

**DESCRIPTION OF ARAB SAINTS IN THE 19-20TH-CENTURY  
SOUTHEAST ASIA: A CASE OF *TAJ AL-A 'RAS*<sup>1</sup>**

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One of the problems concerning the spread of Islam, whether inside or outside the Middle East, is the role of charismatic figures. In literary works, they are presented as “saints” or “waliy,” and the narratives of their lives often contain miraculous stories. For Arab residents in Southeast Asia, the achievements of such figures play an important role in their identity making, as they are proud of being the descendants of those who came from Arabia and spread the knowledge of Islam among the people of the host societies. The present paper tries to analyze the realm of the power of Arab saints in the 19-20th centuries by discussing the way they are presented in a book *Taj al-A 'ras*, a bio-hagiographical work written in Arabic and published in Indonesia.

In the discussion, the present writer focuses specially on an Arab family of *sada*<sup>3</sup> origin, namely the al-‘Attas family, because the book mainly deals with the history of that family. A special attention will be paid to the relationship between Arab migrant saints in Southeast Asia and the authorities of their host societies. First of all, anecdotal stories about miracles that Arab saints used for/against the authorities are introduced and human

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on researches conducted in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Yemen and the Netherlands in 2000-2001. The discussion of this paper partly comes from my dissertation (Kazuhiro Arai, *Arabs who Traversed the Indian Ocean: The History of the al-‘Attas Family in Hadramawt and Southeast Asia*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Michigan, 2004), especially chapters 4 and 5. I would like to thank The Toyota Foundation and The Matsushita International Foundation for supporting my research project.

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<sup>3</sup> *Sada* (sg. *sayyid*) are those who descended from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and ‘Ali b. Abu Talib, the fourth orthodox caliph.



relationships among the characters of the stories analyzed. Then, the narratives are compared with the life history of a non-saintly Arab notable in the same period. This process will show the realm of the power of Arab migrant saints in the host society and what the history is for Arab residents in Southeast Asia.

### **Background Information**

Most Arab residents living in Southeast Asia are the descendants of immigrants from a South Arabian region of Hadramawt, which is now a part of the Republic of Yemen.<sup>4</sup> The sea route between the Arabian Peninsula and Southeast Asia goes back to pre-Islamic period, but a large scale migration from Hadramawt to Southeast Asia began only in the eighteenth century and was accelerated in the nineteenth century, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal and the introduction of steamships to the Indian Ocean. Most emigrants settled in places where Islam had some influences such as today's Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and the Southern Philippines. The reasons for the migration were longstanding tribal warfare and general hardships of life in Hadramawt and the possibility of having better life in the regions around the Indian Ocean. Other than Southeast Asia, Hadrami Arabs also migrated to East Africa, the Red Sea region and India.

Most of Arab immigrants in Southeast Asia were engaged in commercial activities,<sup>5</sup> but there were religious teachers who exerted themselves in propagating orthodox Shafi'i teaching, taking pupils and founding schools.<sup>6</sup> Among the immigrant

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<sup>4</sup> For Hadrami diaspora in the Indian Ocean, see articles in Ulrike Freitag and W. G. Clarence-Smith eds., *Hadrami Traders, Scholars, and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s-1960s*, Leiden: Brill, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> In India, many Hadrami immigrants became mercenaries.

<sup>6</sup> It should be pointed out that commercial and religious activities are not mutually exclusive, as many



Hadramis were religious figures who came to be recognized as saints. In Java alone, there are shrines of Arab saints in Jakarta, Surabaya, Pekalongan, Tegal, Solo and Bogor.<sup>7</sup> The successors to the saintly figures, who are usually their descendants, take care of the shrines, give lecture to the public in religious ceremonies and hold yearly visits to the shrines called *hawl*.<sup>8</sup> Although the “saint veneration” in Hadramawt and its diaspora came under criticism after the turn of the twentieth century, the shrines are still maintained and *hawls* held.

The sphere of activities of Arabs is not confined to religious teaching and commerce, though. They have been active in regional politics, too. In the past, there were sultans of Arab origin in Siak (Sumatra), Pontianak (Kalimantan) and Perlis (Malay Peninsula). Even today, it is not uncommon to see a person of Arab descent become a Cabinet member in Indonesia and Malaysia. Receiving Western education, some Arabs became scholars, teaching at universities. The success of Arab residents in Southeast Asia can partly be attributed to the diversity of their occupations.

## **Source**

The main source for the present paper is a book titled *Taj al-A‘ras* (Bride’s Crown), an Arabic *manaqib* published in Indonesia in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> *Manaqib* is a type of literary work that deals with the life of saintly figures with the emphasis on miracles that they worked in their lifetime. The author of the book, Ahmad b. Husayn al-‘Attas, was

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religious figures were merchants at the same time.

<sup>7</sup> Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, 1900-1942*, Singapore, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 57 and personal observation of the present writer. There is another shrine in Singapore, and the present writer assumes that one can find others in various places in Southeast Asia.

<sup>8</sup> The present writer has confirmed that *hawls* are held at least in Pekalongan, Bogor and Tegal and observed the Pekalongan *hawl* in November 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Ali b. Husayn al-‘Attas, *Taj al-A‘ras fi Manaqib al-Habib al-Qutb Salih b. ‘Abd Allah al-‘Attas*. 2 vols. Kudus (Indonesia): Matba‘a Manara Kudus (henceforth *Taj al-A‘ras*).



born in Hadramawt, studied in his homeland and the Hijaz and migrated to Indonesia. He established himself in the city of Jakarta as a religious figure and died in 1976. The book is written in Arabic language and consists of two volumes (each of which contains around 800 pages). It is dedicated to the life of a sufi and scholar in Hadramawt, Salih b. ‘Abd Allah al-‘Attas (d. 1862/3) who lived in the village of ‘Amd. However, it contains the biographies of more than two hundred fifty persons who were the teachers, the contemporaries and the students of Salih al-‘Attas. Thus it also serves as the compilation of the biographies of Hadrami ‘*ulama*’ in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.<sup>10</sup>

We have to address problems using a bio-hagiographical literature for a historical study.<sup>11</sup> Although it contains a description of past events, the contents are distorted because it is written to serve the cult of saints. The main focus of *manaqib* works are the special characteristics (*akhlaq*), wonderful achievements (*karama*), and inspired utterances (*kalam*) of departed scholars and *sufis*. The events described in *manaqibs* are often embellished with miracles ascribed to these religious figures. The stories on miracles are highly stereotyped; they contain events such as curing disease, knowing the death of a person in a distant place and the like. In this regard, it cannot be considered as a “transparent record” of the past. In fact, the present writer was advised by some Arab residents not to use *manaqibs* for historical study because, according to them, one can find no historical information there.<sup>12</sup> However, those stories occasionally contain elements that give readers keys to understand the society in which such saints lived. Therefore, *manaqibs* should not be excluded from historical sources just because

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<sup>10</sup> *Taj al-A‘ras* seems to be widely circulating in Hadramawt and among Arab residents in Southeast Asia, as the present writer saw the book in various places in the both regions.

<sup>11</sup> For the difficulty of using biographies for historical studies, see J.S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communications with Arab residents during my research trip to Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, 2000-2001.



of the problem of the historicity of their contents.

Moreover, *manaqibs* are precious sources for family history. It is generally recognized by the specialists of this field that the networks of Hadrami emigrants in the Indian Ocean operated through blood relationships. Thus the study of family is essential if one tries to do research on their networks. The problem is how to collect information on a family. It is true that ordinary historical records such as chronicles, colonial archives and periodicals contain some records on the situation of a certain family. However, that kind of fragmentary information is not enough, and researchers have to rely on biographical works (i.e. *manaqibs*) in order to reconstruct the comprehensive history of a family. Although the present writer cannot, and does not pretend to, suggest the way such works should be analyzed for a historical study, he would like to emphasize the importance of studying *manaqibs* to understand the history of Arab migration in the Indian Ocean.

### **Stories on Arab Saints and Local Authorities**

Now, let us discuss two stories in which Arab saintly figures contacted with local authorities. It is necessary to point out that, in *Taj al-A'ras*, there are various kinds of stories about saints, and those about their relationships with local authorities occupy just a fraction of the whole book. The reason why the present writer pays attention to that kind of stories is that they tell us how saints were expected to act vis-à-vis secular powers. By doing so, a comparison with non-saintly Arabs becomes possible, and the lives of the saints can be put in perspective.

(1) Story 1: Ahmad b. Muhammad Bin Hamza al-‘Attas and a Dutch Police.



The first saintly figure to be introduced is Ahmad b. Muhammad al-‘Attas (d. 1886) of Batavia.<sup>13</sup> He was born in the village of al-Khurayba in Hadramawt and migrated to the Dutch East Indies in the mid-nineteenth century. According to *Taj al-A‘ras*, the key factor behind his decision to leave the homeland was the loss of his property after a dispute. It was Salih b. ‘Abd Allah al-‘Attas (the above-mentioned sufi and scholar for whom *Taj al-A‘ras* was written) who recommended mentally unstable Ahmad to go to Java. Listening to Salih’s advice, Ahmad first went to the Hijaz and then traveled around Java, Timor, Sulawesi and Madura. In every place in Southeast Asia, he studied under Hadrami ‘*ulama*’. Finally, he settled in Batavia and built a *zawiya*-mosque in 1877/8 in the district of Pekojan. However, in his final years, Ahmad returned to al-Khurayba, his home village in Hadramawt. Just before his death, he asked to be brought to ‘Amd, where his teacher Salih b. ‘Abd Allah al-‘Attas was buried, and died there. The *zawiya*-mosque of Ahmad b. Muhammad Bin Hamza al-‘Attas still exists in Jakarta, though it is maintained by another Hadrami *sada* family. Ahmad b. Muhammad did not leave descendants in Southeast Asia.

Concerning his relationship with the local authorities, following story is related.

One of the miracles of the protagonist of the biography (i.e. Ahmad b. Muhammad al-‘Attas) which spread among the people of Batavia, Arabs or non-Arabs, is (the episode of) the wife of a Dutch police chief who fell sick. Her condition was so serious that famous doctors could not do anything but wait for her death. Then some of the police chief’s Muslim assistants informed him about Ahmad b. Muhammad al-‘Attas. The police chief came to him, knelt before him and explained the condition of his wife. Ahmad became anxious (about her) and told him not to worry. He then gave the police chief water over which he read a verse of al-Qur’an and spat. The wife drank the water and was cured. The police chief continued to glorify Ahmad even after the saint’s death: he came to the night of Khatm<sup>14</sup> at the *zawiya* of Pekojan in the month of Ramadan every year, bringing with him uniformed police squad.

<sup>13</sup> The biographical information on Ahmad b. Muhammad al-‘Attas comes from *Taj al-A‘ras*, vol. 2, pp. 514-532 unless mentioned otherwise.

<sup>14</sup> A ceremony of reading the al-Qur’an all through. The Khatm session at the *zawiya*-mosque of Pekojan was started by Ahmad b. Muhammad al-‘Attas.



They guarded the zawiya until the end of the ceremony. During his lifetime, the police chief used to prepare sugared water at his own expense for all those who gathered at the zawiya on the night. He continued to do that for so long time that the Arabs remember his name and rank. Those who missed the Khatm used to ask those present whether “Skaut Heine”<sup>15</sup> came to the gathering. The answer was “Yes, (he will do that) until his death.”<sup>16</sup>

(2) Story 2: Ahmad b. ‘Abd Allah b. Talib al-‘Attas and a Dutch Police.

Another al-‘Attas saint who demonstrated his miraculous powers to a local authority is Ahmad b. ‘Abd Allah b. Talib al-‘Attas.<sup>17</sup> He was born in al-Hajarayn, Hadramawt, in 1839/40. His education started in Hadramawt, but he went to the Hijaz after the death of his father and stayed there for twelve years, studying under Ahmad b. Zayni Dahlan (d. 1886)<sup>18</sup> and other ‘*ulama*’. Finally, he went to Java and established himself as religious figure in Pekalongan, a city on the northern coast of Java. Unlike Ahmad b. Muhammad al-‘Attas, Ahmad b. ‘Abd Allah b. Talib remained in Java and died in Pekalongan in 1929. After his death, a shrine was built, and his son ‘Ali started the *hawl* of Ahmad, which still attracts thousands of participants each year.<sup>19</sup> Currently, ‘Abd Allah al-Baqir al-‘Attas, the great grandson of Ahmad b. ‘Abd Allah, takes care of the shrine.<sup>20</sup>

Like above-mentioned Ahmad b. Muhammad, Ahmad b. ‘Abd Allah b. Talib al-‘Attas is said to have had a contact with the local authorities. *Taj al-A‘ras* says:

Ahmad b. Talib was known for his strictness about the clothes of Muslim women. People of the town knew well about that, and women never walked on the street

<sup>15</sup> The present writer has not checked this name with a Dutch. In the original text, this name is spelled as “هَيْتِي تَو الفسَلَا”.

<sup>16</sup> *Taj al-A‘ras*, vol. 2, pp. 525-526. Translation by the present writer.

<sup>17</sup> The biography of Ahmad b. ‘Abd Allah b. Talib al-‘Attas is based on *Taj al-A‘ras*, vol. 2, pp. 310-330.

<sup>18</sup> A scholar in Mecca who became the Mufti of the Shafi‘is and Shaykh al-‘Ulama’ of that city in 1871. Many Hadrami scholars studied under him. See EI2, “Dahlan, Sayyid Ahmad b. Zayni.”

<sup>19</sup> Personal observation of the present writer, November 11, 2000. The majority of the participants of the *hawl* were Indonesians including the students of nearby religious schools.

<sup>20</sup> His genealogy is ‘Abd Allah al-Baqir b. Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Ahmad b. ‘Abd Allah b. Talib al-‘Attas.



between his house and the mosque without completely covering their bodies. One day, a foreign woman, apparently not knowing the situation, was walking on the street in imported dress without covering her head. She encountered Ahmad b. Talib, and he immediately shouted to her and hit her with his stick. For Ahmad, it was a duty he had to fulfill. People gathered around her and explained the situation, persuading her to forget about that matter. She, however, went to the police station headed by a Dutch. The police chief ordered his Javanese Muslim assistants to take Ahmad in, though they knew Ahmad well and declined to follow the order. The police chief became interested in Ahmad and went to his house by himself. He saw Ahmad on the street but returned to his office without doing anything. He said, "At first, I decided to arrest him, but I saw two savage lions on both sides of him." The Dutch police chief told the woman to go to the Javanese prince. The prince also knew Ahmad very well and did nothing except for paying a small amount of money to the woman as compensation.<sup>21</sup>

What can be said from the above stories? First of all, the present writer does not discuss whether such events really happened. For the followers of saints, the historicity of such events is not important. This does not mean that they blindly believe in miracles described in *manaqibs*. Nor are they an "ignorant" group of people; the followers of a saint are often well-educated and high-class people. They just implement a different set of mind when dealing with the life history of their ancestors or spiritual masters who had saintly character.<sup>22</sup> In other words, asking the historicity of miraculous events is irrelevant to them.

It is interesting that the authorities who witnessed the miraculous powers of the Arab saints are always Dutch policemen. In the first story, an Arab figure cured a disease of the wife of a Dutch police chief by means of a miracle. In the second one, Ahmad b. 'Abd Allah al-'Attas avoided being arrested by showing lions to a Dutch police chief. Policemen were the authorities whom ordinary people, including Hadrami immigrants, encountered on the street. Also, they were notorious among the immigrants for their

<sup>21</sup> *Taj al-A'ras*, vol. 2, pp. 314-316. Translation by the present writer.

<sup>22</sup> In this sense, sainthood can be a subject of psychological analysis. For a psychological approach to the sainthood, see Katherine Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997.





abusive behavior. Police authority thus appeared in the eyes of Hadrami immigrants as the symbols of European domination and arrogance. Stories of driving away or granting a favor to the Dutch policemen must have made a strong impact on readers. The story of Ahmad b. ‘Abd Allah in Pekalongan is still mentioned during his *hawl* as an example of how rigidly he followed *shari‘a*.<sup>23</sup>

In bio-hagiographical literature, stories on contacts between saints and secular powers are not uncommon. In the case of the al-‘Attas family, for example, its founder ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Rahman (d. 1661) is said to have shown a miracle to the Sultan of Hadramawt, Badr b. ‘Abd Allah al-Kathiri (d. 1664/5), in order to avoid drinking coffee which the sultan made for him.<sup>24</sup> In another occasion, ‘Umar al-‘Attas convinced the Sultan not to use force against the Zaydis of Yemen when they came to Hadramawt in 1659/60.<sup>25</sup> In India, one Muhammad b. Ahmad al-‘Attas is said to have established a good relationship with a local king. According to a story, he owned a large plot of land near Bombay. It was given by an Indian non-Muslim king, who gave his confidence to Muhammad and frequently visited him. When the king died, people cremated him, but the hand of the king which Muhammad had touched when they shook hands remained unburned. People were frightened at the incident and built a dome over the hand.<sup>26</sup> In some of this kind of stories, miracles play important roles in defining the relationship between saints and secular powers. However, in other stories, miracles are nowhere to be found; the “saints” exercise their influence by means of his own authority or political power.

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<sup>23</sup> Personal observation, November 11, 2000, Pekalongan.

<sup>24</sup> Muhammad b. Hashim, *Tarikh al-Dawla al-Kathiriyya*, Cairo: n.d., 1948, p. 75.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> *Taj al-A‘ras*, vol. 1, pp. 358-359. In Islam, cremation is to be avoided, and this story is intended to show the superiority of Islam



In the case of the above-mentioned two saints, apart from miracles worked on behalf or against the officials, *Taj al-A'ras* does not mention the relationship between them and local authorities. Neither of the two had any formal post in the colonial administration system such as the head of Arab community. Nor did they serve as consultants or advisers to the authorities. In other words, miracles were the only element through which the two saints could form relationship with the authorities. Although some incidents which would develop into the above-mentioned stories may have really happened, it is quite possible that these saints, except that they were highly respected religious teachers, did not have any secular power to exercise their influence over secular authorities. They were first and foremost religious leaders or charismatic individuals who gained a popular following in their host societies.

### **Comparison: The Life of an Arab Entrepreneur**

The two figures introduced above do not necessarily represent the Arab notables of Southeast Asia at that time. As already mentioned above, there were Arabs who became local rulers in at least three places. In the case of religious figures, Said Oesman ('Uthman b. 'Abd Allah Bin Yahya), a Batavian-born Arab '*ulama*', was appointed by the Dutch colonial government as an Honorary Advisor on Arab Affairs in 1891 and later assumed the position of unofficial yet Dutch created position of the Mufti of Batavia in 1897.<sup>27</sup>

Other than these figures, the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries witnessed the emergence of Arab entrepreneurs who aimed at the modernization of the

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The umma below the winds*, London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003 pp. 85-88. For Said Oesman, also see Azyumardi Azra, "A Hadhrami Religious Scholar in Indonesia: Sayyid 'Uthman," in Freitag and Clarence-Smith 1997, pp. 249-263.



Muslim community. One example of such figure is ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi b. ‘Abd Allah al-‘Attas (d. 1929).<sup>28</sup> He was born to a wealthy Arab family in Batavia sometime in the mid-nineteenth century. He received basic education in Batavia and continued his study in the Hijaz and Hadramawt. That course was not so different from other Arabs, including religious figures. The difference was that he took a tour of Muslim states such as Egypt, Syria and the Ottoman Empire and came to recognize the miserable conditions under which Muslims were put. He realized the importance of modernizing Muslim community and was concerned about the education of Muslim children. He established relationships with reform-minded persons in the Middle East and the Dutch East Indies including Haji Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah. Taking over the family business, ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi al-‘Attas financially supported Muslim reform organizations. In 1901, he jointly founded Jam‘iyyat Khayr, an organization intended for the modernization of the Arab community and giving modern-style education to Arab children in Batavia. He also founded his own school, the “al-‘Attas school” in 1912 and invited a Tunisian teacher.<sup>29</sup> All of his four sons were sent to Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium, France, the Ottoman Empire and others) to study. They later became engineer, medical doctor, agriculturalist and businessman. The family of ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi established a good relationship with Dutch officers. ‘Abd Allah himself was a close friend of C. Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), a Dutch Orientalist and advisor on Islamic affairs for the East Indies government from 1889 to 1906. They first met in the Hijaz, and

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<sup>28</sup> The biography of ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi al-‘Attas is mainly based on newspaper *Borobudur* (Batavia), no. 36 (January 10, 1922); newspaper *Hadramawt* (Surabaya), no. 202 (June 29, 1929); Oriental and India Office Collection, The British Library, R/20/A/1409, “Index of Arabs in the Netherlands East Indies, Anti-British and Friendly” (henceforth “Index of Arabs”); A. Wright and O.T. Breakspear eds., *Twentieth Century Impressions of Netherlands India*, London: Lloyds Greater Britain Publishing Co., 1909, p. 482 unless mentioned otherwise.

<sup>29</sup> According to the “Index of Arabs,” school had ceased operation by 1919.



the friendship continued until the death of ‘Abd Allah in 1929. Two of his sons, Isma‘il and Muhammad, were appointed the members of *Volksraad* (People’s Council during the Dutch colonial period) in 1918 and 1931 respectively. ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi al-‘Attas was one of the most renowned Arabs in Batavia in his time.

An interesting point of ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi is that, although he was a prominent figure in Arab community, his life is nowhere to be found in *Taj al-A‘ras* or other *manaqibs*. The present writer obtained information on his life from British colonial archives, Arabic newspapers published in Southeast Asia and an account of the Dutch East Indies written in English.<sup>30</sup> In other words, he is largely ignored by the writers of *manaqibs*, even though ‘Abd Allah had an extensive knowledge of Islam. That does not mean that his life history is being forgotten or intentionally ignored by ‘*ulama*’; as far as the present writer knows, the members of the al-‘Attas family in Indonesia are proud of the achievements ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi al-‘Attas as much as those of saintly figures.<sup>31</sup> One of the reasons for his absence in *manaqibs* is that he was not in the chain of transmission of religious knowledge. Usually, the *manaqib* of a saintly figure is written by his follower(s) after the death of the master. ‘Abd Allah exerted himself in educating Muslims, founding his own schools, but did not have “disciples” in the sense of traditional religious teaching. Thus, no comprehensive biography of ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi has been written, and if one would like to know his life history, he/she has to consult various kinds of sources for only fragmentary pieces of information.

### **Concluding Remarks**

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<sup>30</sup> See foot note 28.

<sup>31</sup> Personal observation during my research in Indonesia in 2000-2001. Even the descendants of Ahmad b. ‘Abd Allah b. Talib al-‘Attas of Pekalongan were proud of his family’s producing a person like ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi al-‘Attas.



One may notice that the worlds described in the stories of two saints and the life of ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi al-‘Attas are very different despite the fact that the three figures lived in roughly the same period. The main reason for the difference is source materials. The Arab saintly figures do not usually appear in colonial archives, travel accounts, and other “secular” materials. On the other hand, practical figures such as ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Alawi al-‘Attas are in most cases ignored by the authors of *manaqibs* since their lives lie outside the scope of that literary genre. The absence of practical figures in *manaqibs* on the one hand, as well as the absence of the saintly figures in other documents on the other, makes it difficult to compare these two types of members of Arab community. In society at large, entrepreneurs, politicians, social activists and other practical figures are more famous than religious scholars and saints. However, when it comes to writing family history, the persons more favored than others are ‘*ulama*’, sufis and saints. Even the recent literary works about the al-‘Attas family (many of them are Malay or Indonesian) deal not with practical figures but with great “holy” ancestors of the past.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, the “history” of the al-‘Attas family has been, and will be, the history of ‘*ulama*’ and saints that is recorded in *manaqibs*.

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<sup>32</sup> For example, Syed Hassan bin Muhammad al-Attas, *‘Umar bin ‘Abd al-Rahman: Kisah dan Sejarah al-Qutub al-Anfas al-Habib ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Rahman Pengasas Ratib al-‘Attas*, 2 vols. Singapore: Masjid Ba'alawi. (2nd ed.), 2001 and Abdurrahman bin Syech al-Atas, *Tanwirul Qulub wal Hawas: Riwayat Hidup Singkat Al-‘Alam An-Nibras Al-Habib Umar bin Abdurrahman Al-Atas Al-Alawy Al-Huseiny Al-Hadhramy*. Jakarta: n.d., n.d. (2000?).

