

**SONS OF THE ‘HOLY LAND’
A CASE STUDY OF AN URBAN ARAB COMMUNITY IN
LOMBOK, INDONESIA**

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The Arab community of Lombok, in the West Nusa Tenggara province of Indonesia, is a unique ethnic minority group revered for its role in the history of religion on the island. This role forms the basis of its integration into the shared cultural heritage of Mataram, the capital city of Lombok, where the title of Islam forms a main identifying aspect for the indigenous Sasak majority. The Arab community is accepted based on its religious tradition, particularly because Islam is a significant and inseparable part of Lombok Arab identity and cultural heritage.

Over 4,500 Arab descendants reside on Lombok, which is about 0.5 per cent of the island's population. An estimated 95 per cent of which migrated during the early twentieth century from Hadramaut in South Yemen (Clegg, 2000). The contemporary Arab community is integrated and accepted on religious criteria, however it also maintains a cultural exclusiveness from the wider society that prevents cultural immersion and restricts inter-ethnic interactions within the Mataram community.

Arab heritage and Islamic religious traditions

The revered history of Arab traders attributed with proselytising various religious traditions is common throughout Indonesia. The numerous trends of Islamic religious tradition that flourished in Indonesia over the centuries generally reflected religious trends emerging in the Middle East during the same period. In Lombok, the Arab descendants are attributed with introducing several variations of Islamic tradition, but most renowned for introducing the mainstream Islamic religious tradition.



The Arab community in Lombok is further defined by religious distinctions, either descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (Sayyid) or non-Sayyid. According to local histories, Sayyid maintained a presence in Lombok since the sixteenth century. With them came the non-mystical teachings of the Shafi School of Sunni, which over-laid the mystical Javanese style of Sufi'ism (Zakaria, 1998:137). The majority of Lombok's Muslim community believe Sayid Duhri Al-Haddad Al-Hadrami, a trader as well as a da'i (proselytiser), initially introduced Islam to Lombok during the later part of the Selaparang Kingdom, in the late seventeenth century.

By the seventeenth century, several Arab traders resided in the western Lombok ports acting as chief advisers to the ruling Balinese noblemen. The Balinese required Arab traders to manage the ports, because trade was largely in Muslim Arab control during this period (Cool, 1897:182). The distinguished role of traders in western Lombok positioned the Arabs with a higher social status, which was strengthened by Sasak admiration for their link to the 'authentic' teachings of the holy-land. This status was maintained by the Arab community, and also in the social memory of the contemporary wider community.

Pursuing the Holy Land

Not all Islamic religious traditions were directly connected to Arab traders, although there was a continuous theme of Arab influence. Religious mystical rituals and ceremonies as performed by the *tarekat* (path for mystics, generally *Sufi'ism*) were revitalised, in particular the *Naqsyabandiyah* order of *Sufi'ism* from the mid-nineteenth century (Azra, 1994:95). The *Naqsyabandiyah* mystical order was named after its founder Baha ad-bin Naqsyabandiyah in the fourteenth century. The revived teachings were concerned with orthodox ritual and were oriented towards *Shariah*. These teachings had a large following in Lombok and were strengthened by the influx in Sasak pilgrims returning from Mecca during this period (Kraan, 1980:231n8).

From the late nineteenth century until 1902, Dutch Government restrictions on Indonesians partaking in the religious pilgrimage to Mecca resulted in many *Haji* travelling via Singapore, where the British colonialists did not impose restrictions on pilgrimages, and the travel route was cheaper than directly from Indonesia. In Singapore there was also a considerably large Arab Hadrami community, who also had a significant influence on the local Singapore Malay



community that were in direct competition and daily interaction with the Chinese communities and were deeply conscious of their religious identity (Ricklefs, 1993:168).

From the late nineteenth century there was also an influx of Arab migrants arriving in Java from Hadramaut, and then moving to the outer islands. This influx was a response to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the growing stagnation of the political situation in the Hadramaut. Many left their land to join the thriving commercial communities in Aden, Singapore and Indonesia. The continuous flow of Arab migration, with the possible maintenance of relations with their homeland, as well as the growing number of Malay-Indonesian pilgrimages, enabled a constant reiteration of contemporary Muslim thought to circulate through Indonesian cities (Lombard, 1996.2:72). There was a new wave of migrants following Dutch control in 1894, which strengthened revivalist influences and teachings that were prevalent throughout the Middle East, Singapore and Java from the nineteenth century. This included the 'modernist' teachings of Jamal ad-Din ad-Afghani (1839-97), Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935) and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) (Johansen, 1996:12-21).

The recent decline in respect shown towards the Arab community's 'holy' origins is related to the increase in Sasak religious education and the number of Sasak religious teachers. The number of Sasak pilgrimages to Mecca from Lombok grows annually and Muslims who return from their pilgrimage acquire the title *Haji*, which gains a great deal of respect from Mataram's local community. The title *Tuan Guru* is the most honoured name given to the Islamic teachers within a community. This prominent position can only be achieved through community support and an individual's dedication to his or her beliefs. While it does not reflect status, caste, as *Tuan Guru* is Lombok's title for Islamic leaders, it does reflect ethnicity, as most *Tuan Guru* are Sasak. Although *Tuan Guru* receive more respect by Sasak in East Lombok than in Mataram's urban setting, they still maintain key positions within the urban religious community, and therefore everyday society.

Religion And Ethnicity: Inseparable Identities

The indigenous Sasak respect and identify with Arabic language, culture, and tradition due to its link with the world religion of Islam. Religion acts as a historical continuity for the Arab community in Lombok, which can be compared with Nagata's findings regarding the Arab community in Malaysia. Nagata observed that Islam formed a 'supranational *ummat*', with Malays adopting Arab customs of foods and clothing (Nagata, 1982:132). This is similar to



Mataram, where Arab customs of foods, clothing, music, and language, are continuously popular. In Malaysia, Arab descendants are commonly considered by many Malays as the 'privileged inheritors of Islam by ancestry and culture' (Nagata, 1982:132). Historically, Sasak also perceived the local Arab in a similar light. The Arabic influence in Islamic culture enabled the Arab communities to maintain a strong connection with the Muslim majority, who traditionally had looked to the Arab community for religious guidance. Although these days the Arab community is no longer as respected as it once was and there is now an array of Sasak attitudes toward the Arab descendants, varying from respect to distrust. While the Arab communities are still recognised as a part of Mataram's religious community other cultural factors intervene to contribute to the degree to which integration occurs.

Various traditional aspects of Arab culture are maintained by the contemporary Arab community in Lombok, and, despite the ethnic group's decline in reverence, have also been incorporated into the local urban culture. The traditional Arab *sambra* dance and the Arab *gambus* guitar are regularly performed to entertain Mataram citizens. In terms of marriage rites, Mataram Sasak increasingly *melamar*, the practice of formally asking the permission of the father of the woman the man wishes to marry. *Melamar* is a replication of the Arab tradition of the same name, however many Mataram Sasak regard *melamar* as an Islamic prescription, rather than a traditional Arab custom, because the Koran indicates this to be the correct form of marriage.

Another tradition practised by the Lombok Arab, which is becoming increasingly popular for the Mataram Sasak is *malam pancar* (an evening of henna tattooing). This Arab and Indian tradition is customarily a celebration of the bride's separation from her family and friends, and held several nights prior to her wedding. *Pancar* are henna designs temporarily tattooed on the hands of the Lombok Arab brides to be. The actual origin of *malam pancar* is locally debated and while *pancar* (henna body tattooing) is practiced in the Hadramaut, South Yemen, the origin of most Lombok Arab, there it was a daily practice, not specific to wedding customs. *Malam pancar* has uniquely transformed into a new tradition that is celebrated by many brides from various ethnic groups in Mataram. This adaptation of contemporary Arab fashions by Mataram community is a result of the high level of interaction and integration of cultures.



Some Arab traditions are also unpopular with the local community, and strengthen the sense of cultural exclusiveness, particularly the Arab specific cultural beliefs that prevent inter-ethnic marriages. Traditionally, Arab women were culturally prohibited from marrying non-Arab descendants in order to maintain strong ethnic bloodlines. Intermarriages were common between Arab men with Sasak women, although rarely between Sasak men with Arab women. Despite the marriage between Arab men and Sasak women, cultural integration was rare, due to differences in economic status, historical restrictions imposed by the colonial administration, designated living districts (the *Kampung Arab*) and Lombok Arab pride in maintaining their strong ethnic cultures and identities. The contemporary Arab community is not as rigorous, however it is still common for an Arab descendant to marry another Arab descendant.

Sons of the ‘Holy Land’

Arab identity in Lombok was maintained and strengthened by its historical link and connection to Islamic related tradition, which maintains a significant influence in the local Muslim identity. In contemporary Lombok, respect for the sons of the Holy Land in relation to their forefather’s perceived role in proselytising Islam has declined in the urban multi-ethnic city of Mataram. Over the last century, large numbers of the Sasak community have undertaken their pilgrimage and returned as revered religious leaders, who pertain more to Islamic or Arab cultural practices than that of the Arab descendants. The cultural influences are considered to be religious, and not attributed to the contemporary Arab descendants’ heritage.

The Arab community continue to be generally respected for their historical role in religious proselytising, however the Arab cultural trends in contemporary society do not imply that the Arab community maintains the admiration of the Muslim community. The cultural influences adapted by the wider community are considered to be religious, and not attributed to the contemporary Arab descendants’ heritage. The wider urban community of Lombok increasingly disassociate the contemporary Arab community with religious tradition. Perceptions of Arab culture are mainly of social exclusiveness and an unwillingness to immerse culturally with the local community.



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