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Review Article

Ḥāḍramī Mobilities, Colonial Histories, and Southeast Asia

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Sumit K. Mandal, *Becoming Arab: Creole Histories and Modern Identity in the Malay World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, xxiii + 259 pp. ISBN 9781107196797, price: GBP 79.99 (hardback); 9781316647493, GBP 31.99 (paperback), 9781108195348, USD 32.00.

Nurfadzilah Yahaya, *Fluid Jurisdictions: Colonial Law and Arabs in Southeast Asia*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2020, xi + 251 pp. ISBN: 9781501750878, price: USD 49.95 (hardcover); 9781501750885, USD 24.99 (epub), 9781501750892, USD 24.99 (pdf).

Southeast Asia's Arab communities, whose forefathers predominantly hailed from the Ḥāḍramawt region in Yemen, have had an outsized impact in many regards. They have contributed disproportionately to religious life, diplomacy, manuscript culture, economic development, the printing industry, and legal reform. They were witnesses, participants, and victims of colonialism, anticolonialism, and the formation of at least three modern nation-states: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. The already impressive academic record on the Ḥāḍramīs of the Malay world has been enriched by the two monographs under review: *Becoming Arab* (hereafter BA) by Sumit Mandal and *Fluid Jurisdictions* (hereafter FL) by Nurfadzilah Yahaya. These works complement each

other in various respects and anyone interested in the topic is best served by reading them both. One imagines a warm welcome for these innovative, well-researched volumes in the fields of Southeast Asian studies, Indian Ocean studies, Islamic studies, Asian history, colonial history, legal history, and a range of other disciplines.

Becoming Arab offers a fascinating account of the Ḥaḍramī diaspora as well as the Malay world, which have become intertwined and co-constitutive over the centuries. Its protagonists are the creole Ḥaḍramīs, a group of polyglots, businessmen, seafarers, leaders, writers, opportunists, experts on Islam, and much more. To understand their past, Mandal invites us to scrutinize colonial notions of race, recognize their power and limitations, and move beyond them. He evokes a Southeast Asia comprised of fluidity, interconnectedness, and hybrid identities, championing a creole perspective on the Malay world, its Arab diasporas, and, arguably, Islam. Chapter 1 illustrates how Southeast Asians of Ḥaḍramī origins, in particular those belonging to the *sayyid* class (descendants of Muḥammad through his grandson Ḥusayn), became integral to the region's maritime trade, religious affairs, and courtly life in precolonial times. The book's second part, consisting of three chapters, depicts a considerably less fluid world: that of colonialism. Chapter 2 elucidates how Dutch and British control over the sea lanes of Southeast Asia pushed the Ḥaḍramīs inland. Through their commercial success and ownership of fixed assets, many sayyids achieved social ascendancy under European rule. In this period, we see the first concerted efforts to alienate Arabs from the indigenous people of many places, especially Java. As Chapter 3 shows, this caused a disruption of pre-existing mobilities. Irony had it that the Dutch establishment increasingly singled out Arabs and Chinese as unwelcome external predators of the native population. The open seas of the past made way for the cramped compartments of colonial stratification, legal pluralism, and forced placement in separate urban districts. Chapter 4 underscores the role of scholars and bureaucrats in the reinvention of Arabs as a threat to the social order, in particular through their supposed influence over the colony's religious life. This resulted in further curtailment of their freedom and interaction with indigenous Muslims.

The third part of the book, also consisting of three chapters, traces the construction of a modern Arab identity in the Malay world. Chapter 5 describes the pull of the Ottoman Empire from the late nineteenth century onwards. While already waning in power, Istanbul developed into a center of Islamic modernity and a counterpoint to European imperialism. The city birthed reformist periodicals and Western-style schools, both of which were patronized by a new

generation of wealthy Arabs. During this age of social mobilization, the Ottoman Consul in Batavia and the local Ḥaḍramī sayyids developed a mutually beneficial relationship. Chapter 6 traces the impact of this sayyid-driven modernity in Java. By the early twentieth century, several newly established institutions aimed to consolidate the position of sayyids as the spokespeople and protectors of Islam. They grew closer to indigenous Muslims, yet their wealth and endogamous practices prevented the relation from outgrowing paternalism. Chapter 7 inspects the formation of a modern Arab identity in the Indies. By the 1910s, the ecumenical efforts of sayyid leaders had made space for more exclusionary politics, aggravated by conflicts within the Ḥaḍramī community and indigenous nationalism. The process of “becoming Arab”, which was characterized in equal measure by racialization and hybridity, neared completion in the twilight of colonialism.

Mandal treats us with yet more intellectual fodder in his epilogue. While the book itself gravitates towards colonial Java, its postscript captivantly illuminates how the Ḥaḍramī ancestry of several prominent Malaysian and Indonesian leaders was erased from the official narrative, although things have eased up in recent decades. In addition to the individuals discussed by Mandal, I was reminded of Sultan Hamid II of Pontianak, whose enemies often highlighted his foreignness to delegitimize his politics, and of East Timor’s second prime minister, Marí bin Amude Alkatiri. While Arab ancestry can indeed be detrimental for politicians, in at least one case it has aided a gubernatorial candidate running against an ethnic Chinese incumbent (Burhani 2017). In addition, Arabness regularly surfaces in discussions on the future of Islam, in which *Arabisasi* tends to be portrayed as a threat to *Islam Nusantara*, the region’s homegrown and allegedly more tolerant version of the religion. In this regard, one notes that Mandal does not address the Ḥaḍramī origins of radical Islamists such as Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, Ja’far Umar Thalib, and Muhammad Rizieq Shihab. Perhaps doing so would undermine his disavowal of racialized stereotypes, rooted in European colonialism and resonating in contemporary thinking, which depict Arabs as religious fanatics. Nevertheless, the book’s central message hardly suffers by asserting that creole Ḥaḍramīs have ended up as a wide range of things: poets, shippers, diplomats, intellectuals, peddlers, literati, reformers, printers, batik traders, money-lenders, and, on rare occasion, practitioners of religious intolerance. Is not such a diversity of pursuits inherent to the creole trajectories Mandal has illustrated so well? We need only to observe the most famous Ḥaḍramī family of the present century, which has brought forth businessmen, power brokers, socialites, musicians, at least one painter and one Trump-supporting conspiracy theorist, yet will probably be best remembered for the sibling who became the leader of Al-Qaeda.

After reading Mandal's exhaustive treatment of Ḥaḍramī history in Southeast Asia, one wonders what more can be said on the topic. Quite a lot, as Yahaya shows us, especially from a legal perspective. She points out that the Arab mercantile elites of the Netherlands Indies and the Straits Settlements played a pioneering role in the development of Islamic law in these territories. In 1875, a group of mostly Ḥaḍramī Muslims in Singapore, introduced in the book as "the memorialists", submitted a petition requesting more government interference in Islamic marriages and the appointment of *qadis* (judges in Islamic courts). Operating within the colonial system, these legally conscious sayyids deliberately and astutely generated their own jurisdictions. What follows is an astounding legal history of the Arabs in British- and Dutch-occupied Southeast Asia. Rather than avoiding the bureaucracies of empire, these colonized subjects relied on them and attempted to ingratiate themselves with the authorities. The efforts of the sayyid elites to safeguard their property, businesses, and relationships with their (often indigenous) families effectively deepened colonial government and marginalized pre-existing jurisdiction. The book lays bare the group's economic pragmatism, political interests, and use of legal systems to improve their communal position in a system rife with Arabophobia. Through a series of complicated legal conflicts, *Fluid Jurisdictions* scrutinizes the Ḥaḍramī relations with other Muslims, their pursuit of capital accumulation, and their permanence in the region. The agency of Arab women in Southeast Asia, on which mainstream historians have had little to say, is dissected through detailed explorations of inheritance cases. In addition, Yahaya casts a novel light on the administrative specificities of the Netherlands Indies, the Straits Settlements, and the myriad connections between the two.

Chapter 1 contextualizes the "lure of bureaucracy" as experienced by the male Arab elite of the Straits Settlements. Their main grievance was the ease with which their wives could file a divorce against them, jeopardizing the management of their property and kin. In the Netherlands Indies, too, the Arab elites disputed the authority of local *qadis* and their power over the domestic lives of Muslims. Chapter 2 highlights the primacy of paper in the interactions between mobile Ḥaḍramīs and the colonial state. Amidst the multiple jurisdictions in which they operated, the power of attorney (*surat kuasa* in Malay, *volmacht* in Dutch) became an invaluable document to regulate mercantile and kinship ties across the Indian Ocean. These written records shaped the lives of Straits Ḥaḍramīs in particular. Even in the Netherlands Indies, whose administration was generally less susceptible to documents produced in foreign jurisdictions, a power of attorney could facilitate the otherwise illegitimate transfer of "native" land to those classified as Foreign Orientals. This legally enforced racialization is elucidated in Chapter 3. Unlike the Straits Settlements, where

class was decisive to one's standing in society, the Netherlands Indies pivoted around an infamous race-based system. For Java's Ḥaḍramī-descended population, the tightening of colonial control meant restrictions in their mobility and right to own property, supposedly to protect indigenous people against their malpractices. The uprooting of Arabs in the Indies context was already described in *Becoming Arab*, but *Fluid Jurisdictions* adds a valuable legal perspective.

Chapter 4 mostly stays in the Netherlands Indies. Dutch efforts to keep the Arabs legally separate from both the indigenous masses and society's European upper crust, while continuously portraying them as unscrupulous usurers, yielded a highly inconsistent, exploitation-prone jurisdictional landscape. The frustration of sayyids with local qadis, particularly in the realm of Islamic marriage, prompted the question whether the colony's non-native Muslims required a separate court. Eventually, the Indies government decided against it. In contrast to British authorities, the Dutch were reluctant to administer Islamic law on behalf of the sayyids. Additional tensions emerged during the First World War. While most Straits sayyids had shown themselves avowed supporters of British rule, many non-sayyids were suspected to harbor pro-German and pro-Turkish sympathies. In the Indies, non-sayyids started to openly challenge the sacrosanctity of sayyids as the spokespeople of Arabs and of Muslims in general. Their perceived anti-British sentiments triggered a sharp increase in surveillance and espionage across the borders of empire, which is vividly portrayed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 calls attention to the importance of immovable property in this period. To protect their wealth and ensure its continuance within the family, Ḥaḍramīs resorted to a type of charitable endowment known under Islamic law as *waqf*. As Yahaya shows, this led to additional compromises with the British authorities, whereas the Dutch administration made it practically impossible for Arabs and other non-indigenous people to create such perpetual endowments. The establishment of waqfs saddled the British authorities with copious translational difficulties, yet for the Ḥaḍramī diaspora, it was a ticket to permanence in the region. They went from migrants to residents.

Fluid Jurisdictions tells a multifaceted story of a community that, in several ways, consented to colonial rule in order to improve their conditions within the system. It did not always work out; their self-imposed traceability backfired when the British authorities came to regard them as a threat. The book also brings to light some persistent blind spots of Dutch scholar-bureaucrats, who habitually overestimated the Arab control over Java's religious life. In reality, their Prophetic descent equipped sayyids with surprisingly little clout over the island's local qadis, who continued to administer their legal affairs as they saw fit. Equally remarkable is the prevalent assumption of a one-to-one relation-

ship between Arabs and Islamic law. As a result, few administrators realized that the Ḥaḍramī, too, possessed something akin to *adat*, exemplified by their reverence of sayyids and rigid marriage restrictions.

When read together, the books reveal a palpable tension accompanying the Ḥaḍramī diaspora over the centuries. Their skills and networks attracted the attention of local rulers, European imperialists, and incipient nationalists, yet their position in the Malay world remained fragile and contested. As mentioned previously, Dutch authorities concocted a series of infantilizing tropes in which Java's indigenous people—invariably portrayed as naïve—had to be protected against the exploitative practices of Arabs and other foreigners. It was of course no accident that this narrative coincided with their own project of land-grabbing. Fueled by the bugbear of pan-Islamism, the Arabs found themselves studied by academics and monitored by governments. Yet despite their perceived peril, they were largely excluded from Indonesia's secular nationalism. Integration took place most successfully in the Islamic movement from the late 1920s (Yamaguchi 2020). Both authors pursue this prolonged tension in detail, each in their own way and with their own focal points. They do not celebrate or condemn the Ḥaḍramī, but offer a complex picture of a resourceful minority in multiple unequal societies.

The books have more in common. They position Southeast Asia at the center and the Middle East at the periphery, while paying close attention to developments in India, the Ottoman Empire, and other parts of Asia. A number of pivotal individuals feature in both works, including Sayyid 'Uthmān, Aḥmad Sūrkitī, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, and Lodewijk W.C. van den Berg. We also catch glimpses of the Arab-descended elites of Pontianak, Riau, and Palembang. The partially similar fate of the Indies Chinese, who were likewise depended upon for their trade activities and capital influx, feared for their economic power, classified as Foreign Orientals, restricted in their mobility and sartorial practices, segregated into enforced residential areas, and withheld from educational opportunities, is also repeatedly pointed out by both authors. Together, the Arabs and the Chinese in the Netherlands Indies were subjected to what Mandal sees as a "tripartite political and legal system" (BA: 76) and Yahaya as a "dual legal status" (FJ: 8). Following the Constitutional Regulation of 1854, they were subjected to the same regulations as Europeans under private and commercial law and as indigenous Indonesians under public law.

One point on which the authors differ is the utility of creolization as a conceptual tool to understand Ḥaḍramī experiences in Southeast Asia. The rationale behind Mandal's endorsement of the creole paradigm is clear. It offers a rejec-

tion of fixed categories and reified notions of race, as still seen, for example, in the dominant racial frameworks of Malaysia and Singapore. It also challenges nationalistic tropes of authenticity, indigeneity, and belonging. By reinstating hybridity as the norm rather than the anomaly it is often contrived to be, creole histories lend legitimacy to communities that suffered the double marginalization of colonialism and nation-building. As such, they have the power to attenuate the influence of race in determining who is Southeast Asian.

At the same time, as Yahaya points out, the creole perspective blurs historically attested racial fault lines and misrepresents practices of self-identification, which typically took place along the paternal lineage (FJ: 18). In addition, it obscures gendered structures in which local women remained subordinate within the diasporic families they married into (FJ: 166). These objections are valid on their own merits and inescapable in a study that emphasizes inequalities *within* the Ḥaḍramī community in terms of ancestry, class, wealth, and gender. Yet Mandal's specific interpretation of creoleness provides some leeway for apparent paradoxes. The creole sayyids, he points out, prioritized genealogy over race, while they were hybrid in their cultural practices (BA: 189). A more binary version of this argument is made by Sila (2015), who characterizes the sayyid community of Cikoang, South Sulawesi, as culturally assimilated rather than hybrid, yet unremittingly obsessed with genealogy and prone to endogamy. Perhaps the presence of vast internal differences is best understood as intrinsic rather than antithetical to communities identified as creole or hybrid?

Mandal's paradigm is largely unaffected by modes of self-designation. Terms used by the community itself, such as *muwallad* (person born of a non-Arabic mother), *wulāyatī* (Ḥaḍramawt-born), *manāṣib* (aristocrats), and *aqhāh* (pure people), are conspicuously absent in his book. Creoles, by contrast, feature in every chapter, seemingly to deparochialize Ḥaḍramī experiences and make them more recognizable. The word creole is used synonymously with the Malay term *peranakan*. One imagines that even Raja Ali Haji, the notorious enemy of creolization (BA: 18), was unwittingly a creole on account of his mobile life and Bugis ancestry. On the surface, this usage resembles a terminological imposition, especially since Mandal treats the creole chiefly as a tangible human category rather than a verb (to creolize), a process (creolization), or an abstract noun (créolité). Yet amidst today's wave of ethno-nationalism and religious intolerance, one could also argue that this intervention is refreshingly radical and that Southeast Asia has valuable insights to offer on the contact phenomena often labelled as creolization. Creole histories, as Mandal insists, "serve as repositories of transregional and hybrid pasts and offer a vocabulary with which to speak of a past of interconnectedness that colonialism and nation-states have erased or rendered marginal" (BA: 211). In that sense, a renewed

dialogue with scholars of Sri Lanka, Macao, the Philippines, India, and other places is eagerly awaited to test their applicability in a broader Asian context. After all, a concept so mobile and mutable as “creole” could suffer no worse fate than confinement in the silos of regional (or disciplinary) specialization.

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