

Two Families: A Comparative Study of The Influences of Saints and Their Teachings on Faith in Malaysia and Indonesia

Saintliness, Wahabbism, History and Identity

Dina Zaman

Introduction

My journey¹ to Indonesia took me three months, and was split up into two phases: in 2012, I visited Pekalongan (September to October) and in July 2013, I visited Garut and Jakarta. In Pekalongan, I was introduced to *Habib* LutfiYahya and his *tariqa*, an order of Sufism. In Indonesia, I was awed and inspired by this mystical Sufi tradition of Islam, and surprised by how widely it was embraced by Muslims there. In Malaysia, the *Nasqshbandi tariqa* for example, is viewed with mistrust as a playground for the moneyed and deviant. *Habib* Lutfi (*Habib* is an honorific title bestowed on Muslim scholars, like *Sayyid* or Imam) is a big name in Indonesia and he is revered as a saint. A *Habib* is a living saint, and he is acknowledged throughout the world for his wisdom.

After the short stint in Pekalongan, I revised my study to include Dr. Syed Salleh Al-Zawawi of Terengganu, Malaysia, as I felt his journey was Sufistic². He comes from an illustrious lineage, and the family's history in Southeast Asia is very recent, when compared to dynasties like the Al-Attas and Alsagoff families. However, his story is no less important, and could easily fill a book on its own.

Three key issues of saintliness, history and identity kept cropping up and are the mainstay of the work. As one sought piety and redemption through the advice of a saint, the saint questioned himself and his work. These lives run parallel to each other and yet interactions with each other are brief and limited by the saint's status. The significance of such journeys is the magic behind the stories. These journeys are not just about politics, they are about people trying to make sense of their lives.

Sourcing for content and data was straightforward. Academic literature, interviews and observations of study subjects were undertaken. Blogs and personal websites were also used as sources of information.

The Search for Spirituality and Sainthood

Everyone searches for meaning in their lives, even in the most inane ways. Facebook, the giant of social media, allows its users to "like" and repost inspirational quotes. Twitter follows suit and Pinterest³ allows users to create canvases of the favorite things they have found on the Internet, and quotes. Religious quotes are shared among friends and go "viral" on social media. Contemporary intellectuals and writers such as Tariq Ramadan and Alain de Botton have written books about the quest for meaning.⁴

For many believers, there comes a time when questioning one's self becomes an important phase in one's life. The existentialist movement promoted this ideology: Who am I, and what kind of a believer am I? A practicing one? A liberal? Lapsed? He or she may experience a setback in life that is so impactful that a total change of lifestyle is considered (and this usually happens, for it is tragedy that changes the course of one's life). The path of good, believing men and women is fraught with challenges, and they must weather them as best as they can. For after all, their apostles and prophets have borne their sins with nary a sigh.⁵

One way to understand meaning in religion is to study the phenomenology of religion. "The purpose of such study is to become acquainted with the religious thought, idea or need which underlies the group of corresponding data. Its purpose is not to determine their greater or lesser

religions value. Certainly, it tries to determine their religious value, but this is the value that they have had for the believers themselves, and this has never been relative, but is always absolute (Christensen and Carman, 1960, 2).”⁶

In short, a saint, dead or living, is a personality who is virtuous and holy, and has led a life devoted to his or her god and beliefs. He has a following and is challenged by oppositionists who view his popularity and influence with great fear. And if the saint is able to perform miracles and healings, then his station as a messenger or intermediary to God is cemented. In many instances, he is God. They are mediators who can communicate messages to and from God(s).

The construction of a holy person is not as straightforward as it would seem. Holy texts such as The Quran and The Bible, for instance, reveal a man who has faced tragedies and yet overcomes the odds. He is also a person who has the ability to see and speak to a Higher Being. This phenomenon is not unusual — it existed long before organized religion, when the concept of God had yet to be understood (though theists may argue that point).⁷

The basis of spirituality and sainthood is essentially Godliness and the search for God. It is how Man makes sense of his world, especially for a man who believes in a god or deity. It is an emotional, physical and ultimately human experience.

Historical Context

Islam’s arrival in the Southeast Asian region has been documented by many, and debated upon by just as many others. Each entry point in the region has its own history of the arrival of Islam. This paper is too brief to discuss ports, types of ships and traders, and routes, all of which have contributed to the spread of Islam in these countries.

Syed Naguib Al-Attas, noted that Islam came to the region couched in Sufi metaphysics, which is really a philosophical approach concerned with explaining the fundamental nature of being and

the world with a religious or spiritual bent. “It was through *tasawwuf* (Islamic science of soul cleansing)⁸ that the highly intellectual and rationalistic religious spirit entered the receptive minds of the people, effecting a rise of rationalism and intellectualism not manifested in pre-Islamic times (Al-Attas 1969, page 5).”

Al-Attas continued, “The earliest known record of probable Muslim settlement in the Archipelago was a Chinese report of the existence of an Arab settlement in east Sumatra, headed by an Arab chief in 55 A.H. /674 A.D. (Al-Attas 1969, page 11).” Arab historian al-Mas’udi (888-956 A.D.) reported that in 877 A.D. about 120,000 or 200,000 mainly Arab and Persian Muslim merchants and traders who had settled in Canton, China, were massacred during a rebellion. This led to an exodus to Kedah, Malay(sia).⁹

The “Arab invasion” as described above spawned the many saints and Sufi rituals in Indonesia especially. There are still many of them in this present time. Luckily for me, a fortuitous meeting with academic Ismail Fajrie Al-Attas paved the way for me to meet a living saint in Java. That made my visit to Pekalongan the highlight of the Fellowship. I was introduced to *Habib* Lutfi Yahya and his friends, and the *Manlid* festival, a joyous celebration of the Prophet Mohammad’s birthday,

What I witnessed there further convinced me that this was the path to take.

Unfortunately, this paper does not permit a lengthy discourse on how Islam arrived in Malaysia. However, in his landmark book, first published in 1896, T.W. Arnold revealed that:

Individual Arab traders, including Sahabas, preached in the Malay Archipelago, Indo-China and China in the early seventh century. Islam was also brought to Malaysia by Indian Muslim traders in the 12th century AD. It is commonly held that Islam first arrived in the Malay Peninsula during the rule of Sultan Mudzafar Shah I (12th century) of Kedah (Hindu name Phra Ong Mahawangsa), the first ruler to be known to convert to Islam

after being introduced to it by Indian traders who themselves were recent converts. In the 13th century, the Terengganu Stone Monument was found at Kuala Berang, Terengganu where the first Malay state received Islam in 1303. Sultan Megat Iskandar Shah, known as Parameswara prior to his conversion, was the first Sultan of Melaka. He converted to Islam after marrying a princess from Pasai, of present day Indonesia (Arnold 1913).

By the 16th century, Islam became the dominant faith of the Malays, though previous animist practices were still practiced.

Sometime in the 15th century, Arab traders began arriving in the region to trade.

Michael Gilson (2003) has researched the Arab diaspora in Southeast Asia. He noted that most of the Arabs who came to the region came from a part of Yemen called the Hadramawt region

My Journey Begins

Pekalongan's significance in this research is that it is not just the hub of batik makers but it is also the epicenter of the Hadramawts/Hadrami community in Central Java. I also chose to focus on Pekalongan for the following reasons: as mentioned earlier, my stay in Indonesia was very short. Ismail Fajrie Alattas' offer to visit was too inviting to pass up, and helped with my research focus in my short stay.

Dr. Syed Salleh Al-Zawawi's family was not part of the Hadramawt exodus that began in 1600 and spread to the Southeast Asian region. The family patriarch, Syed Yusof Al-Zawawi, and other relatives, were expelled from Egypt during the Battle of Mecca in the late 1920s to 1930s. Syed Yusof was the *Mufti* (Islamic Legal Scholar) of Terengganu, Malaysia from 1953 to 1975.

To begin understanding Dr. Syed Salleh's journey and his love for his late grandfather, there is a need to understand the history of Mecca, and Wahabbism.

Wahabbism (or Salafism) is a very conservative form of Islam And its origins come from its founder Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) of Saudi Arabia, who was disillusioned and angered by what he deemed as frivolous traditions that veered believers from the true path of Islam. Wahabbism gained popularity, even if its strict and non-compromising stance on Islam intimidated many.¹⁰

The Massacre of Taif in 1924 was the catalyst for many Arabs migrating to other countries. Taif, a small city in Mecca, faced quite a number of battles in its life. The Hadramawt migration had begun in the 17th century but by the 1920s, there had been many battles. Among the *ulama* (religious leaders and teachers) who left was the eminent *Mufti* Syafi'iyah Makkah Sayyid Abdullah Az-Zawawi .

While there is extensive documentation of the Hadramawt's journey to the region, the travels of Syed Yusof Al Zawawi, Zaini Dahlan and other *ulamas* who left in the 1920s are not well documented.

Lost Souls? The Question of Identity

A Brief Encounter with a Living Saint

Habib Lutfi Yahya is recognized by Sufi Brotherhoods all over the world, and is acknowledged by his followers as a holy man who understands and revels in the joys of "real living". *Habib* is no stranger to the Internet: he has his own website and many of his lectures were published by his followers in book called *Secerca Tinta*. His education was mostly in Central Java at Islamic boarding schools, or "*pesantrens*", and he was a student of *ulamas* in Mecca and Medina.



September 18, 2012 – Habib Lutfi Yabya, Mawlid, Pekalongan, Java
(Photo credit: Dina Zaman)



Habib Lutfi Yabya (Photo credit: Dina Zaman)

Some of my observations were:

1. *Habib* Lutfi's styles of "*ceramah*" (teaching) differed at various venues, such as his home, an office-cum-home, and the mosque he founded. The audience influenced his presentation. When at his office he was rather casual, but when greeting his followers at the mosque, he transformed into an ethereal being. Wearing the clothes and headgear of a holy man also transformed his demeanor. Is he a spiritual actor, or a shrewd *ulama* who understands his audience and their needs?
2. The socio-economic backgrounds of his followers ranged from beggars to professionals, they all came to see him and worship him.
3. An uncomfortable question which arose: are holy men allowed to receive alms, in huge sums, in the manner that the *Habib* did? To be fair, he did not charge any fee for his sermons,

and any alms from his devotees were voluntary. But where is the line between devotion and business? The *Habib* does "work", but his work is not based in an office. He will need sustenance. How much money is too much? How does one really ascertain whether or not a holy man, or living saint (even dead) is authentic? Godliness is subjective and reliant on perception. Facts are also to be debated. In the case of the *Habib*, a friend and I debated the following concerns: (1) the *Habib's* acceptance of alms, and living in an upper-middle class neighborhood; is class a negating factor when one decides on holiness? Also – while it is understood that the *Habib* will need to feed his family, how many alms are too much?

Again, in a brief discussion with the venerable *Habib*, he talked about his physical weariness of being a holy man. People came to see him for even the most petty of troubles. But he had to attend to every one of their requests, as it gave them great

comfort. While his path was known to him since he was young, perhaps he had underestimated the burden of responsibility. He was, at the end of the day, human. The travels he took around Indonesia, and Malaysia, have brought him and his teachings to many people, and it will be like this until the end of his life. He cannot question his path; this was *Al-Qada' Wal-Qadar*. His path is a divine decree from Allah, and like it or not, he has to obey. Yes, he is a father, husband, and an uncle who plays many roles to many people in his “real”, “human” life, but he is also a saint. While he does not liken himself to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), their lives are parallel.

The Good Doctor — A Holy Man in the Making?

Dr. Syed Salleh is a doctor in Terengganu, Malaysia. He has travelled to Indonesia countless times, trying to reconnect with his illustrious past. His present can be considered as humble, though he is highly regarded in Terengganu. His late father was both the *Mufti* of Terengganu and the son of Syed Yusof Al-Zawawi. He led an idyllic life and was a dutiful son. He did well in university, married and then practiced as a doctor. He has children.

However, in the last few years, he began to make an effort to not only record his late grandfather's journey, but to also follow a spiritual path. His relatives consulted Sufi mystics and *ulamas* from Morocco, the United Kingdom, and Yemen, to name but a few, and many came to his house, to rest, and teach.

What makes the good doctor a would-be saint, a holy man? First let us look at the legacy he inherited.

In *The Role of the Malay Archipelago Scholars in Terengganu in the Development of the Shafi'i Sect*, we discover that:

“In... the mid-20th century (1940-1975) Terengganu was visited by two *ulamas* and iconic Arabic scholar, Syeikh Hasan Yamani (1940-1952) and Syeikh Yusuf Ali al-Zawawi (1952-1975). They had both

been appointed as Terengganu State Government *Mufti* (Muhammad Abu Bakar. 1991).

Syeikh Yusuf Ali al-Zawawi held the post of Terengganu State *Mufti* from the year 1952 to 1975 after the death of Sheikh Hasan Yamani. He was the 10th *Mufti* for Terengganu. Syeikh Sayyid Yusuf Ali Al-Zawawi was also born in Saudi Arabia, in a village near the town of Dahrán, in 1908. His grandfather, Syed 'Abd Allah 'Ali Al-Zawawi, a follower of the Shafi'i sect was once the *Mufti* of Mecca and had once taught at the Masjidil Haram (Kasan et al. 2012).”¹¹

The above encapsulates Dr. Syed Salleh's grandfather's rich spiritual education and legacy. Yet little is written of his work in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. What is known is that he was once the *Mufti* of Mecca and held a high post in the Syura Committee. He was also a teacher to many *ulamas* who came from far and wide to be taught by him.

The good doctor is indeed proud of his heritage, but he also acknowledges that Malay-Malaysians have been reluctant to accept his family, and there has been tension. Ultimately he will always be “an Arab” to them. One senses a certain discomfiture residing in Dr. Salleh – he may be a Malaysian, but his faith and race are always questioned.

It is because of this yearning for a sense of “home” and “place” that he began visiting Indonesia a few years ago. He tracked down saints like the *Habib* Anis, the Smiling *Habib* of Solo, and was astounded by the level of *ikeblās* (sincerity) and spiritual pride that is prevalent in Indonesia. He wondered how the *pesantrens*, orphanages, or even the communities that he saw in Indonesia managed to feed 3000 people? That could never be replicated in Malaysia, he said. He recounted an incident where he met an Indonesian from Madura, who travelled by foot and train to go to Aceh, to help the tsunami victims.

But he has reservations, as his journey and memories may unsettle certain quarters in Saudi Arabia. The Wahabbi influence is very strong and this may affect his path, and his research.

The Almost Forgotten Family of Zaini Dahlan

Garut is a hilly locale about five hours away from Jakarta. It has a cool climate and is famous for its “*dodol*”, a locally made dessert. Padi fields abound in Garut. It is a quiet town.

I visited Garut, to connect Dr. Syed Salleh’s ancestors with a descendant of Syeikh Ahmad Zaini Dahlan, who was very well-acquainted with the doctor’s family. Zaini Dahlan is also revered as a saint, though perhaps not on the same scale as the Smiling Habib of Solo, Habib Anisbin Alwi Al-Habsyi Solo and Habib Lutfi of Pekalongan. He is still revered by the small Arab community in Garut.

I met his granddaughter, Sofi, and her family. Her grandmother’s sister, who was crippled by a stroke, lived with them, and was familiar with Syed Yusuf.

Who was Zaini Dahlan? He was most famous for his diatribe against the Wahabbi influence for

having a negative impact on the true essence of Islam.¹² Seeing that there was little future in the city of his birth, he decided to head east, to Indonesia, and that was where his descendants settled.

Zaini Dahlan’s remaining family members revere the saints. Photos of saints litter the house. Oddly enough, one would think that the Hadramawt community would have strong ties with each other in Indonesia. In this case, they had distant relatives, but kept very much to themselves. There seems to be a disconnect, as they keep to themselves. It could be that because many were brought up in the Wahabbi tradition, they did not keep old letters or photos as mementoes. Sofi’s husband, Habib Fahmi, was a gentle man, who preferred that his wife speak on the family’s behalf. For this family, it was a journey of revelations. Sofi was brought up on Wahabbi doctrines; while she remembered her late grandfather, she did not know who he truly was. It was in primary school that she realized she was different – she was ostracized and teased. She had no inkling why at the time.

“I had no idea what Wahabbism was about, and neither did I know what a Sunni was. I didn’t know



July 7, 2013 – Syeikh Zaini Dablan’s family. Old photo of he and friends. Undated. (Photo credit: Dina Zaman)



Sofi, the granddaughter of Syeikh Zaini Dablan (Photo credit: Dina Zaman)



Syeikh Zaini Dahlan's grave and relatives. (Photo credit: Dina Zaman)

that there were distinctions. I was brought up as a Muslim, and my identity was that. A Muslim.”

When she found out why she was ostracized, Sofi decided to embark on an investigation.

“I may come from a conservative family, but I am educated. I started reading up on the differences. I read about “*ziarah kubur*” (a ritual where relatives of the deceased come to visit the grave) and thought, there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s not as if we are worshipping the dead; we are just asking Allah to bless them in the hereafter.” After all, Muslims offer prayers to the Prophet, so he is blessed in heaven,” she said. “Why not the deceased?”

Thus she began a quest to find out more about her late grandfather, and the true teachings of Islam, that is not tainted by Wahabbism. It has been difficult, as most religious schools in

Indonesia are funded by *Persis*¹³ which is backed by Saudi money and is influenced by Wahabbism, she said. The schools her family founded find it difficult to offer the students proper facilities as they have little money to upgrade the schools.

It was somewhat frustrating too, as they kept very little documentation. Hardly any letters or diaries are kept – they are a practical family. All they have are memories, as the cliché goes, but the encounter they had with me has prompted them to discover the truth about their family and to learn more about the political aspects of Islam.

Resonance Despite Differences

The next question would be to ask how the processes of saintliness, history, and identity interact with each other in this context.

The boundaries are almost seamless: as one is enthralled by an anecdote or factual nugget of saintliness, one has also to confront the saint’s identity and history. In this paper, three personalities are investigated. Dr. Syed Salleh Al-Zawawi, *Habib* LutfiYahya and the family of the deceased Zaini Dahlan are saints/saints-in-the-making/descendants of saints.

And yet, the seamlessness of sainthood, history and identity are three separate themes too. As I said earlier, the three are the mainstay of this study. For instance, the saint, after years of rigorous trials and learning, or after receiving the message from Allah (*wahyu*), passes on his knowledge to his students and community. He utilizes his personal history in his storytelling as a way to teach religious history, to teach the community, and “show” that he is a learned man. His very identity as a teacher and saint depend on his reputation and knowledge.

This synergy can be compartmentalized and discussed separately, but in this context, all three must be acknowledged as symbiotic. One cannot be effective without the others, for each one on its own would be too weak. The saint’s identity

is also insular: he has to look inwards, within himself, to gather the strength and confidence needed to meet with his audience. Sometimes he has to struggle with arrogance and perhaps, contempt. And yet his identity is also external: he has to look the part of the saint, and feign or adopt the ways of saintliness.

For example, *Habib* Lutfi, on a one-to-one basis, is a highly personable and humorous man, who to the researcher (me), is also a tired man. He acknowledges the legacy before him: the numerous *Habibs* who preceded him and their responsibilities. He has learned enough about the life of the venerable Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) – the trials and triumphs. This is not a lightweight legacy.

As mentioned earlier, he also faces personal challenges. His schedule is relentless as he visits his students all over Indonesia. His time belongs to them, not him or his family. He has struggled with his relations with his family, when he began his duties as a *Habib*. He may not admit it publicly, and again, perhaps I am assuming or interpreting it based on MY perceptions, but it would seem that he sometimes questions his standing and position. At a gathering in the mosque in Pekalongan, he looked drained, and when he had time, he closed his eyes to rest. He may be a saint, but he is a man who tires, and even more so than the average man. He has no choice – he was a chosen one, a man who Allah wants, to lead and soothe a community. He is not just a father to his children, but also a father to his sect. It's a juggling act, being a man and saint!

On the other extreme are the descendants of Zaini Dahlan. This lone family in Garut knows little of its illustrious legacy. The knowledge of the lineage is scanty, and based on hearsay. The saints the family knows of are dead, and exist only in old photographs. It was my visit that made them think of their legacy: they must dig up more about the deceased Zaini Dahlan and reconnect with other relatives who live scattered around Indonesia. Sofi is more aware of her identity than her family members. She is conscious of her late grandfather's "fame" as a saint and former *Mufti*

of Mecca, but again, her understanding of him was that of a grandfather. He was that, not a saint or a learned man. She was his granddaughter, who was brought up on an Islam with Wahabbi leanings. It is through her own personal investigations that she faces different versions of her history, and is doing her best to understand each one of them. There's family history, the political history behind each Islamic ideology, and then she is faced with her own understanding of Islam: is she Sunni or Wahabbi? A Sufi? As she learns more about these ideologies she is also confronted by a legacy that is fast disappearing from family folklore.

These two examples demonstrate that saintliness, history and identity are related, and that one cannot be understood without the others.

When one looks at this study objectively, it is not (to this researcher at least) about a blatant comparison between two countries. Malaysia and Indonesia share many similarities — our languages are almost similar, and our faiths and cultures are almost the same. Herein lies the contradiction — we may be similar but we are also vastly different from each other.

Both countries share a Hindu-Buddhist history, but Malaysia shies away from promoting this heritage, and has preferred to be known as a solely Muslim country throughout the ages. Indonesia however is the most populous Muslim country in the world, and yet is still proud of its Hindu history. Both countries have their share of saints, but Indonesia's saints are better known. Malaysia's saints and holy people are rather pedestrian in comparison. Indonesia's *Wali Songo* saints for example are renowned throughout Malaysia and the region.

While the Muslims in both countries are Sunni Muslims, in Malaysia, it would seem that contemporary Islam in Malaysia is influenced by Wahabbism. The latter is an impactful influence in Indonesia, but there is still space for a diversity of (Muslim) voices and thought.

Now, this paper is not about the differences of Islamic thought and practice in both countries. This can be incorporated into the paper, but alas, the length of the paper does not permit an additional discourse.

The players in this study are from both countries, and the situations they experience are almost similar. It is how they deal with their 'problems' that fascinates me. They are not the typical, mainstream Malaysian/Indonesians with mainstream issues. They are rather unique individuals. They are all part of the Arab diaspora. They are also in interesting predicaments: they seem to be anachronisms, or a combination of the modern Muslim proclivity to piety but not in the sense of orthodox Islam. Their piety or "saintliness" is a blended version of Islam that integrates some orthodoxy with Sufism.

They have had to be very careful as they negotiate their space in a society that can be quite unkind. I sensed that they found the memories painful, even as they masked the situations with humor.

Dr. Syed Salleh Al-Zawawi has had to negotiate his legacy as a grandson and son of learned Arab sheikhs who migrated and settled in Indonesia and Malaysia, with his wife and extended family, who are Malay. His spiritual journey is not just about finding out more about his roots; he has to deal with sectarian tensions between Muslims in Malaysia. Many Malay Muslims also see him as an Arab. He is aware of the prejudice. He is able to circumvent situations as he is a respected general practitioner. At home, as the leader of his family, he has invited sheikhs and *ulemas* from abroad, who are of Arab origin and Sufistic in their teachings. In this sense, he is 'lucky' because Malaysia is a patriarchal society. His wife is obliging, and follows him on his travels. And yet, he still grapples with his many identities (legacies).

The one thing that came up over and over again in my research and in interactions with my respondents was Arab pride. It is understandable, and one must be sympathetic with their need to cling to this identity. They come from a land that

gave birth to Islam and the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), and they come from an illustrious lineage. What is there not to be proud of?

Back to Dr. Syed Salleh — he has circumvented his "problem" by holding family gatherings to talk about Islam, family matters and everything under the sun. This is not unusual — this happens everywhere! But he has taken matters into his own hands — he strives to get teachers to come. His standing as a doctor has helped, and his late father's reputation has helped him become a community leader. However, his life has certainly not been a bed of roses.

For the most part, negotiations and confrontations have been very private and personal, and kept within the familial boundaries. As far as they are concerned, this situation is not a media campaign. Like many devout Muslims (and theists), this is *dugaan* — a personal challenge from Allah.

It is not enough to understand the challenges these subjects face. As Gabrielle Marranci¹⁴ notes in her book, *The Anthropology of Islam*: "Therefore, I wish to suggest that we need to have a paradigm through which the anthropologist of Islam can effectively study Muslims as human beings rather than living symbols of a religion. To do so, we need to observe the dynamics of Muslim lives (seen as individual agencies expressed through identity acts) within societies. This means taking into consideration the relationship that exists between Muslims and their emotional environment. Such an approach allows us to challenge stereotypes, Orientalisms and essentialisms, which as we have seen, are affecting not only common sense, but also social scientific research (Marranci 2008, page 100)."

Conclusion

This research sparked an investigation into identity in the context of saints and "would-be" saints. A superficial study of such personalities would probably focus on a saint's perceived "goodness" and the miracles he performed. But the reality is not like that at all: the responsible

truth seeker (in this case, researcher-writer) has to take many contexts into account, such as history, culture, language, ethnic diasporas, to name a few. This essay is not conclusive, and is the jumping off point for more research.

When I started this journey, I thought I would be documenting the lives of an ordinary man, a living saint and the descendants of a saint. I did not know that politics would come into play. These stories must be heard and told. At the same time, I am observant of the fact that my research subjects lead private lives, and would not want trouble. This journey (research) is a delicate one.

Three months is not enough — there is a gamut of themes and topics that are relevant to this study, which would require an extended period of study and time to follow up with the research subjects.¹⁵

NOTES

¹My journey into observing and documenting ‘holy men and women’ in Malaysia began as a column published on the news website, The Malaysian Insider (www.themalaysianinsider.com), in 2011. My research took me all around Malaysia, living with families of holy people alive and deceased. I met with women who took the oaths of the nunnery, investigated the myth of a pious man whose death shocked the country in the 1980s, and learned that one reason why Sarawak’s shamans and healing traditions are on the wane is recession. The high cost of healing materials has almost killed their culture but not the conversion of Abrahamic faiths.

²The Merriam Webster dictionary explains the word ‘sufistic’ as of, relating to, or in accordance with Sufism, which is a mystical part of Islam. Practitioners of Sufism are known as Sufis.

³Social media is a platform that allows people and communities to interact with each other on the Internet.

⁴Tariq Ramadan and Alain De Botton have questioned the meaning of life in their books, *The Quest for Meaning and Religion for Atheists*.

⁵The Guardian UK website published on 27 July, 2013 an interactive blogpost, asking its readers if they needed to rely on saints. The comments showed that faith played an important in their lives.

www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/27/catholicism-christianity

⁶This paper asks, what is the religious need that we, Man, desire so fervently that we need to place so much value and importance on it? (And here, all religions and their believers share the same ideal: seeking meaning). Perhaps the need is that Man wants to placate his insecurities and fears. As Muslims say, *Wallahuallam*. Only God knows.

⁷The Oxford Dictionary of Saints by David Hugh Farmer (1978) is an exhaustive history that confirms that personality cults existed before the 4th century, as well as the championing and/or reviling of martyrs.

⁸‘Soul cleansing’ is a process within Islamic mysticism (or Sufism), whereby the believer confronts his or her emotions and/or issues by reciting either Quranic verses or one of the 99 names of Allah. This purifies the soul and banishes demons. There are other rituals in *Tasawwuf* that are too numerous to detail out here. The *Tasawwuf* classes I have attended also bordered on the philosophical – Who is Allah? What is ego?

⁹Syed Naguib Al-Attas’s *Historical Fact and Fiction* is another source on how Islam arrived and influenced the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. Not to forget too, the eminent historian, Azryumardi Azra, who wrote *Jaringan Ulama*, also wrote detailed analyses of the Islamic phenomenon.

¹⁰In Part Two of the Turkish work *Mir’at al-Haramain: 5 volumes*, Matba’-iBahriyye, Istanbul, 1301-1306 A.H, Ayyub Sabri Pasha gives a fascinating and detailed account of how Wahabbism began, how it spread all around Arabia, and that by 1737 A.D. became political to the point of being a reason for declaring war for the first time, in 1791A.D., against the emir of Mecca. Practicing Wahabbism had been done only secretly until then.

¹¹Yusof's early education in the Holy Land, Mecca began when he was 7 years old (some views state 11 years old), when he successfully memorized the al-Qur'an and subsequently furthered his studies in Egypt, and for several years, at the Al-Azhar University. He presented a dissertation of over 12,000 *hadith* to obtain his degree (Muhammad Abu Bakar. 1991; Files from the Terengganu State *Mufti* Department (TSMD). undated). His published works include a collection of fatwa (rulings), and his views on the rulings, which were published as a book called "The Fatwas of Terengganu State *Mufti* (From 1953-1970 A.D)". The book was published in 1971 in conjunction with 25 years of DYMM Sultan Ismail Nasaruddin Shah's reign. He also published a small digest called "Guide to Ibadah" or "Risalah Panduan Ibadah" and wrote several articles for the "Voice of the Terengganu State Religious Department", a monthly magazine (Files of the Terengganu State *Mufti* Department (TSMD). Undated).

¹²As-Sayyid Ahmad ibn Zaini Dahlan (rahmat-Allahi 'alaihi), *Mufti* of the blessed city of Mecca, described under the topic "Al-fitnat al-Wahabbiyya" the tenets of Wahabbism and the tortures the Wahabbis inflicted upon Muslims? [Al-futuhat al-Islamiyya, second volume, page 228, Cairo, 1387 (1968); photo-offset reproduction of a comparable part, Istanbul, 1395 (1975).] He wrote: "To deceive the 'ulama' of Ahl as-Sunnat in Mecca and Medina, they sent their men to these cities, but these men could not answer the questions of the Muslim 'ulama'. It became evident that they were ignorant heretics. A verdict declaring them disbelievers was written and distributed everywhere. Sharif Masud ibn Said, Amir of Mecca, ordered that the Wahabbis should be imprisoned. Some Wahabbis fled to Dar'iyya and recounted what had happened to them." [Al-futuhat al-Islamiyya, second volume, page 234, Cairo, 1387 (1968); photo-offset reproduction of a comparable part, Istanbul, 1395 (1975).]"

¹³*Persatuan Islam Indonesia*, or Islamic Union, is an organization that strives to teach the original teachings of Islam as taught by the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). It claims traditional teaching is not original because it became mixed

up with the local culture Through its scholars such as Ahmad Hassan, also known as 'Hassan Bandung' or 'Hassan Bangil', Persis introduces Islam derived directly from the Quran and Hadith.

¹⁴I came upon Marranci's book in the online library, Questia .com, by chance and the chapter 'Beyond The Stereotype: Challenges in Identifying Muslims Identities' resonated with my work on this paper. "Following recent neuroscientific theories (Damasio 2002), I have argued that while the self and the autobiographical self are real, identity is a machinery of personal imagination allowing vital coherence between the individual and his or her environment. Hence, emotions and feelings are central to the development of personal identities... My explanation of personal identity suggests that to the question 'what is a Muslim?' we cannot answer by only highlighting cultural symbolic elements of reference to Islam as codified religion. Rather, to the question 'what is a Muslim?' we need to answer 'a human being'... In other words, 'I'm Muslim' means 'I feel to be Muslim'. I have suggested that it is by focusing on that 'feel to be' more than the symbolic 'Muslim' that we can understand how Muslim identity, in particular among western-born Muslims is expressed, formed and developed beyond the imposed stereotypes."

¹⁵The following quote is from a workshop participant from the 12th API Regional workshop conducted in Bali, November 2013: "The coming of the Prophet Muhammad was supposed to cleanse the religion of idolatry which had been a perennial problem. Every time a religious reformer comes, people tend to turn to idolatry by treating others as sacred or holy or even infallible..The clash between Sufism and Wahabism has historical roots [connected to the conflict] between Sunnism and Shiism...The problem we are facing as Muslims is that both are extreme; so I don't know how we'll be able to connect them." — While I am very tempted to answer this comment, again, this paper does not permit it—not only because there is no space but also because the comment would spark a totally new paper!

REFERENCES

- Alatas, Ismail Fajrie. 2011. *Becoming Indonesians: The Ba'lawi in the Interstices of the Nation*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV
- Al-Attas, Syed Naguib. 2012. *Historical Fact and Fiction*. Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science and Civilization
- . 1969. *Preliminary Statement on A General Theory of the Islamisation of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka
- Arnold, Thomas Walker. 1913. *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*. London: Constable & Company Ltd. Available at: www.scribd.com/doc/33686144/The-Preaching-of-Islam-1896-1913-Thomas-Walker-Arnold
- Azra, Azyumardi, 2005. *Islamic Thought: Theory, Concepts and Doctrines in the Context of Southeast Asian Islam, Islam in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: ISEAS
- Carman, John B. and W. Brede Kristensen. 1960. *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff
- Ewing, Katherine Pratt. 1997. *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam*. Durham, S.C: Duke University Press. Available at: books.google.com.my/books?hl=en&lr=&id=IC28fFIn4XkC&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=manifestations+of+sainthood+in+Islam&ots=2v3_HyT7CN&sig=voq_W1RyFgoQZHc2_ydGrU1Xn1I&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=manifestations%20of%20sainthood%20in%20Islam&f=false
- Farmer, David Hugh. 1978. *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Gilsenan, Michael. 2003. Out of the Hadhramaut. *London Review of Books*, 25 (6):7-11. March 20, 2003. Available at: www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n06/michael-gilsenan/out-of-the-hadhramaut
- Website for Guardian U.K. newspaper: Comment Is Free: Do We Need Saints? Available at: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/27/catholicism-christianity
- Gross, Rita M. and Nancy A. Falk eds. 1958. *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Habib Lutfi Yahya's Website. www.habiblutfiyahya.net/
- Hendricks, Syaikh Ahmad. 2005. *Sainthood (Wilayah) and Nearness (Qurb)* Available at: www.sunnah.org/tasawwuf/sainthood.htm
- Ho, Engseng. 2006. *The Graves of Tarim*. Berkeley, Ca: University of California Press
- Hocking, William Ernest. 1912. *The Meaning of God in Human Experience: A Philosophic Study of Religion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
- Hopgood, James F, ed. 2005. *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*. Alabama: The University of Alabama Press
- Kasan, Hasnan et al. 2012. The Role of the Malay Archipelago Scholars in Terengganu in the Development of the Shafi'i Sect. *American-Eurasian Network for Scientific Information (AENSI) Journal of Applied Sciences Research (JASR)*, 8(11):5333-5341. Available at: www.aensiweb.com/jasr.html
- Marranci, Gabriele. 2008. *The Anthropology of Islam*. Oxford: Berg Publishers
- McCarthy, David Matzko. 2012. *Sharing God's Good Company: A Theology of The Communion Of Saints*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans
- Notosusanto, Nugroho, Marwati Djoened Poesponegoro and Sartono Kaqrtodirdjo. 1975. *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia Vol III*. Indonesia: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan
- Ramadan, Tariq. 2010. *The Quest for Meaning*. London: Allen Lane

Smith, Robert G. 2008. *The Natural Basis for Spirituality: Redefining the Inner Light*. Available at: retina.anatomy.upenn.edu/~rob/natspir.html.

Sullivan, Patricia A. 2005. *A Reinterpretation of Invocation and Intercession of the Saints*. Available at: www.questia.com/read/1G1-133107076/a-reinterpretation-of-invocation-and-intercession

Wigmore, Ivy. 2012. *What Is Social Media*. whatis.techtarget.com/definition/social-media

Wilson, Stephen. 1983. *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* Available at: books.google.com.my/books?hl=en&lr=&id=KSY4AAAAIAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=why+are+saints+important&ots=2jVSkZgYN2&sig=nKqMVAtoeDO-c1zq2Dhy3QVL6Ls&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=why%20are%20saints%20important&f=false