CHAPTER ELEVEN

HADHRAMIS WITHIN MALAY ACTIVISM: THE ROLE OF AL-SAQQĀF(S) IN POST-WAR SINGAPORE (1945–1965)

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Introduction

The post-war years have often been portrayed as a period of awakening and intense activism amongst Malays in Malaya. Issues of identity, belonging, culture, religion and language were contested, leading to the rise of polemics and tensions between various ethnic groups on the island. This chapter examines the role of several prominent Hadhramis from the al-Saqqāf family who played crucial roles in determining the course of Malay activism and how such involvement reflects the durability and overlapping of the Malay, as well as Hadhrami identities within the Singapore public sphere then. It also examines the ways in which these Hadhramis utilised Islam, politics and Malay literary culture as crucial elements towards the championing of Malay supremacy in Singapore from 1945 to 1965.

Arabs, or to be more specific, those of Hadhrami1 descent, have played major roles in the history and development of Singapore since its founding in 1819. The earliest Arabs to arrive on the island were two wealthy merchants from Palembang in Sumatra, namely Sayyid Muhammed ibn Hārtūn al-Junayd and his nephew, Sayyid ʿUmar ibn ʿAlī al-Junayd, who, alongside other families such as al-Kāf2 and

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1 “Hadhrami” is a term to denote a person belonging to a sub-grouping within the wider race/ethnicity now termed as “Arab”. Originating from Yemen in a region called Hadhramaut. Hadhramis were known for their adventurous trait of establishing business networks and propagating Islam in parts of Africa, mainland Asia and Southeast Asia. For details of the origins and roles of Hadhramis in the Malay world, see Muhammad Hasan al-Aydrus, Penyebaran Islam di Asia Tenggara – Asyraf Hadramaut dan Peranannya, Jakarta: Lentera, 1996.

2 Al-Kāf, al-Saqqāf, al-Junayd, al-Jafrī, Basharahil are ‘surnames’ of various Hadhrami families in Singapore. The spelling of such surnames differs in various texts. Alsagoff, for example, is also spelled as “al-Saqqāf”, “Alsagof”, “Alsagoff”. I have
al-Saqqāf, aided in the building of homes and schools, as well as other amenities for the migrants of varied backgrounds. The late nineteenth century saw the rise of many prominent Hadhramis in Singapore, who took important functions, such as Justices of the Peace, philanthropists, municipal commissioners, and reformers, as well as religious leaders. Due to such varied contributions, they were regarded by the Malay-Indonesian community as “natural leaders” to represent and express all aspects of their needs. The Dutch scholar, L. W. C van den Berg, whose work represents the first serious study of the Arabs in Southeast Asia, argued that the late nineteenth century saw an increasing influence of Hadhramis upon the Malays in all aspects of life, including political, social, economic and religious affairs. On various occasions, Hadhramis were even revered as “saints”, who were endowed with supernatural powers.

In the latter half of the 1920s, however, there came about a major challenge to Hadhrami influence upon Malay affairs. This was the setting up of Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS) or the Singapore Malay Union (SMU) on 14th May 1926. The formation of this organisation was significant as it was, in many ways, a reaction against the idea that the non-Malay Muslims (that is, Arabs, Indians, Jawi Peranakans [or people of mixed Indian and Malay ancestry]) had a right to represent the Malay community within the colonial polity. The resentment of SMU towards Arab dominance did not end there. In 1939, members and sympathisers of the SMU revived a Malay newspaper in the Jawi script, called Utusan Melayu, with the objective of diminishing the overwhelming influence of Arab-owned newspapers. The main target of attack was the al-Saqqāf family, who were then amongst the richest Arabs in Singapore and the owners of the influential newspaper, Warta Malaya. SMU asserted that Warta Malaya represented the opinions and aspirations of the Muslim community in general, rather than the Malays in particular.