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Title : SPEECH AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE YEMENI-HADRAMIS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: IDENTITY MAINTENANCE OR ASSIMILATION?

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Prof. Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk
Chair of the Conference

Excellencies, Distinguished speakers, guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

First of all, I would like to say that I am greatly honoured and privileged to be here this morning at this International Conference on "The Yemeni-Hadramis in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?" I would like to record my appreciation to the organizers, the Department of History and Civilization, International Islamic University Malaysia, and the Embassy of the Republic of Yemen to Malaysia, for inviting me to this Conference and to share my thoughts on this very exciting topic.

2. I am pleased that the organizers have been able to assemble renowned scholars and researchers from different parts of the world from Africa, America, Asia and Europe. Their participation and thorough analysis, I am sure, will enhance our understanding on the Yemeni-Hadrami migration into Southeast Asia and its contribution to the two regions – Hadramaut and Southeast Asia. In this regard, I would like to congratulate the organizers for convening this Conference. I do hope that during their short stay here our foreign participants will find time to experience the rich cultural heritage of our country.

3. I am confident that the exchange of views at this Conference would spur greater interest amongst academicians especially those from this region to carry out more research on the subject as well as to gather more understanding on the subject.

4. Being of Hadrami descent, I am very much interested in the question of migration and assimilation of the Hadramis. Indeed, international migration has been a common factor throughout the history of mankind but what is important is to understand why some communities have been able to assimilate more successfully with the local communities than others, for example. What characteristics and values

help assimilate communities? Sometimes certain communities are able to maintain their specific identities in spite of assimilation. What keeps a community distinct from each other in spite of their continuous interaction for generations? Looking at the programme overview, I am confident that the Conference will address these questions but with special emphasis on the case of the Hadrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia.

5. The theme itself requires lengthy debates and discussion. Even the word Diaspora can bring negative and positive connotations depending on the way you view the subject matter. If we were to rely on commonly used definition of diaspora, it would mean ethnic minority groups of migrant origin residing and living in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of the origin. In the case of Malaysia, generally people of Hadrami descent did not consider themselves as diasporas because they have been totally assimilated within the local community through the sharing of the same religion and mazhab, proficiency of the language and practicing the culture of the host country.

Excellencies/Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. The migration of the Hadramis to this part of the world undeniably has contributed to the richness of cultural diversity of this region. But, what were the reasons for their migration to Southeast Asia? I believe the reasons were mixed and varied. Some came as preachers or men of God preaching the teachings of Islam and introduced the religion of Islam to the local population. Many became Muftis, Qadhis and Imams of the community.

7. At this juncture, it is important to note that the madrasahs were built by the Hadramis to teach the principles and tenets of Islam as well as Arabic. Sadly, in this world of counter-terrorism by the West, madrasahs have now been painted with the negative image of producing radicals that are taught to hate the West. On the contrary, many ulamas and local elites of this region who were trained in the madrasahs had contributed to the nation building process of the countries in the regions.

8. Economic opportunities in the British and Dutch colonies also attracted the Hadramis to venture out of Hadramaut. The creation of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated the surge in the arrival of Hadramis to the region. Many of them came to search for new economic opportunities in the British colonies of Penang and Singapore and were mainly involved in the traditional spice and incense trading. Over the years, with increased wealth, they ventured into real estate and textiles without compromising their religious work and duties.

9. As the British were eager to promote their new 'cities', the wealthy Arab settlers who were already accustomed to the culture of the region were found to be the perfect candidates. In fact, they were given a lot of incentives and flexibility by the British. The al-Junid, al-Qaff and al-Sagof families were the earlier Hadrami settlers from across the Straits of Malacca and became part of the community. I consider

they had assimilated well with the locals on account of their exemplary conduct and character in dealing with the locals through their business transactions and religious work and duties with the local community.

Excellencies/Ladies and Gentlemen,

10. In Malaysia, the Hadrami community is a unique case of community integration. The community was able to assimilate and become part of the multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious Malaysian society. Yet, at the same time, the community has managed to maintain some degree of their Hadramaut identity without diminishing their role as Malaysian citizens.

11. The same is also true in Indonesia. The Hadrami community in Indonesia also assimilated with the local population through inter-marriages. By marrying the locals, the Hadramis adapted to the new culture of the lands.

12. As migrants in a foreign land, I believe what is important is to assure the local population that the Hadrami community is as much the same as the local community - that their interests are compatible with that of the local community. Over the years, the process of integration has become complete as physical appearances, language, culture and mindset have eventually integrated with the local community. The Hadramis were then accepted as part of the community of their new nations. In Malaysia, they are considered as bumiputeras and enjoy the special privileges under the Federal Constitution.

13. For the current generation of the Hadrami community they should learn from the experiences of their forefathers and elders and use them to contribute positively to the society and wellbeing of their fellow Muslims. This, I believe will augur well with the image and precedent set by their forefathers who were respectable merchants as well as religious teachers.

14. Many of the Hadrami families have been in this region for many generations. Many were born in their adopted country and had become part of the country and are very much Malaysians like those of Chinese and Indian descent. In fact, many Hadramis were active in the struggle for independence and played a critical role in the formation of Malaysia and the nation building process.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. Undoubtedly, the migration of Hadramis to Southeast Asia has become a significant factor to the region. In this respect, the migration process should also be looked at from the perspective of the period of their arrival to Southeast Asia. Each time period has its own characteristics and peculiarities that would impact on the local population as well as the Hadramis themselves.

16. Before the colonial era, the Hadramis were instrumental in spreading the teaching of Islam to the region. The observation of Mazhab Shafie in the field of fiqh in the Malay world is largely contributed to the Hadramis who themselves were practitioners of the same Mazhab. During this period, conflicts with the local population were not known of. The Hadramis were easily accepted by the local community as they were highly regarded as religious teachers as well as through intermarriages.

17. During the colonial period, about 500 hundred years ago during the Portuguese invasion of Southeast Asia the Hadramis had fought alongside the local people. It is interesting to note that Sharif Hidayatullah, an Arab descendant and governor of the Muslim Kingdom of Demak in the late 15th and early 16th century, had successfully led the locals and managed to oust the Portuguese from the entire north coast of Java.

18. Then in the 17th century the Dutch came with their crusading spirit and viewed Muslims as infidels. When they introduced the "divide and rule policy" the Hadrami community refused to play into the hands of the colonialists. The Dutch divided the peoples of Indonesia as Muslims and Christians and the Arabs were grouped together with the other Muslim subjects. As some of the Hadrami descendants had become local political leaders and sultans they had play a leading and active political role in the fight against the Dutch. In fact, my forefathers were exiled from Manado to Sulawesi by the Dutch and finally we landed here in Malaysia.

19. To further divide the Hadramis from the local population, the Dutch introduced the infamous law IS163 categorizing the Arabs as Vreemde Oosterrlingen or "foreign Asians." Thus, treating the Arabs as a minority in the same group as the people from China and India. Under this new law, three categories were introduced including that of "foreign Asians", namely European settlers and indigenous population. Clearly, the Dutch was weary of political integration between the Hadramis and the local pribumi.

20. At the end of the 19th century during the Aceh war against the Dutch in Northern Sumatra, the Hadrami community of Batavia (now Jakarta) and a significant number of scholars in modern Indonesia and Malaysia became supporters of the Pan Islamic movement led by the Ottoman ruler, Sultan Abdul Hamid.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

21. The sacrifices that the Hadrami community made during this period had convinced the indigenous people in Indonesia and Malaysia especially of their commitment to Islam, their love for justice, and these actions brought the two communities closer to each other.

22. The Islamic modernist movement which originated in Egypt under the leadership of Jamaluddin Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and which was led by Rashid Rida made a

significant impact in Southeast Asia. This movement eventually helped in the formulation of nationalists thought in the region. The Hadrami community, too, played a very prominent role in this struggle.

23. Participation in anti-colonial activities had enabled many Hadramis to contribute to the growth of the independent movements both in Indonesia and Malaysia. They fought shoulder to shoulder with their brothers and sisters of the land towards the independence of their home countries in Southeast Asia. For example, in Malaysia, the contribution of such personalities such as Syed Sheikh al Hadi, Syed Nasir and Syed Jaafar Albar in the struggle for the independence of Malaya through the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) was significant. Many Hadramis were journalists, writers and teachers and they were active in inspiring the spirit of independence in the Malay Archipelago. All these activities contributed positively in the assimilation process of Hadrami community to the local Malay community.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

24. The link between Hadramaut and the Hadrami Diaspora was at its height during the early migration period and prior to the Second World War. A lot of money was remitted back to Hadramaut from this region. In fact, Hadramaut was considered as a knowledge center and training ground for the children of Hadrami descent. However, World War II and developments during the colonial period limited the link with the land of their ancestors. This Conference in my view would further encourage Hadrami descendants to learn more about their heritage and in return contribute to the enhancement of bilateral relations between the Republic of Yemen and the countries of the region.

25. On that note, I wish all of you a fruitful discussion during the conference and hope that the conference will come up with viable suggestions and solutions that will contribute to the development of Southeast Asian and Islamic studies as academic disciplines, and significantly enhance our closer understanding of the history and culture of the region.

26. It is now my pleasure to officially declare this Conference open.

Thank you.