



THE ROLE OF SYED AHMAD BIN MUHAMMAD  
SEMAIT IN DISSEMINATING ISLAMIC  
TEACHINGS IN MODERN SINGAPORE: HIS  
APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

BY

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## ABSTRACT

This research looks into the role of Syed Ahmad Bin Muhammad Semait in the dissemination of Islamic teachings in modern Singapore. This study starts by tracing the history of Islamisation of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago with a focus on the roles and contributions of scholars in this region. It then studies the ideas and thoughts of Syed Ahmad and how they are transmitted in his writings and translations. It also discusses the impact of Syed Ahmad's contributions to Islamic education in modern Singapore. Data were collected through interviews of his family members, students and friends. Library research was carried out on his literary output. The findings show that Syed Ahmad's selected appropriate subject matters to write about and translated in accordance to the problems of the community. The scholar wrote in modern Malay language. His *magnum opus*, the translations, commentary and analysis of *Sahih Bukhari*, is his greatest work of his forty years in propagating Islam through print media. The book attests to Syed Ahmad's philosophy of providing important Islamic texts to the public. This is the first such work in the Malay language.

## ملخص البحث

تبحث هذه الدراسة في دور السيد أحمد بن محمد سميظ في نشر تعاليم الإسلام في سنغافورة المعاصرة. تبدأ الدراسة بتتبع تاريخ أسلمة الأرخييل الملايوي-الإنديونيسي، مع التركيز على دور ومساهمات علماء هذه المنطقة. تتناول الدراسة بعد ذلك أفكار ومفاهيم السيد أحمد وكيفية نقلها من خلال كتاباته وترجماته. كما يناقش البحث أثر مساهمات السيد أحمد في التعليم الإسلامي في سنغافورة حديثاً. تم جمع بيانات البحث من خلال المقابلات الشخصية مع أفراد أسرة السيد أحمد، وطلابه، وأصدقائه. وأيضاً تم جمع البيانات من خلال البحث المكتبي لإنتاج هذا العمل. ولقد أظهرت نتائج البحث بأن ما اختاره السيد أحمد من مواضيع كتابية وترجمية تناسب وتوافق مشاكل المجتمع. ولقد كتب العالم باللغة الملايوية الحديثة. أما رائعته، وترجماته، وتعليقه، وتحليله لصحيح البخاري فيعد من أعظم ما كتب في السنوات الأربعين التي قضاها في نشر الإسلام من خلال وسائل الإعلام المطبوعة. ويشهد الكتاب على فلسفة السيد أحمد في تقديم أهمية النصوص الإسلامية للعامة. ويعتبر هذا العمل هو الأول من نوعه باللغة الملايوية.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts (Islamic Spiritual Culture and Contemporary Society).

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IsmawiHj. Zein  
Dean of International Institute of  
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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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DISSEMINATING ISLAMIC TEACHING IN MODERN SINGAPORE: HIS  
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*I dedicate this thesis to my beloved wife, Nur Khadijah Binti Ramli, and my four lovely children, Nurul 'Ulum Binte Muhammad Mubarak, Sari Hasanah Nur Khafifi Binte Muhammad Mubarak, Abdul Rahman Bin Muhammad Mubarak and Muhammad Rahmat Bin Muhammad Mubarak.*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Abstract in Arabic .....	iii
Approval Page.....	iv
Declaration Page .....	v
Copyright Page.....	vi
Dedication .....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii

<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction .....	1
General Scope .....	2
Objective of study .....	4
Definition of Terminologies.....	4
Literature Review .....	5
Research Methodology.....	20
Research Design.....	20
Participant .....	22
Data Collection Method .....	22
Interview .....	22
Library Research .....	23
Data Management .....	24
Data Analysis .....	24
Ethical Issues.....	26
Researcher's Role and Subjectivity .....	26
Significance of Study .....	27
Limitation of Study .....	28
Conclusion.....	28

<b>CHAPTER TWO: SYED AHMAD SEMAIT: PERSONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT.....</b>	<b>29</b>
Biographical Data.....	29
Education.....	34
Social and Political Environment.....	36
Early Twentieth Century to End of WWII.....	36
Post WWII to Separation of Malaya .....	40
Post-Independence to Syed Ahmad's demise .....	43
Conclusion.....	45

<b>CHAPTER THREE: DISSEMINATING OF ISLAMIC KNOWLEDGE.....</b>	<b>47</b>
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Ideas and Thoughts .....	47
Diagnosis of his Community.....	50
Printing and Publishing .....	55
Authored Books .....	58
Syed Ahmad's Magnum Opus .....	62
Some Characteristics of Syed Ahmad's Magnum Opus .....	65
Translated Books.....	69
Imam Habib Abdullah Al-Haddad .....	71
An-Nashaa'ih ad-Diniyah wal-Washaaya .....	72
Risalatul Murid & Risalatul Mudzakarrah .....	73
Risalah Sabilil-Iddikar Wal-I'tibar .....	73
Al- Mu'awanah wal-Muzhaharah wal-Mu'azarah.....	73
Dawwah At-Tammah Wat-Tadzkirah Al-Ammah.....	74
Edited Books and Translations.....	74
Siyarus Salikin ilaa Ibadati Rabbil- 'Alamin .....	77
Teaching .....	79
Conclusion.....	84

<b>CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>86</b>
Conclusion.....	86
Suggested Areas for Further Research .....	91

<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>93</b>
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APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .....	98
APPENDIX II: PICTURES OF SYED AHMAD'S MAQAM .....	100
APPENDIX III: A SAMPLE OF SYED AHMAD'S DISCUSSION ON IKHTILAF .....	101
APPENDIX IV: A SAMPLE OF AHMAD TAKING A MODERATE VIEW ON MATTER OF BID'AH .....	102
APPENDIX V: SAMPLE ON OMISSION OF SANAD IN SAHIH BUKHARI'S TRANSLATION .....	103
APPENDIX VI: SAMPLE DISCUSSION ON DIFFERENT FIQH MAZHAB .....	104
APPENDIX VII: SAMPLE DISCUSSION ON ASBAB AL-WURUD.....	105

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### INTRODUCTION

Islam spread from its epicentres of Mecca and Medina to other parts of the world from 7<sup>th</sup> century through the tireless effort of Muslims who were led by the examples set by Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) and his companions. The propagation of Islamic discourse has always been championed by Muslims who believed in the importance of sharing its message of Truth to others devoid of the message. The message of Islam was carried by scholars, merchants and traders who left the comfort of their homeland to live in foreign lands and cultures.

The movement of the *Hadhramis* across the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia was inextricably linked to the propagation of Islam. In their enthusiasm to promote the traditions of Prophet Muhammad and the companions, *Hadhramis*, engaged in transcultural exchanges with the local population in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> The *Hadhramis* demonstrated their cultural intelligence when they presented Islam to predominant areas of Buddhist and Hindus. They demonstrated the flexibility that existed in Islam, that is, the ability to blend with cultural practices and change false rituals without creating much discomfort among the people.

Social scientists stress that Islam was brought to the region by traders from Arabia, Persia, India and China. It is clear that Islam was introduced to this region through trade, but it is premature to conclude that the large scale spreading of Islamic teachings among the locals is due to this. There are other theories explaining the large

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<sup>1</sup> Enseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5.

scale acceptance of Islam in terms of economic and political motives, rivalry between the Muslims and Portuguese, inter-marriage and Sufi proselytisation.

The role of the *Hadhramis* in the Islamisation of the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago are well known but there have been little mentioned about their methodology of spreading the religion. From the time Islam was first introduced to the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago to our current time, the *Hadhramis* have played a vital role in many aspects of the life of the indigenous people. They were instrumental in setting up Islamic education for them while being involved in trading.

## **GENERAL SCOPE**

The scope of this study focuses on the dissemination of Islam in Southeast Asia, specifically Singapore. It explores the thoughts of a local born '*Alawiyyin* scholar, Syed Ahmad Bin Muhammad Semait, who was able to analyse the state of the local Muslim population and use his business and publishing strategies to propagate Islam.

One of the most fascinating sociological and historical fact about the history of Malay publishing in Singapore in the twentieth century has been the prominence and often pre-eminence of Arabs among its participants. From the Riau born modernist thinker Syed Sheikh Al-Hady to the newspaper proprietor Syed Hussein bin Ali Alsagoff and the polemicist Syed Abdullah bin Abdul Hamid al-Edrus (Syed Ahmad Lutfi), each of these personalities played crucial roles in transforming Singapore into becoming a nerve centre of publishing in the Malay World. One recent study reports that Arab publishing houses in the name of Al-Imam Printing Company, Percetakan Warta Malaya and Qalam Press were instrumental in the production of hundreds of books, periodicals, religious tracts, magazines and novels that were distributed throughout Southeast Asia. So influential were the Arabs in the world of print in

Singapore as it is in mainland Malaya and Indonesia that by 1940s, it was said that neither a book nor a newspaper written in Romanized or *Jawi* Malay would see the light of day without an Arab financing its publication or spilling his pen on one of the pages.<sup>2</sup>

One distinctive feature of Arab involvement in the world of publishing during the twentieth century was the interlacing of economic motives with that of educational work and religious reformation. There is perhaps no novelty in such acts of what has been termed as ‘religious entrepreneurship’. These were, in some measure, a continuation of practices that could be dated back to the introduction of Islam in the Malay World when wayfarers and Sufi teachers who came to spread the religion had so often engaged in commercial activities to ensure their survival. In so doing, they intentionally amassed a large amount of wealth and property that were used to further enhance the work of publication and reform. However this was not to last. By the end of the Second World War in 1945, Arabs were stripped of the economic dominance they once held. Faced with a new global capitalist environment which debilitated diasporic businesses which were stifled by nationalist policies of the postcolonial state that came in the form of land acquisitions and rent controls, Arab prominence in the publishing realm and reform in Singapore dwindled rapidly with the exception of a few notable examples. One publishing firm which emerged strongly amidst the cataclysmic shifts in the local and global arenas was Pustaka Nasional established by a local religious scholar, Syed Ahmad Bin Muhammad Semait.<sup>3</sup>

An Arab by birth, Syed Ahmad had established one of the most successful printing houses that lasted for more than four decades on the island-state. However,

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<sup>2</sup> William R. Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism* (England: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Semait can also be spelled as BinSmith or Basmeih. For the purpose of this thesis and also how the name is commonly being spelled in this region, the author has adopted the spelling of Semait.

aside from some brief mention about his life, writings and translations as well as the wide coverage given to his tragic demise in a road accident in 2006, very little scholarly writings have been dedicated to analyzing the career of a self-made man who rose from a humble beginning to become a prominent publisher and a respected religious scholar in Singapore.

## **OBJECTIVES OF STUDY**

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. To discuss the role of Syed Ahmad in the dissemination of Islam in modern Singapore.
- ii. To learn his methods from his works for contemporary application.
- iii. The impact of his work on Islamic education in Singapore.

This study aims to address these two research questions:

- i. What are the ideas and thoughts of Syed Ahmad in his works?
- ii. How are the ideas and thoughts realised and disseminated?

## **DEFINITION OF TERMINOLOGIES**

A brief description of the terminologies used in this study is described below.

- i. *'Alawiyyin*

The term *'Alawiyyin* refers to the *sayyids* of Hadramaut. *Sayyids* are blood descendants of Prophet Muhammad via his daughter Fatimah and husband Ali bin Abi Thalib. Fatimah and Ali were bestowed with two sons, Hassan and Hussein. The *'Alawiyyin* referred in this research are the descendants of Hussein. All the different families of the *'Alawiyyin* come from *Imam* Syed Ahmad Bin Isa bin Muhammad bin

Ali al Uraidhy bin Ja'far Ash-Sadiq bin Muhammad Al-Baqir bin Zainal 'Abidin Ali bin Hussein who is the grandson of Prophet Muhammad. *Imam Syed Ahmad bin Isa* migrated from Iraq to Yemen and hence was known as *Al-Muhajir* (The Emigrant).

ii. Modern Singapore

Modern Singapore refers to the time period between the early twentieth century and the demise of Syed Ahmad.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Southeast Asia is home to one of the world's largest Muslim population where a majority speaks the Malay language and culture. The study of Islamisation of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago gained the interest of many western and Southeast Asian scholars. Different scholars researched on the historical aspects of the coming of Islam to this region, delineating many theories about the beginning of Islam in this part of the world. Despite the large corpus of research, there has been no conclusive or agreeable theory on the exact year that Islam entered this archipelago and the first group of people who are responsible for introducing the Islamic faith to the people of this region.

This section will embark on the writings produced on the Islamisation of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago; it will cover the debates on the theories of Islamisation in this region and contributions of *'Alawiyyin* and religious scholars in the dissemination of Islam and the intellectual development of the Malay world. The rationale for organising the review in this manner is to move from a general perspective of the Islamisation of the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago to a more focused discussion on the roles and contributions of Muslim scholars of the Archipelago.

The coming of Islam to Southeast Asia was centred on two periods of migration in the history of Islamic civilisation<sup>4</sup>. The first phase was during the 'Umayyad dynasty which saw the brutality and injustice faced by the 'Alawiyyin. Next was the migration of the descendants of Syed Ahmad Bin Isa which happened via two different routes: The first was the migration from Hadramaut to India and the second was from India to Southeast Asia or from Hadramaut to Southeast Asia through India.

Western scholars on history of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago state that Islam came to this region in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century based on the voyage and discovery of the Italian Marco Polo.<sup>5</sup> Muslim scholars of this region argue that Islam was already being practiced here between 800 – 900 CE<sup>6</sup> and some in 1100 CE.<sup>7</sup> Hamka for example, argued that based on historical sources from China that Islam came to this part of the world as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, much earlier than the discovery of the Terengganu Inscription Stone.<sup>8</sup> These differences between assertions by Muslim scholars and western scholars in the study of the history of the archipelago can be attributed to the attitude taken by western scholar in minimising the importance of the study of Islam and its role in the archipelago. Western scholars were also primarily focusing on historical and sociological perspectives due to the absence of primary sources that were available in the Malay language.

Among scholars, there are those who dismiss the theory that Islam was brought to the Malay-Indonesia archipelago by the Indians, stating that the majority of the

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<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Hasan Al-Aydrus, *Penyebaran Islam di Asia Tenggara: Asyraf Hadramaut dan Peranannya* (Penerbit Lentara: Jakarta, 1996), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesia World: Transmission and Responses*, (UK: C. Hurst & Co, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Hasan, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Habib Thahir Al-Haddad, *Sejarah masuknya Islam di timur jauh*, translated by S. Dhiya Shahab (Jakarta: PT Lentera Basritama, 1997), 53.

<sup>8</sup> Rosnani Hashim, "Hamka: Intellectual and Social Transformation of the Malay World" in *Reclaiming the Conversation: Islamic Intellectual Tradition in the Malay Archipelago*, edited by Rosnani Hashim (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2010), 194.



Muslims in this part of the world follow the *Shafiee* school of thought in their jurisprudence like the '*Alawiyyin*'. Majority of Muslims in India follow the *Hanafi* school of jurisprudence and therefore it is unlikely that Islam came from the Indians.<sup>9</sup> Sayyid Ajmal Al-Idyus<sup>10</sup> has pointed in his class lectures that all Malabar is *Shafiee* and hence this argument is not completely true. He has said that the Indian theory cannot be discussed altogether because of the long history between the regions. Syed Naquib Al-Attas also endorsed the Arab-origin theory and strongly opposed the Indian-origin theory. He said,

The well-known theory that Islam came from India and was conveyed to the Archipelago by 'Indians' cannot be accepted. This theory seems to have been formulated to fit into the 'autochthonous theory' based upon observations of merely the 'external' characteristics of Islam as revealed according to patterns and according to past experiences with Hinduism and Buddhism. However, what is more important in this respect should have been observations of the 'internal' characteristics of Islam as a religion, for Islam is always understood by the Muslims themselves in this sense.<sup>11</sup>

He added,

Roughly from the 10<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century backwards, all the major relevant (religious) literary evidence studied did not record a single Indian author or work of Indian origin. Any author described as 'Indian' or works as of 'Indian origin' by Western scholars turned out to be actually Arab or Persian, and most of what has been described as Persian has in fact been Arabian, whether considered ethnically or culturally. The early missionaries too from what is known of their names and titles, have been Arab or Arab-Persian. It is true than some came via India, but some also came direct from Arabia or via Persia, and from there via

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<sup>9</sup> Syed Farid Al-Attas, "Foreword" in *The Hadhrami Arabs in Southeast Asia With Special Reference to Singapore: An Annotated Bibliography*, edited by Noryati Abdul Samad (Singapore: National Library Board), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Professor Sayyid Mohamed Ajmal bin Abdul Razak Al-Aidruss is a professor of American, British and world literature at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), a post graduate faculty of the International Islamic University (IIUM). Apart from literature, he teaches Advanced English and thesis writing at the institute. He has published poems and articles locally and internationally and most recently published an article entitled, "Hick's pluralism and Rumi's Mathnawi: The continued propagation of misappropriate lines" in the *Al-Shajarah* (2011), 16(1). Professor Ajmal has also translated Rumi's mathnawi into the Malay language. He is a native speaker of English and Malay and has reading knowledge of several other languages.

<sup>11</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on A General theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1969), 25.

China. It is true that some works were written in India, but their origin is Arabia and Persia... what is more important, their religious content is Middle Eastern, not Indian.<sup>12</sup>

These claims are challenged by another group of scholars who provided evidence on the legitimacy of Indonesian Islam being brought in by south Indian Muslims after they had gained a firm hold of South Indian ports. They add that the spread of Islam in the Indonesian Archipelago was by the *Shafiee* Gujeratis and Malabaris.<sup>13</sup>

Pijnappel ascribes the spread of Islam in the Indonesian Archipelago to these Shafiee Arabs of Gujerat and Malabar especially because these regions are mentioned so frequently in the early history of the Archipelago.<sup>14</sup>

However this theory was challenged by other scholars who mooted that South India as a more likely origin of the Indians who spread Islam to the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago. Their argument was that the spread of Islam to the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago took place before Gujerat was Islamized while South India had been Islamised several centuries ago. Snouck Hurgronje<sup>15</sup> first introduced this idea in 1883. He said,

The inhabitants of the Deccan, who resided in great numbers in the port cities of this island-world as middlemen in the trade between the Muslim states (of Western Asia) and the East Indies, were as if in the nature of things destined to scatter the first seeds of the new religion. Arabs, especially those who passed for descendants of the Prophet under the name Sayyid or Sharif, later found a welcome opportunity to demonstrate their organizational ability. As priests, priest-princes and as sultans they often put the finishing touches to the formation of the new realms.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> GWJ Drewes, "New light on the coming of Islam to Indonesia" in *Readings of Islam in Southeast Asia*, edited by Syed Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique and Yasmin Hussain (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), 7-17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>15</sup> Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje was a Dutch scholar of Oriental cultures and languages and Advisor on Native Affairs to the colonial government of the Netherlands East Indies.

<sup>16</sup> GWJ Drewes, 8.

Snouck then continued in his inaugural lecture at Leiden in 1907 entitled “Arabia and the East Indies” devoted most of his lecture to the relations of India with Indonesia Islam. He pursued his idea by analysing the similarities between three gravestones discovered in the Pase district which resembles those found in Gresik of Malik Ibrahim who died in 1418 CE. In 1910 Von Ronkel expressed that those gravestones found in Gresik were from Indian origin. These claims were further reinforced when in 1912, Mosquittee discovered that these stones were imported ready-made from Cambay Gujerat. Snouck in his lecture then proposed the year 1200 as the earliest date of the coming of Islam into the Indonesian Archipelago.<sup>17</sup>

Then Snouck proposes the year 1200 as the earliest data for the first serious steps toward inclusion of the Indonesian Archipelago into the territory of Islam; these steps are supposed to have been taken by Muslim merchants from India, with which the Archipelago had been in contact for centuries.<sup>18</sup>

In 1963, S.Q. Fatimi of Pakistan proposed that Bengal as being the source of Islam in the Malay world. This theory was initiated based on three separate sources used. These were mainly two eye-witness accounts by Marco Polo in 1292 on Perlak and Samudra and on the field report by Tome Pires regarding foreign kings of Pasai written in the early sixteen century.<sup>19</sup>

More recently, Ahmad Sanusi Hassan<sup>20</sup> provided an evidence of the coming of Islam to Southeast Asia was from the East (China) instead of the commonly held

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Tan Ta Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 143-145.

<sup>20</sup> Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ahmad Sanusi Hassan is a lecturer in the Architecture Programme at School of Housing, Building and Planning, University of Science Malaysia (USM), Penang Malaysia. His research is specialised in sustainable architecture and construction, and urban design for Southeast Asian tropical wetlands. He is one of the nine regional writers, three of each from Asia, Africa and South America who has involved in preparation of Guideline: Agenda 21 for Sustainable Construction in Developing Countries: A Discussion Document edited by Christina du Plessis, published by The International Council for Research and Innovation in Building and Construction (CIB), and United Nations Environment Programme International and Environmental Technology Centre (UNEP-IETC),

arguments that it came from the West (Indian and Arabian region). In his analytical study of the construction of the Kampong Laut Old Mosque (KLOM) in Kelantan, he showed the similarities and differences of the elements in roof design were influenced by traditional Chinese roof design that can be attributed to religious influence.<sup>21</sup>

The findings of the differences and similarities of the building construction elements between KLOM and traditional Chinese buildings can be used as guideline to understand architecture in the state of Kelantan as well as Southeast Asia. The finding is able to give an evidence to support the argument that Islam came to Southeast Asia from the East (China) and the role of Kingdom Champa was in disseminating Chinese cultures and influences to the Malay Kingdom.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, the coming of Islam was one of the momentous events in the history of Malay-Indonesia Archipelago as the coming Islamic presence spearheaded a revolutionary change to the mindset, culture and language of the indigenous people of the archipelago.<sup>23</sup>

The Arab-origin theory has been the more popular theory on the Islamisation of the Archipelago. More studies are being carried out on the roles and contributions of the ‘*Alawiyyin*’ to those of Indian origins. As stated by Drewes,

Unfortunately we have to admit that now, after almost 75 years [1968] such an investigation has not taken place [investigations into the contributions and literature of South Indian in the Archipelago], so that on the Indian side the position has remained unchanged.<sup>24</sup>

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which was launched at The Earth/World Summit, Johannesburg in September, 2002. At the University, he is lecturing in courses related to sustainable urban design, sustainable architecture and construction, Computer Aided Design (CAD), and computer movie animation. Based on these knowledge and understandings, he has integrated all these specialisations in his research, teaching, consultation and publication. He wrote *Konsep Perumahan Tradisional Berkelompok dan Berdensiti Tinggi di Pantai Barat Semenanjung Malaysia* and *Issues in Sustainable Development of Architecture in Malaysia*.

<sup>21</sup> Hassan, A.S., “Islam Came to South East Asia from China: Evidence from Traditional Chinese Roof Design in Kampung Laut’s Old Mosque, Malaysia”, *Canadian Social Science*, vol. 6, no. 5, (2010): 1-15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Syed Naquib Al-Attas, *Preliminary...*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> GWJ Drewes, 8.

The studies on *'Alawiyyin* cover different themes. Academic interest in conducting research about the *'Alawiyyin*, specifically their role in the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago, started due to the interest of the colonial masters in Southeast Asia. W.H. Ingrams' report on *Hadramawt*, Van den Berg's study of Arab communities in Southeast Asia and Snouck Hurgronje who was the advisor to the colonial Dutch East Indies government fall into this category. The studies range from history and culture, to travel accounts, migration patterns, politics, and nationalism, diaspora in Southeast Asian countries, family history, literary contributions, business and enterprise.

These few examples are just representatives of many other genres that scholars from the west and east have contributed in analysing and delineating the role and contributions of the *'Alawiyyin* in this region. R.B. Sergeant conducted an extensive study of South Arabia where he left several dozen monographs and articles on *Hadramawt* showing the interest of western scholars in this area. Anthony Reid's study on Abdul Rahman al-Zahir in Aceh and RO Winstedt's article on the *sada* in Siak and Perak are some of the scholarly works on the *'Alawiyyin*. Also, the role of Arabs are studied in high school as a subject for advanced college students, especially their roles in Singapore, Surabaya, Muar, Malacca, Johor and some other places.<sup>25</sup> The study of the *'Alawiyyin* naturally will deal with issues of diaspora, identity maintenance and assimilation with the community that they entered.<sup>26</sup>

Scholarly works in the study of the *'Alawiyyin* has become more systematic and prominent with the introduction of a landmark volume edited by Ulrike Freitag and William G. Clarence-Smith which was given the title of *Hadrami Traders, Scholars*

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<sup>25</sup> An example is a master's dissertation written by Lim Lu Sia in 1987 with the title 'The Arabs of Singapore: A Sociographic Study of their Place in the Muslim and Malay World of Singapore.'

<sup>26</sup> Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk & Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim (eds), *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation* (Brill: Boston, 2009).

*and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s – 1960s*. This book was a compilation of the edited papers from the conference “South Arabian Migration Movements in the Indian Ocean, the Hadrami Case, 1750 – 1960” which was held in 1995 at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. This volume puts together a collection of the major trends in the modern history of the Hadhrami community at home and abroad. This has inspired many smaller conferences and workshops and also PhD and master dissertations discussing the 'Alawiyyin Diaspora from various aspects. A more recent attempt in complementing the previous study and providing a focus to Southeast Asia is the edited volume by Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk and Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim of the conference on *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?* As stated by the editors,

In line with the academic concern, the primary objective of this book is to compliment the prevailing discourse on the topic, open up new area of discussions and motivate students to continue research in the field.<sup>27</sup>

This book is a compilation of edited conference papers with the theme of “The Arab-Yemenis in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation” convened by the Department of History and Civilisation, International Islamic University of Malaysia in collaboration with the Embassy of the Republic of Yemen to Malaysia on August 2005. This book outlined the various aspects of the roles, contributions and the complex intertwined issues of 'Alawiyyin Diaspora community with regards to their identity maintenance or identity assimilation with their host community.

The 'Alawiyyin in Singapore are within the sphere of the larger 'Alawiyyin Diaspora. Ali Ummahani Alkaff<sup>28</sup> examined the identity of the 'Alawiyyin in

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>28</sup> Ali Ummahani Alkaff, “A portrait of *Hadhramis* in Singapore and the Places they Inhibit,” (Master’s thesis, University of London, 2008), Unpublished.

Singapore and the places they inhabit. Nurfadzilah Yahya<sup>29</sup> studied the interaction of the elite 'Alawiyyin with the colonial masters in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ameen Ali Talib<sup>30</sup> on the other hand provided an account and brief introduction of the 'Alawiyyin migration to Singapore. There have been unpublished academic works on the 'Alawiyyin in Singapore by Lim Lu-Sia<sup>31</sup>, Loh Chee Harn<sup>32</sup>, and Nurzan Mohd Wahie.<sup>33</sup> The Arabs contribution to the development of Singapore was recognised and acknowledged by the government in 1992 when the then Brigadier-General (BG) Lee Hsien Loong delivered a speech at the Arab's Association<sup>34</sup> 46<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner. Family studies of 'Alawiyyin in Singapore was also carried out by Ulrike Freitag's "Arab Merchants in Singapore: Attempt of a Collective Biography" which described the rise and fall of four major Arab 'Alawiyyin families in their family enterprise.

Two conferences on the 'Alawiyyin were held in Singapore. The first conference held in 1995 carried the theme of "Singapore Arabs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" where participants discussed the question of Arab identity that relates to language and education. This conference also presented the role of Arab women in the community and highlighted the decline of Arab enterprising companies. The second conference was held in April 2010 under the title of "Rihlah – Arabs in Southeast Asia" with the theme "Islam, Trade and Culture: The Role of the Arabs in Southeast Asia".

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<sup>29</sup> Nurfadzilah Yahya, "Tea and Company: Interactions between the Arab elite and the British in Cosmopolitan Singapore", in Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk & Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim (eds.), *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 57-79.

<sup>30</sup> Talib, A.A., "Hadramis in Singapore", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 1, (1997): 89-96.

<sup>31</sup> Lim Lu-Sia, "The Arabs of Singapore: A sociographic study of their place in the Muslim and Malay World of Singapore," (Academic dissertation, National University of Singapore, 1987). Unpublished.

<sup>32</sup> Loh Chee Harn, "The Arab Population of Singapore, 1819-1959," (dissertation, University of Singapore, 1963). Unpublished. Available in ISEAS.

<sup>33</sup> Nurzan Mohd. Wahie, "The Arabs in Singapore," (dissertation, University Malaya. 1959). Unpublished. Available at National University of Singapore.

<sup>34</sup> The name of the Arab's association is Al-Wehdah.

Most of these studies did not present the dissemination of Islamic teachings as the driving factor for the 'Alawiyyin in their migration, their assimilation into their host community or their entrepreneur ventures. A study in this genre could be attributed to Roff William (1964) where he describes the community under the form Malayo-Muslim with a particular emphasis on the 'Alawiyyin.<sup>35</sup> This study illustrates the origins, involvement in pilgrimage arrangement and the impact of 'Alawiyyin on the local Malay community. Another work is done by Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied where he outlined the role of a particular 'Alawiyyin family, the Alsagoff with the Malay activism in post-World War II period. The three areas of Malay activism delineated in this study was the role of the Alsagoff in the reassertion of Islam among Malays, Malay politics and Literary culture. He concluded the study with a question about 'Alawiyyin identity assimilation or maintenance when they played their role within the Malay activism.<sup>36</sup> William Roff article describes the 'Alawiyyin literary activities as a mean to maintain their identity or assimilate into the Malay community. The study was not attempt to show how the 'Alawiyyin in used literary movements in spreading the message of Islam via print media. Other sources that attempt to place Islam as the motivating cause of the community are oral history interviews with Syed Hussain Bin Abdul Gadir Aljunied<sup>37</sup> and Syed Ali Redha Alsagoff.<sup>38</sup>

Apart from these studies on the 'Alawiyyin roles and contributions and their literary movements through journals and publications, there have been many individual scholars who have made impact to the intellectual development of the

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<sup>35</sup> Roff William, "The Malayo Muslim World of Singapore at the Close of the Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1964): 75-90.

<sup>36</sup> Syed Muhammad Khairudin Aljunied, "Hadhramis within Malay Activism: The role of Al-Saqqaf in Post-War Singapore" in *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation*, edited by Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk & Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim (Brill: Boston, 2009), 225-244.

<sup>37</sup> Oral History Centre (1983). Recording can be retrieved from National Achieves of Singapore.

<sup>38</sup> Oral History Centre (1996). Recording can be retrieved from National Achieves of Singapore.