

## **SUSTAINING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DIASPORA AND HOMELAND: THE CASE OF SINGAPORE HADHRAMIS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with the Hadhrami diaspora in Singapore as a case study of how in contemporary events the Hadhrami diaspora has helped sustain the relationship with the motherland. What makes the study of Singapore Hadhramis interesting is that this is a community that has been in Singapore for over two centuries. The other interesting aspect is that most families have migrated to Singapore via Indonesia and to a large extent consider themselves as Arab Jawa/Arab Indon. They have maintained close ties with Indonesia; in a sense Indonesia is the second motherland. The other element is that most migrated to Singapore with wealth made elsewhere; mainly from Indonesia. The fourth element is Singapore is a rich and developed country and most of the community do not harbour thoughts of returning to motherland but at same time are not severing ties. The last and most interesting element is that the majority of Singapore Hadhramis do not speak Arabic and have never visited Hadramaut. All these elements could have contributed to the Singapore Hadhrami community not maintain links with motherland. However strong bonds exist and continue. The pioneers, understandably, never forgot their motherland. They created numerous wakafs for Hadramaut.

**Keywords:** *singapore, hadhrami, diaspora, motherland*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, immigrants “uprooted themselves from their old society in order to make themselves a new home and adopt a new country to which they will pledge allegiance” (Basch et al., 2005). They give up many traditions of the motherland and assimilate into the dominant culture of their new home (Gordon, 1964).

However, certain migrations in history have been in large enough numbers to create an ethnic minority in the adopted land. Migration of the Hadhrami from Hadramaut in Southern Yemen has created diaspora communities along the Indian ocean and they have maintained their heritage and cultures to a large extent. These Hadhramis have adopted some of the local cultures and even transported them back to their motherland. For example, some Malay words are commonly used in Hadramaut vocabulary. The cuisine in Hadramaut is also influenced by Indonesian cuisine. The South East Asian Hadhrami community have created a hybrid distinct culture; often referred to as “Arab-Indon culture”.

The question this paper addresses is how can a diaspora community sustain its relations with the motherland when the diaspora has been in the adopted land over generations and the diaspora members have no experience of the motherland and do not speak the language of the motherland.

This paper deals with an old diaspora that is 5th or 6th generation or more; namely the Hadhrami diaspora in South East Asia and in particular in Singapore. The paper looks at the Singapore Hadhrami community as a case study of how the Hadhrami diaspora has maintained their links with the motherland.

Studies on migration had traditionally focused on two themes. The first theme centers on the adaptation of immigrants in the new country (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gordon, 1964; Iceland, 2009; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Yinger, 1981). The second theme is the determinants of migration, such as the economic factors that caused people to migrate (Castles & Miller, n.d.;

Hatton & Williamson, 1998; Massey et al., 1999; Spellman, 2008; Stark, 1991; Thomas, 1973; Tilly, 1976; Trager, 2005). A third theme emerged in immigration research—transnationalism, which is about the connection and interactions between immigrants and their country of origin and how this attachment influences both the sending country and the receiving country. From the traditional assimilation theory perspective, transnational activities are transitional, so they will disappear over time as immigrants become better integrated into the host society (Alba & Nee, 2003).

Even if one's assimilation process is complete, assimilation and transnationalism are not binary opposites (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Some studies have shown that immigrants who are well-adjusted into the host society are more likely to be involved in transnational activities (Guarnizo et al., 2003).

Sheffer (1986), defined diasporas as “ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their country of origin—their homelands” (p. 3).

Diasporas are drawn together as a community by their common bonds of ethnicity, culture, religion, national identity and, race (Coles & Timothy, 2004). Interestingly, diasporas are often more attached to their traditional heritage than the people who still live in their homeland. For example, maintaining a Scottish identity and a link to Scotland may be more important for the Scots outside of Scotland than it is for those living in Scotland (Harrison, 2005).

Diasporas develop a strong connection to people of similar origins or ethnic backgrounds and form their own community or social groups within the host country. In the Singapore Hadhrami context, this is done through the Arab Association (Al Wehdah).

Assimilation and transnationalism can co-exist and are not binary opposites (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Most immigrants, instead of being fully assimilated or fully transnational, are a combination of both (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Moreover, the relationship between one's level of assimilation and transnationalism may vary due to the differences in immigrant generations and national origins.

One characteristic that diaspora communities have in common is a connection to both their country of origin and the host society, resulting in sub-national, transnational, and non-territorial identities (Ashworth et al., 2007). In fact, an alternative term for diaspora is “hyphenated community,” which refers to “the semantic coupling of the homeland and the host state” in labels such as Irish-Americans and Scottish-Canadians (Coles & Timothy, 2004). In Singapore, the Hadhramis are referred to as Singaporean Arabs (Talib, 1997). The South East Asian Hadhramis, including the ones in Singapore, are sometimes referred to as Arab-Jawa or Indon Arabs. In Hadhramaut, they referred to as Mualied (plural for mualad).

According to assimilation theory, transnational ties to the homeland will also decrease from generation to generation, as each generation is more assimilated than the previous generation (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). The longer immigrants stay in the new country and the more they are incorporated into the new society, the weaker their ties to the homeland will be (Alba & Nee, 2003).

Immigrants can also be categorized according to their generation cohort, which has a significant influence on their life and experience. Immigrants can be divided according to their family generation history in the destination country (Rumbaut, 2002).

## **METHOD**

What makes the study of Singapore Hadhramis interesting is that this is a community that has been in Singapore for two centuries and most community members are 5th generation and beyond. The other interesting aspect is that most families have migrated to Singapore via Indonesia and to a large extent consider themselves as ‘Arab Jawa’ (Arab Indon). They have maintained close ties with Indonesia and almost all have family connections in Indonesia; in a

sense Indonesia is the second motherland. The other element is that most migrated to Singapore with wealth made elsewhere; mainly Indonesia. The fourth element is Singapore is a rich and developed country and most of the community do not harbour thoughts of returning to their motherland but at same time are not severing ties. The last and most interesting element is that the majority of Singapore Hadhramis do not speak Arabic and have never visited Hadramaut.

The Hadhrami culture is tribal and places emphasis on lineages and genealogy. This is particularly for the Sayyids. The diaspora in Singapore is majority Sayyids. The Sayyids claim lineage from Prophet Muhammed (SAW). This lineage gives them religious capital and many of them are religious scholars, commonly referred to as Habib. This tribal culture and the lineages emphasis means the Hadhramis in the Diaspora would maintain their family name and would, in many cases, have family trees. This results in ease of identifying relatives in the home land.

All these elements could have contributed to the Singapore Hadhrami community not to maintain links with motherland. However strong bonds exist and continue. These bonds have resulted in Hadhramis in Hadramaut having a better standard of living and better well been. The pioneers, understandably, never forgot their motherland. They created numerous wakafs for Hadramaut and the trust deeds will specify Hadramaut as beneficiary as in the case of Shiekh Sallim Talib charity trust where apart from poor Muslims, two mosques in Hadramaut were specified as beneficiaries for a certain percentage of available funds.

There are numerous wakafs and/or trusts created by diaspora Hadhramis in Singapore. Many of these would indeed be dedicated to helping the needy in Hadramaut. There were family trust settlements created by the pioneer migrants and some trusts created for relatives, for example the siblings of the settlor. These trusts meant there were beneficiaries in Singapore and in the motherland (sometimes elsewhere too). The trustees would keep family records for purposes of identifying beneficiaries and the trust income distribution. This knotting of interests has no doubt given rise to recognising the cousins' descendants in the motherland. The trusts held for the benefit of the settlor's relations meant that trustees need keep record of settlor's relation descendants.

The first Hadhramis to arrive in Singapore in 1819 were two wealthy merchants from Palembang in Indonesia. They were from the Al-Junied family (Talib, 1997). Modern Singapore is often said to have been founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. Raffles was aware of the role the Hadhramis played in south east Asia trade and wanted to bring them to Singapore to have Singapore as a thriving trade hub. His blueprint for Singapore included an Arab (Hadhrami) district. In giving instructions to Singapore housing committee in 1822, he states "the Arabs population would require every consideration. No situation will be more appropriate for them than the vicinity of the sultan residence...." (Buckley & Hurt, 1996).

The early period (1800s to WWII) was the heydays of Hadhrami wealth. Most have made their fortunes in Indonesia. These earlier settlers maintained close links to the motherland. They would send monies and build mansions in the motherland. The sentiments of the early period in embodied in a well know phrase in the folklore culture that says "ma Jawa bibadl thala makatieb ya hamd"; loosely translated as "Jawa is not an alternative, it is just for business".

The earlier settlers would send their children to Hadramaut for periods of time. This practise strengthened the ties with the motherland. World war II stopped this practice (Talib, 1997). The 1960s saw major changes, as by then Singapore imposed rent control regulations and Singapore Hadhrami wealth started dwindling. This was further affected by the Singapore Land Acquisition Act where significant plots of real estate belonging to Hadhramis was acquired with minimum compensation. Singapore was also independent as part of Malaya and then totally independent state in 1965. South Yemen gained independence in 1967 and became a communist state. The new regime in South Yemen made it difficult to travel to or from hadramaut and the connections dwindled. Gradually, the Singapore Hadhramis were losing

their affiliation with the motherland and entered in a period of identity crises. This was amplified in 1992 with the use of the term “Malays of Arab descent” (Talib, 1997).

The focus on this paper is on events after 1990 to understand how one community sustained its identity and sustained its links with the motherland; even after going through an identity crisis. The revival of identity and the links were inter-connected. This happened as result of political changes in Yemen but more importantly through the Arab Association strengthening the links at community level.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The Singapore Hadhramis have an association called The Arab Association- Al Wehdah, which has been registered since 1946. However, Al Wehdah, by 1990, was losing its appeal to the younger generation of Hadhrami community (Talib, 1997). In December 1991 a magazine for the community was launched by individuals. The magazine was called Al Shourouq, which means “rising of dawn” to imply a beginning of a new era for the Hadhrami community. The magazine mission was promoting the Arab identity among the community. The magazine ceased publications in 1993. The Al Shourouq team published a concept paper outlining the issues and challenges facing the community and called for further participation from the community. The Al Wehdah met with the Al-shouroq team and asked that they collaborate with the association. One of the concept paper writers joined the Al Wehdah management committee and later became its vice president. A conference was organised by Al Wehdah in 1995 to discuss the concept paper and other issues faced by the community. It was a catalyst for the younger generation to participate and later form a youth wing in the association (for more details see Talib 1997).

The debate on the identity crises and the Al Shououq impact had galvanised the youth in the community. This was also influenced greatly by the political happenings in the motherland. In 1990, Southern and Northern Yemen merged to form one nation and communist rule in the south was abandoned. That merger meant travel to and from Hadramaut (motherland) became easier. Economically, there were also signs of opportunities arising from (a) the intention to declare Aden port in South Yemen as a free trade zone (b) the discovery of oil in the south of Yemen and (c) the relaxing of laws to be more business-friendly (see Talib 1994).

The Singapore Hadhrami appetite and interest in Yemen was ignited by the continuous visits of delegates from Yemen, as well as family members. A significant event was the visit by the “Aden Free Port Authority” to Singapore. Members of the local Hadhrami community in Singapore, with strong contacts in Yemen, convinced the “Aden Free Port Authority” to visit Singapore on a study mission. That visit resulted in (unsuccessful) negotiations with “Port Authority of Singapore” (PSA) to manage the port of Aden. That visit was followed by a visit by the prime minister of Yemen in 1995 and the President in 1998. Each visit would have the Al Wehdah host a dialogue session between the community members and the guests.

The Yemeni government then appointed HE Helmi Talib as the honorary counsel for Yemen. This had an immediate effect of the Al Wehdah having ease of communication with Yemen government. This was strengthened with Dr Saadeldeen Talib (Helmi’s brother) being involved in Yemen politics.

The 1990s indeed saw a number of Singaporean Hadhramis visiting Yemen and Hadramaut. A handful of them settled in Yemen for long periods, returning Singapore only after the recent Yemen War. These travels and the various visits by delegates from Yemen increased the affiliation to the motherland. It was significantly strengthened with technological advancements. The communication apps like WhatsApp, skype, imo etc made keeping in touch with family members easier. The internet made information easily accessible.

Our focus in this paper is on community-level activities that help sustain these affiliations. The Arab Association in the 1990s had twice sent a delegation to Yemen to participate in the

Yemen government-sponsored conference for Yemeni diasporas. The association also started cultural dance classes and had a performing music band and dancers that would perform in most weddings of the community.

In 2001, Café le Caire opened in Arab Street which turned Arab Street of Singapore into a hub for the community. It reclaimed the area as the Arabic district (see Holmberg 2014). In 2004 the Arab Association held a 10-day heritage week in Arab Street. The Arab community regained their identity and pride. This was followed with an exhibition at the National Library titled *Al Rihlah*. In 2019, another exhibition titled the *Qisah* was held in conjunction with Singapore's bicentennial celebrations. This exposure of the presence of an Hadhrami community in Singapore increased the sense of belonging to Singapore and in a way encouraged the links with Hadramaut. The feeling of being a diaspora community accepted in the 'new' home allowed the community to look at their roots and reconnect with the motherland without any sense of divided loyalty.

When the Foreign Minister of Singapore wanted to visit Yemen, the Arab Association invited him to visit Hadramaut as their guest. Leaders of the association accompanied the Foreign Minister. Whilst in Yemen, these leaders arranged the Hadramaut visit by the foreign minister. The Singapore delegation were impressed with the association's network.

That visit raised the prominence of the Singapore Arab Association in Hadramaut. Shortly after the trip, HE Helmi Talib (also vice president of the Arab Association at that time) was appointed as the Non-resident Ambassador of Singapore to Yemen.

That visit was followed by the Singapore Hadhrami community, in the following year, helping Hadramaut with the flood relief. Hadramaut experienced one of the worst flooding they ever had and Singapore Hadhrami community collected funds and went themselves to Hadramaut to implement aid projects. In 2021, the Arab Association raised relief funds and sent it to the needy in Hadramaut (Haller & Landolt, 2005).

The Arab Association had also worked with UNDP to install solar panels in schools in Hadramaut. The Arab Association used the network it has in Yemen to source and instal the solar panels. They also mobilised friends of Al-Wehdah in Hadramaut, Yemen to provide an oversight on the project and report to Al-Wehdah. The UNDP were impressed how the Arab Association were able to accomplish matters on the Hadramaut ground better than the UNDP officials (see <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/undp-partners-diaspora-in-singapore-for-rehab-efforts-in-yemen>).

## CONCLUSION

What can diaspora communities learn from the Singapore Hadhrami case? The identity crises and the gradual alienation from the motherland was reversed by the action of few individuals and mainly by the Association taking a community lead. Identity of a diaspora community is strong influenced by their relationship with the motherland. When the emotional connection to the motherland is lost, diaspora communities start to have identity crises. This started with the Hadhrami community in Singapore but was reversed. The story of the Singapore Hadhramis could provide a good example for other diaspora communities to learn from.

Singapore Hadhrami community is interesting to study, as they do not speak Arabic and the majority of them have not been to Hadramaut (though more have been since 1990). They are also post 4th generation, mostly 5th or 6th generation and had very little links to hadhramaut prior to the efforts taken by the association. This is in line with studies claiming that immigrants who are well-adjusted into the host society are more likely to be involved in transnational activities.

While it is natural for immigrants to be attached to two (or more) countries, the nature and characteristics of the two bonds may be very different. Tsuda (2004) defined "home" as "a

stable place of residence that feels secure, comfortable, and familiar” and “homeland” as “a place of origin to which one feels emotionally attached” (p. 125).

Transnational practices can also be divided into personal transnational ties and collective transnational actions. Personal ties include keeping in touch with your relatives across borders, traveling as tourists, and sending or receiving remittances. Collective transnational actions include taking actions to parley home and host country social issues into transnational platforms. The Arab Association of Singapore took collective actions, representing the Hadhrami community, to maintain and sustain the relationship with the motherland.

The vision statement of the Arab Association of Singapore is to have an inclusive vibrant close-knit community that is recognized and acknowledged as part of Singapore’s social fabric and participative at national events, while maintain close links with the Hadramaut (the motherland). Other diaspora communities could benefit and learn from the experience of Al-Wehdah (The Arab Association) in maintaining close links with the motherland.

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