

# Arab Symbols in Coastal Communities for the Development of Multicultural Environment in Semarang

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**Abstract.** This study aims to identify the symbols and attributes of Arab as part of shaping the multi-ethnic identity of Semarang. As a coastal community, the culture of Semarang is formed by various ethnicities, such as Javanese, Chinese, and Arabic. It is believed to have formed Semarang identity. Through historical research, it is seen that the identity of Arabs in Semarang is more "fluid". Therefore, it is able to shape the cosmopolitan identity of Semarang. Following Bikhu Parekh's concept about multiculturalism, this preliminary study can be used for developing a cultural environment based on intercultural experimental efforts while at the same time developing the cultural lives of each ethnic group.

**Keywords:** Arab symbol; multicultural environment; Semarang.

## 1 Introduction

This study aims to trace Arab identity in the formation of multicultural societies in Semarang City through symbols and attributes attached to them. As an area on the north coast of Java, Semarang had become an important political and economic center during the Dutch East Indies colonial period from 1800 to 1942 [1]. The status attracted many foreigners to come to Semarang either temporarily or permanently. This made Semarang a unique melting pot. One of the large ethnic groups is Arabs. That is why Arab expressions in Semarang are different compared to those in other cities, due to their more fluid nature. This fluidity is believed to be the basis for the formation of Semarang identity as a multicultural city.

The Arab community in Semarang, also referred to as "Semarang Arabs", is a general term used by Indonesians to refer to foreigners who embrace Islam [2]. Although, the term 'Arabs' does not only refer to people descended from Arab lands, but also Muslim foreigners from Persia and Gujarat, the majority of Arabs in Semarang are descendants of migrants from Hadramaut, South Yemen [3, 2]. The first generation offspring, as a result of the process of diaspora in this community, were later referred to as Arab descent.

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The Arabs have an established position in Indonesia and have played an important role in history. In the colonial period, they were categorized as Foreign Easterners (*Vreemde Oosterlingen*) along with Asian immigrant groups besides China and Japan. The status allowed them to have greater access to markets as a center for urban economic activity [4] and also placed the Arab community as one of the historical communities, in addition to the Chinese ethnic group and local communities. The absence of a dominant ethnic culture has given Semarang a unique identity. The success of the Arab community to blend in the way of life of the *bumiputera* community has brought about various traditions consist of Arab, Islamic, and Javanese cultures. In general, the hybrid culture which so-called Islamic culture, among others seen in the bridal ceremony and circumcision. Although in certain traditional ceremonies, for instance *dhugdheran*, elements of Chinese community culture can be found, these traditions are recognized to be forms of Islamic culture. The successful assimilation of the Arab community can also be seen from the spread of Islamic culture in a city [3]. That, in turn, has shaped a multicultural picture of Semarang society.

The term multicultural society or multiculturalism refers to a group that has three or more different entities. Those also influence one another while still maintaining their original culture [5]. According to Parekh, there are several things that must be considered to understand culture, namely cultural community, loyalty to culture, cultural interaction, cultural diversity, evaluating culture, and respecting culture [5]. In this framework, cultures are defined as shared meaning systems, facilitating coordination and providing members within a given society with a sense of epistemic security. Moreover, they enable to comprehend both social and physical environment. As globalization draws people with diverse cultural meaning systems together, some individuals open their minds to embrace diversity while others turn their backs on it [6]. Based on this background, this study aims to prove the historical roots of the contribution of Arabs in Semarang in the formation of a multicultural society through two main focuses, namely the formation of the identity and existence of Arabs in Semarang through their characters and attributes.

In the absence of a dominant ethnic group culture and in view of Semarang's reputation as a cosmopolitan city, this study seeks to examine the identity of the Arab community in Semarang historically through its figures and social attributes. This is possible because each ethnic group basically has a tendency to maintain their cultural distinctiveness as a basis for their identity as a community. The choice of this topic is also based on the fact that studies of the Arab community in Semarang are still relatively neglected compared to studies of the Chinese community. Due to the lack of studies on the Arab community in Semarang, this study hopes to contribute to existing works on the community. In a broader context, this research is expected to be one of the references for a more in-depth study, notably on the formation of ethnic identity as a foundation for the development of a multicultural community environment.

## 2 Research Method

As a historical study, this research was carried out through four phases, namely the collection of sources (data), criticism, interpretation, and writing (presentation) [7, 8]. Collection of sources (data) is done through literature study and field work. Literature study is conducted by examining written sources that contain information about the Semarang Arab community. Meanwhile, the fieldwork involved observations and interviews. Observations were made at two Arab community neighbourhoods in Semarang, namely Kampung Melayu and Kampung Kauman. Interviews were conducted with Arab figures in Semarang. This was undertaken in order to understand the mental categories, interpretations, perceptions and feelings, and motives that underlie the action according to

the perspective of the informant [9]. This method is used because not all testimonies are available in written form. Information in oral history includes the experience, vision or testimony of the informant. An informant can be said to be a historical agent if the informant knows, understands, heard, and observed or experienced the events firsthand [10]. Criticism involved cross-examinations of sources obtained, by comparing sources with information provided by informants. In addition, these primary sources are also compared with similar information that has been widespread in the community. Historical interpretation (analysis) is done by comparing facts to reveal events that occur, to compile the facts of events, so that a complete and round picture is obtained [11]. At the writing phase, reconstruction is carried out by presenting data by compiling data and information that allow conclusions to be drawn.

### **3 Result and Discussion**

#### **3.1 The Making of Arab Identity: A Global View**

Amid the strengthening of the identity politics in the post-Reform era, the struggle for the identity of Arab descendants in Indonesia is increasingly interesting to study. Van den Berg's classic study of the Arab community in 1886, which is considered the oldest study of this community has "encouraged" scholars to continue to study the Arab diaspora and hybridity in Indonesia in particular and Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean in general [12]. Berg's study is considered a comprehensive study of the community that was once considered by the Dutch colonial government as one of the biggest threats to their dominance in the Dutch East Indies [13].

The struggle for Arab-Hadrami identity as a result of the diaspora, can be referred to the phenomenon of "old" diaspora, which took place on a large scale from the mid-18th century to the late 1950s [14]. In the midst of discrimination imposed by the Dutch colonial rulers, Arab-Hadrami played their role in the social, political and economic fields. In a new place, these Hadrami immigrants took part in expanding the business market, achieved prosperity, and sent profit back to Hadramaut [15]. This contact between Java and Hadramaut was at the same time a picture of the existence of the Hadrami community in the Southeast Asian region. Not only did members of the Hadrami diaspora send money to their families, but they also sent their children to Hadramaut to get an education. In fact, some of them had contacts with political activities in Hadramaut [16]. However, due to the idea of nationalism and discourse about nation-states, this activity dropped dramatically [17].

The story above is an illustration of how the dynamics of the Arab-Hadrami diaspora took place and their efforts in adapting to the new environment. The history of the Hadrami community and their land of origin, Hadramaut, is the history of the earliest forms of globalization based on shipping and trade. For centuries, migration played an important role in the life of the Hadrami people [18]. The number of migrants and the intensity of contact between the Hadramaut homeland and their diaspora communities had increased, especially after the use of steamers enlivened sea voyages [2, 19].

The story of Arabs in Indonesia is generally a success story, especially in the fields of trade, politics, education, and religion. While the Arab diaspora have been influenced by local people both socially and culturally, they have not acted passively in the face of the new conditions that surround their lives. In fact, some of them exert a very strong influence on the lives of local people, for example in the field of Islamic education and teaching. In general, when some Arab diaspora actors still preserve Hadrami's habits and identity, some of them actually demonstrate social and cultural creativity as an effort to fuse with the

culture and social life of the people. The dynamics of migration and Arab diaspora in Indonesia entered a dramatic new phase in the early 20th century. Arab leaders in Java established educational institutions and newspapers that formed a new, modern collective identity [20]. In Semarang, this is shown by A.R. Baswedan and *Pewarta Arab* [19].

At the beginning of the 20th century, the result of the Hadrami diaspora process was the establishment of modern educational institutions, such as Jam'iyat Khair and Jam'iyah al-Islah wa al-Irshad (Al-Irshad). These two educational institutions produce two large groups within the internal Arab-Hadrami community, namely the traditionalists (Jam'iyat Khair), which were dominated by the Alawiyin group (Ar-Rabithah), and the reformists, which were dominated by the Al-Irshad group [22]. These two groups not only represented the same conflict in their native land Hadramut, but also became the subject of their debate in the new homeland. The conflict between the traditionalist group represented by the sayid group, and the reformist group represented by the non-sayid group, in the next period transformed from a social debate into a more doctrinal debate [23].

The Arab is a community that has strong diaspora character and tradition. This is evident in the context of family relationships and networks both in Hadramaut and in Southeast Asia [24]. In addition to being strong *muhajir* (diaspora actors), they have also been active in roles especially in the socio-economic and religious fields. Arab-Hadrami families outside Hadramaut, have been transformed into merchants, statesmen, and even "Sufi" teachers who are important in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia [25]. Family ties through *nasab* (genealogy) are the key to the formation of a network of descendants of the Arab diaspora to continue to have ties to their ancestral lands, thus their socio-religious position. For Arab society, genealogy is a representation of the past and therefore shapes history [26]. One of the main factors that contributes to the strictness in maintaining their genealogy is because the group can trace their ancestors to the prophet of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad and from there the linear was established in the first human, Prophet Adam [27].

As a community that is attached to religious traditions and trade, in turn the Arab community also has political aspects that must be considered. The *nahdah* (revival) concept of the Hadrami in the Dutch East Indies, for example, shaped a new identity by adopting Western modernization through the formation of modernist organization and education, Al-Irshad [22]. The Nusantara and Hadramaut Networks, in turn, formed a new network and pattern in the formation of pilgrims [28]. The transformation of *haul*, from what was originally an Arab diaspora phenomenon into an expression of Islam in general, is a form of Arab efforts to identify and reconstruct their new identities [29, 30].

### **3.2 The Existence of Arab in Semarang: Actor and Attribute**

The Arab community in Semarang is one of the many colonies in the archipelago. They traveled a long journey by sea carrying Indonesian pilgrims. They found a vacant spot on the ship because some Indonesian worshippers died in Arab land. After arriving in Indonesia, especially Java, they lived in Arab villages in coastal cities such as Jakarta, Pekalongan, Semarang, Surabaya, and Gresik. In these cities the Arabs were led by an Arab Captain or *Kapiteinde Arabieren* [31]. These Arabs obtain trade monopolies and excise sales contracts, allowing them to accumulate abundant wealth. In most cities in Java, this was a common phenomenon, as was the case in Semarang. Remnants of that glory still exist in the form of large, multi-storey houses such as in Kampung Baru, Lawang Gajah, and Layur, which were once housing complexes of Arab descent. The position of Arab Captain in Semarang was first held by Sayyid Muhdar bin Abdullah Al-Habsyi who was also a Captain of

Bengal. He was appointed by the Dutch colonial government on April 15, 1899 [32]. *Insaf*, No. 4, April 1938, Year 2, gave an information that the position was last held by Edroes Al-Djoefri on December 1, 1927.

In Semarang, administratively there was no Arab Kampung. However, the existence of Arabs in Semarang can easily be found on Jalan Petek and Jalan Layur. These two main corridors are part of Kampung Melayu. There, the Arab community lived with several other ethnic groups, such as Madurese, Buginese, Banjarese, and Chinese. Also in Kampung Melayu, the Arab community left a historical trail in the form of settlements and the Layur Mosque. Based on information from Ali Mahsun, guard of the Layur Mosque, the mosque which is also called the Menara Layur Mosque had existed since the 18th century. Based on information from Habib Zein bin Muhammad As-Segaf (Semarang Arabic-Hadrami figure, now lived in Magelang), the typical form of this mosque is the tower architecture which is similar to the minarets of the Hadramaut. This proves the Arab-Hadrami cultural expression in this village is very strong. However, this seems to work in harmony looking at the position of the mosque which stands adjacent to Klenteng Dewa Bumi (the God of Earth Temple). It shows not only the ethnic differences in the people living in the region, where they can carry out social, economic and cultural activities, but also freedom of worship according to their respective religions and beliefs [33].

Based on Semarang Military Guide Map (1939), in the 1930s, the location of Kampung Melayu was on the banks of the *Kali* (River) Semarang which could be sailed by boats carrying merchandise from ships anchored in the city of Semarang. This was the reason that Kampung Melayu was inhabited by many foreign traders who came from outside Java. In the new place, they resided either temporarily or for a long period of time, transforming it into an established settlement area. In the next period, this area transformed into Dadapsari Village, North Semarang District, Semarang City [34]. Also in 1930s, there were 2.200 Arabs in Semarang [35]. **Fig. 1**, showing the road conditions and Kampung Melayu village, Semarang around 1920-1925.



**Fig. 1.** Kampoeng Melayu Street with Masjid Layur Tower in the background around 1920-1925 (Straat in Kampong Melajoe te Semarang, KITLV 117562) [35].

At the beginning of the 21st century, the river beside the Layur Mosque experienced siltation and was no longer passable by boat. Some Kampung Melayu residents also began to leave their homes due to the tide that had become worse since the 1980s. Some of them, moved to Karimunjawa island [37]. However, based on information from Ali Mahsun, some Arab communities who survived, still maintain the Arab-Hadrami tradition there. One that can still be found in the Layur Mosque, is the tradition of drinking Arab coffee after

breaking the fast during Ramadan. The Arab coffee beverage is traditional because it is mixed with seven kinds of spices. Some people call to the Arab coffee by the name *Gahwa Jie*, because it has ginger and black cumin as ingredients. In addition to the coffee, another dish is *Roti Kaak*, a typical Yemeni bread that is brown in color and has a hard texture. Other traditions that are still found are the *haul* (ceremonies marking the anniversary of a person's death), the reading of *Maulid* (the book of life of the Prophet), and *Khataman Bukhari* (closing of the reading of the Sahih Bukhari).

Apart from Kampung Melayu, another Arab residential area in Semarang is in Kauman Village. Kauman is derived from the term *pekauman* which means the place where people live (people who are skilled and devout in practicing Islam). This is based on the Arabic *qaum ad-din* which means the leader of the Islamic religion. Unlike Kampung Melayu, morphologically, the existence of Kampung Kauman cannot be separated from the existence of Kauman Great Mosque. In other cities in northern Java, such as Pekalongan and Surabaya, the formation of Kauman settlements is always closely related to the existence of the Great Mosque in these cities. Kampung Kauman Semarang is behind (west) of Kauman Great Mosque which consists of small villages, such as Bangunharjo, Patehan, Kepatihan, Book, Jonegaran, Getekan, Mustaram, Glondong, Butulan, Pompo, Krendo, Masjid, Kemplongan, Pungkuran, Suromenggalan, and Duchy [38].

In Kampung Kauman, the Arabs lived and settled in houses that had a typical Javanese architecture form *Jawa Semarangan*. In addition to residential houses, the most prominent main building in this area is the Kauman Great Mosque. This mosque was built during the reign of Kanjeng Raden Tumenggung Suro Hadimanggolo II, who was in power in 1713-1751. However, all construction was actually completed during the period of Kanjeng Raden Tumenggung Suro Hadimanggolo III in 1760. Therefore, he was also called the *Destic er van de Missigite Semarang* (founder of the first Great Mosque in Semarang City) [39]. The mosque building which is a blend of Javanese, Arabic, Chinese, and European styles also experienced a severe fire on April 11, 1885. The fire broke out very quickly and destroyed all the items in the mosque, including antique chairs [39]. After renovation, the original form of the mosque remains preserved as shown in **Fig. 2**.



**Fig. 2.** Kauman Mosque in Semarang around 1900 (Moskee op de aloen-aloen te Semarang circa 1900, KITLV 4001199) [40].

In the context of this study, the figure of Kanjeng Tumenggung Suro Hadimanggolo I and II, is not only important because of his position as Duke (head of Semarang government), but also the figure of Kyai Bustam Kertoboso as his great grandfather. Kyai Bustam Kertoboso, whose real name is Sayid Abdullah Muhammad Bustam, the son of

Sayid Husein who married the granddaughter of Amangkurat II [41]. During his life, Kyai Bustam served as Semarang High Prosecutor and concurrently as the Onder Regent in Terboyo with the title Kyai Ngabehi Kertabasa [42]. The descendants and family of Kyai Bustam, lived in a village known as Kampung Bustaman [43]. However, in the next period, Kampung Bustaman transformed into a dense village inhabited by Javanese. Some physical changes to the building and the atmosphere of the village occur over time.

Kyai Bustam had a descendant who later became a famous painter, Raden Saleh Syarif Bustaman, who was born in Terboyo in 1811. His father's name was Sayid Husein bin Alwi bin Awal bin Yahya, while his mother was Mas Ajeng Zarip Husein. Raden Saleh's father died at a young age, so he was educated by his uncle, Suro Hadimanggala V alias Kanjeng Sunan Terboyo who lived in 1765-1827. Suro Hadimanggala had great admiration for the Western world, as well as classical Javanese literary texts and Islamic texts. He also arouse the interest of Raden Saleh in art. Through his uncle, Raden Saleh was taken care of and entrusted to a Belgian painter, Antoine Joseph Payen (1792-1853) [44].

Historically, prominent Arab figures in Semarang have played an important role in shaping their identity as Arabs, as well as as Semarangese. In addition to physical relics in the form of mosques and houses, some Arabs in Kampung Kauman Semarang still maintain the typical Hadrami tradition, both in marriage and daily life. In addition, the majority of Arabs who work as traders, carry out their profession by selling religious books, perfumes, worship equipment, including Hajj paraphernalia. The Arabs will continue to grow to be a significant and inseparable part of the multicultural Semarang society.

## 4 Conclusion

Based on the above description, this study has proven that the Arab community in Semarang played an active role in their efforts to preserve the culture of origin while adapting to the new environment in Semarang. Through their symbols and attributes as Arab descendants, they have built a solid foundation for the development of a multicultural environment that is not only based on their ethnic origin but also with intercultural experiment efforts both through physical forms and new traditions.

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