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# The Pioneers of the Singapore Muslim Identity

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## The Pioneers of the Singapore Muslim Identity

### Synopsis

*This article highlights the historical contributions of three notable *asatizah*—Ahmad Hassan (Hassan Bandung), Ustazah Khamsiah Binte Ahmad, and Ustaz Mofradi Bin Mohd Noor—who embodied the Singapore Muslim Identity (SMI) and integrated Islamic values within a diverse, modern society. Ahmad Hassan is recognised for his scholarly works and moderation of religious views. Additionally, Ustazah Khamsiah's advocacy for women's rights and progressive educational methods is explored, and Ustaz Mofradi's involvement in political activism and community leadership is highlighted. The article underscores their pioneering efforts in shaping the Malay/Muslim community, emphasising resilience, inclusiveness, and adaptability as essential qualities for contemporary *asatizah*.*

### Introduction

The Singapore Muslim Identity (SMI) is an endeavour to ensure that the Singapore Muslim community remains cognisant of and is responsive to life in a highly diverse and plural globalised society. Its primary aim is to crystallise specific Islamic attributes, values and teachings which have been part of the ethos of Singapore Muslim community which contributes to nation-building and full social citizenship for members of the Muslim community (Basma, 2018).

Although the SMI in and of itself is a modern concept, it would be fallacious to assume that its ideals of a contextualised Islam and contribution to society are new. In fact, in the formative years of Singapore and even earlier, *asatizah* were much involved in the society through their initiatives in religious matters, women's rights, and even politics. To substantiate this claim, I have selected three *asatizah* for this commentary who exemplified SMI before it was formally conceptualised and distilled into the values of RICAP. They have made pioneering contributions to the Malay/Muslim community, addressing socio-religious issues that had no precedence. Despite their significant impact, the *asatizah* that I have deliberately selected are arguably unsung heroes to the public. Through this commentary, I hope to familiarise and provide some exposure to the diverse heritage of our local *ulama*.

### Ahmad Hassan (1883-1958): the mufassir

Born in 1887 in Singapore, Ahmad Hassan or Hassan Bandung was the son to a scholar,

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Ahmad Sinna Vappu Maricar. His mother, Muznah, was from Palekat, Madras. Both parents were from India who later moved to Surabaya, and then Singapore for trade. Hassan's exposure to the art of writing was likely inspired by his father, who was the lead editor for '*Nurul Islam*', a Tamil-language semiweekly newspaper. His writings often addressed religious and linguistic issues in a question-and-answer format. Transitioning from trading, Ahmad Hassan became a prolific scholar and writer, emulating his father, who wrote over 60 publications across different fields of religious studies such as jurisprudence, exegesis, and interfaith.

Although Hassan never received formal Islamic education, he studied under prominent scholars at that time, including Haji Ahmad at Bukit Tiung (Kampung Tiung) and Muhammad Thaib at Kampong Rokoh, where he learned *Nahu* and *Saraf*. As a young man, he used to work different jobs spanning from a perfume seller, a printer in his father's business and a writer for the Jeddah Pilgrims Office in Singapore. He was also a *munshi* (Malay and English language teacher) in neighbouring Johor. He taught part-time at an Indian *madrrasah* at Arab Street, Baghdad Street, and Geylang, the Islamic education hub then. Hassan was appointed as a replacement teacher for Kiai Muhammad Fadhlullah Suhaimi at Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, illustrative of the level of trust the community had in his knowledge.

### *Hassan's formative years in Singapore*

Before his migration to Surabaya and later Bandung, Hassan was critical of his observations of his father's religious practices. Growing up in Singapore, he observed his father returning after funerals without performing *talqin* and *tahlil*, both common customs to the local population. He also learnt from his father not to recite *niyyah* (intentions) before prayer, an act considered as *bid'ah* (innovation) by some Muslims (Siti, 2017).

Hassan's first publication in *Utusan Melayu*, a widely circulated daily newspaper in Malay, was an article on *kadis*<sup>1</sup> in Singapore, in which he condemned *kadis* who held their hearings with mixed gender seating in the same court. Given that it was written in the early 1900s, this was a novel area of criticism as the Islamic resurgence movement that pushed for social reforms only began much later. He later gave a speech on 'the decadence of Muslims' and was subsequently barred from speaking in public due to the overly critical nature of his speeches. Hassan also criticised the culture of *taqbil* (kissing the hands) of descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in another *Utusan Melayu*

[1] *Kadis* are appointed religious officials who solemnise Muslim marriages.

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article. This was engendered by his interactions with a scholar from Egypt who was teaching in Madrasah Alsagoff, who reprimanded him for ‘lowering his own status towards another person’. Consequently, Hassan was accused of slandering nobles (*sayyid*) and given a warning by the Singapore government (Siti, 2017).

### *Hassan’s migration to Indonesia*

In 1921, Hassan moved to Surabaya to manage his uncle’s textile business. There, he was introduced to influential politicians that had formed ‘*Sarekat Islam*’, an Indonesian socio-political organisation initially formed by Muslim Javanese batik traders to compete with the Chinese-Indonesian traders. Over time, ‘*Sarekat Islam*’ evolved into a nationalist group advocating independence from the Dutch colonialists. There, he met K.H. A. Wahab Hasbullah, later a leader of Nahdhatul Ulama, who taught him the differences of *Kaum Muda* and *Kaum Tua*, and Faqih Hasyim, who was one of the leading figures of *Kaum Muda*. Subsequently, Hassan was influenced by Faqih Hasyim and his ideas.

In early 1924, Hassan moved to Bandung to further his studies in textiles. While he was there, he stayed with Kiai Haji Muhammad Yunus, one of the founders of Persatuan Islam (Persis) in Indonesia. Hassan’s involvement with Persis introduced him to a new class of Islamic scholars who were students of the Darul Ulum in Makkah, an institution of religious learning frequented by students from the Malay Archipelago. It was led by Sheikh Yasin Padang, the renowned *hadith* scholar, along with other scholars such as Haji Zamzam and Kiai Haji Muhammad Yunus himself.

Since his exposure to Persis and its scholars, Hassan seemed to have moderated and calibrated his views. Once focusing on religious polemics, Hassan shifted his attention towards education, teaching young children at the *pesantren* in Persis, and completed his own exegesis of the Quran called ‘*Tafsir Al-Furqan*’ in 1956. This work, more a translation than an exegesis, addresses and interprets certain verses regarding selected topics with footnotes (Mahwanih, 2006). Its methodology is heavily influenced by Rashid Rida and Muhammad Abduh. He also wrote his magnum opus, *Soal-Jawab Masalah Agama* (Q&A on Religious Issues), a compilation of religious questions and his verdicts, which became popular not only in Indonesia, but also in Singapore and Malaysia. Hassan Bandung’s *Soal-Jawab* was a key reference that has played a central role in the genesis of the Muhammadiyah in Singapore where teachers used to read it alongside passages from the Quran and the Hadith.

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What is worth highlighting from Hassan Bandung is not his religious views per se but his receptiveness and willingness to adapt his views in ways that can bring benefit to society. His transition from a signature polemical style of writing towards the writing of Hassan's *Soal-Jawab* book is a testament to this adaptability.

### **Ustazah Khamsiah Binte Ahmad (1929-1981): the activist *mudirah***

Ustazah Khamsiah Binte Ahmad was the principal of a *madrasah* during the peak of the women's rights movement in Singapore, just before the passing of the Women's Charter. As one of the few prominent female *asatizah* of her time, this section highlights her contributions to the Malay/Muslim community, focusing on her advocacy for Muslim women's rights.

### ***Ustazah Khamsiah's achievements as a *mudirah****

In 1960, Ustazah Khamsiah Binte Ahmad was appointed as the first *mudirah* (principal) of Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, at a relatively young age of 31. By then, Madrasah Alsagoff had already switched from co-ed to a full-time all-girls school. As principal, she initiated sewing and cooking classes for students every Saturday (Pergas, 2014). Such skills were a necessity at a time where most households adopted traditional family structures and spousal roles. This initiative disproved a popular stigma of that time, that women who went to school were incapable of performing their responsibilities as caregivers of their households. It paved the way for more advancements for women. This initiative underscored how Ustazah Khamsiah, as a religious educator, was cognisant of the social milieu and the status of women of her time. She sought to push boundaries set up by social norms on gender roles, which often became intertwined with religion.

### ***Her attitude towards *dakwah****

From an interview with Ustazah Kamaliah Abdullah, Ustazah Khamsiah was an excellent teacher who never raised her voice to educate her students. Instead, she approached them personally, giving advice for their personal growth, and allowing them to realise their mistakes without using shame as a disciplinary tool. Her ethical method of education sets her apart from her contemporaries, as other teachers may have resorted to shaming or corporal punishment which were widespread practices, making her an example to be emulated by our *asatizah* today (Pergas, 2014).

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As for her activism for women, she used to teach at Mount Emily Girls' Home. She also wrote for magazines focused on womanhood such as '*Wanita Tiang Negara*' (Women as Pillars of the Nation) dan '*Baik Wanita Majulah Negara*' (Good Women for the Advancement of the Nation) to advance Islamic education for women. Unfortunately, she was unable to sustain the publishing of these magazines due to a lack of proper funding. One of her books, titled '*Wanita Islam*' (Muslim Women), was written in 1981 and discussed the Islamic perspective on women, gender roles, family institutions, and polygamy. In this book, she paralleled Prophetic examples and guidance, and quoted stories of the Prophet's (PBUH) wives. This book was even republished six times in 1991.

Her approach towards *dakwah* showed her awareness of socioreligious trends among Malay/Muslims.

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She once received an anonymous letter from another teacher who was unhappy with her 'soft' leadership. She calmly responded with the Malay proverb, '*Bagai menarik rambut dalam tepung, rambut jangan putus, tepung jangan berserak*' which means 'like pulling hair out of flour, ensure that the hair does not break, and the flour does not get messy'. This statement clearly shows Ustazah Khamsiah's consciousness of the sensitivities of advocating women's rights in the Malay/Muslim community. (Hakeem Samsuri)

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She acknowledged that fierce leadership would cause backlash, as women's activism was still in its early stages. Therefore, she believed a softer approach would be more constructive for the movement, allowing incremental yet progressive developments.

To summarise, her sensibility in education, gradual approach towards women's rights advocacy, and understanding of the sensitivities of her time made her the paragon of an *ustazah* striving for progress while staying relevant to the Malay/Muslim community's trends. The limited research on Ustazah Khamsiah, apart from the *Beacons of the Ummah* book, should aspire other *asatizah* to conduct more research on her.



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### **Ustaz Mofradi Bin Mohd Noor (1920-2008): a PAP founding member, Pergas pioneer**

In 1954, Ustaz Mofradi was among the 14 founding members of the People’s Action Party (PAP), the incumbent political party in government since Singapore’s independence. Three years later, he joined *Himpunan Protem*, an assembly of senior *asatizah* responsible for establishing the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas). His involvement in these two organisations represents an active involvement in society beyond the religious sector, which should be modelled by our *asatizah* today.

Like many past *asatizah*, Ustaz Mofradi did not begin his career in the religious sector after completing his studies at Madrasah Aljunied. He ran a corner shop, sold books and scrap wood in Johor, worked as a hospital attendant at Singapore General Hospital, and taught basic Islamic education to the workers’ children. He also became a part-time teacher in some *madrasahs* before founding his own Madrasah Khairiah at McAlister Road (Paya Lebar). In 1958, he began giving sermons on Singapore Radio regularly.

His contributions in the Malay/Muslim community are countless, but his involvement in the political sphere is particularly intriguing, specifically in the early years of Singapore through his participation in the PAP. As one of the few Malay figures in the early days of the political party, alongside Abdul Samad Ismail and Ismail Rahim, he was a very active member. He regularly attended meetings, participated in the election of other party members, and was involved in discussions on party manifestos. However, his participation in PAP was not well-received by other Malays, many of whom were staunch supporters of PKM-UMNO. He was often labelled a ‘traitor’ and a ‘Communist’.

At a women-themed rally held by the PAP Women’s Wing in August 1959, Ustaz Mofradi, as the only Malay representative, expressed his support for women’s empowerment. He stated,

“ .....

The time has come for Muslim women to rise and be firm with men who use polygamy to serve their self-interests, instead of understanding that it is a provision allowed in Islam.

.....”

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Interestingly, this was said a year before Ustazah Khamsiah became *mudirah*, during a peak period for women's rights movements, which she actively contributed to thereafter.

Ustaz Mofradi was a remarkable figure who had a multifaceted career spanning different areas of society. As a leader of *asatizah* fraternity, he played a crucial role in shaping the religious landscape of the Malay/Muslim community. Additionally, Ustaz Mofradi was also a vocal advocate for the rights of the Malay/Muslim community.

### Conclusion

Hassan Bandung, Ustazah Khamsiah, Ustaz Mofradi were visionaries whose contributions were not limited to only a single organisation, displaying resilience in their volunteer work and activism. They managed to contribute to society without neglecting the needs of the Malay/Muslim community. Their contributions are encapsulated in Muhammadiyah Singapore, Madrasah Alsagoff, and Pergas, all of which are agencies instrumental in bettering the Malay/Muslim community even today.

These harbingers of progress within the religious sector should be emulated by our *asatizah*, and the values they upheld should be embraced, especially in response to contrary sentiments.

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They exemplify that Religious Resilience, Inclusiveness, Contributiveness, Adaptiveness, and Progressiveness are inherent to *asatizah*. Maintaining this trajectory is essential to counter the rapidly evolving trends of modernisation in Singapore in years to come. (Hakeem Samsuri)

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**RPCS internships** provide young budding researchers with a 3-month opportunity to hone their research and writing skills alongside the core research team. From 2023 to 2025, interns will contribute to the RPCS Islamic Intellectual Heritage Project, exploring the works of past *asatizah* in the areas of Governance, Society (Social Cohesion and Family), and Science and Technology. As part of their internship deliverables, interns are encouraged to write a commentary piece on scholars of their choice.

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