keramats in the Malay world and draws visitors from all over Indonesia as well as Malaysia and Singapore.

Hadramis like Sayyid Husein had been arriving in small numbers in the Malay world since the 1500s, and made an especially significant impact on its coastal polities around his lifetime. They came as traders, diplomats, and Islamic scholars, having honed their skills through sojourns in the Hadrami diaspora scattered across the Indian Ocean. They were prized by the sultanates of the Malay world as these relatively new Muslim polities sought interaction with and recognition from the wider Muslim world. By the end of the eighteenth century, Hadramis became an integral part of courtly life by assuming important positions and marrying into ruling families. In addition, they controlled much of the shipping between the Arabian Peninsula and the Malay world. Ships plied the route from Batavia to distant ports such as Muscat, making the

<sup>1</sup> Claudine Salmon-Lombard, 'Un Chinois à Jakarta (1729–1736)', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, vol. 59 (1972), pp. 292–3.

long and sometimes difficult journey by staying close to the coastline of southern Asia.

The close interaction between Hadramis and the inhabitants of the Malay world led to the rise of creole communities that possessed Hadrami and local cultural attributes but were neither one nor the other. Creole Hadramis assumed multiple roles, frequently involved in sea-going trade, diplomacy, and the dispensation of knowledge on Islam. Among them were the ruling family of Perlis on the Malay Peninsula, Siak in Sumatra, and Pontianak in Borneo. There were also writers, including the well-known Munshi Abdullah. Creole Hadramis lived and travelled through the region and left their mark in the names of families, places, and mosques, besides the many *keramats*, as well as writings. Their transnational biographies epitomised a culturally fluid Malay world.

Sayyid Husein lived and died close to the port of Batavia, namely Sunda Kelapa, a site of interaction in the eighteenth century between diverse people from distant parts of the world. From the north came Chinese traders who had settled here before the arrival of the Dutch. From across the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean to the west came Persians, Gujaratis, and Arabs. Portuguese was so widely spoken in Batavia and the region as to serve as the *lingua franca* of the city. While the Dutch ruled the islands under their control from Batavia, their English rivals were emerging as a significant power in the region whose presence was felt in the city too. People of German, French, and other European origin busied themselves in a variety of trades and professions. From the Malay world came traders, sailors, soldiers, craftsmen, slaves, aristocrats, Islamic scholars, and others. The people gathered in Batavia brought with them a diversity of languages, music, skills, dress, architectural sensibilities, and faiths that shaped the character of city. Sayyid Husein's gravesite itself exemplified the intimate interaction between distant worlds that gave rise to the creole society and cultural practices. A Dutch scholar-bureaucrat observed in 1886 that the venerable Hadrami's tomb was then 'one of the principal places of pilgrimage' in the archipelago. Visitors to the site were 'not only the natives, but also Chinese and European mestizos' who came 'to make vows for success in their undertakings, for gaining children, and so forth'.<sup>2</sup>

Sayyid Husein's gravesite came to be attributed with the miraculous powers of a *keramat* because he accomplished a challenging task or performed a miracle for his community. We know little about what led to his prominence, as the historical documentation is scarce. However, as

<sup>2</sup> L. W. C. van den Berg, *Le Hadhramout et les colonies Arabes dans l'Archipel indien* (Batavia: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1886), pp. 162–3.

with other keramats, there are many stories that relate his superhuman feats. From these stories we learn that Sayyid Husein and his followers were imprisoned by the Dutch as the latter had become wary of his popularity and prominence in the community.<sup>3</sup> He was able nevertheless to leave the confines of his cell regularly without notice to lead his fellow prisoners in prayer, as he would appear to be asleep before the eyes of his guards at the same time. His followers are said to have buried Sayyid Husein's body at a Muslim cemetery in the city when he died, only to find it back in his room in Luar Batang afterwards. They realised after a few attempts at reburying him that it was the venerable Sayyid's posthumous wish to be buried in Luar Batang. His body remained in place once it was interred in the very location of his room. The stories of extraordinary acts filled the gravesite space and resonated with worshippers; they helped to ensure the continuity of the veneration of the shrine from generation to generation.

Sayyid Husein's time was one in which Dutch colonial power was not fully formed. His gravesite marks a rootedness in a notably hybrid cultural space and era for the Malay world. Near-contemporary records suggest that Sayyid Husein died sometime between 1796 and 1798, which puts it shortly before the momentous changes that would follow the bankruptcy of the Dutch East India Company in 1799.<sup>4</sup> The latter had established itself on Java and other islands by the time of Sayyid Husein's arrival but began to fail after its representatives in Batavia mismanaged its financial affairs. The Dutch Crown assumed control of the Company and its territories following the latter's bankruptcy. This handover signalled a gradual shift to stronger centralised rule and the gradual decline of the creole character of Batavian society. Controls were imposed over the interaction between Hadramis and local inhabitants in the nineteenth century with the increasing application of 'race' as the instrument of rule. The longstanding connections of Hadramis with the Malay world began to change significantly. It is here that this book begins.

<sup>3</sup> Adolf Heuken, *Mesjid-mesjid Tua di Jakarta* (Jakarta: Yayasan Cipta Loka Karya, 2003), pp. 51–2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.