CHAPTER 7: THE DECLINE OF THE ROLES AND INFLUENCES OF THE HADHRAMIS IN MALAYA AND SINGAPORE

Introduction

20th century Malaya witnessed significant changes in the politics, economics, and social aspects of the country. The world economic slump in the 1920s and 1930s left a big impact to the economic activities in the country. Many entrepreneurs and traders were affected by the economic depression, yet the well-to-do Hadhrami Arab elites benefited from the economic downturn that hit the country as they took the opportunity to accumulate wealth by buying assets. The Hadhrami Arabs were known as among the wealthiest individuals in Singapore in the 1920s and 1930s who possessed a lot of properties in the form of houses, shop lots, and lands.

The Japanese occupation of Malaya (1941-1945) and its aftermath in the 1940s had also affected the economic activities of the country. This period also witnessed changes in local politics as well as the emergence of political unrest due to the process of independence of Malaya in 1957. The British tried to consolidate their power in Malaya through the establishment of the Malayan Union, but received negative responses from the people, particularly the Malays. The period between after the Second World War until the late 1960s was a crucial time for the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya. This period was marked as the starting point of the decline of the Hadhrami Arabs in the country economically, whilst on the other hand, it also saw the involvement of Hadhrami Arabs in the politics of modern Singapore. This political struggle was unavoidable and it was a must to participate to ensure their survival in Singapore. Being a minority group in a densely populated Singapore with a majority of Chinese population made the Arabs’ presence on the island felt by many. Although their number was small, they managed to do well in their lives socially, economically, and politically. Meanwhile in the Malay
states, the situation was different since the majority of Hadhrami Arabs had become part of the Malay community and were even known as Malays. Despite the Hadhrami Arabs’ survival in a multi-racial society in Malaya, the Malays saw the Hadhrami Arabs as a dominating ethnic in the economic sector.

The ups and downs of the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya were also related to the political and economic changes that took place in the country as well as in the Middle East. The political affairs in Malaya as well as in Hadhramaut, their homeland had more or less affected the Hadhrami Arabs in their diaspora. Most of the Hadhrami Arabs in the diaspora maintained a close link with Hadhramaut. Therefore, this chapter attempts to discover and highlight the plausible factors that contributed to the decline of the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya, particularly in Singapore in the 20th century when it was once a focal point for the Hadhramis to make a living and accumulate wealth and fame in the region. This chapter also discovers how the Hadhrami Arabs coped with the ever changing world surrounding them.

The term ‘decline’ used in this chapter refers to the shrinking of the Hadhrami Arabs’ dominance in politics and administration, economics, and social status in Malaya. This decline was noticeable in Singapore compared to the Malay states as the Hadhrami Arabs were distinctively known as a Muslim minority group in the republic. In the Malay states, such a decline was not apparent as the Hadhrami Arabs had mostly became part of the Malay society and were well accepted by the Malays as their brothers in Islam. The separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 contributed to this decline as well, as many of the Hadhrami Arabs were separated from their families and fellow brothers in Malaya. This decline was also related to the policies introduced by the Government of Singapore, particularly after the Second World War which had
affected the socioeconomic of the Hadhrami Arabs who were once known as wealthy Arabs on the island.

**Political Changes**

Political issues played a major role in the lives of the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya as well as those in Hadhramaut, Yemen. The decline of the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya reached its climax when the people lost contact with their homeland in Hadhramaut. The independence of South Yemen in 1967 left a big impact to the Hadhramis in Yemen as well as those in the diaspora. The new communist regime in power implemented policies that forbade the Hadhrami immigrants from returning to their homeland, including those in Malaya and Singapore. This policy was continued at least until the 1990s, when South Yemen and North Yemen had finally reunited.¹

The new government in power imposed policies that forced the Hadhrami emigrants to disconnect their family ties with their kin in Hadhramaut. The practice of sending back children to Hadhramaut for religious education as well as visits was also halted. This definitely affected the remittances received by the people in Hadhramaut from their relatives overseas, as well as the funds received from *waqf*. Ameen stresses on the effects of this political change to the education of the young generation, such as their level of Arabic language proficiency and the identity as the children of the Hadhrami Arabs. The children had started to lose contact with their ancestors in Hadhramaut, and many of them hardly ever spoke Arabic.²

The political situation in Malaya and Hadhramaut also contributed to the shrinking number of Hadhrami Arabs in the country. The communist government in

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Yemen implemented policies in 1969 that affected the flow of Hadhrami Arabs’ migration to Malaya. The Hadhrami Arabs’ mass migration to the Malay World, in particular Malaya, occurred in the early 19th century. The majority of them were among the sadah group of the various clans of the Sayyid descent, as well as non sadah from Hadhramaut, Yemen. Their numbers increased every year. The influx of Hadhrami Arabs who migrated from Hadhramaut to Malaya increased every year since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The use of steamships facilitated the flow of Hadhrami Arabs’ travel and diaspora to the east. However, the flow of Hadhrami migration to Malaya was affected by the immigration policy enacted in the early decades of the 20th century, particularly in Singapore.3

Immigration control was first enforced in 1919 when an ordinance was introduced on 11th April 1919 to control the influx of newcomers to Malaya. However, this ordinance did not affect those who were born in Malaya and Singapore. In order to administer the influx of immigrants, an alien ordinance was introduced in 1933 whereby the Immigration Department was established in January 1933 in Singapore with its first office situated in the Chinese Protectorate Building at Havelock Road. It was then moved to the Palmer Road Government officers in January 1953. The department also introduced a fixed quota for alien immigration to control the number of immigrants to Malaya through Singapore. The Alien Ordinance of 1936 restricted the number of immigrants entering the country with a limited quota. It said that only 25 Arabs were allowed to be ferried out to the island in one ship.4 Originally, the ordinance was purposely implemented to control the influx of the Chinese immigrants to Malaya which saw an excess of thousands of Chinese into the country with the setting of a quota of 4,000 immigrants every month. The policy was also applied to non-shipping companies,


whereby they were permitted a number of aliens not exceeding 25 people from any nationality per month. This policy and restricted quota of permitted aliens also applied to the Hadhrami Arab immigrants from Hadhramaut, Yemen. This situation indirectly affected the number of Hadhrami Arab immigrants to Malaya, as well as the return of Hadhramis to their native country.\(^5\)

Despite the political change and distress suffered by the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya and Singapore due to the loss of contact and political link with their homeland in Hadhramaut, this period had witnessed an increased number of Hadhrami Arabs’ involvement in the politics of Malaysia and Singapore, particularly after the Second World War. The Hadhrami Arabs had started to realise the need for their participation in politics, particularly in Singapore, to secure their rights and interests in the republic. Being a minority Muslim community in Singapore, it was crucial for them to get involved in the political affairs in order to ensure their survival in the country. When Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia on 16\(^{th}\) September 1963, the citizens of the state of Singapore became Malaysians and they were issued Malaysian passports.

However, Singapore did not stay long under the Federation of Malaysia, as the country separated from Malaysia on 9\(^{th}\) August 1965 to become a sovereign state of its own entity. This separation gave a big impact to the people in Singapore, in particular the Malays and Hadhrami Arabs as part of the minority group of Muslims in the republic.\(^6\)

The Hadhrami Arabs’ involvement in religious administration in the Malay states saw some of them holding important positions such as *mufti* and *syaikh al-Islam*. However, the number of appointments decreased in the 20\(^{th}\) century due to the increased number of qualified local Malays who pursued religious studies in the Middle East by deepening their religious knowledge and mastering the Arabic language in institutions.

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such as the Al-Azhar University in Egypt and also in Hijaz in Makkah and Medinah. However, there were several Hadhrami Arab religious scholars who served as *mufti* in the state of Johor and Terengganu in the 20th century, such as Sayyid Alwi bin Tahir al-Haddad (1934-1961), Sayyid Abdul Qadir b. Mohsin Al-Attas (1907-1933), and Sayyid Yusof b. Ali Al-Zawawi (1952-1975). Sayyid Alwi bin Tahir al-Haddad (1934-1961) was the longest serving *mufti* in the Religion Department of Johor before and after the Second World War.7

**Economic Depression**

20th century Malaya also witnessed the decline of the Hadhrami Arabs’ influence in the economic sector in Malaya, particularly in Singapore. The world economic slump in the 1920s to 1930s affected the economic flow of the country. This situation influenced the market prices of rubber, the trade sector, as well as properties and real estates in Malaya and Singapore. However, this situation benefitted the rich as well as the wealthy Hadhrami Arab merchants as they accumulated more real estate and properties, particularly in Singapore. The land price in Singapore has increased ever since it was opened as a trading port. The economic slump that hit Malaya had slowed down the economic activities of the country. However, the Hadhrami Arab elites looked at this situation as a chance to benefit from the economic slump by acquiring more land and properties. For instance, Sayyid Ahmad al-Saqqaf or al-Saggof bought a piece of 999 leasehold land and a house at No. 74, Arab Street for $8,600 from a local property auction in 1922.8

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8 *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (1884-1942), Local Property Auction, 27 October 1922, p. 12.
The Hadhrami Arabs were reported to be among the wealthiest individuals in Singapore and Penang owing to their large possessions of land, houses, and estate properties. According to Lee Warner who was quoted in Ingrams, he mentions that “...whole streets in Singapore and Penang are owned by wealthy Hadhramis, mainly of the Kathiri tribes”. Ingrams asserts that due to Islam’s restriction on interest, the Hadhrami Arabs could have probably spent the profits from their business ventures in buying land and houses. J. A. E Morley reveals how the Hadhrami Arabs ran their businesses in which some of them managed to amass lots of properties through money lending activities.

Sayyid Ahmad b. Abdul Rahman al-Saqqaf was one of the wealthy men in Singapore. He engaged in very large trades, owning steamers and sailing vessels. When he passed away, his wealth and business ventures were inherited by his son, Sayyid Mohammad b. Ahmad al-Saqqaf, who was known as the leader of the Muslim community in Singapore. Sayyid Mohammad Al-Saqqaf had vast business interests in Singapore in the form of land and property shares. He was reported to own a great part of property in Kampung Glam, Singapore. In Johor, he also owned a large estate known as Cucob Concession.

The Hadhrami Arabs’ business ventures had shown signs of inability to compete with foreign traders and merchants, such as the Chinese and the Europeans as early as late 19th century as these entrepreneurs were better connected compared to the Arab merchants and traders. Their commercial and business activities were disrupted due to the outbreak of the Second World War. Once the war ended, business and trade activities continued as usual. However, the Hadhrami Arabs were not as dominant as the first several generations

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of Hadhrami Arabs who traded in Malaya in the 19th century. The Hadhrami Arabs, especially the elites, had business contacts in Malaya and the neighbouring countries as well as in the Middle East. Shipping enterprise was another source of income from which the Hadhrami Arabs prospered.\(^\text{13}\)

This business earned them much revenue in which they made profit by conducting inter-island trades and shipping in the Malay Archipelagos. This included providing services for potential *hajj* pilgrims to Jeddah. The al-Saqqaf family was one of the Hadhrami Arabs who were involved in the shipping industry.\(^\text{14}\) They once were actively involved in trade, conducting inter-island trades in the Malayan waters. However, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the use of steamships became famous and made its way to the Southeast Asia. This was a great blow to the Hadhrami Arabs who were involved in the industry as they had to compete with the European shipping companies. The Hadhrami Arab entrepreneurs did not lag behind in this regard as they also acquired steamships. Sayyid Mohammad al-Saqqaf was reported to own three steamers.\(^\text{15}\) The al-Saqqafs acquired steam ships to meet the demands of the flourishing pilgrimage enterprise of conveying pilgrims to Jeddah. In 1874, the company ferried 3,476 pilgrims to Jeddah using their four steamers.\(^\text{16}\) The Singapore Steamship Company belonging to the Al-Saqqaf company had carried potential *hajj* pilgrims to Jeddah as early as 1871.\(^\text{17}\) Sayyid Muhsin or Massim, also spelt Massein, was also engaged in the pilgrim industry as a pilgrim agent, ferrying potential *hajj* pilgrims to Jeddah using a British ship named *Fathool Carrim* or *Fathul Karim*. Sayyid

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\(^{14}\) PRO C.O. 273/206. The information is obtained from a special edition of Straits Governments Gazette, August 1895.

\(^{15}\) PRO C.O. 273/206.


Ahmad was also engaged in this industry. He rented a British ship named *Fathool Illah* or *Fathullah*, using it to ferry potential *hajj* pilgrims to Jeddah.\(^{18}\)

However, the involvement of Hadhrami Arabs in the region’s shipping industry did not last long as they had to face stiff competition from European shipping companies. The Hadhrami Arabs’ shipping companies were not able to compete with the European shipping companies, such as the British shipping company, the Dutch, and the Germans. In fact, there was bitter rivalry between the European shipping companies themselves in the trade in Southeast Asia. The rivalry among the European shipping companies during the inter war years of the 20\(^{th}\) century affected the trade and economy of the countries in Southeast Asia.\(^{19}\) For instance, Sayyid Muhsin (Masim) b. Salih al-Jifri was one of the Hadhrami Arab traders who prospered in the shipping industry. However, his business was closed down in 1894 due to its inability to compete with the European companies.\(^{20}\) The Al-Saqqaf company was also reported to cease its shipping operations before 1914 due to stiff competition with the Dutch and British shipping companies. However, it was reported that the family was still operating their business in Jeddah, conducting a pilgrim agency in 1940.\(^{21}\)

The British dominated the shipping industry in Malaya because they owned many steam ships. The British shipping company, the Blue Funnel, did not only transport commodities, but it also provided services for ferrying pilgrims from Malaya to Jeddah. The steam ship was widely used in the Malay World as it shortened the journey from three to six months depending on the weather to only about 16 days of

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\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 301.
travel from Singapore to Jeddah. The inability to compete with the European companies caused the Hadhrami Arabs’ shipping companies to close down their operations.\textsuperscript{22}

**Government Policies**

The aftermath of the Second World War left a big impact on the economic development of Singapore. There were several factors that affected the decline of the Hahdrami Arabs, as well as their social status in Malaya and particularly, in Singapore. Among these were government policies such as the Rent Control Act, Land Acquisition Act, and the enactment introduced by the government concerning the Administration of Muslim Law Act 1968 that monitored the administration of charitable *waqfs* in Singapore. The Rent Control Act launched by Singapore in 1946/7 affected the Hadhrami Arabs’ properties on the island.\textsuperscript{23}

The Act froze all the rents of pre-war properties and put those properties under the control of the Singapore government. The Rent Control Act introduced by the authorities was aimed to prevent landlords from raising rents by taking advantage of the shortage of housing in the island. The Hadhrami Arab families in Singapore were major landowners. The Rent Control Act introduced by the government of Singapore in 1947 had a considerable impact on the Hadhrami Arabs’ income as many of them were major landlords. Most of them depended on the income collected from the rental properties. Due to the Rent Control Act, the rents of pre-war properties were controlled. Furthermore, the implementation of Rent Control Act had gravely affected the income of the *awqaf*.\textsuperscript{24} Meanwhile, properties built or completed on or after that date were free from the control. The rent was fixed by the Rent Conciliation Board and such rent was turned into a standard rent. This act had caused the standard rents to be frozen to the

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. See Mohd Zulfadli Maafor, Sheikh Haji Tanah Melayu: Aktiviti dan Operasi 1900-1950, PhD Thesis, Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2011, pp. 95-100. Apart from Blue Funnel, there were also other shipping companies that ferried pilgrims from Malaya to Jeddah such as the Nemazie and Straits-Hejaz Steamship. Mohd Zulfadli Maafor, Sheikh Haji Tanah Melayu, p. 97.


\textsuperscript{24} Ulrike Freitag, Arab Merchants in Singapore, p. 135.
maximum rent listed (or legal rents) unless the Rent Conciliation Board permits for the rent to be raised in order to cover repairs or modifications. However, the properties built on or after the date were free from the control.  

This Rent Control Act had indirectly affected the Hadhrami Arabs’ income as the *waqfs* or trusts were mostly pre-war properties which resulted in the decrease of their income. The Hadhrami Arabs owned considerable assets in the form of rental properties and *waqf* or trusts. They had private family trusts as well as public charitable trusts. Through these trusts, they maintained the family businesses in Malaya and Singapore, as well as in their home country, Hadhramaut as they lost their source of income. Since most of their properties were in the form of *waqfs*, this situation affected much on their income which resulted in the loss of their economic influence in Singapore. 

The government of Singapore developed the island aggressively as they acquired land for urban development. The Land Acquisition Act gave authority to the government over control of land use in Singapore. Thus, the act enabled the government to acquire land wherever and whenever necessary, in particular the pre-war properties for urbanisation. Many of the Hadhrami Arabs’ properties were in the form of lands and buildings. Ameen further says that most of the land in today's central business district was at one time owned by the Hadhrami Arabs’ *waqf*. The *waqf* bearing the Hadhrami Arabs’ family names were either for private use or charity. These *waqfs* were also meaningful to the Hadhrami Arabs, giving them a considerable status amongst their fellow Muslims in Singapore. These properties were taken by the government and the compensation paid was relatively lower than the market value. Under the name of modernization, more properties were acquired in the 1970s and 1980s for urbanisation.

**References:**


development. The Hadhrami Arab families suffered losses that affected many of their properties in Singapore. It also indirectly eroded the Arabs’ identity as major landlords in Singapore, as well as their wealth and influence in Malaya and Singapore.27

In 1962, the Al-Saqqaf Perseverance Estate was taken by the government for urban development. Shaykh Salem Talib was one of the Arab families who owned a considerable number of properties in Singapore. It was reported that the family owned more than three pages in the list of properties on the island. However, their properties were taken by the government and they were left with less than a one page list. The al-Junied family had 10 acres of land donated to the Muslim Trust Fund for the purpose of accumulating more income to be used for welfare projects. The Trust body had planned to build a mosque and a madrasah on the land, but they were not permitted to do so by the government. The land was later taken by the government in 1985.28 In 1965, The Straits Times reported that the Central Government planned to buy the 1,000 acres of AlSaggoff Estate in Geylang Serai to develop the area by building a housing scheme in the estate. About 50,000 Malays were living in the estate.29

The introduction of the Muslim Law Act in 1968 had caused the Hadhrami Arabs to lose their authority over the waqf or trust funds’ management. The Singapore Islamic Council was established to monitor the administration of charitable waqfs in Singapore. Before the Act was introduced, the waqf properties belonging to the Hadhrami Arab families were managed and controlled by the trustees. However, when the Council started to take over the management of waqf, the Hadhrami Arabs began to lose their rights and authority over the waqf properties. The Hadhrami Arabs’ association with the waqf, as well as their reputation as generous and philanthropic

29 The Straits Times, 15 April 1965, ‘Alsagoff Estate: Minister meets the trustees’ p. 13. Article also available on microfilm reel NL12168 (Lee Kong Chian Reference Library) and online, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19650415.2.77.aspx
Arabs in charitable work started to diminish as they no longer possessed such abundant resources for those purposes.\textsuperscript{30}

In the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Malaya witnessed significant changes in the politics and administration of the country. In Singapore, various policies were introduced by the government for the sake of modernisation. The Rent Control Act (1947), Land Acquisition Act, and Muslim Law Act (1968) that were introduced by the Government of Singapore left a big impact to the economic resources of the Hadhrami Arabs in Singapore. Since the majority of them were dependent on the \textit{waqf} and rental properties as a source of income, these policies had decreased their revenues. Many of their properties were taken by the government, incredibly affecting their wealth. The collection of revenues lessen, indirectly affecting the amount of remittances sent to their homeland in Hadhramaut.\textsuperscript{31}

Remittance plays an important role in the development of Hadhramaut. The remittance sent by Hadhrami Arabs in the diaspora to their homeland was used to rebuild and maintain Hadhramaut’s social, political, and economic developments. These remittances were collected from personal incomes as well as incomes from \textit{waqf} revenues. The revenues from the \textit{waqf} was initially used to fund religious and social activities. For example, the revenue yielded from Sayyid Mohammad bin Ahmad’s \textit{Waqf} Fund was distributed to various channels among which are for maintaining the Hadjee Fatimah Mosque in Singapore, running the Al-Saggof Arab School in Singapore, maintaining poor relatives in and outside Singapore including Hadhramaut, and the poor in the city of Seiyun and other areas in Hadhramaut.\textsuperscript{32} Meanwhile, the Al-Kaffs used the collection accumulated from the \textit{waqf} revenue for the purpose of

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ben, Simpfendor, \textit{Singapore’s Hadhrami Community in Today’s Economy}, p. 5.
strengthening their social and political causes in Hadhramut. The money was also used to build schools and al-Kaff road from Tarim to the coast. They also supported the Sultan’s military force. Gradually, they became part of the imperial elite in Hadhramut.\footnote{Ibid., p. 241.}

As asserted by Syed Farid Al-Attas, the remittances played a significant role in the development of Hadhramaut, from which they were used for daily life as the people of Hadhramaut depended much on these kinds of remittances received from overseas, particularly from Malaya and Indonesia. These remittances also provided financial support to the Kathiri and Qu’ayti Sultanates of Hadhramaut. The shortage of income from the revenue of \textit{waqf} and rental properties had a remarkable impact to the development of Hadhramaut. The relatives and families in Hadhramaut depended on the incomes that were sent back home.\footnote{Syed Farid Alatas, “Hadhramaut and the Hadhrami Diaspora”, in Ulrike Freitag and William G. Clarence –Smith (eds.) \textit{Hadhrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s – 1960s}, Leiden: Brill, 1997, p. 25.} “Notes of the Day”, written by an anonymous writer known as \textit{Anak Singapura} in the Straits Times on 1\textsuperscript{st} August 1939 highlighted the role played by the al-Kaffs in the economy of Singapore and their homeland, Hadhramaut. The al-Kaffs were synonymous with Al-Kaff and Co. which was ranked as the biggest single rate payer in Singapore. The writer also touches on the important role played by the al-Kaffs or the Kaf family as they were known in Hadhramaut for their contribution in developing Hadhramaut with the amenities of life, such as electricity, education, telephones, connecting important houses, and building houses and bungalows with swimming pools that were used to irrigate small gardens planted with a variety of fruit trees.\footnote{ \textit{The Straits Times}, “Long Journey Through Unknown Arabia, Influence of Al-Kaff Family in the Hadhramaut,” 23\textsuperscript{rd} July 1939, p. 11; \textit{The Straits Times}, ‘Notes of The Day,’ 1\textsuperscript{st} August 1939, p. 12. Accessed from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article.}

The writer further stressed that the money used by the al-Kaffs to develop Hadhramaut came from the income accumulated from the rentals of houses, shop lots,
and properties owned by the al-Kaffs in Singapore.\textsuperscript{36} It shows that the Hadhrami Arabs’ link with their homeland in Hadhramaut was never cut even though they had been away from their homeland and even had their own families in Malaya.

The \textit{waqf} had been an important institution for the Hadhrami Arab community in Malaya. This institution was important to keep the maintenance of mosques and \textit{madrasahs} that were run by the Hadhrami Arab individuals in Malaya, Singapore, and also in Hadhramaut. The Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya maintained close contact with their homeland in Hadhramaut by sending money back home. The rich Hadhrami Arabs sent their sons to Hadhramaut to be educated with religious knowledge, as well as to learn the Hadhrami culture. The outbreak of the Second World War halted these activities. It was resumed only after the war ended.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{The Identity Crisis}

The issues of identity and nationality were among the other matters that worried and annoyed the Hadhrami Arabs in the turn of the 1950s, particularly when Singapore was separated from Malaysia as two different political entities in 1965. In the Malay states, the issue of the Hadhrami Arabs’ identity was not that apparent since the majority of the young generation were born Arabs or \textit{Peranakan} Arabs from mixed marriages of Arab fathers and local mothers. The mixed marriages between Arab fathers and Malay mothers gave birth to a new generation of Arabs that is known as \textit{Peranakan} Arab, which also indirectly entitled them to be called and considered as Malays. They culturally and socially became Malays and profess the religion of Islam.\textsuperscript{38}

The Hadhrami Arabs in general, can be categorised into two groups; the pure Arabs and the born Arabs. Such a marriage was not a big deal to the Hadhrami Arab

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\textsuperscript{36} The Straits Times, ‘Notes of the Day,’ 1\textsuperscript{st} August 1939, p. 3.
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Sayyids since it is the tradition of the Arabs to preserve their genealogy through the patrilineal line. Children born from a marriage of an Arab father and mother are considered pure Arabs, whilst the children born from the wedlock of an Arab father to a non-Arab mother are considered as born Arabs or Peranakan Arab. As most of the Hadhrami Arab immigrants to Malaya were males, many of them were married to local women. This explains the increased number of Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya in the late 19th and 20th century.39

Unlike the Sayyids, a Hadhrami Arab woman or Sharifah was only allowed to marry an Arab man of the Sayyid descent. The traditional Hadhrami Arab Sadah parents were strongly attached to the kafa‘ah that sometimes caused them difficulties to find suitable spouses for their daughters. Due to the strictness of the Sadah tradition to preserve the patriarchal lineage, some of them would prefer their daughters to become “... lifelong spinsters rather than lose them in matrimony to non-Arabs”. There were times when the Peranakan Arab daughters were more conservative and choosy in matters related to marriage compared to the other members of the larger Muslim community. Omar Farouk further adds that as for the girls, “... exogamy and interracial unions were out of question”.40

Owing to the process of assimilation with the locals through marital relations, the number of Hadhrami Arabs’ population in Malaya of pure Arab blood had started to decline. This gave birth to a new generation of Malays of Arab blood known as Peranakan Arab. The social and cultural life of this generation was not much different from the Malays as their mothers were mostly local Malay ladies. They spoke Malay and learnt both Malay and English languages at school, but very seldom spoke Arabic although their fathers were Arabs. According to A. Rahman Tang who studies about the

Arab society in Muar, Johor, he noted that the Arab society used to communicate with the local people especially the Malays using a Malay-Arabic language which is a mix of Malay Language and informal Arabic language that is also called bahasa Arab pasar. Most of the Arab men who married Malay women did not speak formal Arabic or did not speak Arabic at all. The spoken language at home was informal Malay-Arabic language. They also did not put much emphasis on learning Arabic. They only taught their children to recite the Qur’an at home. This was one of the reasons why the young generations of Peranakan Arabs in Malaya could not speak Arabic.\(^{41}\)

Interrmarriage could be one of the reasons for the Hadhrami Arabs to lose their Arab identity. Their intermarriage with local women and intermingling with local people had gradually diminished their cultural identity that was commonly characterised by language and culture. This phenomenon was felt even during the second and third generations of Arabs in Malaya from local mothers who did not speak Arabic. However, there were Hadhrami Arabs who managed to keep some of their Arab culture such as wedding ceremonies and religious rituals like ratib or prayers. An Arab wedding ceremony is different from the Malays. Apart from that, the Hadhrami Arabs of the Sayyid descent were still confined to the tradition of kafa’ah when it comes to marriage.\(^{42}\)

The issue of identity also contributed to the decline of the Hadhrami Arab Sayyids in number as towards the 20\(^{th}\) century, particularly after the Second World War, many of them were recognised as Malays. The political change in Malaya had forced them to go with the national policy of the country regarding citizenship. Many of them were born Arabs from mixed marriages of Arab fathers and local mothers. By marrying the locals, the Hadhrami Arabs, as well as their children, adapted to the new culture of

\(^{41}\) A. Rahman Tang Abdullah, ‘Sejarah Masyarakat Keturunan Arab di Muar’, Academic Exercise, Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 1991/91, p. 53.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
the land. Although they had become part of the Malay community, some of them managed to maintain some qualities of their Hadhramaut identity; the elitist lifestyle of the Sadah, while at the same time keeping their new identity as Malays. Regarding the term ‘race’, many of the Hadhrami Arabs opted to be identified as Malays, especially the young generation of Peranakan Arabs. In practical life, both Malays and Hadhrami Arabs socially and religiously shared the same customs and way of life.\(^43\)

According to Article 160 of the Federal Constitution, the term “Malay” means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, practices Malay customs and (a) is borne, before Malaya was independent, in the Federation or in Singapore, or his father was born in the Federation or Singapore, or on the day of independence, he/she is domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore, or (b) he/she is a descendant of someone mentioned above. Based on this statement, it is clearly stated that being Islam, conversing in Malay Language, living in Malaya, and practicing the Malay customs and way of life are the criteria for a person to be considered as a Malay. The new generations of Hadhrami Arabs born in Malaya mostly had these criteria.\(^44\)

The Hadhrami Arabs benefitted from the advantage of being Peranakan Arabs. Many of them prospered and succeeded in their undertakings in Malaya. In this respect, gradually, many of them, particularly those residing in the Malay states (present day Malaysia), adopted the ‘Malay’ title rather than ‘Arab’. They were considered as Bumiputera and enjoyed the same privileges as other Malays under the Federal Constitution.\(^45\) This could possibly one of the reasons that led to the decreased numbers of Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya. The various policies introduced by the government of

\(^{43}\) This situation happened could possibly due to the change of government policy. Such as in Singapore where the Peranakan Arabs have no choice but to adopt race Malay in their identity card instead of Arab that is considered as foreigners, in order to enjoy the benefits and privileges specially provided for the Malays. Al-Junied, Syed Muhd Khairudin, “The Role of Hadramis in Post-Second World War Singapore – A Reinterpretation”, Immigrants & Minorities, July 1, 2007.


Singapore could have possibly made the *Peranakan Arabs* who were born and grew up in the Malay community to change their citizenship in order to enjoy the privileges provided by the government.\(^{46}\)

Matters related to the definition of Malay have also been highlighted by the press, such as The Straits Times in 1987. There was a need to include Islam in the definition of Malay as there is a loose definition of being Malay that defines Malay as “someone who is Malay, Javanese, Boyanese, Bugis, Arab or any other persons who are generally accepted as a member of the Malay community by that community”. The need to include Islam as one of the criteria of being Malay is important as Malays do not accept non-Muslim Malays as their representatives, particularly in Singapore, as Islam has become the identity of the Malays and their culture is also based on the religion of Islam.\(^{47}\) So, the general term of ‘Malay’ is understood by many as a person who practices the Malay culture, speaks the Malay language, and professes the religion of Islam. In Singapore, the Malays have a special position in the Singapore Constitution. Malay children are entitled to free education up to the tertiary level. However, this privilege is not given to those of Arab and Indian Muslim descent.\(^{48}\)

Ameen relates the consequences of the policy implemented by the communist regime in power in Yemen that prohibited the out and in of the Hadhrami citizens in Yemen which resulted in a number of problems faced by the Hadhrami immigrants in the diaspora, including those in Malaya. He further says that the Hadhrami Arabs in Singapore faced an identity crisis where the younger generation did not speak Arabic. Living in cosmopolitan Singapore that emphasized on the use of English as a medium of communication, the Hadhrami Arab children were more inclined to speak English rather than their native language. The environment and residence areas also contributed to this


\(^{47}\) The Straits Times, ‘Call to Include Islam in definition of Malay,’ 11\(^{st}\) December 1987, p. 23.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.
situation, where most of their family members and friends spoke either English or Malay. This had been true in cases where their mothers are Malays who did not converse in Arabic. Moreover, when the Hadhrami Arabs lost contact with their homeland in Hadhramaut, there was a cut in the relationship where they used to send their children back to Hadhramut to be educated in the homeland to learn religion and the Hadhrami culture, as well as for visits.\textsuperscript{49}

The Hadhrami Arabs in Singapore were aware of the problems faced by their community that if not addressed promptly and properly, would cause the younger generations to totally lose their identity as an Arab that has connections with Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. They also realised that the lack of Arabic knowledge was the key factor that contributed to the problem. Therefore, they established an Arabic language centre to improve the children's knowledge and proficiency of Arabic language as well as to teach them the knowledge about their identity, heritage, and culture. It was also a big challenge for them to maintain their identity as Hadhrami Arabs.\textsuperscript{50} Syed Farid Alatas asserts that “the relatively less developed status of the Arab community in the Southeast Asia, and particularly in Singapore, has something to do with the problem of identity. While it is correct that the Arabs in Singapore are part of the Malay community to the extent that they have assimilated aspects of the Malay culture, they still identify themselves as Arabs.”\textsuperscript{51}

Meanwhile in the Malay states, the government of Malaysia enacted a constitution to look after the people's rights, in particular to preserve the rights of Malays and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak. In the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 153 discusses the special status of Malays and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak. It mentions about the privileges given to them such as scholarships, education, appointment in government service, business permits and

licenses and reserved land. The constitution that was enacted in 1948 has been revised and amended to meet the needs of the people from time to time.\textsuperscript{52}

From this article it is clear that the Malays and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak are given privileges as citizens of Malaysia. Meanwhile, other races are also included in the constitution accordingly in terms of their rights as Malaysians. In the case of \textit{Peranakan} Arabs, they have no other choice except to accept the reality that they are now Malaysians. Taking several factors into consideration, many of them had decided to be categorized as Malays to enjoy such privileges. Moreover, the \textit{Peranakan} Arabs had long established relations with the Malays through marriage when many of them had married Malays.

The Hadhrami Arabs easily assimilated into the Malay culture in Singapore due to the common interest between them as they share the same faith and were a minority group of Muslims living in a multiracial secular country dominated by a Chinese population. “As a result, a majority of the Hadhramis 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”.\textsuperscript{53}

**Social Degradation**

Religious and social recognition that was enjoyed by the Hadhrami Arabs as respected people in Malaya due to their sacred connection with Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. had started to be questioned by the Malays. All this while, the Malays looked upon them with respect and considered them as the inheritors of the ultimate preacher of Islam. In Singapore, there were Hadhrami Arab elites who preferred to maintain a different identity separated from the Malays, although most of them were of mixed descent that was also known as \textit{Peranakan} Arab or born of Arab fathers and local mothers. The well

\textsuperscript{53} Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljuneid, “The Role of Hadramis in Post-Second World War Singapore - A Reinterpretation”, p. 178
to do Hadhrami Arabs who were concerned about the society contributed to the society’s wellbeing through charitable works as they were also associated with the *waqf* institution in Singapore. However, the feelings of respect had started to wane due to the feelings of dissatisfaction among the Malays towards the Hadhrami Arabs who confined to their elitist and exclusive lifestyle and abandoned the needs of other fellow Muslims in the society. The Malays felt that they were neglected by their Muslim Arab brothers.\(^{54}\)

This scenario affected the activities of the Hadhrami Arabs and *Peranakan* Arabs in Malaya, such as their printing companies and newspapers. The PASPAM or Malayan Pen-Pal Brotherhood was an organization which promoted literature and culture and was organized by a newspaper called *Saudara*. This organization was joined by about several thousands of members from various Muslim communities in Malaya.\(^{55}\)

The issue of some Hadhrami Arabs or *Peranakan* Arabs who prioritized their community over the Malays had caused distrust among the Malays. The Malays began to question their sincerity in religious and social responsibilities towards their fellow brothers in Islam. As a result, the organization began to lose its membership from the Malays due to the growing distrust amongst the Malays towards the non-Malay members, in particular, the *Peranakan* Arabs.\(^{56}\)

This issue had a significant impact towards the organization as the Malay members did not support organizations with leadership dominated by Arabs or Indian Muslims. Therefore, the Malays worked hard to have their own newspaper rather than working with newspaper companies owned and financed by the Hadhrami Arabs. The Malays also started to criticize the sincerity of the Hadhrami Arabs in their efforts to improve the Malay society. As a result, *Utusan Melayu* was established in 1939 through the efforts of several Malays in Singapore who wanted to have their own newspaper.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02619280802018165.

\(^{55}\) *Warta Malaya*, 28th November 1940, p. 10.

The national newspaper was founded independent of funds from the Hadhrami Arabs or other foreign sources. Abdul Rahim Kajai was made the editor of *Utusan Melayu*. The newspaper also provided an open column to discuss issues related to the definition of "Malay" or "Melayu".\(^{57}\)

Syed Muhd Khairudin Al-Junied stresses on the issues that worried the Malays regarding the roles that should be played by the Hadhrami Arabs, in which they hoped that it should be focused on improving the society (Malay Society), particularly its economy and not to take control over their lives. This could have been the reasons for their worry and discontentment towards the Hadhrami Arabs. At the same time, the Malays felt that they were left behind compared to their fellow brothers. As a result, the Malays expressed their dissatisfaction towards the Hadhrami Arabs by establishing an organization known as *Kesatuan Melayu Singapura* (KMS) or Singapore Malay Union in 1926.\(^{58}\)

KMS aimed “...to encourage its members to play a greater role in the public and governmental affairs; to sponsor Malay progress and interest in politics and education; to make representations to the government on behalf of the Malay community in all matters concerning the rights and freedoms of the Malays...”. KMS believed that only the Malay Muslims should be representatives of the Malay Community and its membership should be restricted to native Malays only.\(^{59}\) They also printed *Utusan Melayu* in 1939 as a tool to voice out their opinions. At the same time, they proclaimed that *Warta Malaya* which was published by the al-Saqqaf family did not represent the views and opinions of the Malays. This situation impinged the Hadhrami Arabs’


\(^{58}\) Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljuneid, “The Role of Hadramis in Post-Second World War Singapore – A Reinterpretation”.

reputation in the publishing industry in Malaya as well as their influence and status in the Malay community that had started to decline in later years.\textsuperscript{60}

This situation affected the social relationship of both communities and it also led to social isolation and adverse effects to the Malays-Peranakan Arabs relationship. Then emerged a new categorisation of Muslims in Malaya based on ethnic and race such as \textit{Darah Keturunan Arab} (DKA) and \textit{Darah Keturunan Keling} (DKK) in order to differentiate the Malays from mixed marriages from pure Malays. Abdul Rahim Kajai was one of the influential journalists during his time (1940) who was known to have highlighted the term \textit{bangsa}, in which he says that Islam is “not a \textit{bangsa}” and further reminds “religious leaders that Malay unity must not be neglected in favour of the bonds of Islam”. Kajai further argues that if the “Malay movement was led or even merely joined by foreigners, then it could not be understood to be a Malay \textit{bangsa} movement”. Kajai cynically referred to the Malays born of mixed ethnic origin with Arab blood as \textit{Darah Keturunan Arab} (DKA), and those with Indian blood as \textit{Darah Keturunan Keling} (DKK).\textsuperscript{61}

The issue of land values that had been increasing in Singapore at that time had also become a concern among the Malays. For example, Kampoung Glam that was once owned by the Malays was then populated by the Arabs. The Malays had to move out to the suburb areas due to high rental costs. This had been one of the reasons that caused the Malays’ discontent towards the Arabs in Singapore.\textsuperscript{62} Morley says that this situation happened because of the money lending business conducted by the Arabs that eventually led to the loss of valuable items deposited as collateral due to the failure of the borrowers to pay back the money.

\textsuperscript{60} Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, “The Role of Hadramis in Post-Second World War Singapore”.
\textsuperscript{62} William R. Roff, \textit{The Origins of Malay Nationalism}, p. 192.
“...during the early days of the Colony’s history; with the result that the Kampong Glam district, for example which was originally predominantly Malay (the original “Sultan” leases having been given mostly to Malays) is now about 5% Malay as against 35% Arab. In other parts of the town the Arab acquisitions while they do not form nearly so large a proportion of the total, are nevertheless very considerable.”

Even though the Hadhrami Arabs played an important role in bringing about progress in the economy of Malaya as well as contributing to the society in matters related to religion and social life in the country, their growing exclusiveness and elitist lifestyle, particularly in Singapore created an atmosphere of distrust on the part of the Malay community. The Malays started to feel threatened by the economic status of the Arabs in Malaya. The strong bond between the Arabs and the Malay communities fostered by early generations of Arab migrants suffered from an uncomfortable period when the socially and economically conscious and educated Malays began to feel that they were being abandoned by the economically established Arabs, who as fellow Muslim brothers, they had hoped, would assist them in bringing about changes in the society.

**Conclusion**

The 20th century was a challenging period for the diaspora of Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya. Many changes occurred during this period of time, particularly after the Second World War that involved the aspects of politics of the host country, as well as the homeland in Hadhramaut. This situation was not so badly felt by the Hadhrami Arabs who settled down in the Malay states compared to those Hadhrami Arabs who resided in Singapore. The government policies introduced in Singapore in the effort of making Singapore as a modern and metropolitan city left a long-term impact on the Hadhrami Arabs in the country, particularly in their economy. It also affected their income and

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status as rich Arabs in Singapore. The enactments imposed by the government affected properties belonging to the Hadhrami Arabs as well as their incomes. The transfer of waqf management trust funds to the Islamic Council caused the Hadhrami Arabs to lose their authority over the waqf revenues, which also indirectly disrepute their association with the waqf and charity works in the society.

The decline of the Hadhrami Arabs in Malaya was most notable in the aspect of economy as they were no longer dominant entrepreneurs and traders in Malaya as compared to in the 19th and early 20th century. The ever changing world did not only affect them economically, but also socially and culturally, whereby the Hadhrami Arabs faced a crisis of identity. The younger generations were exposed to the Western culture and way of life and many of them were not able to converse in Arabic. These changes were quickly realized by the older Hadhrami Arabs, prompting them to establish an Arabic language centre in the efforts to revive the Hadhrami Arabs’ identity and culture. They also re-established links with the homeland by encouraging travels to Hadhramaut so that the younger generations would not forget their origins and homeland.