

## The genealogy of the Hadhrami Arabs in Southeast Asia – the ‘Alawi family

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### Abstract:

*Genealogy is an important aspect in the life of individuals from the family group called ‘Alawi of Ba ‘Alawi, whose first descendant hailed from the region of Hadhramaut, at the southern coast of Arabia, in present-day Yemen. The author is from this group of Arabs who are strict in keeping their genealogy and family trees.*

*Living in Southeast Asia, members of the ‘Alawi family are part of the well-researched Hadhrami diaspora, where genealogical texts and activities evolved side by side. One major factor that brings about this strictness in keeping their genealogy is because the group can trace their ancestry to the prophet of Islam, Prophet Muhammad and from there the genealogical lineage was established to the first human being, Prophet Adam.*

*However in the course of the Hadhrami diaspora there are multiple other factors which contributed to this keeping of the genealogy that had become structured and institutionalised. The first part of the paper will attempt to trace the effects of the diaspora in this respect, while the second part of the paper will cover the author’s personal journey in tracing her roots amidst this long history of migration.*

**Keywords:** Genealogy, Hadhrami ‘Alawi diaspora, Hadhramaut.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Genealogy is an important aspect in the life of individuals from the family group called 'Alawi or Ba 'Alawi, whose first descendant hailed from the region of Hadhramaut, at the southern coast of Arabia, in present-day Yemen. I am from this group of Arabs, who are strict in keeping their genealogy and family trees.

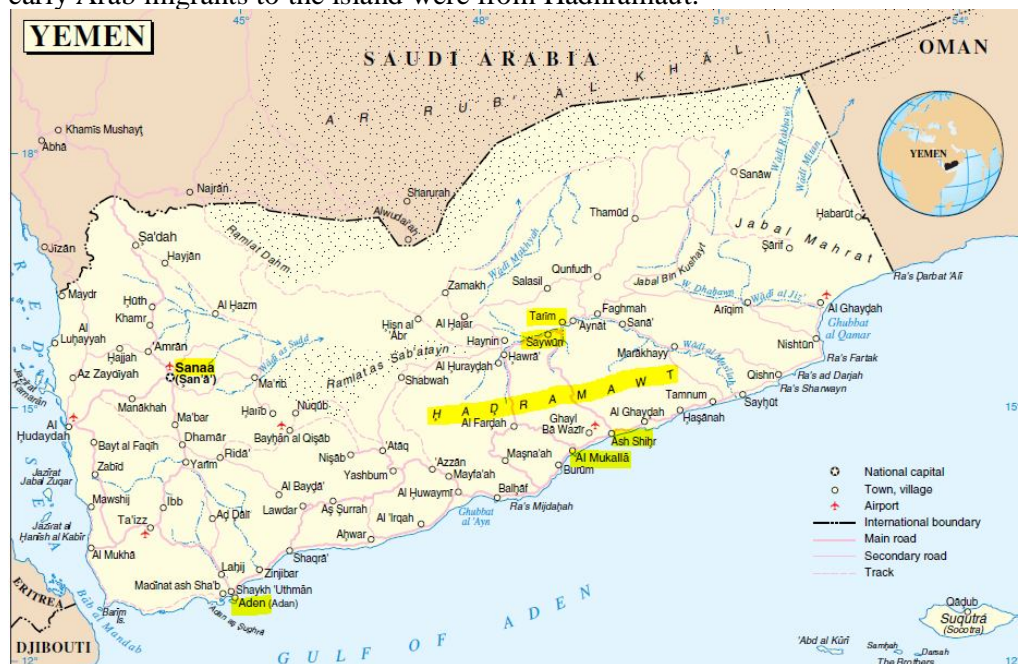
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However in the course of the Hadhrami diaspora there are multiple other factors which contributed to this keeping of the genealogy that had become structured and institutionalised. The first part of the paper will attempt to trace the effects of the diaspora in this respect, while the second part of the paper will cover my personal journey in tracing my roots amidst this long history of migration.

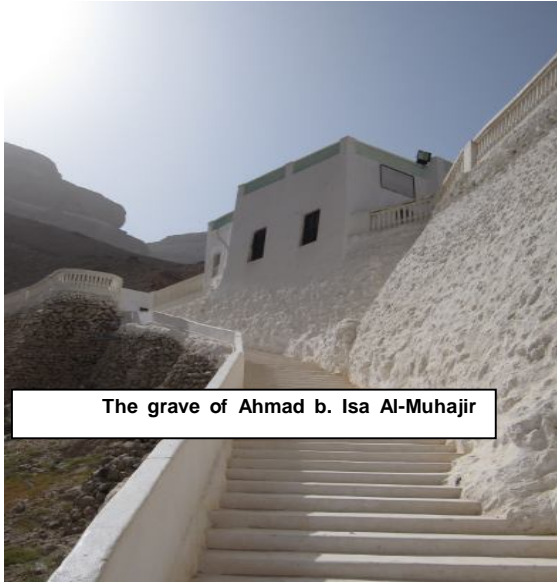
# 2 ORIGIN OF THE 'ALAWI FAMILY

The 'Alawi family was named after 'Alawi, who was one of the grandsons of Ahmad bin Isa Al-Muhajir, the 10<sup>th</sup> descendant of Prophet Muhammad. Ahmad bin Isa first migrated from Basrah, Iraq to Hadhramaut in the year 956 AD.<sup>1</sup>

His descendants formed the various Hadhrami Arab families with surnames that are well-known in the Southeast Asia region – for example Alattas, Aljunied, Alhaddad, Alkaff and Alsagoff. Hence in Singapore, as in the other Southeast Asian countries, almost all of the early Arab migrants to the island were from Hadhramaut.<sup>2</sup>



When Ahmad Al-Muhajir first arrived in Hadhramaut with his family, the locals questioned this new arrival's genealogical descent from the Prophet Mohamad. That challenge started the process where trusted Hadhrami pilgrims to Mecca verified the claims with pilgrims coming from Iraq. The process of verification was as strict as the practice of recording the sayings (*hadith*) of Prophet Mohamad whereby the trusted persons must fulfil as many as 20 criteria on his character (*al-sanad*) and the text he conveyed (*al-matan*).



After his origins was verified, Ahmad Al-Muhajir ensured his genealogical records were well kept by his family. Three of his descendants forged the foundation that established the 'Alawi way which led to the practice of systematic keeping of the 'Alawi family genealogy.

Muhammad Al-Faqih Al-Muqaddam (d. 1255) who initiated the sayyid, Sufi 'Alawi way.

Abdurrahman Alsaggaf (d. 1416) who created the ritual form of the Sufi 'Alawi complex.

Omar Al-Muhdhar (d.1430) who first established the "Naqbatul Ashraf" (the brotherhood of the sharif or sayyid) which was the first formal *sayyid* association.<sup>3</sup>

### 3 THE 'ALAWI GENEALOGY

With the establishment of the Sufi 'Alawi way, the tradition of keeping ones family tree became something beyond just a patrilineal genealogy. It was the unveiling of the genealogy of Prophet Muhammad and not just mere listing of names. This is well explained by Mohammad b. Abi Bakar Al-Shilli (d. 1682) in the introduction of his book "The irrigating fount: biographical virtues of the 'Alawi Sayyids":

*"The science of genealogy is a grand art. It is part of the sciences of Prophetic hadith (sayings of the Prophet). The Prophet had said: 'Learn from your genealogies of your kinsfolk (arham) attached to them, for the bond of kinship (silatur-rahim) is love in family, riches in property and merit in the afterlife.' ..... Among its legal boons are descendants, suitability in marriage (kafa'a), avoidance of marriage with those prohibited, providing for those to whom one is obliged, knowledge of the female/matrilateral kin whom one is commanded to visit regularly and aid".<sup>4</sup>*

The genealogical text became a religious treaty from where a person knows who he/she can/cannot marry, how much inheritance to be distributed in accordance to the Islamic law of inheritance and who among the relatives deserve to be visited regularly and assisted. The Sufi 'Alawi way also resulted in these genealogical texts to contain mysticism and stories of great ancestors with Tarim, Hadhramaut as the focal point.

When the 'Alawis *sayyids* migrated out of Hadhramaut across the Indian Ocean to the west coast of India, east coast of Africa and further away to Southeast Asia, these texts "travelled" with them. Because the noble lineage of these *sayyids* who were descendants of the prophet, they received special treatment in the countries they reside in. Many of the early migrant

Hadhrami *sayyids* who were mostly males, were taken in as respected teachers, judges and saints of Islam in palaces of the royalties who had embraced the new religion. The favourable treatment, especially given by the Malay and Bugis Sultanate, include some of the *sayyids* being married into the royal families and a few became Sultan themselves (for example the Bin Shihab Sultan of Siak Sultanate in Riau, and the Al-Qadri Sultan of the Pontianak Sultanate in Borneo).

The intermarriages of the Hadhrami *sayyids* with the local added on to the ‘Alawi genealogical text making it almost like a map of the Hadhrami diaspora itself. But it is a one-way affair since *kafa’a* rule allows only the *sayyids* to marry the *sharifah* (the feminine equivalent of *sayyids* - these titles are used for the ‘Alawi families only in Southeast Asia region) – although the *sayyids* are free to marry women out of the ‘Alawi circle.

#### 4 GENEALOGY IN THE DIASPORA

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were more migrants coming from the non-*sayyid* group – known as *shaykh* and called themselves the *Irshadi* group. There was a challenge on the status that the *sayyids* received and the *kafa’a* rule itself which led to the ‘Alawi-Irshadi struggle,<sup>5</sup> especially in the Dutch Indies (present-day Indonesia) where the Sultanates were as we mentioned. When the *Rabithah ‘Alawiyah* (Arab Association) was formed in Jakarta in 1928, a centre to look after the genealogy of the ‘Alawi family was created soon after. It is called the ‘*Alawiyin* Statistical Center. The centre issues family tree posters and passports (containing a summary of the family tree) for those who request for them. One can fill in a form, pay a nominal fee to get one’s genealogy checked and get the poster/passport produced. To do this, one has to give at least 5 names of one’s ancestors as the ‘Alawis are fond of naming their off springs after their ancestors. This is the link to the website where an online application can be made: <http://www.rabithah-alawiyah.org/id/urusan-nasabmaktab-daimi/> .

The above issue of the *kafa’a* was one reason for the need to structure this process of keeping the ‘Alawi genealogy. There was also the economic reason which started with the activities of the Hadhrami Arabs in Southeast Asia especially in Singapore in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These Hadhrami Arabs were among the first to see opportunities in investing in properties that many investments were put in them. We saw wills of these wealthy Hadhrami Arabs that would list down properties they owned in the most valuable areas.

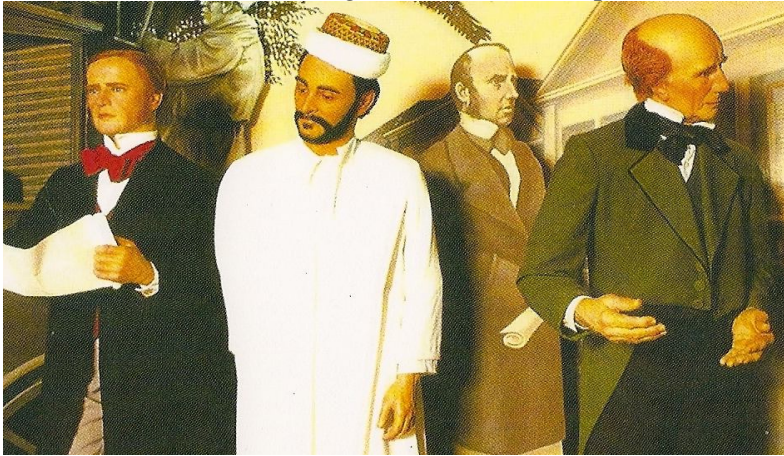
These elders chose the legal form of family trusts under the English law and translated it to the Islamic private endowment or *waqaf*.<sup>6</sup> Many of these *waqaf* are still being managed and descendants are still receiving benefits from these endowments. With intermarriages across the diaspora and movement of families between Hadhramaut and the diaspora, there was a need to establish one’s genealogy, especially where there were incidents of false claims made upon some of the *waqaf*.



## 5 BEHIND THE NAME ALJUNIED

The journey into tracing my genealogy started when I was part of the research team working on the Rihlah – Arabs in Southeast Asia exhibition project. The project was commissioned by the National Library of Singapore – here’s the link to the website and the virtual exhibition: <http://rihlah.nl.sg> ). For this project I had first visited Yemen in 2004 and to Indonesia (Palembang & Solo in late 2009) for research and to source for artifacts. Subsequently I had made 4 more trips to Yemen between 2006 and 2009.

My research was also sparked by the many questions that I regularly received for having a famous surname “Aljunied”. In Singapore there is a road named Aljunied Road and a train station called the Aljunied MRT Station. One of the electoral divisions is also named the “Aljunied Group Representation Constituency”. In the Singapore Images museum in the Sentosa Island off Singapore, there is a wax figure of Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied standing next to British officials and traders, Alexander Laurie Johnston and Turnbull Thomson. Behind him is Alexander Guthrie. The figures showed how the Hadhrami Arab traders were involved in the global trading scenes in their diaspora.



Syed Omar Aljunied was born in Tarim, Hadhramaut. There was no record to confirm the exact year of his birth but some historians estimated it to be in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> He had 2 brothers, Ahmad and Abdullah. He was married to a lady from the Alkaff family, Sharifah ‘Alwiyah binte Abdullah and they had 2 daughters and 5 sons. All of them were born in Singapore.

My relationship with this pioneer Arab in Singapore is through my paternal grandmother, Khadijah binte Abdul Rahman, whose father was the grandson of Syed Omar. Syed Omar and his descendants had contributed to the early development of Singapore, dealing in trade and properties, as well as social engagement with all the communities in Singapore<sup>8</sup> – see this article on him on this National Library of Singapore website Singapore InfoPedia: [http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP\\_847\\_2004-12-29.html](http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_847_2004-12-29.html) .

## 6 PERSONAL JOURNEY

Before Sir Stamford Raffles founded Singapore, Syed Omar’s uncle Syed Mohamad bin Haroon Aljunied had established himself as a successful trader in Palembang, Indonesia. Arab traders were welcomed by Raffles who encouraged them to set up business in Singapore and bring in the capital that the new land needed. Attracted by the news of a free port as

compared to the restriction imposed by the Dutch, Syed Mohamad sailed from Palembang to Singapore with his family and his nephew in 1819.<sup>9</sup>

When Syed Mohamad died in Singapore in the year 1824, his nephew took the responsibilities to look after his business and manage his wealth as well as Syed Mohamad's young son, Syed Ali Aljunied who later became Syed Omar's son-in-law.

When I was in Palembang in 2009, I was not able to meet any living Aljunied except for 2 boys (below 12 year-old) who were the sons of my dad's deceased cousin and his Palembang wife from the 'Alawi family. From personal sources, I found that besides the attractiveness of a conducive trading port, Syed Mohamad was not happy with some business dealings in the court of the Sultan in Palembang.

During the trip, I observed an interesting phenomena in the graveyards and mausoleum of famous Arabs and ulama' as well as those of the royalties. In most mausoleums, next to the grave of every Sultan or Prince of Palembang there would be a grave of a Hadhrami Arab (Aliydrus, Bin Shahab, Alsagoff, etc). This re-iterated the fact that these Hadhrami Arabs were well received by the Sultan who had appointed them as his prince's godfather and teacher. This was the pull-factor that attracted the Hadhrami Arabs to come to Palembang ever since the Sultan of Palembang became a Muslim in the late 18th Century.

The push-factor from Hadhramaut was the hardship in making a living there during those times due to the physical conditions as well as the constant political turmoil that hindered trades in Hadhramaut.

There were some Hadhrami Arabs who married into the royalties as we had discussed and from the research on my genealogy, one of Syed Omar's great grand-daughters was married into the Siak Sultanate of the Bin Shihab family. Following the tradition, all the *sharifah* of the earlier generation married a *sayyid*. If no suitable one was available, some relatives would be "imported" from the Hadhramaut as in the case of my paternal grandfather who was sent from Hadhramaut to marry my grandmother as well as to look after his father-in-law's property agency – a typical family business among the Hadhrami Arabs who acted as trustees in managing and distributing the property incomes among the families in the region as well as back in Hadhramaut.<sup>10</sup>

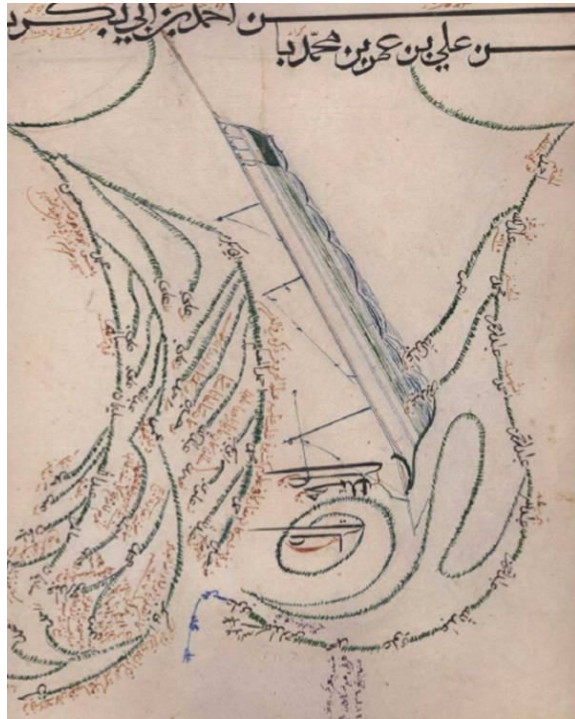
Many family records that I gathered affirmed these activities. They were many manuscripts of wills, power of attorney, correspondences of people moving between Singapore, Indonesia and Hadhramaut. The wills, for example, were full of names of beneficiaries that cross the ocean between the diaspora and the homeland. Detailed instructions were given with respect to ritual that had been practised by the ancestors in Hadhramaut.

## 7 TRACING THE ROOTS

Moving on further to where it all began, my trip to Hadhramaut. Tracing the history of the Aljunied family in Tarim, at least for the generation of Syed Omar, was not that easy since many of those ancestors had set up home in Singapore a long time ago. Since both my father and my mother were from the Aljunied branch of the 'Alawi, not much was gathered there, although some documents and genealogical texts originated from Singapore were still kept by relatives. These were brought back by the elders who had always the intention of going back to the "homeland". Throughout the family tree we see the mobility of these Hadhrami Arabs – born in Singapore, died in Tarim; born in Java, died in Tarim; and so on.

These movements brought about socio-cultural exchanges in both directions. In Tarim I saw many familiar things, especially the food. The staples were rice as compared to bread as in most other countries in the middle-east. The men wear "sarong" rather than the long white "*tuub*" or long robe. Even the language was affected when some Indonesian words were used for familiar things like "seterika" (for iron instead of the usual Arabic word "*mikwah*").





## 9 CHALLENGES

Besides the many family trees that a genealogist would copy for each family that request them, a typical genealogist would have multiple volumes of reference books containing genealogical texts and basic family trees of the 'Alawi family from the core genealogy of Ahmad bin Isa Almuhajir. Almost all of these references are in the Arabic language.

Hence a challenge that an individual genealogist like my brother in law, Syed Omar Alshatri (who is the current family genealogist) faces now is to groom someone to take over this role. The apprentice has to be trained on how to use the multiple volumes of reference books and how to add information to the set. And more importantly the person must be conversant in Arabic, a language that not many in the region can master well.

Another challenge is the use of online tools which were not perfect in some and parts ways as we had discussed the preference of taking in names of the ancestors and in recording the cases of marriages among cousins which are quite common among the 'Alawi families in the efforts of keeping marriages within the group.

## 10 CONCLUSION

The Hadhrami 'Alawi diaspora had started long ago and there are a greater number of the descendants of 'Alawi, the grandson of Almuhajir, who lived away from the "homeland". The genealogical texts and family trees may not be as significant to the younger generation as they ignore the '*kafa'a*' rule when the time of marriage.



My interest in tracing my history, and subsequently that of the ‘Alawi family, had brought into the research the wider aspects of a long history that my ancestors were part of.

It also gave an interesting insight into the established practice of this group of Arabs who continue to struggle with their identity in the midst of assimilation and distance within the community in the diaspora.

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#### ENDNOTE

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2. F. Ulrike, “Arab merchants in Singapore – Attempt of a collective biography” in Hubb d Jonge and Nico Kaptein (eds), *Transcending Borders – Arabs, politics, trade, and Islam in Southeast Asia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), p. 113.
3. Ho, Engseeng, *The graves of Tarim: Genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 206.
4. Ibid., as quoted by Ho in p. 147.
5. F. Ulrike. (2002), p. 130.
6. F. Ulrike. (2002), p. 100.
7. Al-Junayd, ‘Abdul Qadir b. Abdul Rahman b. Omar. *Al-‘uqud al-asjadiyya fi nashr manaqib ba’d afrad al-usrah al-Junaydiyya*. (Singapore: Abdullah and Junied Aljunied. Published at the expense of Abdullah and Junied Aljunied and distributed gratis, 1994), p. 164.
8. Singapore Tatler. The pioneering Aljunieds: Philanthropic calls in *Singapore days of old: A special commemorative history of Singapore published in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Singapore Tatler*. (Hong Kong: Illustrated Magazine Pub., 1992), pp. 54-55.
9. C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1988* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 14.
10. See Talib, Ameen Ali. Hadramis in Singapore in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 17(1) (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 89-96, for a general survey.

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