CHAPTER THREE

ARAB HADHRAMIS IN MALAYSIA:
THEIR ORIGINS AND ASSIMILATION IN MALAY SOCIETY

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Introduction

The term ‘assimilation’ is loosely used in this chapter to describe the process of the integration or indigenisation of the Hadhramis into Malay society in Malaysia from the time of their advent into the region up to the present day. In this context, I may argue that this process of assimilation has a historical, social and political significance due to the fact that it gave the Hadhrami migrants special respect in the indigenous society, where they dominated the political discourse and held a variety of key posts ranging from chiefs of villages to paramount rulers at the apex of the Malay political structure (kerajaan). The chapter examines first the significance of their ideology of descent, and, second, the process of their adaptation and assimilation in the Malay environment. Special attention will also be paid to their role in Malay society with a particular emphasis on those who trace their origins to al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and are given the title of sayyid (pl. sāda).

Origins of the Hadhramis in Malaysia

The vast majority of the Arab Hadhramis in Malaysia migrated from Hadhramaut in southern Yemen, and the rest came from other parts of the Arab world. They are ethnically classified into two major

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2 For further details, see Othman, “Hadhramis in the Politics”, 82–94.
3 Huub de Jonge, “Dutch Colonial Policy Pertaining to Hadhrami Immigrants”, in Freitag and Clarence-Smith (eds.), Hadhrami Traders, Scholar and Statesmen, 96.
groups: sāda and non-sāda. The sāda trace their descent to the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) via his daughter Fāţima, the wife of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the mother of his sons, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. This claim links them matrilineally with the Prophet while preserving their patrilineal descent to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib via his son, al-Ḥusayn. In 929, one of al-Ḥusayn’s descendants, known as Aḥmad ibn Ṭāfār, migrated from Iraq to Hadhramaut, where he was given the title “Al-Muḥājir ila Allah” or the migrant to Allah, and is regarded as the ancestor of the Hadhrami Sāda. Later in 1127, his descendant, Sayyid ‘Alī ibn ‘Alawī Khalāq Qassam, migrated to Tarīm in southern Hadhramaut and converted it into a prominent centre of Islamic education in the region. After him, the Hadhrami sāda were given the name of Bā ‘Alawī or Alawī Sāda, and they widely spread in Hadhramaut and in the diasporas, forming various branches or clans such as al-Saqāfī, al-‘Attās, al-‘Aydārūs (also known as al-Idrūs), ‘Aydīd, al-Junayd, al-Qādīrī, Āl Yahyā, al-Shāṭrī, Bā Rukbah. It is believed that most of those who came to Southeast Asia were descendants of Bā ‘Alawī clan and its several branches.

The second group of the non-Sayyid Hadhramis in Malaysia claims descent from the Quraysh tribe which had played a significant role in the pre- and post-Islamic history of Makkah. It is historically known that the indigenous population of southern Yemen are mainly from the Qaḥṭānī clan which has no direct link with the Quraysh. But since the manifestation of Islam, it became a kind of prestige for all Arabs to trace their descent back to the Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. Here, one may notice that the non-sayyid Hadhramis, who are mainly from southern Yemen, trace their descent to the Quraysh of northern Arabia.

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5 The main reference used by the Alawī Sayyids to legitimize their claim of origins is: Shaliḥ, Kitāb al-Mashra’ al-Rawwī fi Manāqib al-Salah al-Kirām Al Bā ‘Alawī, Cairo, 1901.
7 Serjeant, The Sayyids of Hadhramaut, 7.
8 Interview with Omar Farouk Sheikh Ahmad Bajunid, University of Malaya, in October 1991.