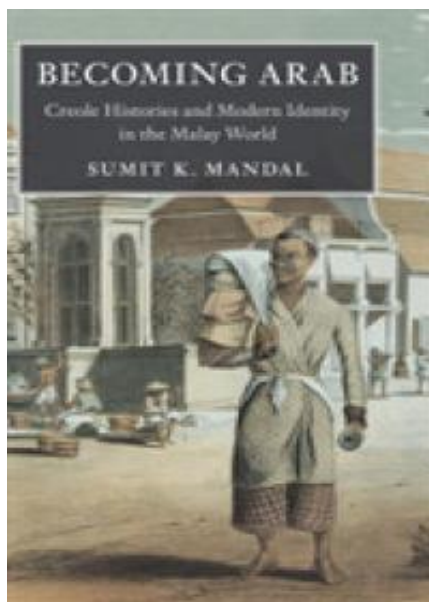


Sumit Mandal, *Becoming Arab: Creole Histories and Modern Identity in the Malay World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 260 pp. Online ISBN 9781108164931.



This book examines the power and limits of race categories by focusing on the Arabs in Dutch colonies of Southeast Asia. The enduring power of these categories is one that the author seeks to unsettle by unravelling the hand of the colonial state. The limits of these categories, Mandal argues, is that it remained a “partially fulfilled fantasy” (6) as far as the Arabs are concerned. By focusing on the 19th century, the author shifts the gaze towards empires before the rise of nation-states. The book consists of three parts. The first deals with the pre-colonial “creole” Malay world and the place of the *Hadrami* Arabs. The second part turns to the establishment of the Dutch empire and its racialised forms of governing. The final part looks at the rise of a “modern” Arab identity from these colonial experiences.

The first part consists of a solitary chapter that outlines the “Sayyids” in the Malay world as a creole community for whom the social dynamic depended on generational adaptation. Mandal explains this through the contrasting classifications of *peranakan* (sons of the soil) and *totok* (foreign) between them; in subtle ways distinct from rigid notions of race. The second part, consisting of three chapters, begins with Chapter 2 that contextualises the Dutch monopolisation of shipping routes previously controlled by Sayyids. This forced them to seek trade inland, confining them to act as economic middlemen for the colonial empire. The push to

the interiors also subtly changed the relationship with the natives, most of whom shared the religion of these Sayyids. With less opportunities for profit from shipping, they started investing in lands and increasingly acted as moneylenders to the rural population. Earlier opportunities for the Sayyids to elite status through royal patronage were now restricted to commercial success. Whereas previously the Sayyid identity had symbolic power with the rulers that often resulted in marital alliances, they now had to gain social prestige through economic means as well.

Chapter 3 examines the efforts of the colonial bureaucracy to control economic access through racialised policies of regulating mobility. In particular was the categorisation of the population according to “legal needs” (76), privileging the “European” over the “Natives” and “Foreign Orientals.” The move to the interiors by these foreigners, particularly the Chinese and the Arabs, resulted in the perceived need to closely monitor them through policies like the “pass regulation” that restricted the acquisition of land. Later restrictions on travel within the colony, termed the “Quarter system,” led to the creation of racial enclaves within urban areas for easier monitoring. The effects of these segregations were to add significance to a racialised representation on physical space and colonial maps, while also justifying control and surveillance. The fourth chapter builds on these racialised spaces and examines its workings on the colonial imagination. The crucial narrative here was on the delimitation of Islam with *Arabness*. Using classic Orientalist tropes, Arabs came to be seen by Dutch scholars and bureaucrats as the vehicle through which Islam negatively influenced the natives. The paternalism extended to the natives by the colony meant a suspicion towards the Arabs and subsequent depictions of them as exploitative.

The third part of the book, consisting of three chapters, looks at the formations of a modern Arab identity at the turn of the 20th century from these colonial experiences and the increasing anti-colonial turn to the Ottoman empire. The enrollment of elite Sayyids in modernist Ottoman education systems in subtle ways reinforced their identity as both foreign and superior to the natives. Coinciding with this was the rise and popularity of Arab/Islamic organisations that institutionalised this paternalistic relation with the natives, particularly the *Djamiat Cheir*. The last chapter attempts to glean the “fault lines of genealogy and class” (203) in these developments in the context of the decline of the Ottoman empire and the rise of Arab nationalism. The book then concludes on how these colonial categories of race have taken on new grammars in post-colonial states that still reproduce “colonial terms of difference to govern their own societies” (209). It is in this context, the author argues, that creole histories provide scope to imagine and see “hybrid social realities in understandings of identity” (207). An epilogue at the end succinctly illustrates contemporary attempts in Southeast Asia to invoke Arab “transcultural trajectories” (232) that provide possibilities for more inclusiveness.

The book is a meticulously argued illustration of how race entered the lives and experiences of creole Arabs in Southeast Asia, connecting it to colonial Dutch

policies and perceptions. Yet there is an overriding sense that fidelity to this circumscribed focus often got in the way of gleaning out broader implications. The particular reasons for the choice of Arabs in Dutch colonies could have been helpful for a reader unacquainted with modern identities in the Malay World. From a scholarly perspective, the half page devoted to description of the colonial archives (235) felt rather short. Here again, it would have been helpful to garner the author's impression about them and what can be said about colonial subjects from them. Take for instance the interplay between Sayyid "paternalism" and colonial race categories that is a significant theme throughout the book (153, 185, 191, 202). There is a perceived ambivalence over whether this paternalism was present ever since their arrival in Malaya; or was it an insignificant aspect aggravated by colonial socio-economic segregation; or could its racial overtones be linked to Arab nationalistic ferment during the early 20th century? There is not enough by what they themselves perceived the case to be, indicating perhaps the limits of these archives in bringing out their voices.

While colonial archives are often deployed today to argue for how local concepts and practices were invariably misunderstood and displaced, the author does go beyond that and illustrate the longitudinal patterns and trends of these processes. Nonetheless, beyond aspects of trade and mobility, it is difficult to gauge the subtle differences in the everyday lives of a pre-colonial creole *Hadrami* with that of a colonial Arab. This thinness in the book's depiction of them could be due to the particular production and function of these archives. In this vein, it could have been interesting to further explore their practices of marriage (that was briefly looked at in page 193, particularly on how colonial racial laws and bureaucracy interacted (or didn't interact) with their particular genealogical notions of *Kafaa'* or hierarchy. These could have better illustrated the book's argument that racial categories remained a "partially fulfilled fantasy" (6) – providing a glimpse into the changes and persistence of creole patterns of kinship. But it could also possibly explain why the Arabs represented throughout the book are of a particular gender, and why women were central in the "quality and intensity of the [racial] exclusion" (9) produced.

Aside from these minor concerns, the book is a welcome addition to the history of identities in Southeast Asia. The structure of the book deserves compliment for its coherent introduction, tightly argued chapters and a lucid epilogue to cap it off. Recommending it to any specialist or novice requires no second thoughts. In an age of increasing racial tensions, this book sensitises one to social implications and repercussions of public policies, while also providing glimmers of hope for inclusiveness by bringing out the different hybrid histories binding humanity.

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