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TRADITION AND ISLAMIC LEARNING



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TRADITION AND ISLAMIC LEARNING

Singapore Students in the Al-Azhar University

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*This book is in honour of
Shaikh Syed Isa Semait,
the second Mufti of Singapore*

*I dedicate this book to my daughter, Nuha
May she be an inspiration to society*

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PREFACE

Initially, it wasn't my personal choice [to study at Al-Azhar]. I wanted to go to a polytechnic, but my parents wanted me to go to the Al-Azhar University and pursue the *ukhrawi* (religious) field. They wanted this for me since I was in Primary 1.

*Fazlurrahman Sidek, a Singaporean studying at
the Al-Azhar University*

In May 2017, an online British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) current affairs programme, *Heart and Soul*, scrutinized the Al-Azhar University's effectiveness in combating Islamic extremism and radicalism. The episode, entitled *The Battle for Al-Azhar*, questioned whether the mode of learning promoted by the university remains relevant in this modern day and age, especially when some scholars had described its curriculum to be antiquated and unreformed.¹ They also asked if the university is doing enough to counter radical ideas promoted by groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda, given that individuals sympathetic to their struggle also referred to the classical texts taught by the university's professors. Some analysts posited that in tackling violence, Al-Azhar is the problem and not the solution.

Yet, the millennium-old Egyptian university remains the most popular destination for Singapore *madrrasah* (Islamic religious

schools) students seeking a degree in Islamic studies. Many Singapore Malay-Muslim parents consider the Al-Azhar as the centre of “moderate” Islam. The university is the standard bearer of Sunni Islam, and it teaches the Shafie School of jurisprudence, one of the four Sunni school of jurisprudence that Muslims in the Malay world generally adhere to. In fact, Al-Azhar remains the top choice for Southeast Asian Islamic studies students, even though there are other centres of Islamic learning offering better scholarships, such as the universities in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait.

The Al-Azhar University is arguably the first university in the world, and it has been the centre of Islamic learning for centuries. Established in the tenth century, Al-Azhar is one of the earliest in the world to issue degrees to its students. Al-Azhar did shape the religious discourse not only in Arabia but also in Southeast Asia. For example, in the early twentieth century, returning students from Cairo brought back reform ideas to Singapore, which was then already a cosmopolitan British town. These returnees inspired the progressive movement in the Malay world, referred to as the *Kaum Muda* (young camp). The movement included individuals like Syed Shaykh Al-Hady, Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin and Haji Abbas Taha, who championed the ideas of the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar then — Sheikh Muhammad Abduh (b. 1849 – d. 1905). The Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar is the highest Islamic authority in Egypt and considered the leading Islamic authority of the Sunni world. The progressives in the Malay world promoted discourses like women emancipation and moving Islam beyond rituals, topics considered taboo by the *Kaum Tua* (conservative group).

To date, I have not come across any study which examines the impact of Al-Azhar education in contemporary Singapore, even though the number of Singapore students studying in the university has increased exponentially compared to the

early twentieth century. There have been works that highlight individuals who shaped the religious life and discourse in Singapore during the pre-independence period and point out the role of the Al-Azhar University in training them (Firdaus, Wan Hussein and Mohd Raman 2010; Syed Zakir 2016), but there has never been an in-depth study on the institution's curriculum and mode of education. In filling this gap, this monograph examines Al-Azhar's connection with contemporary Singapore, particularly the learning experience of Singaporean students in Al-Azhar. For decades, Singapore students have gone to Cairo and enrolled into the University upon completion of their GCE "A" levels (pre-university levels) or diploma. These students would be 18 or 19 years old when they entered Al-Azhar.

These Al-Azhar graduates (known as Azharites) have made numerous contributions to Singapore's Islamic discourse. Prominent Al-Azhar graduates from Singapore include former Mufti Syed Isa Semait (served as Mufti 1972–2011) and the current Mufti Dr Mohamed Fatris Bakaram (2011–present). Some of these Al-Azhar graduates serve in the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura or Muis), a statutory body formed by the Singapore government to administer Islamic affairs. Majority of the Al-Azhar graduates take up roles as religious teachers in the *madrasahs* or become independent preachers (*pendakwah*). To be sure, the Al-Azhar education serves as the rites of passage for many Singapore *madrasah* graduates before one becomes an *alim*. Despite its contributions to Singaporean religious life, the learning experience of Singaporeans studying in the Al-Azhar University has not been properly documented.

This monograph has three objectives. First, it hopes to highlight the significance of the Al-Azhar graduates in the broader context of understanding Islamic discourse and learning in Singapore. Some *madrasahs* tweaked their curriculum to suit the

entry requirements for the university. Moreover, the thinking of the religious elites in Singapore is influenced by their mentors and teachers from the university; they cite their works, and to some extent, glorify them.

Second, this ethnographic study departs from the existing studies on Muslims in Singapore through the security lens, especially after 9/11. Studying the Muslim community in Singapore, and the connection it has with the Middle East, should transcend terrorism and radicalism, which gained traction with the rise of radical groups such as the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) and ISIS. There are many other issues concerning Islamic thought and reforms that deserves scrutiny, such as reforms in the *shariah* courts, religious institutions, and particularly problems associated with traditionalism and conservatism and their impact on modernisation (Azhar 2014; Noor Aisha 2008). For any form of reforms to take place, it should begin with a proper understanding of the religious education, the religious elites, and their mode of thinking. Understandably, this monograph only focuses on the Al-Azhar University graduates because it is a preliminary study and does not intend to make any big claims. I hope that more studies on Islamic studies graduates from the other Islamic universities — both in the Middle East and Asia — will follow suit.

Third, this monograph attempts to build on existing academic studies that analyse the *madrasah* education in Singapore. These works are mostly descriptive in nature and less about discussing its challenges and problems. Only a handful of scholars undertook a critical approach of the Islamic education system. However, this monograph is neither a critique of the Singapore Al-Azhar graduates nor a glorification of their institution of learning. It is a fact-finding study to understand the religious experience of *madrasah* students who went on to pursue a degree from the university. What are their struggles and challenges? What are

their career paths? Is there an Al-Azhar “school of thought” that Singapore students adhere to?

Answering these basic questions will allow readers to understand the mechanics of the Al-Azhar system, its merits and its problems. This monograph hopes that other researchers will probe further into the gaps of Singapore’s religious education system, providing useful information for the authorities to improve the policies concerning *madrasah* education in general. Policymakers can then determine if Al-Azhar remains the ideal institute of Islamic learning for *madrasah* students and how best can returning graduates apply their knowledge in the context of a multiracial and multireligious Singapore.

Note

1. You may hear the programme through the link <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p052nstm>> (accessed 9 October 2017).

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In 2015, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) awarded me the Shaikh Syed Isa Semait Scholarship (SISS), an award named in honour of Singapore's former Mufti. The award has allowed me to carry out this preliminary study on Singapore students studying at the Al-Azhar University in Egypt. I would like to convey my deepest appreciation to Muis, particularly the Muis Academy, for making me the first SISS recipient, and for all its support rendered to the project. I wish to express my gratitude to Shaikh Syed Isa Semait, the former Mufti of Singapore, for sharing his insights on his Al-Azhar journey. I hope this monograph will do justice to him as the scholarship that funds this project bears his name. He has been a source of inspiration for me. May his voice of moderation and humility resonate among the religious elites in the country and help the community grow into a progressive one.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to my family members, especially to my wife, Sarina Mohamed Rasol, my father, Haji Saat Dawood, my mother, Hajjah Azizah Sahlan, and my family members, Norshahizal Saat and Siti Radiah Mohamed Shariff for the moral support and prayers.

I also wish to thank Mr Tan Chin Tiong, former Director of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, for all his support towards my academic development. He was the one who encouraged me to understand the Middle East impact in Southeast Asia, and I hope this monograph can contribute to a better understanding of Islamic thought in the Malay world.

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Thank you!

ABBREVIATIONS

AMLA	Administration of Muslim Law Act
API	Akademi Pengajian Islam (Islamic Studies Academy)
ASWJ	<i>ahlus sunnah wal jamaah</i> (Sunni)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
IIUM	International Islamic University of Malaysia
Ikhwanul Muslimin	Muslim Brotherhood
INFAD	World Fatwa Management and Research Institute
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)
JC	junior college
LBKM	Lembaga Biasiswa Kenangan Maulud (Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board)
LNO	letter of no objection
Mendaki	Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community
MTFA	Muslimin Trust Fund Association

Muhammadiyah	Muhammadiyah Organization
MUI	Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Ulama Council of Indonesia)
Muis	Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore)
NGO	non-governmental organizations
NU	Nahdlatul Ulama (Revival of the Ulama)
NUS	National University of Singapore
PAS	Parti Islam Se Malaysia (Pan Malaysian Islamic Party)
Pergas	Persatuan Guru-Guru Agama dan Ulama Singapura (Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association)
Perkemas	Singapore Students Welfare Assembly in Cairo
PMRAM	Persekutuan Melayu Republik Arab Mesir (Malay Federation of the Arab Republic of Egypt)
PSLE	Primary School Leaving Examinations
PUM	Persatuan Ulama Malaysia (Ulama Organization of Malaysia)
STAM	Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia (Malaysian Higher Islamic Religious Certificate)
STU	Sijil Tinggi Ugama (Higher Islamic Religious Certificate)
UKM	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia)
UM	Universiti Malaya
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
USIM	Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (Islamic Science University of Malaysia)
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia (Science University of Malaysia)

A NOTE ON TRANSLATION, SPELLING AND OTHER CONVENTIONS

This study relies on primary interviews originally written or spoken in the Malay language and translated into English by the author. Some of the interviews were carried out through e-mail correspondence.

The book retains plural forms of the Arabic terms. For example, the term *ulama* refers to the plural for religious scholars. A religious scholar is referred to as an *alim*.

Non-English terms are *italicized*.

Most interviewees are identified by pseudonyms to protect their identity. There are some exceptions, such as the interview with Shaykh Syed Isa Semait, the former Mufti of Singapore.

Malay and Indonesian authors are identified by their first names, not surnames. Hence, Norshahril Saat is cited as “Norshahril” rather than “Saat”, and Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman is cited as “Noor Aisha” rather than “Abdul Rahman”. However, Arabic names are treated in the same manner as English names, and their family names are identified. Hence, Yusof al-Qaradawi is cited as “al-Qaradawi”, similar to “Hefner” for Robert Hefner.