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Book Reviews

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Becoming Arab: Creole Histories and Modern Identity in the Malay World. By Sumit K. Mandal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xxiii+259 pp.

This fascinating study, for which the prototype was the author's doctoral dissertation (Mandal 1994), argues that intermixing Arab (especially Hadrami) immigrants with local inhabitants in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) led to the emergence of creole Arab communities until the end of the eighteenth century. With the Dutch government's takeover of the NEI from the Dutch East Indies Company in 1799, new laws on racial separation led to "the gradual decline of the creole character of Batavian society" (p. xxiii). Creole Hadramis were regarded under racial categorization laws as Arab by Dutch authorities, leading to some fluidity in their identity over the next 150 years.

Part I (chapter 1) argues that the Malay world was highly ethnically mixed and creolized prior to 1800, as evidenced by Arab honorifics assuming new meanings, the prominence of sayyids rather than Arabs (such as less prominent racial categories), hybrid titles, multilingual facilities, and mixed-race Arab Malays closely connecting with both sides of their families. Mandal draws heavily on Abdullah al-Misri's *Hikayat Mareskalek*, arguing that "authors such as Al-Misri never travelled beyond the archipelago but were local interlocutors in the transregional retellings and translations of not only the Qur'an but also 'stories of kings of olden time'" (p. 36).

Part II (chapters 2–4) points to the transformation of the understanding of Arab-ness after the Dutch government's assumption of rule in 1800. Unable to compete with European steamships,

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creole Arabs left the maritime economy and moved into the Javanese hinterland, assuming new occupations that set them apart (as with the Chinese): “Arabs came to be increasingly represented in public life as outsiders and by their economic function: middlemen, moneylenders, and landlords” (p. 69). The Dutch policy of racial categorization with associated restrictive regulations during the nineteenth century led to a racially stratified social order. An integrated identity among the creole Arabs gave way to a sense of Arab separateness.

Part III (chapters 5–7) describes how the creole Arabs took the initiative in shaping a new and dynamic identity in face of the challenges from colonial control. They looked increasingly to the seat of caliphal authority in Istanbul. Their engagement with the wider world of Islam brought them into contact with Islamic reformist thinking, and in turn they became the conduit for these new ideas back to the Malay world. This saw the emergence of new publications: Al-Imam, Al-Bashir, Oetousan Islam, and Oetousan Hindia. The sayyids established organizations such as the Djamiat Cheir to provide a vehicle for their increasingly modern identity. That organization in turn established a network of modern schools, all of which served to challenge the colonial authority in various ways. These dynamic developments placed Arabs in significant positions; Mandal observes that “the notion of Arab leadership over native Muslims became the normative language that was embraced not only by sayyids but by native Muslims as well” (p. 180). But not all was smooth in this evolving identity, as tensions developed between “those who identified with Arab nationalism and those loyal to the Ottoman Empire” (p. 187), leading to factionalism among the Arabs, which Mandal attributes back to the Dutch: “Colonial transformation resulted in inversions of Hadrami social hierarchy that created a fault line between sayyids and shaykhs” (p. 191).

This book sits well amongst a growing literature on a topic that has received much attention over the last twenty-five years. This has been especially stimulated by two conferences on diasporic

Arab communities, at SOAS in 1995 and Leiden in 1997. Mandal's introduction sets this book within its scholarly context by making reference to a veritable who's who of Southeast Asian specialists, both text-based and anthropological: Anthony Milner, Tim Harper, Robert Hefner, Joel Kahn, G. William Skinner, Leonard Andaya, and others.

This study has clear strengths. The author wisely acknowledges the limits of race categories: "The official histories of contemporary nation-states in the Malay world present race and racism in almost sacrosanct terms as the legacy of the colonial state's policy of divide and rule. Scholarship on the subject offers further nuance" (p. 9). Furthermore, his detailed engagement with the concept of creolization offers helpful insights to a term fraught with ambiguity and subject to diverse interpretations. Moreover, the author's decision to do a broad-brush study of several centuries is timely, given the more detailed studies of particular periods and communities that appeared in the proceedings from the two above-mentioned conferences.

Yet, certain features of this book raise questions. The extent of his claims about creolization pre-1800 require further consideration and evidence, and, given that these claims represent the foundation of Mandal's study, it has perhaps been built upon shifting sands.

Furthermore, the edges of his own categories are perhaps too sharp, with the shadow of Edward Said looming large over this volume. Pre-1800 creolization was unlikely to have been as clear-cut as he suggests, with varying degrees of integration among Malay world Arabs highly likely. Not all colonial policymakers and writers were the bad guys; suggesting that colonial authorities were responsible for creating a fault line between sayyids and shaykhs is drawing a very long bow. Mandal suggests that Raffles reportedly "regarded Arabs as barely civilised" (p. 117), yet in early letters to his family, Raffles showed an open-mindedness to the religious other that was arguably unusual for his day. And although many colonial officials wrote negatively about the Arabs they encountered, Mandal seems to dismiss their critiques as necessarily having no validity whatsoever.

Nevertheless, this is a timely and important study. It carries forward research into Arab history in Southeast Asia some considerable way and should be required reading for students of Malay world history.

Peter G. Riddell
Melbourne School of Theology/Eastern College Australia, 5 Burwood Highway, Wantirna, Victoria 3152, Australia; email: peter_riddell@yahoo.com.

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Soul Catcher: Java's Fiery Prince Mangkunagara I, 1726–95. By M.C. Ricklefs. Singapore: NUS Press, 2018. xx+439 pp.

Prince Mangkunagara I (1726–95) is a fascinating figure from Javanese history who was known as a fierce rebel who established a semi-independent principality in Surakarta that still exists today. His formidable military exploits earned him a lasting reputation in Indonesia as a great general. In fact, his awe-inspiring posthumous name was 'Soul Catcher' (*Samběr Nyawa*), as he used to 'snatch up' the souls of his enemies, Javanese and Dutch alike, ruthlessly killing them in battle. However, he was not just a fearsome warrior but also a pious Muslim, an enthusiast of Javanese culture and all-around *bon vivant* with a taste for beautiful women and hard liquor. The prolific historian M.C. Ricklefs, who has already demonstrated his exceptional skills with many publications on eighteenth-century Java, now paints a vivid picture of one of the most prominent characters of that period who put his stamp on the direction of Java's history. It is hard to imagine another biographer equally fit for this task, as Ricklefs' intimate knowledge of the contemporaneous primary sources from both the Dutch colonial archives and Javanese narrative poems