

# A Portrait of the Arabs in Singapore Through the Lens of *al-Huda* (1931-1934)

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## ***Abstrak***

Masyarakat Arab di Singapura pada 1930-an digambarkan oleh *al-Huda* (1931-1934) sebagai sebuah masyarakat yang kehilangan pengaruh dalam kalangan masyarakat Islam di situ kerana sentiasa bertelagah sesama sendiri. Perselisihan mengenai keturunan yang diasaskan kepada perkahwinan yang dianggap murni atau sebaliknya, dan kebudayaan yang ditentukan dengan gelaran “sayyid” dan penggunaan bahasa Arab tulen, lebih menjarakkan lagi perhubungan antara masyarakat yang berketurunan Arab itu sendiri, apatah lagi dengan masyarakat yang bukan Arab.

**Kata kunci** Orang Islam Singapura, Alawiyyin, Irsyadi, Saiyyid.

## ***Abstract***

*Al-Huda portrayed the Arab society in Singapore in the 1930's as one which was losing its influence among the Moslems because the people were always in conflict with one another. Conflicts caused by marriages that were considered pure or otherwise, and culture that was based on the titles of “sayyid” as well as the use of pure Arabic, further distance the relationships among the Arabs themselves, as well as non-Arabs.*

**Keywords** Singapore Muslims, Alawiyyin, Irsyadi, Saiyyid.

This article is an attempt to discuss the social history of the Arabs in Singapore, based on articles published in the local Arabic newspaper, *al-Huda* from 1931 to 1934. The underlying assumption is that the understanding of their social condition during the early 1930's will also help us understand the history of Islam and the Muslims in Singapore and the region better. Due to conflicts in Java, it was generally believed that the Arabs were polarized into two main groups. However, *al-Huda* viewed the situation as something more complex since the Arab community was ideologically divided into four groups. Apart from these they were further delineated according to whether they were born

in the Middle East or locally. Thus the Arabs in Singapore were also marked by their different opinions and approaches on issues such as languages, social ranks and culture, depending on which group they belonged to. Internal schisms and bickering among them undermined their ability to continue leading the local Muslim community as they used to. Articles published in *al-Huda* offer explanations as to why the Arabs became marginalized in the Malay political development especially in the 1930's which was the critical decade in the history of Malay Muslims in British Malaya.

## INTRODUCTION

After more than three hundred years of being colonized first by the Portuguese (1511-1641), then the Dutch (1641-1824) and finally the British (1786-1957), Malay Muslim societies in Malaya (now Malaysia) started thinking about fighting for independence in the early twentieth century. They were inspired by *al-Imam* (1906-1908), a Malay periodical, published by the Arabs and Malays in cooperation between the Arabs and Malays in Singapore (Karamah Baladram, 1931: 7). Although the Arabs were a minority group in Malaya, they succeeded in influencing local societies through their Islamic activities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the history of Malaysia the Arabs were often seen as heroes for having inspired the Malay Muslims to seek and achieve their political freedom. They played a significant role in the political development of the Malay Muslims until they were replaced by the English educated Malay elite. The 1930's was a critical decade in the history of Malaya, as the economic depression had begun to fan anti-foreign racial sentiments. This paper tries to examine the social conditions of the Arabs in the 1930's based on the assumption that their failure to contribute to the Malay Muslim society was due to their own weaknesses. This paper tries to see the problems through the lens of the Arabic newspaper *al-Huda* to describe the social history of the Arabs during those difficult days. *Al-Huda* is chosen because it shows no apparent bias and reached the entire Arab community in Singapore.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

*Al-Huda* in its article "Malaya" stated that "Egyptian traders visited Malaya in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century... pepper and Chinese silk and nutmeg and sandalwood... were commodities from Malaya" ("Malaya", 1932: 10). Contacts between the Middle East and Southeast Asia were mainly through trading, but subsequently expanded to incorporate religion, politics, migration and others (Omar, 2004). In the modern history of Malay Muslims in Malaya the Arabs were key players in the process of enlightenment and development among the Muslims in the region. They were involved in efforts to liberate the Muslims

from backwardness, poverty and wrong Islamic practices. It is generally accepted that the history of Malay nationalism in Malaya is divided into three phases. The first phase between 1906 and 1926 is the 'religious' phase (Raden Soenarno, 1960; Roff, 1973) that involved the Arabs as the main players. *Al-Imam* (published in Singapore between 1906 to 1908, with the slogan "to awake those who are sleeping" invoked the Malay Muslim consciousness with provocative articles (Aziz Mat Ton, 2000), which inspired the publication of other newspapers and periodicals in the Malay Muslim community.

The Arabs functioned as leaders who were honored and respected by the Malays before the 1930's. Raden Soenarno and William R. Roff both considered 1926 as the end of the religious phase in the evolution of Malay nationalism. This suggests that after this period, the Arabs were overshadowed by the Malays as public figures and leaders in the Muslim society. Nevertheless Sarim Mustajab (1979) argued that the periodization given by Roff and Raden Soenarno needed further clarification since Islam continued to play a central role in the lives of Malay Muslims in Malaya. The Arab contribution to the local Muslim community in the 1930's is difficult to trace since it was a critical period in the history of Malaya. Economic conditions were bad for the Malays and the country since the prices of the main economic commodities such as rubber and tin dropped drastically. Chinese dominance in the economy and their growing political influence created uneasiness among the Malays. Hence, Malay newspapers began to highlight issues on "Malayness" and Malay rights (Adnan Nawang, 1998). They were also alarmed that the 1931 Census of Population showed that the total number of Chinese was bigger than the Malays.

Abdul Rahim Kajai, the editor of a Malay newspaper, *Majlis* (1931-1935) wrote sarcastically about the Chinese, Indians and Eurasians, referring to them as coolies in the Malay Peninsula ("Kaum Kuli...", 1932: 5). The British administration was also criticized for allocating posts to the Chinese, Indians and Eurasians in the Malayan Civil Service ("Malayan Civil...", 1932: 5). It was against this background that the Malays became xenophobic. It was the first time that issues on the purity of the Malay race were raised, and the Arabs who were labeled as *Darah Keturunan Arab* (People of Arab Blood) and the Indian Muslims as *Darah Keturunan Keling* (People of Indian Blood) were considered alien to the Malay race and the latter's political aspirations. This development marked a radical departure from the past, especially to the Arabs, who had always been regarded as the natural leaders of the Malay Muslims and custodians of their religion and culture.

The Arabs chose to settle down in Singapore at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century because this island was suitable for their commercial interests. After the meteoric rise of Singapore as an important *entrepot*, it became a centre for the Arabs who wished to explore Southeast Asia (Omar, 1996: 23). In Malay history Singapore already existed a long time before the Melaka Sultanate and

was popularly known as Temasek. However, the modern history of Singapore was marked only from 1819 when Stamford Raffles occupied it (Chew & Lee, 1991). Raffles and Farquhar occupied this island after having manipulated a frustrated Malay Prince, Tengku Long, from the Johore-Riau Kingdom (Badriyah Salleh, 1999). Raffles then declared Singapore as a free port in order to compete with the Dutch ports in East Indies. The Dutch responded with a series of claims that Singapore actually belonged to them. This overlapping claim by the British and Dutch ended in 1824, when they signed the Treaty of London which divided the Malay Archipelago into two political spheres. The British assumed power in the Malay Peninsula. Thus, the British strengthened their influence in Singapore which became an important trading centre in the East (Wong, 1991).

Attractive conditions in Singapore helped this island to become a popular destination and settlement for traders from all over the world. The diversity of the population was reflected in the categories used in the census prepared by the British in 1824. The categories were Malays, Chuliahs, Arabs, Bugis Creole Chinese, Indians, British, Klings, Europeans, Japanese and Eurasians, some of the categories also had their own sub-groups (Makepeace & Brooke & Bradell, 1991). One of the important categories was the Arabs, most of whom were businessmen from Indonesia (Bajunid, 1996, Morley, 1949). A report stated that a large number of Arab vessels came to Singapore from Java (Beckley, 1984: 324).

Even though the Arabs were rivals of the British in the trading world for a long time, the latter welcomed the Arabs in Singapore (Morley, 1949), and Raffles had even planned to establish an "Arab Campong" (Arab village), which could settle 2000 residents (Buckley, 1984; Morley, 1949). The Arab settlements in Singapore were initiated by the al-Junied family. Saiyyid Omar bin [Ali] al-Junied and his uncle (also business partner) Saiyyid Mohamed bin Haron al-Junied came from Java in 1820 (Beckley, 1984: 62; Freitag, 2002: 112). However, the Arab population fluctuated, so it is hard to determine the exact number. The first census (1824) recorded that only 15 Arabs had settled in Singapore, but the number increased to 1,237 in 1911 and 1,939 in 1931 (Morley, 1949: 175). What is certain is that Arab immigration to Singapore was continuous. *Al-Huda* had a column entitled, *wusul was safar* (arrival and travel) which reported Arabs who traveled back and forth within the Malay archipelago and outside it. For example, in October 1931, *Al-Huda* reported the arrival of a ship from Hadhramaut in Singapore with 90 Hadramis, 80 of whom chose to settle on the island (Freitag and Clarence-Smith, 1997). They did not prefer to settle down in Indonesia because they were the *Alawiyyin*, who believed that they were of the high ranking social group, but had discords with the *Irsyadi*, the commoners who had no *Saiyyid* in front of their names in the East Indies.

A majority of the Arabs in Singapore were businessmen (Roff, 2003). Freitag marked 1920s and 1930s as the heyday of Arab businesses in Singapore when al-Kaf, al-Saqqaf and al-Junayd were some of the leading businessmen there (Freitaq, 2002; Elinah Abdullah, 2006). They acquired and owned large estates having benefited from the low prices of land after the First World War. They used their wealth to establish 'wakaf'. The *Singapore Sunday Times* reported the value of the wakaf properties belonging to the Arabs was estimated to be USD 130 millions (Gee, 2001: 30). *Wakaf* is an irrevocable dedication of a portion of one's wealth for any charitable purpose by providing facilities for the benefit of Muslim society. Thus the wakaf institution helped Arabs to build a reputable image among the local Muslims. This explains the reason why the Arabs were honored and accepted as leaders in 1930's.

Their wealth and contribution made the Arabs the doyens of the Malay Muslim communities in the Malay Archipelago. As indicated above the Arabs in Singapore adopted the honorific 'syed' (saiyid) in front of their names. This title refers their lineage to Prophet Mohammad's family known as the *Alawiyyin*. They considered themselves special and assumed as the guardians of Islam. *Al-Rabitah Al-Alawiyah* (*Alawiyyin* Association) in a letter to all the *saiyids* in Singapore and Malaysia emphasized the need "to preserve their honored family line" to "improve the conditions of Muslims" (Paridah Romly, 1984, Appendix 9). The *Alawiyyin* believed they were special compared to the others.

The *Alawiyyin* actively published newspapers and periodicals to spread their thoughts. They published at least 15 Arabic newspapers in the 1930s (Roff, 1972: 59-62) as well as Malay newspapers and periodicals, which usually carried similar issues discussed in the Arabic newspapers. The articles covered issues concerning the Malay Archipelago and outside it. Generally the Arabs contributed a lot to the early development of the mass media in Singapore (Chen, 1991). These newspapers and periodicals were mediums for the Arabs to present their thoughts and principles. *Al-Huda* (1931-1934) was one of these newspapers and is used here to discuss the history of the Arabs in Singapore.

### ***Al-Huda: A brief introduction***

This was a weekly newspaper published at No. 745, North Bridge Road, Singapore. *Al-Huda* was the fourth Arabic newspaper published by the Arab society after the *al-Islah*, *al-Hisam* and *al-Munstasyir* (Karamah Baladram, 1931: 7). It was circulated in the Malay Archipelago and also in the Middle East, India, and France (Najam Iam, *al-Huda* 1931: 1). It was sold at seven riyals, but the readers outside the Malay world had to pay one riyal extra (it was also sold in rupiah at 5-8 ½ rupiah per issue). At the beginning it contained only eight pages but during its height the pages were increased to 20.

The earlier newspapers had to stop publication because of various difficulties. Similarly *al-Huda* went through several obstacles before it could eventually be published. Abdul Wahid al-Jilani, the editor (who later became the chief editor), expressed his gratitude and thanks to the readers who supported him through his difficulties at the onset of its publication (Najam Iam, 1931: 1). He printed only 500 copies for the first issue but later increased the number to 1,000 copies since the demand was great. However, it met the same fate as the previous newspapers as it had to cease publication in 1934 with volume 138 as the last issue.

In the Malay Archipelago, the target readers, were not only the Arabs, but also the local community-called *Jawi* or *Jawa* by the editor (“Editorial Notes” 1931: 1). They were encouraged to join the discussion or raise any issue by sending letters to the editor. The editor in his message to the readers did not insist on the perfection of the Arabic grammar but as long as they could easily be understood. They were also required to provide correct information about themselves (“Editorial Notes”, 1931: 1). This approach helped to widen the circulation of *al-Huda* which also influenced the Malay Muslim communities.

However, despite the loose approach to the standard of the language used in the letters sent in by the readers, articles published in this paper usually discussed intellectual matters, especially the “Editor’s Note”. In the first volume, *al-Huda* stated that one of its objectives was to provide the Muslim population with intellectual reading materials (*al-Huda*, 1: 1). The editor tended to discuss issues that were related to the Muslim societies both inside and outside the Malay world. He discussed political thoughts, especially the concept of democracy based on the British Parliamentary system which was published consecutively in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> volumes. Such topics recurred from the 31<sup>st</sup> until the 51<sup>st</sup> volumes. Atheist and communist doctrines were also discussed a few times in this newspaper.

*Al-Huda* attempted to provide neutral views based on Islam on any issue that it discussed. This was clearly presented when the editor talked about democracy, language, culture and social status. The concept of rationality and freedom to raise personal opinions was highly appreciated in this newspaper. There was quite a number of articles in which opinions that were contradictory to the editor’s view were also published. As the Arabs were divided into *Alawiyyin* and *Irsyadi*, this paper chose to be free from those two by publishing letters and opinions from both parties. Because of such stand, some of the Arabs believed that this newspaper actually and endlessly perpetuated the disputes between the two Arab communities (*al-Huda*, 46: 2).

Some similarities between *Al-Huda*’s and *Irsyadi*’s thoughts on freedom, modern education and equality prompted some to mistakenly identify this paper to belong to the *Irsyadi*. *Al-Huda* clearly denied *Hadramaut*’s (a newspaper

belonging to the *Alawiyyin*) claim that it was run by the Irsyadi (*al-Huda*, 73: 4). A similar explanation was repeated by its editor during his speech in Indonesia (*al-Huda*, 138: 1). He claimed, and is rightfully accepted, that *al-Huda* is a neutral source to depict the reality of the Arabs in Singapore. Their profile and background is discussed below.

## Who were the Arabs in Singapore?

As illustrated above, the Arabs were only a minority group in Singapore, but they stood tall in the Malay Muslim society due to the advantages that they had, i.e., background and wealth. Their engagement in religious activities and their role as businessmen who also organized Muslim pilgrimages to Mecca (Roff, 1967) made them honored by the Malays. Recognizing their impact and influence on the Malay Muslim society in the Malay Archipelago, the British appointed an Arab representative in the administration of Singapore even though the census showed that they were only a minority. The census of population placed the Arabs under the category of the 'others', along with others such as Abyssinians, Africans, Annamese, Armenians, Fiji Islanders, Japanese, Jews, Mauritians, Persians, Siamese, Singhalese, Syrians, Turks and Convicts (Beckley, 1984: 358).

It is not easy to determine who the Arabs in Singapore actually were. However, there is still room for discussion to recognize their common characteristics. Generally they were determined from the country of origins, i.e., from Hadramaut (Bajunid, 1996). But, this is too simplistic to describe them, because in the 20<sup>th</sup> century many of them were born in Singapore as the result of marriages between some of them with local women (Bajunid, 2005:188). We can therefore, safely say that the Arabs in Singapore consisted of two groups, one of whom came directly from Hadramaut and the other were those born of mixed lineage known as Singaporean 'local' Arabs.

The Singapore Arabs were also recognized by their language. An example is shown by a letter sent by an Arab contributor to *al-Huda*. Reacting to the issue of the inability among children of mixed marriages to converse in Arabic, the author tolerated that, people whose descendents were Arabic could still claim themselves as Arabs even though they were not using Arabic as their mother tongue (*al-Huda*, 17: 3). Obviously there were Arabs in Singapore who conversed using either Arabic or Malay or both. Other than that, some of the Arabs in Singapore also conversed very well in English (among those who attended English schools or madrasah, and who came directly from the Middle East could also speak English fluently, *see* CO 273/531). Chinese was also spoken by some of the Arabs ( the editor once wrote that he 'knows' Chinese after having studied this language for about 1½ years, while a columnist in *al-Huda* (Majnun) had a Chinese newspaper as the source for his articles (*al-Huda*, : 2).

Regarding the issue of who the Arabs in Singapore were, the Arabs themselves admitted that ‘the Arab’ was ‘a person who was born in Hadramaut and the father was a *Hadramis* or someone who was born in ‘*Jawa*’<sup>1</sup> but their father was *Hadramis*’ (*al-Huda*, 17: 3). Bajunid, suggested a similar definition on his interpretation of the Arab community in Southeast Asia, but he added Islam as one of the main characteristics (Bajunid, 2002). He also showed that some Arabs in Singapore defined themselves by the family lineage rather than the lifestyle or culture that they adopted in their daily life. This caused further rifts among the Arab communities in Singapore.

Did the Arabs in the 1930’s assimilate to the local society? Generally, the Arabs in Southeast Asia were known as a group that assimilated well with the local society. Scholars suggest numerous reasons such as religion and economy as factors that led them to do so. In Singapore, a letter published in volume 14<sup>th</sup> of *al-Huda* illuminates this issue. The content was a criticism raised against the Arabs who were married to local women, but who had abandoned Arabic culture and practiced local culture. The writer was obviously a staunch defender of the ‘purity’ of the Arabs (*al-Huda*, 14: 7).

Moreover, the Arabs in Singapore were also influenced by European culture. They were “rich people, who owned two cars” and always “gambled on horses. Donated prizes and drank various kinds of rare drinks and organized parties for Arab and European friends” (*al-Huda*, 49: 2). This group was referred to in *al-Huda* as the “rich or honored people” but they were also criticized because they did not attend intellectual discussions because they were “afraid of ghosts...and being snatched away in the street of Imad al-din in Qaherah between [wine] glasses” (*al-Huda*, 36: 4). Resentment towards this group was clearly demonstrated in various articles in *al-Huda*.

The above discussion suggests that this minority group was divided and separated in every aspect of life. There were differences in terms of personal backgrounds, languages and life styles. Different values held by the groups were clearly illustrated in *al-Huda*. Their opinions and comments aimed to criticize the others will be the main focus of the discussion in the next section.

### **The Arabs through the lens of *al-Huda***

Overall, *al-Huda* shows that the Arabs in Singapore during the 1930’s were facing serious internal conflicts, influenced by the *Islah* movement in the Middle East during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and social and political disputes among the Arabs in Indonesia. Almost all of the volumes in *al-Huda* contain articles concerning these issues. Their conflicts revolved around the issues on identity. The Arabs were so concerned about their identity and their pride for being Arabs that this had caused them to fight with each other and subsequently to contradict themselves about some of the Islamic teachings.



## Conflicts over background and identity

The Arabs in Singapore during the 1930's as mentioned above, were divided into two main groups, according to the places of birth and according to their ancestries. Articles in *al-Huda* prove that this community argued and quarreled over the issues of ancestry. The first group were those with *saiyyid* in their forenames and known as *Ba Alawi* (lit. *Alawi* family, pl. *Alawiyyin*). *Al-Rabitah Alawiyyah* (*Alawiyyin*'s association) traced their original ancestors up to Qusai, the fifth grandfather of Prophet Mohamed. *Hadramaut*, the *Alawiyyin* newspaper in the 1930s, announced that they would issue certificates for all the *Alawiyyin* (*al-Huda*, 75: 4). *Al-Rabitah Alawiyyah*, the *Alawiyyin* association, gave serious attention to the use of *saiyyid* in a Muslim name. The appointment of Abdul Rahman al-Aidrus as the investigator to examine particularly on the *saiyyid* in Surabaya demonstrated the strict measures taken in recognizing someone as 'ahli bait' (prophet's family members) (*al-Huda*, 84: 8).

The second group is *Irsyadi*. They were considered the commoners who had no *saiyyid* as a title to their name. This group insisted that the *Alawiyyin* accept them as their equal. They believed that there was no caste or rank in Islam as a person was judged on his faith and commitment to Islam. Thus, to create a classless society in the Arab society, *Irsyadi* claimed that *saiyyid* had no special meaning. According to them it had a similar meaning to 'Mister' in English, [der] *Herr* in German, *Monsieur* in French, *Signor* in Italian, *Tuan* in Malay and *Sita* and *Muna* and *Wana* in Tamil' (*al-Huda*, 48:19). *Alawiyyin* rejected this claim and in response further exalted their so-called extraordinariness and differences from the others (for example see *al-Huda*, no. 44: 3). Such conflict worsened the situation that created deeper cleavages and separation within the Arab society in the 1930's. Both groups started to call the other miscreants.

*Alawiyyin* were labeled by *Irsyadis* as "the people who will receive God's curse", while the *Alawiyyin* described those who were unwilling to recognize their extraordinary rank as "infidels, atheist and rancid" (*al-Huda*, 75: 4-5). The hatred towards each other was demonstrated clearly by such descriptions. The harsh attitudes towards each other came as the result of the different understanding about their background and identity in Islam. *Alawiyyin* believed that they deserved to be honored compared to other Muslims because of their relationship with the prophet's family. *Sin Tit Poh*, (a Chinese newspaper published in Surabaya, under an Arab as the editor; Saiyyid Abdul Rahman Baswedan) declared that *saiyyid* is a preferential position for *Alawiyyin* (*al-Huda*, 84: 8). *Alawiyyin* also claimed that *saiyyid* is a title that is connected to the Islamic faith, and could not be translated into another language. *Irsyadi* refused to accept those claims as they rejected *saiyyid* as a part of Islamic teaching and considered the status claimed by *Alawiyyin* as deviant (*al-Huda*, 84: 8; 49: 2; 48: 19).

The issues on identity and position among the Arabs in Singapore perpetuated the conflicts among themselves. The effort to reconcile the two parties failed due to their unwillingness to cooperate. An article entitled 'haul al-soleh' (to work in peace) which elaborated on the failure of the attempt to unite the two parties, demonstrates strong antagonism among the conflicting Arabs (*al-Huda*, 48: 19). According to the author, the initiative taken failed because the first condition that revolved on the principle of equality was rejected by *Alawiyyin*. The frustration among *Irsyadi* was revealed through *al-Huda*. The column *Mulahazat Usbu'iyah*, for example, published an article about the position of *saiyyid* on April, 11<sup>th</sup> 1932. The dissatisfaction was clearly portrayed by the author's harsh description of *Alawiyyin* as being 'irrational' and 'haughty'. *Alawiyyin* were also depicted as arrogant and greedy (*al-Huda*, 49: 2; 48: 19).

*Irsyadi* also accused the *Alawiyyin*'s eagerness to hold on to their 'special' identity as the cause of some misunderstanding among Malay Muslims concerning Islam itself. A reader wrote to *al-Huda* and commented in a letter written by a Malay Muslim (published by *Bintang Timur*) on the *Alawiyyin*. He stated that some Malays believed that their economy and life would be blessed if they worked with the *Alawiyyin* and they would be able to overcome difficulties easily if they uttered "*saiyyid*" repeatedly (*al-Huda*, 47: 8). However, the writer disagreed with such belief and noted that Islam treated everybody as equal regardless of their 'color' and the *Irsyadi* were better because they believed in equality, rather than people's background (*al-Huda*, 47: 8).

Articles published in *al-Huda* suggest that the *Alawiyyin* purposely tried to distinguish themselves from the others. Reacting to this, the editor of *al-Huda* wrote about the concept of democracy and emphasized the principles of equality and its similarities in Islam (*al-Huda*, 31: 1; 32: 1). He believed that democracy would lead the Arabs towards harmony. The principles of equality would help them to live within the concept of civil society, which was better for the Arabs.

There was, however, a neutral group among the Arab society in Singapore. Its presence could be traced from letters published in *al-Huda*. These letters were written by readers who usually suggested the roles of the Arabs as "the custodians of Islam", who should live in peace and stop their disputes with one another (*al-Huda*, 76: 11; 10: 6). The Arabs should appreciate equality among Muslims as it was part of the Islamic teaching. What equality was from their perspectives and to what degree the message delivered in *al-Huda* was accepted by the Arab society will be evaluated below.

## The problems on marriages

As the Arabs in Singapore were really concerned about their identity, marriage issues were widely covered and discussed in *al-Huda*. Mixed marriages among the Arabs in Singapore referred to two types of marriages. The first was marriage between Arabs and local women and the other was between the *Alawiyyin* and non-*Alawiyyin*. Their perspectives on both matters were different and will be elaborated further in this section.

Articles published in *al-Huda* suggest that some of the Arabs in Singapore opposed mixed marriages between Arabs and non-Arabs. Almost all the articles written had the intention to stop this kind of marriages. They deliberated on the importance of preserving the 'Arab-ness' among the migrant Arabs. The column 'About the Arabs in Singapore' describes how those who married local women usually abandoned their culture and adopted local culture (*al-Huda*, 14: 7). This was strongly frowned upon and had created certain anxieties. Such concern on Arabs who gave up their culture was published in the same column in the 16<sup>th</sup> volume. The author warned them that they would lose their identity if they continued to be indifferent (*al-Huda*, 16: 3). According to him, the Arabs in the Malay Archipelago were obliged to preserve their culture and language because they were always 'Arab' wherever they were, and a race could only be assumed to be special if they preserved both (*al-Huda*, 36: 11).

They did not believe that children from mixed marriages would be pure Arabs because they would never be able to converse in Arabic fluently (*al-Huda*, 13: 1). The inability to speak in Arabic among the younger generation was considered a big problem because the Arabs regarded Arabic as a dignified language, the language of the Quran and the language of Islam (*al-Huda*, 12: 7). The column 'About the Arabs in Singapore' on August, 10<sup>th</sup> 1931, made a remark on the decay of Arabic in Singapore. The author urged all Arabs in Singapore to enhance their efforts to improve on the use of Arabic because Arabic was a sacred language (*al-Huda*, 12: 7).

Abdul Wahid al-Jilani, the editor of *al-Huda*, although he believed mixed marriages were good to establish good relationships with 'foreigners', but at the same time he was not in favour of such practices. His disagreement came along with reasons such as those that would create health problems (poor physical conditions; children's IQ would be dull and defective). He also stressed on the different physical appearances among children of mixed marriages compared to pure Arabs. (*al-Huda*, 13: 1). He was also worried should there be war between their homeland and Singapore, where would their loyalty be (*ibid.*).

Clearly, Arabs in Singapore opposed marriages to local women because they worried that the Arab identity among migrant Arabs in Singapore would disappear. Thus, most of the Arabs in the 1930s, refused to assimilate with local society. This was different from the Arabs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who clearly

presented that they would devote themselves to Malaya as they were grateful to the country (*al-Imam*, quoted in Roff, 2003: 69). The Arabs during the 1930's were urged to stop marrying local women. Saih Iraqi (an Arab public figure in the Malay Archipelago) wrote that Arabs married local women because their dowries were lower than for Arab women (*al-Huda*, 16: 2). Even though his statement was denied by an Arab reader, such statements did affect Malay Muslims as they also read this newspaper. Haji Agus Salim made a statement that the Arabs had underestimated the local community (*al-Huda*, 24: 3). Thus, issues on mixed marriages with Arabs had to some extent lowered the adoration on the Arabs among some of the Malay Muslims in the 1930s. This could be one of the reasons English educated Malays became more influential than the Arab educated groups in Malaysia's political struggle for independence.

Arab prejudices against mixed marriages became a threat to their community in Singapore because some of the Malays had started to alienate them. At the same time, a different issue on marriages also tore the Arab community apart. This was the issue on marriages between the *Alawiyyin* and *Irsyadis* that subsequently touched on the interpretation of Islamic laws on marriages. On the issue on *kafaah* (compatibility), *Alawiyyin* prohibited their daughters from marrying non-*Alawiyyin*. The reason was, they came from groups that were incompatible for them. Majnun (an author in *al-Huda*) sarcastically wrote about *Alawiyyin* understanding on non-*Alawiyyin* whom they thought 'were born as slaves, and of low status and were poor' (*al-Huda*, 49: 2). The *Irsyadi* and neutral group opined that such thinking was against Islamic teaching because everybody was considered equal before God. Saiyyid Saleh bin Ahmad bin Ali bin Jabar in his articles 'Cases to oppose the family of Ba Alawi' strongly suggested that the principles of choosing marriage partners practiced by the *Alwiyyin* as the first reason the latter would be cursed and abominable before God (*al-Huda*, 75: 4).

A striking case that took place in Singapore was on Ibn Aqil's marriage. He (*non-Alawiyyin*) married Saiyyid Banu al-Hindi and was considered as having committed a terrible sin. The *Alawiyyin* asked for a judgement that the marriage be cancelled. A meeting among them was then held at No. 5, Syurat Street. Saiyyid Abu Bakar Syihab questioned both the groom and Saiyyid Abdullah al-Attas who was responsible in conducting Ibn Aqil's marriage. (*al-Huda*, 17: 7). Sayyid Abdullah defended his actions because he believed that the groom had met all the requirements and conditions according to Islamic law and according to the Syafie School of thought. This marriage continued to be a strong issue that divided the *Alawiyyin* and non-*Alawiyyin* further.

In summary, issues on marriages became a big problem within the Arab society in Singapore. Marriages with local women caused anxiety because it was considered as a threat to the efforts to preserve their Arab-ness. At the same

time, the 'exclusive group' among the Arabs in Singapore refused to allow their daughters to marry Arabs from other groups to maintain and preserve their 'special' family lineage - which became a prominent reason for the disunity among the Arabs in the Malay Archipelago. Then again the question on identity kept the Arabs in Singapore in constant conflict with the rest who had previously respected them.

### **Education as a savior?**

Even though the Arabs in Singapore had internal conflicts, as mentioned above, the fear of losing their identity continued to increase. Criticisms and warnings about the Arabs losing their most important features: language and culture were favorite topics in *al-Huda*. The Arabs in Singapore turned to education in order to improve their condition. However, their educational institutions known as *madrasah* were also facing problems. *Al-Huda* found the curriculum practiced by *madrasahs* (schools) in Singapore as being divided into two types: a combination of Islamic and modern subjects while the other only focused on the Arabic language and religious subjects (*al-Huda*, 36: 11). Each type claimed their curricular approach was better than the other. *Madrasah* that combined religious with modern subjects claimed that they were necessary to help the Arabs move along with modernity and development. The other group condemned them as deviants and said that religion and Arabic should be the only subjects offered to children in Singapore so that they could preserve the language and understand their religion better.

*Al-Huda's* editor personally believed that the language problem among the young generation was an extension of the *madrasah's* administrative problems. Teachers lacked certain abilities to teach. To prove his point, Abdul Wahid Jilani, wrote in '*tahlil al-kimiyawi*' (Critical Analysis), about his first experience (in 1927), when he came to Madrasah al-Junied al-Islamiyyah, Singapore. He found that the headmaster (Abu Bakar Taha) was irresponsible (*al-Huda*, 9: 3). A series of criticisms against Abu Bakar bin Taha describing him as evil personified (*al-Huda*, 9: 3), harmful for Muslims (*al-Huda*, 8: 6) and also an irresponsible and ignorant person, were published in *al-Huda* (*al-Huda*, 10: 3).

Numerous comments and responses from readers on the issue showed deep concern about their children's education. At the same time it also suggested that students who graduated from *madrasah* suffered from low academic quality. They were very poor students as they could not master either Arabic or mathematics (*al-Huda*, 4: 1). Their ability to compete in a cosmopolitan city like Singapore was also doubted as they were not exposed to subjects on philosophy, logic or chemistry in *madrasah* (*ibid*). They did 'not possess

the intellectual spirit' and did not behave as they should (*al-Huda*, 19: 2). A reader suggested that madrasah in Singapore had to be reformed to improve the students' quality. In order to make the young generation Arabs competitive in Singapore, vocational education was suggested to be established for them (*al-Huda*, 2: 6).

Arabic education in the 1930's was different from the situation during its heyday in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Madrasah* during that time succeeded in producing public leaders, promoting knowledge and helping Muslims to overcome their problems. On the contrary *Madrasah* in Singapore during the 1930's were facing dilemma and problems. Thus, it could not offer any solution for the Arabs to overcome their problems. To make it worse, the problems on *madrasah* was not the only reason the Arabs were losing their respect and identity.

### **Focusing on shared values**

*Al-Huda* published many articles on the Hadramaut to convince people that the Arabs were coming from the same group. Columns such as *Qitr al-Hadrami* and *Risalah Hadramaut*, for example, always discussed their beloved homeland. *Wakaf* that was always practiced in Singapore during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was channeled to Hadramaut by wealthy families such as al-Kaf who built roads there. There were new articles and topics as well as letters from readers who conveyed their compliments for such deeds. Close relationships between migrant Arabs and their homeland suggested that their love and devotion to the Hadramaut remained an important aspect of the Arab society in Singapore. Besides, their concern for the Middle East was also presented very clearly in the paper. News on Egypt were routine in *al-Huda* because the country was considered to be the center of the Arab world during that time (*al-Huda*, 2: 2).

Some of the Arabs in Singapore believed that focusing on similar values that they shared would help to overcome the problems in Singapore. Thus, the foundation of clubs and associations among the Arabs was encouraged in order to help them to reunite and preserve their identity. Saih Iraqi in his response to the language problem in Singapore suggested the Arab community on this island should establish an Arab cultural association. Associations could serve as the center for Arab activities and help to enhance the use of the Arabic language and keep them closely connected (*al-Huda*, 13: 4).

The Arabs in Singapore established many clubs and associations to unite their clans. One of them was known as 'The Association of the Unity of Islam'. The members came from among the Arabs and Indian Muslims (*al-Huda*, 10: 7). Unfortunately this association which administered the affairs of the members was split three years later due to their disagreement on the *Qadiani* (*al-Huda*, 10: 7). Another association which was established on the same goal was "The Arab Literature's Club". The leader was Syed

Ibrahim bin Umar al-Saqqaf. Other posts in the organization were filled by Abdul Rahman al-Junied, Syed Husin bin Ali al-Saqqaf, Ahmad Umar Ba Faqih, Ahmad Muhamad al-Junied, Hasan b. Salim al-Munawiyya, Salim bin Husin al-Siri, Alawi bin Husin al-Siri, Ahmad bin Umar al-Saqqaf and Dr. Hasan bin Alawi al-Junied (*al-Huda*, 13: 8; 14: 2). The activities of this association focused on uniting the Arabs and strengthening their brotherhood (*al-Huda*, 13: 8). 'The Jawi Peranakan Club' founded by Ali bin Umar al-Aidarus and Muhamad Abdullah Hazbul shared similar goals, but they also tried to encourage the Arabs in Singapore to join voluntary works (*al-Huda*, 24: 6).

Information found in *al-Huda* shows that the Arabs in Singapore tended to use associations and clubs as mediums to unite their clans. Thus, the formation of associations and clubs in Singapore by the Arabs suggests that although there were disagreements among the Arab communities, there were also efforts to strengthen ties between them. The long lasting disputes that continued for fifteen years were disliked by the Arabs. A reader through his letter suggested the Arabs in this region should try ending their animosity by using rationality and knowledge (*al-Huda*, 10: 6). His wish, however, seemed too good to be true. The Arabs, despite their efforts to unite themselves, were still trapped in the old arguments even after *al-Huda* ceased to be published. The editor's note in the last volume of this newspaper described the ties between the Arabs in Singapore as being loose as they did not meet/know each other. They also had no association to help them in exchanging ideas and opinions or to uphold the spirit of unity (*al-Huda*, 138: 1). Thus, the Singapore Arabs during the 1930's moved nowhere from their long lasting disputes and at the same time had a hard time to preserve their identity in that cosmopolitan island.

## Conclusion

The Arabs in Singapore during the early thirties were going through internal conflicts and were trapped in confusion in their desire to preserve their identity. Alarmed by the danger of disintegration, they tried to unite but failed. The variety of backgrounds, lifestyles and education led them far apart. *Al-Huda*'s mission to improve 'the Arabs who were careless and lazy' (*al-Huda*, 138, 1: 1) was unfinished by the time it ceased to be published on June, 20<sup>th</sup> 1934. However, *al-Huda* did not really fail to influence the Muslim societies in the Malay Archipelago. The idea of appreciating knowledge, freedom and civil society that had always been promoted in this newspaper was used by Malay politicians during these times (Holland & Wehfreitz, 2008). Thus, the impact from the Arab disputes to the whole Malay Muslim societies needs further study. Information presented in this paper is also open to further discussion since the writing is not based on the whole collection of *al-Huda* or any other newspaper or periodicals that were published during the same period.

## Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> Jawa or Jawi is a term used to refer to the Malay Archipelago; see Snouck Hurgronje. (Mecca & Azyumardi Azra 1994)

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