

## **The Identity Dilemma of Arab Descendants in Indonesia**

\*AINUR ROFIQ AL AMIN

FIKRI MAHZUMI

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel, Surabaya, East Java, 60237, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author: ar.alamin1972@gmail.com

**Published online:** 31 October 2022

**To cite this article:** Ainur Rofiq Al Amin and Fikri Mahzumi. 2022. The identity dilemma of Arab descendants in Indonesia. *KEMANUSIAAN the Asian Journal of Humanities* 29(2): 157–176. <https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2022.29.2.8>

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2022.29.2.8>

**Abstract.** This study discusses the identity dilemma and internal dynamics experienced by the Arab ethnic group in Indonesia. As part of the migrant community, they were often faced with identity duality, as the inheritors of Arab genes and cultures and as multicultural Indonesian citizens. Applying qualitative methods and historical approaches, the current study analyses academic sources paying attention to the turmoil of identity that caused identity dilemmas and internal dynamics. The results show that Arab descendants in Indonesia experienced identity dilemmas from the pre-independence era until the post-reform era. This dilemma impacted internal dynamics among them, which include nationalism, socio-culture and religion. The identity dilemma of Arab descendants in Indonesia will probably continue, and this calls for the right formula to balance the Arab identity and the Indonesian identity. Integration and assimilation are key for Arab descendants in Indonesia to overcome the identity dilemma and gain important positions in the socio-religious order of Indonesia.

**Keywords and phrases:** identity dilemma, Arab descendants, *sayyid*, Hadrami, Indonesia

### **Introduction**

The existence of Arab ethnicity (referring to people of Arab Hadrami descent who came from Hadramaut, Yemen) in Indonesia is an interesting topic across disciplines. Historical background and internal dynamics are the main topics studied (Ho 2006; Jacobsen 2009; Abushouk and Ibrahim 2009; Alatas 2011; al Qurtuby 2017; Mandal 2018). One of the exciting aspects is their diaspora's success in many parts of the world (de Jonge and Kaptein 2002). Another important thing about their diaspora is how they persistently maintain their original identity from localities' influence in the overseas lands (Syarif and Ansor 2020). However, this persistence is not without turmoil. From the beginning of their arrival until

now, these Arab ethnicities have been in an identity dilemma resulting in internal dynamics since their arrival (Subchi 2019).

The identity dilemma is not something new for the diaspora community. This problem is always experienced by people who live overseas, both individually and collectively. Genetic and cultural changes always threaten diaspora communities around the world. If they do not have the right strategy, they might lose their original identity. It is the loss or change of original identity that continues to threaten the Arab community in Indonesia. Since they arrived in the 13th century AD, the Arab community has been living in this identity dilemma (Mandal 2018). The reason is none other than the duality of identity that is always attached to them, namely as the inheritors of Arab genes and cultures and, at the same time, as Indonesian citizens who are always in touch with the localities where they live (Abushouk and Ibrahim 2009; Jacobsen 2009).

As an Arab ethnic group born in Indonesia, Arab descendants are faced with two contradictory sides of identity: (1) the responsibility of inheriting and preserving Arabism and (2) the obligation to dissolve into Indonesians completely. These two opposing sides of identity then force them to formulate a way to balance the two identities. Integration and assimilation are the formulas for responding to the challenges that arise in accordance with Indonesia's socio-political dynamics. These two strategic formulas are projections to overcome primordialism in multicultural Indonesian society (Abushouk and Ibrahim 2009; Mahzumi 2018).

Some studies reveal that Arab descendants in Indonesia are currently classified as a hybrid or creole society, a combination of Arab ethnicity (impure), Indonesian citizens and at the same time as Muslims (Ho 2006; Abushouk and Ibrahim 2009; Mandal 2018). This condition cannot be separated from their long dialectical process, in the Indonesian context, to find out the right formula to combine the two identities they have: as Arab descendants and Indonesian citizens. The process has not run smoothly. There have been dynamics as evidence of the dialectical process. Some evidence of the internal dynamics is the tensions between the *sayyid* (the Prophet Muhammad [PBUH]'s descendants) and non-*sayyid* groups, the debate on the *kafa'ah* (marriage between *sayyid* women and non-*sayyid* men) system in marriage and the vision of nationalism during the independence revolution. This internal dynamic's ups and downs are still visible and even tend to increase when a phenomenon of Arabism in the Arabian lifestyle arises (Syarif 2019).

The politics of the 2019 presidential election put the Arab descendants in Indonesia against each other. At that time, most of the Arab descendants, especially those who idolised Rizieq Shihab, were in the position of supporting Prabowo-Sandiaga Uno.

On the other hand, another significant number of Arab descents supported Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin. In retrospect, the condition was the aftermath of political segregation in the 2017 *Daerah Khusus Ibukota* (DKI) Jakarta (Special Capital District of Jakarta) governor-general election. The two candidates for governor had different ethnic backgrounds and tended to be opposite. Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, of Chinese descent, was involved in political contestation with Anies Baswedan, an Arab descent. At that time, primordialism was on the rise and identity politics seemed to be crystallising. The tension for the election for the governor of DKI and the presidential election was getting higher and hotter because of the radical groups involved in it (al Amin 2019a; 2020). This political contestation then led to the contentious issue between Islam-Arab and Christian-Chinese. There was even an indication of xenophobia when the general public and even elites in Indonesia gave statements that seemed to discredit Arab descent.

This article sought to find the historical relationship between the identity struggle of Arab descendants and the latest facts about this subject in Indonesia by focusing on the identity dilemma and internal dynamics that occur among them.

### Review of Related Literature

Starting the research on Arabs in the Dutch East Indies, Lodewijk Willem Christiaan van den Berg did ethnographic work in his magnum opus, *Le Hadhramout et les Colonies Arabes dans l'Archipel Indien* (1886). Van den Berg's work was translated into Indonesian in two versions: The first is *Hadhramaut dan Koloni Arab di Nusantara* (1989) and the second is *Orang Arab di Nusantara* (2010). Both versions were published by INIS, Jakarta. In his book, van den Berg tried to provide as much detail as possible about Arabian people living in the Dutch East Indies; their history, cultures, customs and their spread to several areas such as Batavia, Pekalongan, Surabaya and so on. His study opened the way for later studies on the same subject (van den Berg 1989).

After van den Berg, some researchers emerged with a focus on the Hadrami diaspora. One of them is R.B. Serjeant, who wrote *The Sayyids of Hadramawt* (1957). This monograph was published by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London. Serjeant studied the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)'s descendants (the *sayyid*), their social status, religious roles and their diaspora from the Hijaz to Hadramaut to Southeast Asia. According to Serjeant, these *sayyids* migrated from Hadramaut to Indonesia before the Dutch or before the 15th century A.D. Many of them lived in Borneo, Kalimantan. He also mentioned that at that time the *peranakan* (*muwallad*/mixed breed) of the *sayyid* had settled in a specific village. Serjeant's belief was strengthened by the evidence of two sacred tombs

in Jakarta from the clans known to Hadrami circles, namely al-Aydrus and Ba Faqih. Besides, Snouck Hurgronje also stated that the practice of reading the *ratib al-Haddad* (a collection of prayers compiled by ‘Abd Allah b. Alawi al-Haddad) had become a religious ritual performed by some people in Aceh (Hurgronje 1905; Serjeant 1957).

Interest in the study of the Hadrami diaspora had increased and attracted many scholars’ attention since 1990, along with the development of diaspora studies in social science disciplines. The Hadrami diaspora scientific forum was held for the first time in 1995 in a workshop on Hadrami emigration entitled “South Arabian Migration Movements in the Indian Ocean, the Hadrami Case c. 1750–1967” sponsored by SOAS. This scientific meeting involved academics and researchers from various countries. Reported more than 30 working papers presented by the participants in the discussion, which lasted for three days. The documents were later published in an anthology edited by Ulrike Freitag and William Clarence-Smith entitled *Hadrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s–1960s* (1997). In this volume, the Hadrami diaspora was discussed in many particular themes, such as social, economic, political and religious ones, which became an inseparable part of this Hadrami diaspora. The scientific forum aimed explicitly to broaden diaspora studies’ scope, especially regarding the Hadrami community who migrated to the Indian Ocean (Freitag and Clarence-Smith, 1997).

After that, another workshop on the Hadrami diaspora was held again in Leiden. Another anthology edited by Huub de Jonge and Nico Kaptein entitled *Transcending Borders: Arabs, Politics, Trade and Islam in Southeast Asia* (2002) was published. The contents of this anthology focused on discussing the Hadrami diaspora in Southeast Asia. It was revealed that the Hadrami community had significantly contributed to the development of the economic, political, social and religious fields in the Southeast Asia regions for centuries. Their diaspora was even referred to as a multisectoral success story (de Jonge and Kaptein, 2002).

The next scholar who studied Hadrami’s diaspora is Engseng Ho. In his book entitled *The Grave of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (2006), he examined the journey of the Hadrami diaspora from their home country, Hadramaut, to the Southeast Asia region. According to him, the success of the Hadrami diaspora in various regions of the world was primarily determined by the ability of these communities to re-modify their original identities so that they could blend with the locality in their new place. However, this blending did not completely eliminate the original characteristics that had been passed down from generation to generation. Through subtle adaptations to the locality, the Hadrami communities were considered very successful in their new environment (Ho 2006).

Boxberger (2002) provided an overview of the collective way of life of the Arab community. Their communal life was influenced by the social, political and cultural dynamics that occurred in the Indian Ocean. Boxberger focused on particular aspects of the communities' lives, such as the way they live in the city and country, the social institutions they had, the rites they practised, their religious beliefs and practices and their educational and political systems on both a global and local scale. Boxberger provided detailed data on the Hadrami people's efforts in their homeland in responding to external influences brought on by the diaspora. According to Boxberger, there were different responses among Hadrami people to the changes that occurred due to the diaspora. In general, the Hadrami community showed more heterogeneous social patterns in their social life (Boxberger 2002).

Boxberger's view above was reinforced by Ulrike Freitag who argued that the socio-political developments in Hadramaut proved that the dynamics of change that occurred were a reflection of the trends that were developing in the Indian Ocean (Freitag 2003). Freitag showed the significant role of the Hadrami elites in formulating adaptation strategies for these overseas communities. Some of these achievements were then brought and implemented in Hadramaut. Based on Freitag's theory, the connectivity between Indonesia and Hadramaut in the Hadrami diaspora was strong and mutually influencing.

Another researcher who studied the Hadrami diaspora is Natalie Mobini-Kesheh. She focused on examining the awakening era of the Hadrami community in Indonesia during the pre-independence period. Among the focuses was a polemic regarding the vision of Indonesian nationalism. In the era of the independence revolution, the emergence of Indonesian nationalism urged the migrant community in the Dutch East Indies, such as the Arabs and Chinese, to reconcile their vision of nationalism. The Chinese ethnic community was able to overcome the problem earlier by assertively being active in the struggle for Indonesian nationalism. Meanwhile, the Arab ethnic community was still trapped in the ambiguity of nationalism, being loyal to Hadramaut as the country of origin or accepting Indonesia that had not yet really been formed (Mobini-Kesheh 1999; Jahroni 2000).

Mobini-Kesheh also revealed the role of *Jam'iyat al-Islah wa al-Irsyad* or *al-Irsyad* (the organisation founded by Ahmad Surkati) as part of the modern Islamic movement in the Dutch East Indies. In his opinion, the emergence of *al-Irsyad* was a new era of the revival of the Arab Hadrami community (*Nahdah al-Hadramiyah*). This era was the starting point for their struggle toward a more advanced modern world. They began to shift from religious conservatism and exclusivism to egalitarianism and inclusivism. The transformation to this advanced era was marked by adopting modern ideas and management in various fields,

especially organisation, education and the media. The revival era of the Arab Hadrami people in the Dutch East Indies occurred when they felt the need for a new identity within themselves called territorial patriotism. Through the al-Irsyad organisation, the Hadrami community began to propagate Islamic reformism and modernism by strengthening Arab identity.

Several scholars from Indonesia had also paid attention to the existence of the Arab community in Indonesia. One of them is Bisri Affandi who discussed the figure of Ahmad Surkati and the role of al-Irsyad in the Islamic modernism movement in Indonesia. His study described the internal dynamics in the Arab Hadrami community in Indonesia, which negated the reformist group (non-*sayyid*) and the conservative group (*sayyid*). This upheaval was a picture of the identity dilemma that occurred in the Arab community (Affandi 1976; 1999).

### **Research Method**

This present study is a qualitative study focusing on the history and dynamics of identity struggles among Arab descendants in Indonesia. The struggle represents the dilemma they have experienced; between inheriting an Arab identity and becoming an Indonesian citizen. Using a historical approach, this study reread primary sources that provided information about the struggle for identity of Arab descent in the pre-independence to the post-independence era in Indonesia. Firstly, this study classified the data obtained, focusing on the identity turmoil that occurred. Secondly, it chronologically described and discussed the identity dilemmas experienced by Arab descendants in Indonesia based on primary and secondary sources.

### **Results and Discussion**

The following are the results and discussion of the identity dilemma experienced by the Arab community in Indonesia from the era of pre-independence until the era of post-independence.

#### **Identity dilemma in the pre-independence era**

##### ***Internal dynamics in the Arab community in Indonesia***

Arab communities overseas are like water which is always changing and adapting to the conditions and situations in which they live and settle but without totally leaving their original identity as Hadrami people. Many researchers believe that the Hadrami diaspora is an exemplar of adventurers adapting to a new place

while maintaining connectivity with their home country that they always miss (de Jonge 1993). These exemplars contain success stories in the fields of economics, education, politics and religion. Two strategies are keys to the success of their diaspora, namely “assimilation”, which can be found in the old diaspora and “integration”, which can be found in the new diaspora (Boxberger 2002; Abushouk and Ibrahim 2009).

In the old Hadrami diaspora, genetic mixing due to marriage between men from the Hadrami circles and local women fills the history of this community's classic diaspora (Boxberger 2002; Abushouk and Ibrahim 2009; Suratmin and Kwartanada 2014). Their diaspora began to enter a new phase when modernisation hit most countries in the world in the early 20th century, affecting the conditions and situations that developed in the Dutch East Indies. The current modernisation led the Arab community to establish organisations, educational institutions and publishing businesses, which are synonymous with modern life. This phase is referred to as the formation of a new, modern identity in the Arab community or, in the Mobini-Kesheh words, the “awakening of Hadrami” or *nahdah al-Hadramiyah* (Mobini-Kesheh 1999).

The “old” diaspora phenomenon—from the 18th century to the end of the 19th century—may best represent the struggle for identity in the Arab community (Clarence-Smith 1997). The process of assimilation in marriage at that time had given birth to a generation of hybrids called *peranakan*. It was from here that the terms *totok* (pure) and *peranakan* emerged in the Arab community, indicating the difference in identity between the two. This identity upheaval was exacerbated by social classifications, which were divided into several strata: *sayyid*, *mashayikh* (singular: *shaikh*, meaning scholar and holy man), *qaba'il* (tribesmen) and *masakin* (poor). The social strata then created social segregation between *sayyid* and non-*sayyid* groups in the diaspora regions, including Indonesia. The existence of Jam'iyat Khair or Jamiat Khair founded in 1901 and Jam'iyat al-Islah wa al-Irsyad or al-Irsyad founded in 1914 was a picture of this internal conflict.

Internal disputes in the Arab community occurred because of the contradicting views on social status and prevailing traditions. This conflict then gave birth to al-Irsyad, which was in opposition to Jamiat Khair. These two organisations represented different points of view, namely pro-conservatism (social status is necessary) and pro-egalitarianism (social status is not necessary). In Mobini-Kesheh's explanation, these two organisations showed two polar groups in the Arab Hadrami community: traditionalist Hadrami and modernist Hadrami (Mobini-Kesheh 1999). This dispute then became more widespread, not only regarding social status but also leading to doctrinal debates and struggles for religious

authority (Rijal 2017; Fanani et al. 2020). Starting from Ahmad Surkati's opinions, prohibiting kissing the hand of a *sayyid*, internal disputes between the *sayyid* and non-*sayyid* groups occurred prevalently and became a prolonged conflict.

Ahmad Surkati was formerly an educator from Sudan who was deliberately brought in by Jamiat Khair, along with his two friends who came from Morocco and Hijaz (Affandi 1976; Mobini-Kesheh 1999). He and his two friends had received education in Makkah. There, he studied the idea of Islamic reform, which was being propagated by many reformist Muslim intellectuals in Egypt. He was also suspected of being involved in the Islamic modernism movement initiated by Muhammad Abduh and his student Rasyid Rida (Affandi 1976; de Jonge 1993). Seeing Ahmad Surkati's educational background and activities, it is not surprising that he had a very moderate mind. Later, this idea sparked a dispute with the conservative groups in the Arab community in Jamiat Khair.

The conflict between Ahmad Surkati and his colleagues in Jamiat Khair began to occur when he visited Solo to fulfil an invitation from a colleague named Awad Sungkar al-Urmei. There, he was asked about the marriage between *sayyid* women and non-*sayyid* men. Ahmad Surkati responded that such marriage was valid. After this incident, Ahmad Surkati began to frequently criticise the common practices in the Arab community, such as the tradition of kissing the hands as a form of respect for the *sayyid* group. According to him, the act was a cult of a man. Ahmad Surkati's fatwas also spread among the Arab community in the Dutch East Indies, sparking hatred from the *sayyid* group toward him, especially the figures in Jamiat Khair. Finally, he was asked to resign as a teacher at Jamiat Khair's school (Mobini-Kesheh 1999).

News of Ahmad Surkati's resignation from the Jamiat Khair school spread. Many, especially those from non-*sayyid* circles, sympathised with him. Friction was unavoidable, resulting in internal conflict among the Arab community between the *sayyid* and non-*sayyid* groups. The majority of Hadrami outside the *sayyid* group supported Ahmad Surkati's view, which reflected social equality and egalitarianism. In 1914, with the help of an Arab *kapiten* (district head) named Sheikh Umar Yusuf Manggus, Ahmad Surkati began to pioneer the establishment of the al-Irsyad al-Islamiyah school in Batavia. As an umbrella organisation for the educational institutions he managed, he later founded an organisational body called Jam'iyah al-Islamiyah al-Arabiyah. The big vision of this organisation was to promote the spirit of modernism and Islamic reformism (Affandi 1976; de Jonge 2004).



The Arab community's internal turmoil in the Dutch East Indies later got bigger, especially when the *sayyid* group founded an exclusive organisation called Rabithah Alawiyyah on 27th December 1928, which had members only from the *sayyid* group. A conflict arena was created both in the real life and in the mass media during this period. Mobini-Kesheh (1999) stated that at least three major themes filled the two groups' doctrinal debates. They were: (1) The obligation to kiss *sayyid*'s hand (*taqbil*), (2) The boundaries of marriage between *sayyid* women and non-*sayyid* men (*kafa'ah*) and (3) The use of the title *sayyid* (*tasyid*).

### ***The ambiguity between Arabness and Indonesianess***

When the internal conflict over the issues of social status and religious doctrines was still fierce, the Arab community was also faced with another problem, namely their citizenship status in the Dutch East Indies. In 1854, the Dutch divided the Dutch East Indies population into three racial groups: the European community, the people of the Foreign East (*vreemde osterlingen*) and the *bumiputera* (inlanders). As a result of this policy, the Arabs became part of the foreign population along with the Chinese, the Indians and other Asian people. Following this policy, in 1866, two other policies were imposed: *wijkenstelsel* (localised settlements) and *passenstelsel* (travel permit or passport regulations). These two colonial policies resulted in the alienation of the Arab community from the *bumiputera* people (Mobini-Kesheh 1999).

Starting from the colonial government's suspicion of the involvement of the Arabs in the rebellions by the natives, the Dutch East Indies government then ordered van den Berg to investigate the involvement of the Arab community in the revolts against the colonial government. From van den Berg's investigation, the government was convinced that there were no harmful elements from the Arab ethnicity. Based on van den Berg's study, although the Arabs were devout Muslims, they did not spread their religion by force or fanatics (van den Berg 1989).

Even though the Arab community was relatively clean from politics in the Dutch East Indies, they still became the object of a rule (*Indische Staats-Regeling*), which aimed to limit the assimilation and the intensity of inter-ethnic communication. Because of this policy, the Arabs were classified as foreigners from East Asia (*vreemde osterlingen*) along with the Chinese and other Asian ethnicities. The policy certainly caused an identity dilemma in the Arab community, especially for the *peranakan* (*muwallad*). They received different treatment compared to the Europeans and *bumiputera* people.

The racial policy of the Dutch East Indies government was followed by a policy of ethnicity-based localisation in a special village in 1866. The form of restrictions on the mobility of foreign ethnicities was contained in the travel permit or passport regulations (*passenstelsel*) from the localised settlements (*wijkenstelsel*). Until 1919 this provision continued to apply and severely restricted the interactions between ethnic groups. As a result of this policy, the feeling of exclusion between the natives and the foreign ethnicities (Arabs, Chinese and other ethnicities from Asia) increased. In the Arab community village, the Arabs are registered by a clan (*fam*), which was led by a district head called the *kapiten* (de Jonge 2004). This situation became even more difficult because it limited social and economic activities for the Arab community.

The turmoil of the identity of the Arab community in Indonesia was getting stronger ahead of the Independence era. The Indonesian nationalism movement since the birth of Budi Oetomo in 1908, which was later confirmed by the Youth Pledge on 28th October 1928, put the Arab community in a worse identity dilemma. This turmoil also involved the pre-existing friction between the conservative and reformist groups. The polemic questioned the nationalism of the Arab Hadrami, both the *totok* or *wulayti* (pure) and the *muwallad* or *peranakan* (mixed) groups, whether being loyal to their ancestral land or accepting Indonesia as a new homeland.

For conservative group, which was dominated by the elderly from the *wulayti* group, they saw that Hadramaut would forever be a homeland. On the other hand, for the reformist group, which was dominated by the youth from the *peranakan* group, Indonesia was their motherland that must be fought for (Jahroni 2000; Tibbetts 1956). The polemic can be traced back to *Pewarta Arab* newspaper as follows:

Kaoem Indo Arab yang berada di Indonesia ini, dengan tanah leloehoer kita Hadramaut masih banyak djoega, oempamanja: perhoeboengan-perhoeboengan familier, warisan dan lain-lainnja, tetapi kendatipoen bagaimana perhoeboengan-perhoeboengan itoe tidak sebanjak dan serapat perhoeboengan-perhoeboengan bapak-bapak kita kaoem wulayti (totok). Dalam hal itoe sangatlah besar bedanja kita dengan mereka itoe ... sedang oentoe kita tjoema ada satoe tanah leloehoer belaka, karena jang sesoenggoehnja tanah air kita dan toempah darah kita, adalah si tjantik Indonesia ini ... orang tak dapat menjalahkan kita jang tidak memperbintjangkan apa-apa tentang Hadramaut. (Anonymous 1933)

Translation:

The Indo Arabs who are in Indonesia, with our ancestral land Hadramaut, are still many, for example, family ties, heritage and others. However, the relationship is not as much and close as our father's *wulayti* (totok). In that case, we are very different from them ... while for us there is only one ancestral land because in fact our homeland and our bloodshed are this beautiful Indonesian ... people cannot blame us who do not talk about Hadramaut.

In addition to the change of orientation from homeland to motherland, the young Hadrami group also encouraged the elderly to settle the dispute of which group was superior in social status, the *sayyid* or non-*sayyid*. For young people, arguing such a trivial thing would only tear the unity and cause the Hadrami community to lag behind other ethnicities as well as the natives, who had moved forward to realise Indonesian nationalism. Compared to the Chinese, the Arabs were arguably late in overcoming the dilemma of national identity. The internal conflict between the *totok* and *peranakan* groups made them slow in responding to the surge of Indonesian nationalism.

Abdul Rahman Uwad Baswedan (afterwards will be referred as "A.R. Baswedan") was the central figure of the youth movement of the *peranakan* group. He wrote extensively to make the *totok* and *peranakan* no longer in polemic and recognise Indonesia as their national identity. One of his phenomenal articles was entitled "Peranakan Arab dan Totoknya" published in *Matahari* newspaper on 1st August 1934. In the newspaper, there was a picture of A.R. Baswedan wearing complete Javanese clothes. The following is an excerpt from his writing:

Arab Indonesia dibesarkan dengan gado-gado, bukan dengan mulukhia. Dengan durian, bukan dengan kurma. Dengan sejuknya hawa gunung, bukan dengan panasnya padang pasir! Mereka dihidupkan bukan di pinggir Dajlah dan Furat, tetapi di pinggir Musi, Kapuas, Bengawan, dan Brantas. Lebih gurih minyak kelapa daripada minyak samin. Sebab itu jalan selamat bagimu, di hari depanmu ialah leburkan diri ke dalam bangsa ibumu. Tanah airmu ialah Indonesia! (Baswedan 1934)

Translation:

Indonesian Arabs were raised with *gado-gado*, not with *mulukhia*. With *durian*, not with dates. With the coolness of the mountain air, not with the heat of the desert! They are revived not on the rim of Dajlah and Furat, but on the rim of Musi, Kapuas, Bengawan and Brantas. Coconut oil is tastier than samin oil. That is why the safe way for you, in your future, is to melt into your mother's nation. Your homeland is Indonesia!

Of course, A.R. Baswedan's writing and picture in the newspaper shocked the Arab community in Indonesia, both the *totok* and *peranakan* groups. Because what he did was considered an oddity that had never happened before. Dressing in another ethnic style in the Arab community was a form of insult to ancestral traditions. Because of this, A.R. Baswedan was criticised by most of his own community for insulting the Hadramaut tradition.

In the era of the independence revolution, the struggle for identity in the Arab community was getting stronger. Van der Kroef (1954), as quoted by Abdul Rachman Patji (1991), stated that the wave of anti-colonial movements that emerged in the middle of the 19th century in Indonesia sparked national solidarity. This situation put the foreign East (the Arabs, Chinese and Indian) into a dilemma and identity crisis (van der Kroef 1954; Patji 1991). In 1908, the birth of Budi Oetomo marked a new chapter of Indonesian nationalism. This new direction of nationalism impacted the struggle for identity among the ethnic migrants, whether joining the vision of Indonesian nationalism or remaining a foreigner for loyalty to their homeland.

The crisis of nationalism continued to happen until before the independence. The Arab community was still in a polemic about national identity, whether accepting the vision of Indonesian nationalism and forgetting Hadramaut or remaining as Hadrami and rejecting the vision of Indonesian nationalism. The concept of nationalism (*wathanîyah*) was still being debated between the *sayyid* (organised in Jamiat Khair) and the non-*sayyid* (organised in Jam'iyah al-Irsyad). The conflict lasted quite a long time, until the birth of the Indonesian Arab Association (PAI) organisation in 1934. The vision and mission of PAI were to strengthen Indonesian nationalism and fight for Indonesia to be accepted as a *wathanîyah* for all Arab communities in Indonesia. The greatest achievement of PAI was their success in holding the declaration of the Youth's Oath for Arab descendants on 4th October 1934, after completing the Arab *Peranakan* Conference on the 3rd of October.

Based on Hamid Algadri's analysis, the upheaval of nationalism in the Arab community could not be separated from Dutch politics. The formation of the Indo Arabische Verbond (IAV) in 1930 was a colonial projection aimed at strengthening primordial feelings among the Arab community. The feeling highlighted was the commitment to being Arabs and their true identity (Algadri 1988; Mandal 2018). Dutch politics aimed to divert the orientation of Indonesian nationalism by strengthening primordialism among the Arab communities who settled in the Dutch East Indies. Therefore, the direction of the IAV was very different from that of the latter organisation, PAI, which crystallised Indonesian nationalism.

### **Identity Dilemma in the Post-Independence Era**

After independence, the question of identity among the Arab community was not yet resolved. Alatas (2011) argued that after the Indonesian vision was realised on 17th August 1945, the challenge of nationalism for the Arab community was even higher. Their national commitment was challenged, after being accepted as Indonesian citizens and having civil rights as the other citizens. Moreover, some Indonesian people thought that the Arabs were still “foreigners” who deserved suspicion and caution. Therefore, it was imperative that the Arab community be able to adapt to the evolving political realities. Rijal (2017) citing de Jonge (2004) and Algadri (1988) explained that although the communities of Arab descent had tried to assimilate for a long time, they are still classified as minority citizens along with Indo-Chinese and Indo-European groups in the post-independence era. Discrimination against them is still found in the constitution, namely in Article 58 which limits their rights to engage in parliamentary elements and economic access. In social interactions, both in society and in work, Arab descendants are still second-class citizens.

Over time, the struggle of politicians of Arab descent in parliament, such as A.R. Baswedan (Masyumi), Said Bahriesj (Indonesian National Party, PNI), Ahmad Bahmid (Nahdlatul Ulama, NU) and Hamid Algadri (Socialist Party of Indonesia, PSI) who voiced that people of Arab descent should be fully recognised as Indonesian citizens finally succeeded. The discrimination finally started to melt away. This is evidenced by the increasing number of Arab descendants who have been involved in the government such as Ali Alatas who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia from 1988 to 1999, continued by Alwi Shihab from 1999 to 2001. Muhammad Quraish Shihab and Said Agil Munawwar also served as Minister of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia. However, Mandal (2018) assessed that communities of Arab descent tend to underestimate Arab identity, because of their ambivalent position in Indonesia. Moreover, some parties in Indonesia still think that Arab descendants are “foreigners” who should be suspected and wary of (Alatas 2011). Therefore, it becomes a must for the Arab community to be able to adapt to the socio-political realities that are developing in Indonesia.

The challenge was getting heavier when they were required to fully integrate and assimilate into the social environment as part of Indonesian citizens. This integration was undoubtedly not easy for the Arab descendants because they were always faced with an identity dilemma, inheriting Arabic traditions and genetics or proving the loyalty of Indonesian nationalism by abandoning their original identity. When they chose to become completely Indonesian, they would lose

their ancestral or even genetic traditions. The traditions would be replaced by the local traditions generally accepted in Indonesia, including the culture, customs and language. It is indeed very delegating, but as de Jonge (2004) argued, non-natives who have assimilated and integrated with the local community, including those of Arab descent, will be fully accepted as part of the indigenous community.

A.R. Baswedan was once worried about the demand for total integration and assimilation of Arab descendants. According to him, the dichotomy between Islamic and nationalist groups should not have occurred. Such a dichotomy was a colonial legacy that was no longer relevant and must have been abandoned. A.R. Baswedan also experienced this when he chose to join the Masyumi party instead of the nationalist party. Many people asked why A.R. Baswedan, who was already known as a nationalist, joined the Islamic party. He explained that his nationalism had always been based on the Islamic doctrine, which was his belief (Suratmin and Kwartanada 2014). He also did not agree that total integration should mean marriage because it would only destroy genetic authenticity and ethnic diversity. Such a kind of nationalism assumption was a form of narrow understanding. For him, the important aspect of nationalism was at the political, not cultural, level (Suratmin and Kwartanada 2014).

During the Reformation era, the struggle for identity and internal dynamics of Arab descent in Indonesia did not stop completely. It had always been part of their life. Sometimes they confirmed Indonesianness, but frequently some Arab descendants were still trapped in exclusive Arabian primordialism. The actual phenomenon of identity struggle among Arab descendants could be found in Zulkifli's (2013), Rijal's (2017) and Syarif's (2019) studies of the dynamics in the Arab community in Indonesia. They argued that the current socio-political changes dragged this community into a new form of upheaval but are still rooted in old themes. They found that the internal dynamics had shifted from the issues of social strata and the *kafa'ah* system into competition for religious authority, in which Sunni-Shi'ite ideological conflicts still occurred in their group.

On the other hand, the strengthening of Arab identity by Arab descendants in Indonesia also seems to be increasing, even having a major impact on the general public. This happened as a result of a new relationship between Arab descendants (especially from the *sayyid* group) and Hadramaut (ancestral land). They are connected with Hadramaut through education, religious tourism and dawah (Arabic: *da'wah*) (Slama 2005). The Arab identity is getting stronger along with the increasing intensity of their relationship with the traditions and culture of origin. Many alumni from universities and *ribat* (informal religious education such as *pesantren* [Islamic boarding school]) carry Arab traditions and culture with

them when they return to Indonesia. They preach in *ta'lim* (teaching) assemblies by using Arab-style culture as well as transferring their ancestral traditions to the general public.

Meanwhile, al Qurtuby (2017) assessed that Arab descent (the term used was "Arab-Indo") in Indonesia was still struggling with their identity. Some tensions and harmony could be found in the relationship between Arab descendants and other ethnicities. The existence of the Arab community was responded to variably by the indigenous people. Some people respected and glorified the Arab descendants because of the Islamisation involving their ancestors. Some others thought negatively about their existence. They were considered a closed, asocial, stingy society, troublemakers and destroyers of local traditions, especially when Arabic identity was often in the spotlight when the phenomenon of Arabism and xenophobia appears at the global level, including in Indonesia.

So far, the people's perspective towards Arab descent has remained positive for Islamic reasons. However, the involvement of some elements of Arab descent in practical politics, radicalism, Islamism and *Salafism* had slightly changed the perspective of some groups of Indonesian people who, on average, had nationalist, moderate, liberal, urban Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds. They discredited, criticised and blamed the Arab descendants for being the masterminds or sources of conflicts, intolerance and anti-diversity, as recently pinned on Rizieq Shihab and some Arab descendants who joined the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). They considered Arab descendants like this as a threat to the national ideology and the state's principles and against the nation's motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). Regrettably, from 1998 to 1999, several Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) elites recruited FPI to become *pamswakarsa* (security forces from civilian groups) to face student demonstrations. The apparatus maintained radical groups, they had carried out the "commodification of radicalism" (al Amin 2019b). FPI is a radical group that was banned by the government in 2020, as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HTI) was also disbanded in 2017.

On the other side, some people highly appreciate Arab descendants who have an inclusive, tolerant, moderate and nationalist attitude. The people are commonly from Nahdlatul Ulama sympathisers, *tarekat* followers and several traditional middle-class Muslim groups. They support the harmony and tolerance shown by Arab descendants who fit this criterion. One of the highly respected Arab descents is Habib Lutfi bin Yahya. As the leader of an NU organisation wing, which specifically accommodates members of the tariqah called Jam'iyah Ahl al-Thariqah al-Mu'tabarrah an-Nahdliyah, he often shows an attitude toward Indonesian nationalism when preaching or interacting with various ethnic groups. Another

respected figure is Habib Syech Abdul Qadir Assegaf, the leader of the Jemaah Selawat Ahbabul Musthofa, which is popular among millennial Muslims and gave rise to the “Syecher Mania” community. He often shows Indonesian loyalty and commitment in his stage performances. At least, he often sings Indonesia Raya and other national or local songs on stage. These two figures often convey messages of peace and tolerance amidst Indonesian multiculturalism although their Arab identity has not changed culturally; in other words, they still hold endogamy. These Arab descendants still to this day get credit and sympathy from the public.

On a communal scale, efforts to integrate Arab descent into multiculturalism in Indonesia are also conducted by some organisations, such as by al-Irsyad al-Islamiyyah and Rabithah Alawiyyah (Suparto, Halid and Mamat 2019; Shahab 2018). They prioritise peace, tolerance and an accommodative attitude towards the diversity of localities in Indonesia in their preaching. Shahab (2018), in the conclusion of his research, stated that on a communal scale, Arab descendants in Indonesia could equally maintain Arab identity and show commitment to Indonesianness by sticking to their traditions but not being closed off from the general public. In this case, Arab descendants must be good at positioning themselves and differentiating between the private area (in the community) and the public area (the general public). It is emphasised that the old integration pattern of the community of Arab descent, namely the practice of mingling and melting amid local communities, will continue to be relevant.

Miftahuddin and Sudrajat (2017) who examined the dynamics of the Arab community in al-Irsyad from 1945 to 2007 found that they have always adapted to two faces of identity (Arab and Indonesian) in responding to challenges in the social, religious, cultural and political fields in Indonesia. From the reign of the old order until the reformation, Arab descendants in al-Irsyad showed a pragmatic attitude in politics -assimilative and integrative- through social interaction in order to blend in with the locality, although on other occasions they still tried to reaffirm their original identity. This is what gave rise to internal dynamics such as when al-Irsyad accepted the principles of Pancasila in the New Order era and returned to Islamic principles in the post-Reformation era. This attitude shows that the community of Arab descent has always been dynamic in responding to external challenges. Since the beginning, the al-Irsyad organisation has been egalitarian and inclusive by accepting members from outside of Arab descent. However, because of this inclusivity, al-Irsyad also experienced a split when there was a struggle for leadership among members who were affiliated with Salafism.

Compared to al-Irsyad, Rabithah Alawiyyah looks exclusive by highlighting the Arab identity, where members of this organisation are still devoted only to the



*sayyid* group of Arab descent (*Alawiyyin*). Rabithah also still adheres to the *kafa'ah* system, as evidenced by the existence of Maktab Daimi in its organisational structure. This institution functions to record lineage among Alawites. The mechanism of integration but not assimilation is their defence to maintain their genetic identity. However, in his organisational principles, Rabithah Alawiyyah firmly accepted Pancasila as the principle of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). Besides that, the *manhaj of da'wah* (methods of dawah) and its organisational struggles are relatively accommodating and tolerant because its foundation is the Alawiyyah order which prioritises exemplary and commendable morals which have been inherited from generation to generation from the prophet as their progenitor. Therefore, in the history of the Hadrami diaspora, *Alawiyyin* has always earned respectable positions both at home and abroad. The consideration is their status as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). However, that does not mean there is no stigma against this *sayyid* group. Some elements of the *Alawiyyin* in Indonesia actually invite prejudice from the public that they are a threat to the building of multiculturalism in Indonesia.

From the activities of Arab figures and their organisations (Rabithah Alawiyyah and al-Irsyad), it is known that the relationship of Arab descent with the general public in Indonesia tends to be inconsistent and dynamic. This condition will continue in the future. According to al Qurtuby (2017), if the Indonesian government and people can manage wisely, democratically and productively all differences, conflicts and tensions between Arabs and non-Arabs, surely tensions that have the potential to cause communal violence due to political interests, socio-cultural differences and economic competition can be prevented. But, if the government and society fail to realise such a situation, ethnic sentiment may be the reason for the triggering of communal violence between ethnic groups, as has happened several times in Indonesia. An alternative way to reduce ethnically-based communal tensions, civil assimilation is the most effective ethnic incorporation in terms of ensuring that weakly mobilised ethnic groups remain peaceful (Alptekin 2017).

## Conclusion

The ethnic groups of Arab descent in Indonesia are still faced with the duality of their identity. As the heirs of the Arab Hadrami identity, they have an obligation to maintain and preserve their Arabness (i.e., genes, cultures and traditions). On the other hand, their status as Indonesian citizens demands that they show their Indonesian identity. For Arab descendants, this dilemma of identity is not easy to balance. The identity upheaval causes a continuing dilemma since their arrival to the archipelago, as has been revealed in this study. Furthermore, this dilemma drives the internal dynamics within these communities as they try to find the right

way to adapt to the socio-political changes that are taking place in Indonesia. From here, the Arab descendants found the right formula to integrate and assimilate into the diversity of Indonesia without eliminating the original identity.

Although this conclusion cannot represent the single identity of their association, the form of ethnic incorporation is more visible in the al-Irsyad organisation by accepting members from outside of Arab descent. In Rabithah Alawiyyah, on the other hand, exclusivity is more visible because this association only consists of *sayyid* groups from this community. Therefore, this study concludes that Arab descendants in Indonesia will continue to experience identity dilemmas in the future.

### Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya that has supported us by facilitating and funding this research.

### References

- Abushouk, Ahmed Ibrahim and Ibrahim, Hassan Ahmed. 2009. *The Hadhrami diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity maintenance or assimilation?* Leiden: Brill.
- Affandi, B. 1999. *Syaikh Ahmad Surkati (1874–1943): Pembaharu dan pemurni Islam di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Pustaka al-Kausar.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1976. Ahmad Surkati: His role in al-Irshâd movement in Java. PhD diss., Mcgill University.
- Al Amin, Ainur Rofiq. 2020. *Kontranarasi melawan kaum Khilafers*. Yogyakarta: Bildung.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2019a. NU di Pusaran Pilpres 2019. *Kompas*, 13 February.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2019b. Komodifikasi radikalisme. *Kompas*, 28 November.
- Al Qurtuby, S. 2017. Arabs and “Indo-Arabs” in Indonesia: Historical dynamics, social relations and contemporary changes. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 13(2): 45–72. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2017.13.2.3>
- Alatas, Ismail Fajrie. 2016. The Pangeran and the saints: The historical inflection of a mid 19th-century Ḥaḍramī mausoleum in East Java, Indonesia. *Indonesia and the Malay World* 44(130): 285–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2016.1173862>
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2011. Becoming Indonesians: The Bā ‘Alawī in the interstices of the nation. *Die Welt des Islams* 51(1): 45–108. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006011X556120>
- Algadri, H. 1988. *Politik Belanda terhadap Islam dan keturunan Arab di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Haji Masagung.
- Alptekin, H. 2017. A theory of ethnic violence: Ethnic incorporation and ethno-political mobilization in Bulgaria and Cyprus. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40(15): 2672–2690. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1266008>
- Anonymous. 1933. *Pewarta Arab*, 11 December.
- Baswedan, A.R. 1934. Peranakan Arab dan tokohnya. *Matahari*, 1 August.

- Boxberger, L. 2002. *On the edge of empire: Hadhramawt, emigration and the Indian Ocean, 1880s–1930s*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Clarence-Smith, W. 1997. Hadhramaut and the Hadhrami diaspora in the modern colonial era. In *Hadhrami traders, scholars and statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s–1960s*, eds. U. Freitag and W. Clarence-Smith, 1–18. London: Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004491946\\_004](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004491946_004)
- De Jonge, H. 2004. Abdul Rahman Baswedan and the emancipation of the Hadramis in Indonesia. *Asian Journal of Social Science* 32(3): 373–400. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568531043584836>
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. Discord and solidarity among the Arabs in Netherlands East Indies, 1900–1942. *Indonesia* 55(April): 73–90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3351087>
- Fanani, A., Setiawan, S., Purwati, O., Maisarah, M. 2020. ISIS' grammar of persuasion of hatred in the article "The Kafir's blood is halal for you, so shed it" published in the Rumiayah magazine. *Heliyon* 6(7): e04448. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e04448>
- Freitag, U. 2003. *Indian Ocean migrants and state formation in Hadramaut*. Leiden: Brill.
- Freitag, U. and Clarence-Smith, W., eds. 1997. *Hadhrami traders, scholars and statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s–1960s*. London: Brill.
- Ho, E. 2006. *The grave of Tarim: Genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley, US: University of California Press.
- Hurgronje, G.S. 1905. *The Achehnese*. Translated by A.W.S.O. 'Sullivan. London: Leiden.
- Jacobsen, F.F. 2009. *Hadrami Arabs in present-day Indonesia: An Indonesia-oriented group with an Arab signature*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Jahroni, J. 2000. Menjadi pribumi di negeri orang: Pergumulan identitas masyarakat Arab di Indonesia. *Studia Islamika* 7(3). <http://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v7i3.706>
- Jonge, H. and Kaptein, N., eds. 2002. *Transcending borders: Arabs, politics, trade and Islam in Southeast Asia*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- Mahzumi, F. 2018. Dualisme identitas peranakan Arab di Kampung Arab Gresik. *TEOSOFI: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 8(2): 406–432. <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2018.8.2.403-429>
- Mandal, S.K. 2018. *Becoming Arab: Creole histories and modern identity in the Malay world*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Miftahuddin and Sudrajat, A. 2017. Identity crisis, contestation and conflict within the Hadrami community of al-Irsyad 1990–2007. *Journal of Social Studies* 13(1): 53–62.
- Mobini-Kesheh, N. 1999. *The Hadrami awakening: Community and identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900–1942*. New York: Cornell University.
- Patji, A.R. 1991. The Arabs of Surabaya: A study of sociocultural integration. PhD diss., Australian National University.
- Rijal, S. 2017. Internal dynamics within Hadrami Arabs in Indonesia: From social hierarchy to Islamic doctrine. *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 11(1): 1–28. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2017.11.1.1-28>
- Serjeant, R.B. 1957. *The Saiyids of Hadramawt: An inaugural lecture*. London: University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies.

- Shahab, Y.Z. 2018. Exploring uniting factor for multiculturalism policy: Portrait of Hadrami, Arab community in Indonesia. *KnE Social Sciences* 3(10): 650–680. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v3i10.2940>
- Slama, M. 2005. Indonesian Hadhramis and the Hadhramaut: An old diaspora and its new connections. *Antropologi Indonesia* 29: 107–113. <https://doi.org/10.7454/ai.v29i2.3531>
- Subchi, I. 2019. A history of Hadrami community in Southeast Asia. *Epistemé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman* 14(2): 169–188. <https://doi.org/10.21274/epis.2019.14.2.169-188>
- Suparto, S., Halid, H. and Mamat, S. 2019. Bani Alawiyin in Indonesia and the Malay world: Network, development and the role of institution in transmitting the peaceful mission of Islam. *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 13(2): 267–296. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2019.13.2.267-296>
- Suratmin and Kwartanada, D. 2014. *Biografi A.R. Baswedan: Membangun bangsa, merajut Indonesia*. Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas.
- Syarif, F. 2019. Defining Arabism: The contestation of Arab identity in the Hadrami community in Betawi. *Paramita: Historical Studies Journal* 29(2): 190–203. <https://doi.org/10.15294/paramita.v29i2.17717>
- Syarif, F. and Ansor, M. 2020. Mosque and reproduction of Arab identity in the Hadrami community in Betawi. *Heritage of Nusantara: International Journal of Religious Literature and Heritage* 9(1): 78–114. <https://doi.org/10.31291/hn.v9i1.565>
- Tibbetts, G.R. 1956. Pre-Islamic Arabia and South-East Asia. *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 29(3[175]): 182–208. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41503102>
- Van den Berg, L.W.C. 1989. *Hadramaut: Koloni Arab di Nusantara*. Jakarta: INIS.
- Van der Kroef, J.M. 1954. *Indonesia in the modern world*. Vol. 1. Bandung, Indonesia: Masa Baru.
- Zulkifli. 2013. *The struggle of the Shi'is in Indonesia*. Canberra: ANU E Press.