

BOOK REVIEW

Becoming Arab: Creole Histories and Modern Identity in the Malay World, by Sumit K. Mandal. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 259 pp.

Rusaslina Idrus

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

Email: rusalina@um.edu.my

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Becoming Arab interrogates the colonial project of racialisation and the formation of modern ethnic identity by examining the history of the Arabs, specifically the Hadramis, in the Malay world. The book starts in the pre-colonial era charting the movement of Hadramis from Yemen to the region, by way of different ports and diaspora, and their interactions and integration with other groups in the Malay Archipelago. The more fluid category of Creole Hadramis was stifled by the 19th-century colonial project of racial categorisation and control that positioned the Arabs into alienated figures with restrictive controls on their economic access and mobility. The colonial categories while powerful were not totalising, as identities remain porous as illustrated by creole histories evocatively presented here. Sumit Mandal argues that by "representing interconnectedness, the creole margins raise question about the exclusionary claims of race as at the centre" (p. 7).

Despite the colonial project of categorisation and control, the Hadramis maintained transregional links across the seas, while integrating their position in the local landscapes. They established links with the Ottoman Empire, positioned themselves as leaders and educators, and created schools, modern social organisations and a press. These histories of control, adaptation, connections and cosmopolitanism are the underlying foundation of modern Asian identities. In this book, Sumit Mandal pushes our understanding of the multi-faceted and incremental processes of race and modern ethnic identity formation. As summarised by Mandal, "Modern Arab identity was thus the outcome of effort not to imitate colonial modernity but to engage it" (p. 22).

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1, consisting of Chapter 1, sets us in the pre-colonial era marked by fluidity of categories where the Arabs were familiar personages in Malay courts and literature. Part 2 consisting of Chapters 2, 3, and 4, examines the colonial racial categorisation and control. Regulations were put in place to restrict the mobility and economic access of the Arabs. The Arabs were marked as "foreigners" and alienated from the "natives" and deemed as a poor influence on the latter. Part 3, which includes Chapter 5, 6, and 7 examines the Hadramis response to the restrictions and the shaping of modern Arab identity. The book ends with an interesting Epilogue that attempts to tie the different historical processes to a discussion about contemporary Arab-Muslim identity ranging from 9/11 to nationalist politics in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The book's ambitious project in connecting the complex and multi-layered histories towards understanding the processes of modern identity making is an important one. The histories of the Hadramis in the Malay world illustrate that the processes of identity formation are complex and dynamic responding to different limitations, needs, and circumstances. The top down colonial racialisation, as well as interpretations by local scholars, constrained and shaped but did not limit the fluidity of the group identities. Hadramis also reimagined their identity and actively positioned themselves as community leaders and educators.

This historical lens tracing the incremental changes allows us to better understand contemporary politics such the conflation of Arab and Islam as an identity, and the discrimination of Arabs in western global discourse. Mandal's book joins in the work of Joel Kahn, Leonard Andaya and Tim Harper that illustrate the fluidity and contingent nature of the processes of race and ethnic identity formation. Such scholarship challenges exclusionary race politics that positions certain ethnic groups as having more rights than others based on claims of primordialism.

In this book, the author uses the term "creolisation" to refer to "the emergence from the interconnection of disparate people, of a social group that is distinct but not divorced from its parent cultures" (p. 17). He also suggests that "creole" "is a helpful rendering in English of the Malay word, *peranakan*, which has long been used to describe a person born in the Malay world to a pair made up of an outsider and local" (p. 17). Yet, the creole histories he describes are much more complex, that extend beyond lineage as the point of connection. I would have welcomed more of a discussion and interrogation of this term, which takes its origins from Caribbean history, and its applicability in the Malay region context.

Becoming Arab showcases fascinating life histories of the Hadramis figures in the region tracing their movements and strategies. Drawing from archival materials, colonial records and other sources, readers are introduced to figures such as Al-Misri, Sayyid Abdallah al-Juneid, Sayyid Mohamed Ahmad Alsagoff, and Sayyid Hassan bin Semit. Noticeably absent in the otherwise thick description of

the Hadrami communities were the women. Hadrami men marry "native" women in establishing their local bases and positions; arguably women were the anchors to the local communities, yet we know very little about them from these accounts. This absence likely reflects the limitation of the archives but this in itself deserves a discussion.

All in all, *Becoming Arab* is an engaging and well-crafted book that challenges our understanding of the colonial project of racialisation and the formation of modern identities. It is a rich addition to the scholarship of the Hadramis and Diaspora studies, but will also appeal to a larger audience with interest in colonial history and race politics. *Becoming Arab* provides a much more complex understanding of transregional movements and contemporary identity formation in the Malay world and the ability of groups to adapt, connect and mobilise in response to different geo-political, economic, and cultural circumstances. Scholars, and students of history in particular, should take inspiration from this innovative and meticulously researched book.