

# WRITING A HISTORY OF A SAINT, WRITING AN ISLAMIC HISTORY OF A PORT CITY



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Maqam Habib Noh (Sayyid Nuh's mausoleum). Author's own, printed with the permission of Sayyid Nuh's family.

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# Writing a History of a Saint, Writing an Islamic History of a Port City

Teren Sevea

## ABSTRACT

*This paper analyses multilingual hagiographies and historical traditions of a nineteenth-century Islamic miracle worker (keramat), Sayyid Nuh bin Muhammad al-Habshi (d. 1866), who lies buried in Singapore and is popularly venerated as a keramat amongst devotees. Like most keramats and Islamic saints, he enjoys an afterlife across Muslim societies of the Indian Ocean. The paper will focus on the texts and traditions that remembered the quotidian lives and afterlives of these keramats in the Malay Peninsula. These texts and traditions have been preoccupied with the keramat's miracles, his healing powers, his flights, his urban cults, his relationships with Europeans, his 'crimes', his prison sentences, prison-breaks, alleged 'madness', and Sufism. As this paper demonstrates, there is an 'archive' of traditions of this keramat that has been memorised by Islamic historians, preserved by them for posterity, and passed on across generations of believers by a reliable chain of transmitters. Historical traditions of this archive have been compiled in Malay hagiographies. These traditions have also been collected, to a lesser extent, in Tamil poems. This paper moreover elaborates on how hagiographers have, from the late nineteenth century onwards, delved into the archive of historical traditions, to produce primers of history on the keramat and his non-literate cults. Following poets and panegyrists of the nineteenth-century, hagiographers have celebrated the infinite lives of this ecstatic keramat, and progressively represented him as an Arab Haba'ib and as an Islamic Sufi.*

## INTRODUCTION

[Thomas Stamford Raffles] issued the command, ordering the corpse to be taken away, then placed upon a buffalo cart, then ordered a proclamation to be drummed around the town: "Therefore ... witness [that] this is the person who was treasonous against the ruler ... even dead, his body is still to be hanged ... then only was [the body] brought to Tanjung Malang ... erected there was a wooden gibbet, then hanged was the corpse, entered into an iron frame ... until it was up to the length of ten to fifteen days, [the body hanged until] mere bones remained.<sup>1</sup>

*Hikayat Abdullah* (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 2008 [1849]:391–396).

In his autobiography, the scribe and teacher (*munshi*) Abdullah Abdul Kadir meticulously remembered the punishment meted out towards the body of a *sayyid*. This *sayyid*, or patrilineal descendant of Prophet Muhammad, was a peripatetic merchant, Yasin, who

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of passages quoted from sources not in English, such as this one, are the author's.

had ‘ran amok’ (amuck) in Singapore on 11 March 1823. Over the past few years, Yasin had regularly travelled between Pahang and the nascent East India Company (EIC) port city of Singapore. In March 1823, however, he was ‘humiliated’ and incarcerated for a debt owed to a rival *sayyid* merchant in Singapore. This legal case took a more violent turn when Sayyid Yasin was released from jail. He immediately embarked upon a hunt for his plaintiff, and fell into a state of ‘amokness’. In this state, he unintentionally stabbed the first British Resident and Commandant of Singapore, William Farquhar.

Abdullah’s ‘eyewitness’ account of the ‘custom order of the English’ and ‘custom of the white man’ recounted that Sayyid Yasin was put to death at the scene of the crime. His body was stabbed by Indian sepoys with bayonets, and further subjected to the ‘stabbing and chopping’ of ‘all the white men’ in the vicinity, who zealously crushed and disfigured the corpse.<sup>2</sup> Upon Raffles’ command, the *sayyid’s* corpse was paraded along the streets on a bullock cart; it was thence strung upon a wooden gibbet, and placed in an iron frame. *Munshi* Abdullah remembered that ‘mere bones remained’ of Sayyid Yasin, and that he was deprived of a Muslim burial until Sultan Hussein Shah’s pleas for his relics.

Abdullah’s record of Raffles’ punishment was later censured by his student, and the Government Surveyor for the Straits Settlements, John T. Thomson. Thomson dismissed it as a ‘melee’ replete with ‘a good deal of religious fanaticism’. This melee allegedly revealed Abdullah’s ‘prejudices and proclivities as a Mahomedan’ (Sweeney 2006:235; Thomson 1874:316). Abdullah’s ‘fanaticism’ was apparently evident in the *munshi’s* baroque remembering of Raffles’ mortification of Yasin’s body and command to hang Yasin’s corpse for a fortnight. Abdullah’s representation clearly digressed from contemporaneous, and more banal, European depictions of Raffles’ ‘salutary lesson’ of hanging the amok for three days (Krishnan 2007:62–64). Indeed, European observers elaborated instead upon the immediate ‘fanatic’ reaction to Raffles’ exhibition of Yasin’s corpse in March 1823. The Dutch colonel and associate of Raffles, Nahuys, for instance, had accentuated that ‘all the natives [had] adopted a threatening attitude’ after Yasin’s hanging. This attitude had compelled the ‘garrison, civilians, settlers and traders, as well as the Chinese who took the side of the Europeans’, to remain ‘night and day under arms.’<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, following the Sultan’s successful requests for Yasin’s relics and their burial, the grave of the amok-*sayyid* became a *keramat*, a ‘place of pilgrimage’ and a ‘place of remembrance’ for ‘devout Malays’. To cite from a later article in *The Straits Times*, these Muslims reconfigured Yasin’s criminality into piety, and generated historical traditions that made the ‘name of the nocturnal amok join those of many far more worthy’ saints.<sup>4</sup>

An 1892 Jawi epistle by Abdullah Al-Aydarus, a Melakan imam and patrilineal descendant of a Singapore-based *keramat*, for instance, clarified that Yasin was a ‘*keramat* [miracle-worker] in the path of God.’<sup>5</sup> Yasin is described in the imam’s epistle as a *keramat*

2 Even the *munshi* who was a familiar of the *sayyid* from Pahang failed to identify the corpse (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 2008 [1849]:392–394).

3 Cited from ‘Translated Extract from the Fifth Letter of the Series, dated Penang, 10<sup>th</sup> June, 1824’ (Miller 1941:195).

4 See Buckley (1902:97–103), *The Straits Times* (1954:14), and *The Straits Times* (1955:9).

5 I am grateful to Muhammad Hashim for allowing me to peruse Abdullah Al-Aydarus’s 1892 epistles and a series of documents pertaining to the family of the *keramat*, Siti Maryam Al-Aydarus (d. 1853). For further details regarding the 1892 epistle, refer to Sevea (2013).

who possessed ‘feet’ in Pahang, Pasai (Sumatra), Singapore, and Surat (Gujarat). The imam also praised Yasin’s faculties of teleporting himself to guide caravans across the Bay of Bengal, and emphasised that he was a member of a fraternity of itinerant Sufis who sacralised Singapore through their interned bodies. This epistle stressed that Yasin’s off-erratic conduct was attributable to the fact that he was a *majzub* (ecstatic, in a state of *jazb*, or intense divine attraction) in opposition to a western conception of amokness.

Dismissing apocryphal narratives related to Yasin’s amokness, such materials remembered how Farquhar had indeed assassinated the *sayyid keramat* upon eye-witnessing the powers of Sayyid Yasin, who was winning widespread converts to Islam in Singapore. The *keramat*-hunting Farquhar had already, in 1819, tried to de-sanctify the Prohibited Hill (Bukit Larangan) in Singapore, which hosts the mausoleum of the fourteenth-century *keramat*, Iskandar Shah. He had ordered sepoy from Melaka to ascend the Hill, to fire ‘twelve rounds in succession [of a cannon], over the top of the Hill in front of the natives’, and ordered them to hoist the Union Jack (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 2008 [1849]:366; Buckley 1902:53). According to the traditions of Yasin’s cult, in 1823, Farquhar had the *majzub* murdered, under spurious allegations of black magic. Despite Yasin’s powers to teleport himself out of cells and cages, and even across the Indian Ocean, Yasin desired to be martyred. Hanging dead, with an ineradicable smile on his face, Yasin prophetically warned Farquhar that the Resident would leave Singapore, disgraced and regretful for not begging him for pardon. Farquhar was indeed dismissed from office by Raffles, on 1 May 1823, but Yasin’s blood and relics remained, to sacralise the port city.

In employing ‘magical’ traditions as prime historical sources, this paper is inspired by a range of scholarly works that have undertaken historical investigations of ‘fairy-tale and absolutely exceptional’ traditions and ‘anomalous’ individuals (Ginzburg 1980:xx; 2012:202, 213, 218, 222–223). It is also inspired by more recent academic work on historical discourse and on the historical value of the sacred and spectacular. It proposes that records replete with historical traditions that ‘appear irrational in terms of the logic of academic historical narratives’ (Feierman 1999:187–188) serve as sources of otherwise unrecoverable social histories of predominantly non-literate *keramats* and cults. Furthermore, these traditions also serve as mines of the ‘very stuff of history, the categories and constructs’ and ‘schemes of interpretation’, with which historical communities associated with *keramats* understood ‘multiple hazards and changes’ and ‘disorderly terrains’ (White 2000:5, 10, 55, 70, 85).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, this paper remains attentive to how later, twentieth-century sheikh-historians have written self-reflexive, didactic histories of Islamic *keramats* and Islamic cults.

Additionally, I will analyse select traditions of another *sayyid keramat* of Singapore, who was similarly criticised by non-believers for being ‘mad’ and ‘criminal’. This *keramat*, Nuh Al-Habshi (d. 1866), was described in Sumit K. Mandal’s recent article on transoceanic *keramats* in Southeast Asia as a Hadrami whose yet ‘popular and prominent’ mausoleum superseded the aforementioned tomb of Sayyid Yassin that was ‘venerated until the twentieth century’ (Mandal 2012:363). The traditions of this *sayyid keramat* were transmitted and transcribed in multilingual hagiographies, chapbooks, and poems, which furnish rich Islamic histories of circulation and belonging across the Bay of Bengal.

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<sup>6</sup> For further works that have mined historical traditions replete with miracles and magic, see Ernst (1992), Gilsenan (1982:75), Green (2009), Moin (2012:12, 15), and Reese (1999:169, 186; 2008).

## THE 'KLING' SHOPLIFTER AND PROPHET?

An old Kling [south Indian] man, who has been reckoned as a prophet ['Nabi Noah'] by the Mohammedans in this settlement for the last 50 years, died the other day ... great obsequies were performed at his funeral ... there were amongst the company the four Europeans, who ... [had been] converted to Islamism ... the deceased was in the habit of taking every thing he wished from money-changers, which he afterwards invariably distributed amongst the poorer of his countrymen. All the hack carriages were free to him, the syces being prevented by the awe with which he inspired them.

*The Singapore Free Press (1866a).*

Engseng Ho's *Graves of Tarim* focused on Hadrami graves across the Indian Ocean, and mentioned the grave of the alleged extortionist, 'Nabi Noah' (Prophet Noah). In Ho's words, the grave of Nuh Al-Habshi lies 'in downtown Singapore, [a] ten minutes' walk toward the sea' and is fashioned as a 'Hindu *chandi* [rather] than a Muslim saint's tomb' (Ho 2006:195). It is also surrounded by 'framed genealogies' that connect the *sayyid* with his siblings in Penang, and with patrilineal 'ascendants in Hadramawt' (Figure 1). Histories of Sayyid Nuh and his Islamic devotional community were first compiled in a 1896 Tamil compendium of poems lithographed in Singapore, Mukamuttu Aptul Katir's *Kirttanattiratu*. Thereafter, histories of Sayyid Nuh and select members of his cult were remembered in a range of Malay hagiographies that were written in the course of the twentieth century. These hagiographies included, in order of transcription, an untitled chapbook from 1941 found in a private library of a descendant of Sayyid Nuh in Pulau Penyengat (Riau) and short hagiographies that were typed and printed by a Singapore-based descendant of Sayyid Nuh, Abdullah bin Ahmad Al-Attas (n.d.-a; n.d.-b). Histories of Sayyid Nuh were further compiled in two Malay hagiographies, the 1993 *Tujuh Wali Melayu* (Said 1993), and the *Lambang Terukir* (Surattee 2006; Surattee 2011). The *Tujuh Wali Melayu* was compiled by a sheikh of the banned Malaysian Sufi movement Darul Arqam, Abdul Ghani Said, and contained a chapter devoted to the 'Malay' *wali* (friend of God), Sayyid Nuh. The *Lambang Terukir: dalam mengisahkan Manaqib Sayyid Noh bin Muhammad Alhabsyi yang Syahir* was first written by Ghouse Khan Surattee in 1999 as a 'primer of history'.<sup>7</sup> This is a compendium of 'correct histories', which were transmitted via chains of transmission, connecting anecdotes and twentieth-century tellings to 'original transmitters and memorisers.

Introducing students of Islamic history to Sayyid Nuh's origins, Surattee's *Lambang Terukir* indicated that hagiographers, descendants, and tomb custodians have regularly differed over the precise homeland of the *sayyid keramat*. Indeed, both Kedah and Penang in Malaya, as well as Hadhramawt in south Yemen, have been proposed as homelands of Sayyid Nuh. These transmitters, however, were positive about Nuh's routes across the Bay of Bengal, the western Indian Ocean, and along the Straits of Malacca in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They were also positive about the fact that the *keramat* was living in the nascent East India Company port city of Penang by 1788, and about the fact that he migrated to Singapore in 1819 (Surattee 2011:35, 42–43). Sayyid Nuh,

<sup>7</sup> I will hereafter cite from the 2011 edition of the *Lambang Terukir* (Surattee 2011), which reproduces the earlier edition with additional traditions.



Fig 1. A framed genealogy of the 'Hadrami sayyid' (Source: author's own)



however, was not the only *keramat* whose life was characterised by itinerancy, oceanic routes, and sojourns at port cities that became sites of their miracles. Hagiographies of another *sayyid keramat* in north Jakarta, Hussein al-Aydarus (d. 1756), for instance, emphasised that his ports of call included the Yemeni port of Mukalla (1733), the Indian hub of Surat (1734/1735), and Dutch Batavia (Abdullah bin Abu Bakar Al-Aydarus 1998). Abdullah bin Abu Bakar Al-Aydarus's 1998 *Sepintas Riwayat Shahibul Qutub Al-Habib Hussein bin Abubakar Alaydarus* conceded that nineteenth-century transmitters of Hussein's historical traditions were divided over his precise origins and birth, but speculated that the *keramat* was born 'someplace in South Yemen, Hadhramaut'.

In the *Lambang Terukir*, however, Surattee documented a broadly acknowledged tradition of Nuh's nativity. This occurred in the midst of seafaring across the 'lethally stormy' Indian Ocean, and it was a birth facilitated by the miraculous intervention of the Ocean-circumbulating prophet, Noah (Nuh), in approximately 1202/3 (1788) (Surattee 2011:34). Surattee relied upon a rendition of this tradition of Sayyid Nuh's oceanic birth, which was traceable to an early-twentieth-century custodian of his tomb, Muhammad bin Ahmad Bilkhair. This was in turn preserved and transmitted by Muhammad Bilkhair's successor-custodian, Hassan al-Khatib (d. 2005). This rendition, however, tempered Sayyid Nuh's 'Kling' pedigree and Tamil-Muslim kin networks that could be traced to the pre-1786 Kedah Sultanate and post-1786 Penang. It postulated instead that the fetal *keramat* was conceived in Hadhramawt and delivered amidst travel (directly) from Hadhramawt to Penang. Such histories also emphasised that Sayyid Nuh possessed an elaborate Alawi genealogy linking him via patrilineal descent to Alawi *sayyids* of Hadhramaut, including the *wali* (friend of God), Ahmad al-Habshi, who lies buried in Husaiyyisah, in south Yemen. Moreover, the *Lambang Terukir* relied upon the memories of Qadri-Naqshbandi sheikh-historians to recount Sayyid Nuh's migration from Penang to Singapore in 1819. This was, as proposed, a quintessential event driven by the Qadri-Naqshbandi sheikh, Salim Ba Sumair's (d. 1853) appointment of Nuh as the authority to 'propagate the practice of the *thoriqa* [*tariqa*, or Sufi pathway] in Singapore' (Surattee 2011:42–43). Michael Laffan, however, has more recently suggested that this *thoriqa* only emerged in the 1860s, through the efforts of the Bornean sheikh Ahmad Khatib Sambas (d. 1872), to merge the 'rituals of the Naqshbandiyya with the pedigree of the Qadiriyya' (Laffan 2011:54; cf. Surattee 2011).

Endeavours to write Qadri-Naqshbandi histories of Sayyid Nuh's itinerancy, settlement, Sufism, and comportment were, nonetheless, compromised by the overwhelming prevalence of historical traditions of Sayyid Nuh as a non-literate *keramat*, or miracle-worker. In these historical traditions, Nuh was venerated neither for his patrilineal genealogies nor for serving as an instructing sheikh who bequeathed a heritage of educational institutions, books, mosques, or *murids* in post-1788 Penang and post-1819 Singapore (Said 1993:18). Traditions transmitted by custodians of Sayyid Nuh's shrine, by the *keramat*'s descendants, and by contemporaries of Sayyid Nuh, and traditions that were documented in a poem in the 1872 *Kirttanattiratu* were all preoccupied with describing Sayyid Nuh as a miracle-worker. These traditions described Sayyid Nuh's *keramatic* career in Singapore, from 1819 to 1866, as one of performing as a miracle-worker in the most ornate and carnivalesque fashion. He was, as hagiographers suggest, an *alim* of the street and docks of Singapore. He was especially comfortable with the subalterns and a diverse group of individuals, including horse-carriage riders, transient workers, merchants, members of the Malay royalty, and even performers of the Chinese opera. These narrations of the *sayyid keramat*'s past unanimously celebrated his Islamic life of travel, teleportation,



eccentricity, nakedness, ecstasy, ‘crime’, ‘madness’, and childishness. They celebrated his approximately seven-decade long career of performing public miracles.

The more recent edition of the *Lambang Terukir* (Surattee 2011) has compiled select ‘accurate’ traditions of a Penang-based hagiographer, Imran Sayyid Ahmad. These traditions clarified that Sayyid Nuh’s career as a miracle-working *keramat* began in his childhood and teenage years in Penang. These traditions pertained to Sayyid Nuh’s early acclaim as a *keramat*. Muslim associates of the miracle-working child, for instance, regularly spotted extracts of the Surah Yunus upon his forehead. Following this, Sayyid Nuh performed miracles in his teenage years, as he pursued a pecuniary career as a humble clerk at the port of Teluk Air Tawar, in Butterworth (Penang), from approximately the year 1803. Therefrom, the perennially ascetic *sayyid* acquired a distinct reputation amongst Straits Chinese employers, colleagues, and merchants as being *tuah* (fortune-bearing) for business. He was also venerated by his Chinese followers as a miracle-brandishing ‘tutelary deity’ and as an eponymous Chinese-Muslim god, *Datuk Ong*. Sayyid Nuh’s more recent hagiographer, and editor of traditions from Penang, Imran Sayyid Ahmad, conceded that the teenage *sayyid* tolerated the Penang Chinese veneration of him as *Datuk Ong*, and accepted their regular donations of *cerut* (cigars). Nevertheless, Surattee stressed that the teenage *keramat*’s smoking was purely driven by his self-sacrificial urge to appease his cigar-hustling Chinese votaries (Surattee 2011:36–37).

Anecdotal histories of Sayyid Nuh’s miracles and faculties of intercession are, however, predominantly related to his stay in the southern Straits Settlement of Singapore, between the years 1819 and 1866. These traditions harked back to an age wherein seafaring was determined by the intermediation of *keramats*, and elaborated upon how the non-literate *alim* of the street and docks miraculously protected South Indian and Arab merchants, as they circulated the Bay of Bengal and the broader Indian Ocean. Moreover, Sayyid Nuh sheltered urban labourers, fishermen, and syces within the British port city, which was plagued by class polarisation, poverty, crime, and the lack of access to medical services and basic amenities. For instance, the aforementioned hagiographies of Sayyid Nuh document a popular tradition of the *keramat*’s intercession to protect a south Indian merchant. According to this tradition, Nuh had heard the ‘unspoken’ anxieties and pledges of this merchant that were expressed as he travelled between the Coromandel Coast and Singapore. Sayyid Nuh bestowed ‘secure travel’ and ‘shouldered’ vessels that were being submerged by storms for his devotee. The *sayyid keramat* thence appeared at the dock of Keppel Harbour, when the merchant returned from his near-fatal journey, to demand Coromandel cloth that the traveller had pledged to Sayyid Nuh—the *keramat* redistributed this to the *fakir miskin* (urban poor, ascetics, and vagrants).<sup>8</sup> Another such tradition was transmitted by an early-twentieth-century healer, Sharifah Lu’luk (Baba Lok), and later recorded in the *Lambang Terukir*. This was related to Sayyid Nuh’s protection of an itinerant but anxious south Yemeni merchant who had beseeched the *keramat* for safety and for his famous powers of insight (*ilmu mukasyafah*) (Surattee 2011:53–55).<sup>9</sup> On this occasion, Sayyid Nuh foresaw the capsizing of the ship that this Yemeni merchant was

8 Renditions of this have been published in Said (1991:22) and Surattee (2011:53).

9 For an example of ‘Nabi Noah’s’ power of insight being reported in the pages of *The Singapore Free Press*, refer to the testimony of the brother of the Temenggong, Inchi Wan Madjit, in court during a manslaughter litigation associated with the *sayyid*’s funeral, ‘Criminal Session’, in *The Singapore Free Press* (1866b).

boarding at Keppel Harbour. The *keramat* playfully plopped himself upon the merchant's luggage and began reciting a protracted prayer (*doa*) that concluded after the time of departure. He saved the 'confused' yet unflinchingly devoted traveller from impending death (Surattee 2011:34).

Histories of Sayyid Nuh, documented in the hagiographies of the *keramat*'s descendants and by Surattee, further described his teleportations to the Kaaba (in Mecca) on Fridays. Between 1819 and 1866, he teleported himself to Mecca and immersed himself in the company of fellow *walis* (friends of God), including the aforementioned Ahmad Khatib Sambas. Alternatively, Sayyid Nuh regularly teleported himself to spirit-infested junctures of the Bay of Bengal to help seafaring captains (*nakhoda*), merchants, lascars, and fishermen alike, by transmitting the esoteric sciences (*ilmu*) of the Indian Ocean and of mastering vessels (Untitled hagiography 1941:5, 8; Surattee 2011:61–62). The prevalence of such historical traditions of Sayyid Nuh's teleportations, in the early twentieth century, was attested to in the writings of the Orientalist and Director of Education, Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States, Richard O. Winstedt. In his 1927 work on 'Malay magicians' and his 1925 *Shaman, Saiva and Sufi*, Winstedt mentioned that Sayyid Nuh was a 'humble clerk who gave up the pride of the eye and the lusts of the flesh for religious asceticism until he could appear in several places at once' (Winstedt 1925:14, 135; 1927:342–344). He compared Nuh to ecstasies who indulged in exercises of 'losing consciousness', to 'Malay village mystics ... in giddy contortions', and to 'Brahmin ascetics ... [in] hypnotic slumber', and reported that he gained 'deliverance from the cycle of existence with power ... to transport himself anywhere at will' (Winstedt 1925:14, 135; 1927:342–344).

Hagiographies of Sayyid Nuh like the *Lambang Terukir* place particular emphasis upon his intimate relationships with cosmopolitan merchants. These merchants supported Sayyid Nuh's travels in his lifetime, funded the architectural expansion of the *keramat*'s tomb (from 1866 to 1890), and assumed hierarchical positions in the cult by the turn of the century. These merchants included a Batavia-based merchant and associate of Sayyid Nuh, Hajji Muhammad Salleh, and a Singapore-based Hadrami businessman, Mohamed bin Ahmed Al-Saqqaf (Surattee 2011:44–45, 58–59, 69). Nonetheless, most extant traditions of the street-wandering Sayyid Nuh remain conscious of the fact that he was an *alim* on the street ... more comfortable with the subalterns'. These historical traditions emphasised his particular intimacy with fellow vagrants, *fakir miskin*, and the urban poor. On the behalf of the *fakir miskin*, as articles in the *Singapore Free Press* showed,<sup>10</sup> Sayyid Nuh developed a notorious reputation as shoplifter and more generally a kleptomaniac. He helped himself to the coffers of shops and hawkers, and sprinkled stolen cash upon the *fakir miskin* and upon an undying entourage of children. A contemporary hagiographer relies on traditions traceable to the Alawi 'Habaib', to supra-normalise the *keramat*'s shoplifting. The hagiographer has clarified that Sayyid Nuh was merely extracting 'voluntary alms', *sedekah* and *zakat* (voluntary Islamic charities for the urban poor), and that his extortionist touch was welcomed by to-be-robbed audiences, for its *berkat* (power; blessing) (Surattee 2011:52).

Inherited historical traditions of Sayyid Nuh may have been 'put in line with the Sharia' by twentieth-century editors and hagiographers. These traditions, however, still survive as compelling portrayals of a form of devotional Islam that was practised

10 For instance, see *The Singapore Free Press* (1866a).

by members of Sayyid Nuh's cult. This was a devotional religion preoccupied with basic questions of power that the *keramat* possessed, and his clients were allowed to access, through devotion. These included the powers to survive and transcend pecuniary poverty, the powers to overcome malnutrition, homelessness, epidemics, and death, and the powers to survive adverse climate and urban displacement.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the 1896 Tamil compendium *Kirttanattiratu* concludes with a panegyric poem, describing an Islam of itinerant Tamil Muslim labourers that was centred upon the messianic Sayyid Nuh Koliullah of Tanjung Pagar (Nuh 1896:46–48). This poem described the plight of the 'people who produced clothes' who had been displaced across the 'Bengal shore'; this was in all probability a reference to Muslim weavers and small-scale brokers who migrated to the Straits Settlements in the course of the nineteenth century, due to the decline of the southern Tamil Nadu handloom industry. These migrants were plagued by 'suppressions', 'difficulties', 'torturous labors' and by 'worries [which if spoken of] one crore of *yugam* [ages] were insufficient [for telling]'. Nevertheless, their 'heart[s] filled with happiness' upon the accessible feet of Sayyid Nuh in Singapore. The *keramat* and axis of Islam on the Bengal shore is, in turn, lauded as the empowering manifestation of immense wealth. Nuh was described in the poem as the one who 'excels in the world in the fashion of nine pearls', who enjoys 'unfading distinction' and possesses 'entirety' in his 'Hand', which is donned by 'golden bangles'. The *keramat* had furthermore opted to reside in the spaces where the 'humble people made home' and in the company of the 'people who produced clothes'.

Malay hagiographies, compiled in Penang, Riau, and Singapore, are otherwise replete with historical traditions of Sayyid Nuh's healing, rainmaking, and crime-busting miracles in Singapore. These traditions were also telling of the social composition of the *keramat*'s cult, and of the religious terms devotees of Nuh used to interpret perils—for these believers, *keramats* provided an avenue for the articulation of remedies.<sup>12</sup> These memorialised histories concern the omnipotent *keramat* who performed miracles whilst remaining impervious to epidemics and adverse climate. According to these traditions, he 'popped up' in the homes of urban labourers, to instantaneously heal malnourished, ill, and deceasing children through austere postures, charms, and conversions of water into milk. As 1866 obituaries in *The Singapore Free Press* showed, Sayyid Nuh would also pop up within the horse carriages of paranoid syces in the port city, to fight 'real' muggers, upon the moment that the syce meditated upon the *keramat* (*The Singapore Free Press* 1866a). Moreover, Sayyid Nuh's hagiographies unanimously record a tradition of the *keramat*'s gift of rain to drought-stricken fishermen in Singapore. 'Descending into a well' and having 'stretched his hands in prayer', Sayyid Nuh drew rain. He ascended only in the rain, to remind drenched listeners that 'absolute devotion' translated into the manifestation of God's power in their lives, and into fulfilled desires (Untitled hagiography 1941:8).<sup>13</sup>

Similar miracles were attributed to the seafaring *keramat* of north Jakarta, Sayyid Hussein al-Aydarus. According to traditions compiled in the aforementioned hagiography, *Sepintas Riwayat*, Sayyid Hussein had travelled to the allegedly 'Buddhist' port city of Surat as a teenager, in 1734/1735, to perform a grand miracle. Sayyid Hussein had attained

11 Refer also to Green (2005:622) and Green (2008:36).

12 For instance, see Untitled hagiography (1941:3–4), Abdullah bin Ahmad Al-Attas (n.d.-a), Said (1993:19–20), and Surattee (2011:51–55, 57).

13 See also the rendition of this tradition in Surattee (2011:52).



his education under a ‘Shafi’i Alim’ and, upon being recognised for his potential, set out to propagate Islam across the western and eastern Indian Ocean, with caravans of traders and travellers (Abdullah bin Abu Bakar Al-Aydarus 1998:6). By 1735, he had stepped foot in the Indian hub of Surat, which had regressed from being a vibrant port city into a ‘city of death’ that was plagued by drought and cholera. The time of Sayyid Hussein’s arrival corresponded with the Mughal blockade of Surat, which threatened the ‘economic life of the city as a whole’ and made ‘normal activity within it came to a standstill’ (Ho 2006:113). The *Sepintas Riwayat* elaborated on how the merchants of Surat looked upon the transient-*keramat* as a messiah and as a *dewa* (god), in this dire context (Abdullah bin Abu Bakar Al-Aydarus 1998:8). According to hagiographies, Sayyid Hussein drew rain with the ‘support of God’ and watered all terra firma in Surat with heavy downpour. The *keramat* furthermore propagated Islam through his miracles. In return for rain, he called upon the ‘Buddhists’ of Surat to recite the *kalimat shahadat* (*lailahalilallah muhammadrasulallah*) twice and to accept Islam. ‘Flocks’ of Gujaratis accepted Islam at the hands of their miracle-worker, and Sayyid Hussein called upon the governor of the port city to establish a well for a mosque (*surau*) and to perform another miracle in Surat. The waters of Sayyid Hussein’s well, and a pool, cured victims of cholera.

Hagiographies of Sayyid Hussein placed particular emphasis upon his development as a miracle-worker in Batavia, between the years of 1736 and 1756. Indeed, the orientalist L.W.C. van der Berg (1886:162–163) mentioned in 1886 that Sayyid Hussein had attained an ‘enormous reputation as *keramat*’, immediately after his death. The Dutch scholar also highlighted that the shrine of Sayyid Hussein, which lay ‘by the estuary of the Batavia river’, had developed into a ‘key site of pilgrimage in the Indian Archipelago’ by the nineteenth century. Moreover, L.W.C. van der Berg emphasised that Sayyid Hussein’s mausoleum attracted natives, Chinese and European mestizos, and received gifts that annually amounted to 8000 guilders. The hagiographies of Sayyid Hussein, however, emphasised intimate relationships that the *keramat* had cultivated with cosmopolitan followers in his physical lifetime.

Traditions pertaining to Sayyid Hussein’s urban audiences in Batavia, for instance, are rich descriptions of the social composition of the *keramat*’s cult and urban audiences that accessed his miracles through ties of devotion, charity, and patronage. Abdullah Al-Aydarus’s *Sepintas Riwayat* highlighted that Sayyid Hussein’s cult in Batavia consisted of Chinese (‘Tionghua’) and Europeans. Hagiographies and yet-circulating oral traditions unanimously state that Sayyid Hussein’s closest associate and devotee was a ‘Tionghua’ (Abdullah bin Abu Bakar Al-Aydarus 1998:10–15). Traditions propose that this Chinese devotee either met the *keramat* in the course of a desperate escape from Dutch custom officers, who had arrested his vessel at the customs barrier of Batavia, or in the course of the Dutch massacre of the Chinese community, in 1740. In either case, the Chinese trader became a devotee after Sayyid Hussein subdued representatives of the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, VOC) who were chasing their fugitive, and made them ‘bow their heads in awe and vanish’, miraculously. The *Sepintas Riwayat* emphasised that the aforementioned ‘Tionghua’ converted to Islam upon being saved by Sayyid Hussein, and upon witnessing the *keramat*’s miracles—Nek Bok Seng was renamed ‘Hajji Abdul Kadir’. The Chinese devotee thence enjoyed the privileges of siestas with Sayyid Hussein and was, after years of companionship, buried next to the body of the *keramat*.

The hagiography of Sayyid Hussein further mentioned a European devotee and ‘Sinyo’ (a term in colonial times for Eurasian men) who witnessed the *keramat*’s prophetic powers and miracles. As we shall discuss below, Sayyid Hussein and his cult suffered violent encounters with representatives of the VOC, during the time that Adriaan Valckenier served as the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies (1737–1741). Sayyid Hussein’s relationship with Dutch authorities, however, improved when Valckenier was succeeded by the new Governor-General, Jacob Mossel (d. 1761). The *Sepintas Riwayat* suggested that Mossel was the aforementioned ‘Sinyo’, and that Sayyid Hussein had met him when he was a humble ‘Dutch boy’. The child Mossel was shocked when Sayyid Hussein approached him, to thump his chest, and to prophesise that he would rise to the rank of Governor-General at the age of forty-six. Upon assuming office, in 1750, Mossel gifted ‘bags of money’ to the prophetic *keramat*, but was further shocked when Sayyid Hussein chucked this bags into the waters of Batavia, and managed to have them reach the hands of his mother, across the Indian Ocean. Sayyid Hussein’s hagiographers furthermore accentuated that Mossel remained a devotee, and gifted the plot of land that continues to house Sayyid Hussein’s grave.

WRITING ACCURATE, ISLAMIC HISTORIES OF AN ECSTATIC

playing with the children ... you were always seen with the crowd of small boys ...  
Sayyid [Nuh] you excelled teasing the wrongdoer ... teasing him in the settlement ...  
you always excelled.

*Kirttanattiratu* (Nuh 1896:46–47)

A range of twentieth-century hagiographers have struggled to expurgate ‘apocryphal’ and ‘inauthentic’ traditions of Sayyid Nuh. These traditions have pertained to the Tamil and Islamicate complexion of Sayyid Nuh, to the social composition of his cult, and to the *keramat*’s ecstasy, ‘madness’, and ‘criminality’. Hagiographies that were edited and put in line with the Sharia, for instance, have not recorded yet-circulating traditions related to Sayyid Nuh’s intimate relationships with non-Muslim ascetics, ecstasies, and saints. These included the Sikh convict whose ‘miracles were seen by tens of thousands ... [and] more implicitly believed than those worked by the ancient prophets’ (Singh 1968:92), Bhai Maharaj Singh (d. 1856). A number of Sikh devotees have held onto the belief that the garments of Bhai Maharaj Singh were bequeathed to Sayyid Nuh, upon the ‘Guru’s’ cell death in July 1856. Such traditions are indeed reflections of the Sikh constituency of the *keramat*’s cult.

Malay hagiographies have further omitted discussions of Sayyid Nuh’s friendships with spirit mediums based in the Fook Tet Soo Hakka Temple, which lay within steps of his eventual grave by 1844. Hagiographers often conceded, in interviews, that the *keramat* had conferred his few remaining possessions to the Hakka temple before his physiological death. Indeed, the *Lambang Terukir* shows that hagiographers have inherited merely a few sentences that were directly uttered by the lips of the *keramat*, including one wherein Sayyid Nuh declared his appreciation for an opera performed in the vicinity of the aforementioned temple, which ‘left impressions’ upon him and allowed him to ‘derive

many moral lessons' (Surattee 2011:44–45).<sup>14</sup> Contemporary hagiographers have therefore laboured to portray Sayyid Nuh as an instructing sheikh who supervised the Islamic observances and Qur'anic readings of his Muslim devotees, and instructed entourages in Islam in the course of his ecstatic public life. In a similar vein, Abdul Ghani Said's chapter on Sayyid Nuh in the *Tujuh Wali Melayu* documented a historical tradition that reflected the ethos of a Muslim cult that was increasingly conscious of reading distinctly 'Islamic' histories of the *keramat*. This tradition was originally transmitted by a Sufi master of the Ahmadiyah Idrisiyah *tariqa* in Rasah (Negri Sembilan), Hajji Muhammad Said Al-Linggi (d. 1926). It was esoterically preserved by a disciple of Muhammad Said Al-Linggi, Muhammad Abu Bakar, who in turn narrated it to the hagiographer in 1991. Muhammad Abu Bakar's rendition detailed his master's memory of an early twentieth-century event when Sayyid Nuh teleported himself to the highest peak of Sufi ascension and cosmological hub, Mount Qaf. Sayyid Nuh travelled to Qaf, along with Muhammad Said Al-Linggi, to attend an assembly of *walis*. This assembly was attended by the Prophet Muhammad; Sayyid Nuh and his consort, however, served as agents of the '*umat* [community] this side' (this was, in all probability, a reference to the Malay Peninsula). Herein, Sayyid Nuh performed as a 'chess player', and negotiated on the behalf of his *umat* (which was exclusively Muslim, according to the *keramat's* late-twentieth-century hagiographer). Through negotiation, Sayyid Nuh protected his community from a smallpox epidemic that was unleashed by God upon Malaya, which ended up massacring *kafirs* (Said 1993:18–20).

In writing 'accurate' histories of Malay *keramats* like Nuh Al-Habshi, Abdul Ghani Said acknowledged that hagiographers were defending the Islamic nature of *walis*, in a time when insults were being levied upon *walis* and Sufism (Said 1993:7–11). The Darul Arqam sheikh reminded Muslim readers to avoid *keramat*-bashing literature, and warned that any act of 'condemning' and 'insulting' the friends of God was tantamount to insulting God. Modern sensibilities of our time may fail to understand the aberrant comportment of *keramats* like Sayyid Nuh, but these ecstasies were unrivalled friends of God, whose symptoms were to be interpreted as signs of divine favour, in the eyes of their contemporaries. These ecstasies allowed believers to access God's power. They enjoyed God's ear and gift of powers to materialise livelihood (*rezeki*, which includes fortune, luck, or blessing by God) and rain for obedient believers. In the vein of the *Tujuh Wali Melayu*, a 1941 chapbook recovered from Riau and the *Lambang Terukir* contain sections warning readers about the ominous consequences of insulting *keramats* and ecstasies (*majzub*), who appeared 'errant' and 'mad' to common humans (Surattee 2011:22–23; Untitled hagiography 1941:1–2). In particular, the aforementioned chapbook warned that insulters would die as *kafirs* and would be deprived of the intercession of Sayyid Nuh on the Day of Judgment.

The 1896 *Kirttanattiratu* praised the 'playful' behaviour of Sayyid Nuh, who roamed the streets of Singapore with an entourage of beardless boys (a common trope in Sufi literature referring to children), and only in a sarong, at times. Malay hagiographies of the *keramat* have in turn, since the *Kirttanattiratu*, supranormalised Sayyid Nuh's 'aberrance'. In fact, some hagiographers accentuated that the 'erratic' ways of saints like Khidr had once confounded 'lesser' prophets, and that some *keramats* and *majzubs* surpassed prophets in

14 Cited from Surattee's narration, July 2013, Singapore.



terms of their intimacy to God and their spectacular powers.<sup>15</sup> As these hagiographies showed, Sayyid Nuh was an ecstatic (*majzub*) who enjoyed an elevated Islamic state of *jazb*—a state of absorption into God, which would appear as a state of madness to the uninitiated. Hagiographers have regularly emphasised that the *keramat*'s so-called 'crimes', episodes of 'madness', and actions in the course of incarceration in prisons and rudimentary asylums were in fact expressions of *jazb*.

Malay hagiographies regularly remembered histories of a port city that was attracting a range of *majzubs* (ecstatics) like Sayyid Yasin and Sayyid Nuh. These texts emphasised that Sayyid Nuh's *jazb* (rather than madness!) was apparent in how he displayed spectacular powers when he was confronted by *keramat*-hunting representatives of the EIC and when he was placed within prisons and asylums. The 1896 *Kirttanattiratu* celebrated Sayyid Nuh's 'teasing' of the 'wrongdoer', and his eventual 'excellence'. It is the twentieth-century Malay hagiographies of Sayyid Nuh, however, that remembered how the street-roaming *keramat* and *majzub* outfoxed and dumbfounded European authorities. These texts recounted violent encounters that he had with representatives of the EIC, and remembered how he was confined and quarantined in cells. Sayyid Nuh, nonetheless, consistently outfoxed and 'toppled' European power by escaping from internment—in doing so, he publicly displayed his *jazb* and his privileged access to God's transferrable *berkat* (Said 1993:21-22; Surattee 2011:50, 55-57; Untitled hagiography 1941:3-5). The *majzub*'s career of confronting, outwitting, and belittling of Islamophobic and pompous European authority, in Singapore, was portrayed in the aforementioned chapbook from Riau, through the following anecdotes:

The white rulers of Singapore since the era of Sir Stamford Raffles were never contented with allowing the ways of Sayyid Nuh R.A. to continue unimpeded, and multiple efforts were undertaken to restrict Sayyid Nuh R.A. and arrest his movement ... On one occasion, in proximity to the Sultan Mosque,<sup>16</sup> Sir John Crawfurd [the second British Resident of Singapore] was riding on his horse carriage in full pomposity when he caught sight of Sayyid Nuh R.A., who was sailing the street in a state of *jazb* without *jubah* ... with an entourage of children ... the *kafir* looked upon Sayyid Nuh R.A. as a madman yet danger to white rule, halted his carriage to frighten Sayyid Nuh R.A. as to incite a bow. ... Crawfurd was toppled off [his horse] belittled ... [upon being counselled by his 'slaves'] with hesitance and replete with awe. Crawfurd chased after Sayyid Nuh R.A. to beg for forgiveness ... Sayyid Nuh R.A. remained undeterred in his engaged devotion to helping sectors of the society that were suffering ... the recidivist Governor Crawfurd ordered his slaves to arrest Sayyid Nuh R.A. and confine him with his legs and hands tied ... [to the awe of] guards of his cell, Sayyid Nuh R.A. was outside of the cell ... yet inside ... [on separate occasions] Sayyid Nuh R.A. would be spotted with an entourage of children on the street [at the same time that he was visible in a cell] ... this is the descent of Sheikh Idris Al-Qaurawani R.A. [d. 1866] ... Sayyid Nuh R.A. was confined on Pulau Sekijang Bendara [St. John's Island] for hysteria ... this was a place for quarantine where Sayyid Nuh R.A. was kept solitary ... [in days] Sayyid Nuh R.A. walked on water with Sheikh Idris R.A. to return to Singapore ... [even in death, at his funeral] Sayyid Nuh R.A. created shock for the ignorant ... Sayyid Nuh R.A. refused

<sup>15</sup> Refer to Said (1993:17) and Surattee (2011:22-23, 48-49).

<sup>16</sup> Approximately between 1823 and 1827, the period wherein Nuh was residing at Kampung Kaji in the house of Al-Faqih Hajji Abdullah Jalil (d. 1827).

to allow the shroud to be placed over his body until four white men [mentioned in the afore-cited 2 August 1866 *Singapore Free Press* obituary as ‘the four Europeans ... [who converted to Islamism’] bowed to kiss his feet.<sup>17</sup>

Said’s and Surattee’s hagiographies further compiled historical traditions of Sayyid Nuh’s overcoming of European power, and of his spectacular escapes from an eclectic range of cages, gaols, and asylums. These traditions have been reproduced in Malay hagiographies almost verbatim. However, the names of representatives of the EIC have been exchanged in individual hagiographies (rotating between Raffles, Farquhar, and Crawford); even sites of Sayyid Nuh’s cells and techniques used to incarcerate him have been confused. The *Lambang Terukir* furthermore compiled traditions of Sayyid Nuh’s flights from rudimentary asylums in Singapore. These included a historical anecdote pertaining to the *keramat*’s confinement in a cell of an asylum on an offshore islet in the 1850s, and his spectacular escape from another cell by walking on water a decade before. This tradition was inherited and transmitted by a Qadri-Naqshbandi sheikh, Abdullah As-Saqqaf (d. 1998) (Surattee 2011:56–57). According to this anecdote, Sayyid Nuh sketched an image of a ship upon the wall of a cell that he shared with an actual madman, and offered an opportunity of liberation to his oblivious cellmate. Unsurprisingly and miraculously, Sayyid Nuh escaped from the cell through the sketched ship.

The trope of *keramatic* life marked by coercive encounters with European power and regular episodes of transforming penal institutions into sites of miracles was not peculiar to the historical traditions of Sayyid Nuh. The hagiographies of a range of saints, including Sayyid Hussein, the cannabis-puffing, ‘mad’ Aurangabadi Banne Miyan (d. 1921), and the founding master of the Muridiyya in Senegal, Amadu Bamba (d. 1927), are similarly replete with memorialised histories of their teleportations from European institutions (Babou 2007:134–135, 140, 181; Green 2008:37). For instance, the traditions compiled in *Sepintas Riwayat* recount episodes of Sayyid Hussein’s confrontations with Islamophobic representatives of the VOC. These confrontations began immediately after his migration from Surat to Batavia, in 1736, and culminated into Sayyid Hussein’s regular incarceration within prisons (Abdullah bin Abu Bakar Al-Aydarus 1998:14).

The *Sepintas Riwayat* recounts a history of Hussein’s settlement in north Batavia, from 1736 onwards, as one of an exponentially growing cult that was centred around his humble home in the old port of Sunda Kelapa. This cult rapidly attracted the ‘cynicism and anxieties’ of representatives of the VOC, who regularly placed Sayyid Hussein in solitary confinement, in Glodok Prison. The *keramat*’s hagiographers emphasised that ‘walls and steel trellis alike were incapable of impeding [him] in propagating Islam’ (Abdullah bin Abu Bakar Al-Aydarus 1998:14). The prison in Batavia became a site for Sayyid Hussein to display his imperishability, spectacularly, vis-à-vis his Dutch incarcerators; to cite from the *Sepintas Riwayat* (ibid.:17–18):

the walls and steel trellis [of the ‘Seksi Dua’ of the Glodok Prison] were incapable of impeding the principal role of Habib Hussein [Sayyid Hussein] in propagating Islam. Despite being in cage confinement, he was unflinching in educating [fellow prisoners and ‘outside’ audiences through teleportation] in *ayats* of the Qur’an and the obligations

17 A rendition of this tradition appears almost verbatim in Surattee (2011:50).

of Islam ... all the Dutch princes of law witnessed the *karomah* of Habib Hussein ... even as he was incarcerated [unlike his followers and normal prisoners] in a quarter that was cramped ... tied by chains of steel ... the police of the prison were amazed as they witnessed, at midnight, Habib Hussein becoming the imam in a hall that was large, leading the *sholat* until dawn whereupon he was [witnessed] leading the society outside [of prison] in this fashion ... at this exact moment, the police witnessed Habib Hussein asleep in the cramped room that was locked ... in due course, the Dutch administration beseeched [Sayyid Hussein] for forgiveness.

Sayyid Hussein's powers of teleportation were not confined to his period of incarceration in Glodok Prison. Historical traditions of the *keramat* that have been memorialised in his post-colonial cult and his hagiographies accentuate that he displayed another miracle in the course of his funeral procession. As Sayyid Hussein's funeral procession was headed for the Tanah Abang cemetery in central Batavia, in 1756, the *keramat* 'popped in and out' of the bars of his casket (*luar batang*). In doing so, he appeared to devotees only at the spot of his current shrine in the *kampung*, Luar Batang (literally, 'Outside the Bar'). For Sayyid Hussein's hagiographers and devotees, this tradition remembered the name of the settlement (Luar Batang), which lay between the Dutch customs office and the sea in the eighteenth century. According to this historical tradition of Sayyid Hussein's funeral, the name 'Luar Batang' was derived from the *keramat*'s miracle instead of the fact that the settlement lay 'outside' of the barrier ('Bar') of the customs office. It reconstructed the site of Dutch inspection and taxation into a place of Islamic pilgrimage, where a *keramat* had chosen to lay buried.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper analysed select traditions of Sayyid Nuh transmitted in hagiographies and poems. It paid attention to diverse historical memories of the non-literate *keramat* and his sacralisation of the port city of Singapore. It has also compared traditions of Sayyid Nuh to historical traditions of an early *keramat* in Batavia, Sayyid Hussein. In doing so, it has proposed that hagiographies serve as sources of otherwise unrecoverable social histories, of non-literate *keramats* and cults in port cities of Southeast Asia (Feierman 1999:187–188). The *Lambang Terukir* concludes with a reflection on a reference to the 'flow of *berkat*' in the Qur'anic chapter al-Kahfi. It proceeds to compare the 'dead' statue of Raffles, to the 'perpetual living presence' of Sayyid Nuh. The *keramat*'s presence is in fact manifest at the site of his mausoleum in the yet-circulating traditions of miracles that were performed by the *keramat* in the course of his physiological lifetime and beyond. These miracles and traditions progressively sacralised the port city, and transformed the erstwhile British port into a key centre of Muslim pilgrimage of the Indian Ocean. In fact, the *keramat*-shrine had acquired a reputation as a primary hub for accessing God's transferrable *berkat* across the western and eastern Indian Ocean, shortly after Sayyid Nuh's funeral. In remembering a history of the *keramat*, this paper has also attempted to recount a key facet of Singapore's Islamic history.



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