CHAPTER NINE

THE INS AND OUTS OF HADHRAMI JOURNALISM IN MALAYA, 1900–1941: ASSIMILATION OR IDENTITY MAINTENANCE?

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Between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the outbreak of World War II, persons identifiable onomastically – by means of their names – as Hadhrami Arabs enjoyed a major presence in the production of periodical journalism in Malaya. But it was not an undifferentiated presence, for it can be argued that it falls into two rather separate periods of activity and two fairly distinct categories of participation. Of the 36 or 37 Hadhramis involved as named editors and entrepreneurs in journalism – some 17% of the total of 207 identifiable persons so engaged1 – a majority were sāda but some were not; some wrote primarily in Malay and some in Arabic; some were locally born muwalladūn but many were immigrants. It is this cast of characters and the periodicals that were their vehicle that are the subject of this chapter.

The subject addressed in this volume invites us to consider, for Hadhramis in Southeast Asia, questions of “identity maintenance or assimilation”. What do we mean by these terms? The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences says of assimilation that it is “a process in which persons of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds come to interact free of these constraints in the life of the larger community.”2 Prima facie it would seem possible to interact in this way – I think this is the experience of most of us – while at the same time maintaining significant elements of cultural identity. But perhaps the issues are rather

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1 This figure is derived from the personal name index to Roff, Bibliography of Malay and Arabic Periodicals, 70–73.

more complex. Some of the most perceptive of recent discussions of the history and sociology of the Hadhrami diaspora in Southeast Asia have been those of Engseng Ho, who in several papers, and in his recently published doctoral dissertation, has argued that what we see at certain moments and in certain places is precisely not assimilation but the development of a distinct creole Hadhrami-Malay community that is “separate from [both] ... host and home societies.” Ho contrasts the formation of creole identity to processes of assimilation, which he sees as an alternative recourse for immigrants, almost invariably involving the loss, or at least the attrition, of cultural specificity. Ho’s argument is closely tied to considerations of biological descent and genealogy, which historically, as he notes, have been of prime importance especially to the sādā. While recognizing the force of these considerations I propose, for the purposes of the present chapter, to circumvent the issue of creolisation and use the term assimilation in the rather more general sense implied by the Encyclopedia. I shall, therefore, discuss my material in those terms, for what seems to me to be involved here, to adapt a phrase of Ho’s, are “degrees of Hadhriminess” rather than the either/or positions that “identity maintenance or assimilation” may seem to imply.

It is necessary to take a step back, however, at this point, to note the larger context in which Malay and Arabic journalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Hadhrami involvement in it, developed. It is remarkable – and indeed often remarked – that print-media journalism makes an almost simultaneous appearance in many different parts of the non-Western world in the last decade or so of the nineteenth century, associated with the introduction of new print technologies, the growth of a literate public, and rising discontents with colonial domination. This is true for print journalism in both the Arab Middle East and the Malay Archipelago. Preceded by Jamāl al-Din

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3 Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*.
5 Ibid.