



Memories of Habib Nuh: Remnants of Islamic Sainthood in Singapore

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Abstract

Habib Nuh, the grand saint of Singapore, is a focus of pilgrimage for both Singaporean Muslims and Muslim tourists. Part of an older and more widespread belief in Muslim saints, the tomb of Habib Nuh is a site of memory and memorialization. Due to the small minority of Muslims in Singapore, it stands as a testament to the survival of Malay Singaporeans, Sufism, and sainthood in the small island nation state. This article explores the history, survival, and religious traditions surrounding the tomb of Habib Nuh.

Keywords: Islam, Sufism, Singapore, miracles, *keramat*, grave



1. Introduction

In 1849, a miscellaneous notice appeared in the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, written by Panghulu Kisang in defense of accusations made by a French minister about him and his family. Panghulu Kisang ruled over an area around the Sungai Benut in the Johor district. In part, the notice reads:

Tatapi saya tiada ingat iang sabagitu, tatapi saya fikir itu tuan tiada tahu hada Malayu, jikalau dia tahu hadat Malayu dia tiada bilang bagitu macham, dan lagi dia kata saya tutop satu domingo itupun duta juga dia bėrhėnti tiga hari Sahaja lamanya, dan lagi dia bėrkata ana' saya bėsar sėkali sėkian tahun dahulu suda kėna gantong di Pulau Pinang sabab mambunoh orang, lagipun mǎrompa di laut (Kisang 1849, xxii).

Among the sentiments expressed by Panghulu Kisang in this statement is that the French minister, through accusing him of being part of a band of pirates, fails to understand the good character of the Malay people. This event from 1849 is indicative of a larger problem in the region. As the eminent scholar Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas has explained, the foreigner has often failed to understand the people of Malaya because of their methodological approach that is based on "what they vaguely know" (Al-Attas 2018, 5). This article explores the importance of Islamic saints in contemporary Singapore, which is an important part of the religious landscape and which many outsiders know little about.

Marco Polo's 1292 voyage described a number of ports in the Malay region; it was during this time that Temasik, the port on Singapore Island, was founded (Heng 2011, 34). The *Sejarah Melayu* (15th c.) narrates the founding of Temasik by Sri Tri Buana, a ruler from Palembang, who brought the leader of the Orang Laut of Bentan, along with several other people (Heng 2011, 45). Temasik appears to have had an "abrupt and short-lived existence" that was marked by an absence of foreigners (including Chinese) through most of its history, linked to the ebb and flow of Malay state formation politics in the Nusantara (Heng 2011, 46, 49).

Malaya, what is now Malaysia and Singapore, was marked by encounters with maritime travelers, sultanates, and teachers of Islam's devotional path, Sufism. The center of Sufism in the region was in Aceh, but mystics, poets, and teachers of the *tariqah* (the mystical path) quickly spread mystical texts and practices to Java and Malaya. As al-Attas notes, "The foundations of Sufism had already been well laid in Malacca as early as 1488, for we hear of the Sultan himself being the disciple of a mystic" (Al-Attas 2020, 2). Today, Singapore's Malay population comprises the majority of Muslims in the country, with smaller groups of Arabs, Indians, and other Muslims. Malays comprise approximately 13% of Singapore's population.

2. Cultural Survival and Community

The destruction of Islamic sites in Singapore has been a casualty of the nation's growth (Arjana 2022, 204). One scholar termed the loss of Islamic graves as "The Lost Keramat of Singapore," stating, "In its modern progress, Singapore has closed dozens of cemeteries and relocated thousands of old graves" (Rivers 2003, 115). In the early 1800s, Singapore had between thirty and seventy *keramat* (Tschacher 2006, 227). The lost *keramat* of Singapore include graves that have been moved for housing developments or lost to time. Singaporean Muslims told me about other, lesser known, *keramat*, including a princess (*putriah*) who was buried near Singapore's port, whose grave Habib Nuh took care of until his death.

A Singaporean religious leader I interviewed told me that many small, old mosques and cemeteries had also been destroyed, eliminated altogether for housing or business buildings. Several important cemeteries have survived in modern Singapore. Among these are Bukit Brown, the Christian cemetery at Fort Canning, which includes some Jewish graves, and the burial place of Sri Sultan Iskandar Shah (Lim 2017, 40). Identified in official signage as the last ruler during the reign of Malay rulers in the fifteenth century, his identity is somewhat contested; he may have been Parameswara, the founder of Malacca, or his son, or someone else (Lim 2017, 41).



Figure 1 Keramat Sultan Iskandar Shah, Fort Canning Hill, the Central Area, Singapore.

Singapore has several mosques, including the Sultan Mosque, a popular tourist destination, and older *masjids* like the Ba'alwie Mosque. The Ba'alwie Mosque was founded by Habib Mohammed bin Salem in 1952. He was an important man, from a family of *ahl-al-sa'wa* (religious scholars), a scholar and Sufi who studied and lived in Yemen, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia before coming to Singapore in 1952 (Abaza 1997, 70). He could bring rain in times of drought and could sense "the scent of a coming *wali* (saint)" (Abaza 1997, 70, 72). Habib Mohammed bin Salem, like many other Singaporean Muslims, also led *dhikr*, a popular practice among Hadrami Arab, Malay, and Indonesian Muslims (Abaza 1997, 72). *Dhikr* is the remembrance of Allah through a ritual of chanting, which may be accompanied with or without music (Al-Attas 2020, 43). This may take place once a month, weekly, or more often, depending on the community. *Dhikr* may be performed at a mosque or other location, such as someone's home. It also has variations, such as the silent *dhikr* (*dhikr khafī*) or aloud (*dhikr jalī*) (Al-Attas 2020, 69).

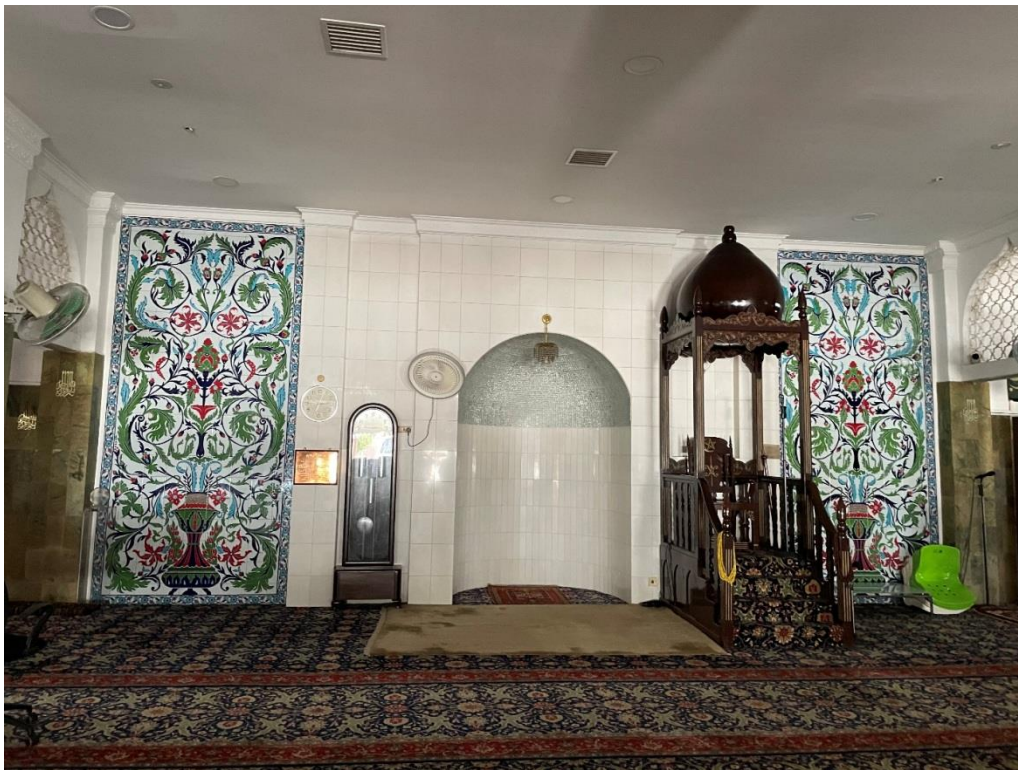


Figure 2 Masjid Ba'alwie, Lewis Road, Singapore

At the Ba'alwie Mosque, *ratib* takes place on Thursdays and is believed to be a regular practice, which can be performed alone or in a community (Al-Attas 2020, 69). A Sufi ritual, it is identified with miraculous events:

There are numerous folk-tales about followers of the Prophet who have been delivered from illness after reading the *ratib*. Indeed, there is a collection of magical stories, which date from the time of the Prophet, related to the benefits of reading the *ratib* to avoid illness and misery, and seeking prosperity (Abaza 1997, 77).

As one Singaporean Muslim told me, popular Islamic practices included reciting Surah Yasin, *dhikr*, *salawat* (blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad), and *tawassul* (seeking intercession of saints). At Habib Nuh, the tomb of the grand saint of Singapore, pilgrims ask for *barakah* (blessings) from the saint and are rewarded for "making effort to come to one of Allah's beloved."

3. Habib Nuh

The tomb of Habib Nuh is located within a busy area of Singapore, surrounded by roads, office buildings, and traffic. One of the remaining *keramats* (places of prayer that often include a tomb) in Singapore, it is a *maqam* (a tomb) of the eighteenth-century Hadrami saint Habib Nuh bin Muhammad al-Habshi. Born at sea (in 1788) while his parents traveled from Penang to Palembang, he settled in Singapore and spent his life helping the poor (Machado 2020, 150). After his death in 1866, his grave became a site of pilgrimage, joining many others across the Malay world and as far as South Africa, where many Indonesians were brought as political prisoners, never to return home. I visited the tomb in 2024, shortly before its renovation. Once surrounded by mangroves, palms, monkeys, and crocodiles, it is now surrounded by highways, malls, and car exhaust.

Like the al-Attas family of the Ba'alwie Mosque, Habib Nuh's ancestry ties him to the network of saints in Hadramaut, many of whom crossed the ocean and settled in what is now Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Habib Nuh's birth is marked by a miracle. His mother and father were traveling by sea and caught in a terrible storm, when his father made a vow (*nazar*) to Allah that if they were spared, they would name their son Nuh, after the prophet (Surattee 2008, 30). The sea suddenly became calm and Nuh was born (Surattee 2008, 30).

The caretakers of Habib Nuh shared their account of Habib Nuh. Habib Nuh is known as the grand saint of Singapore. Many Muslims believe he arrived in Singapore to counteract the colonial influences and that, in the words of one religious leader, "Allah planned this." Habib Nuh was known for his knowledge and kindness, and of course, his many miracles. He is a symbol of inter-religious culture. Habib Nuh sat in the front row of the Chinese opera, which was normally reserved for (invisible) spirits. He lived in Kampung Gelam and used to rush to people who were in distress,

even if they were far away. Many stories about him attest to his magical powers. He would walk through the monsoon rains and he would be dry. People gave him money to give to the poor because they wanted his *barakah* (blessings). He teleported to *haji*, and according to many, regularly attended Friday prayers in Mecca. Another story about Habib Nuh involved someone who sought prayers before going on a ship. The person then missed his departure and the boat sank, killing all aboard. Habib Nuh had sat on this man's luggage doing prayers to keep him from boarding the doomed ship.



Figure 3 The grand staircase leading up to the Habib Nuh Shrine (Keramat Habib Noh) on Mount Palmer, Singapore.

The tales of Habib Nuh's life often reflect service to others, especially children and the poor. At his death, one of the Singapore newspapers described this service in this way:

As far as we can gather the deceased was in the habit of taking everything he wished from the different shops, and even money from the money-changers, which he afterwards invariably distributed amongst the poor of his countrymen (*The Singapore Free Press* 1866).

Habib Nuh was known to "throw money" at the young children who followed him around town (Rivers 2003, 108).

The practice of *tahnik*, the act of giving honey to a newborn, was a *sunnah* Habib Nuh practiced, with the hope that it would promise a faithful life for the baby (Surattee 2008, 34). He was known to hand out sweets and gifts to the poor and would appear at the door of a family with a sick child, where he would offer prayers and give the family food (Yahya and Alhabshi 2023, 4). Nuh loved to watch Chinese opera, and even though he did not understand the language, he could follow it through the actors. Stories about Habib Nuh's children or grandchildren range from claims he had no children to several tales of his daughter and son. One Singaporean scholar insisted Habib Nuh had a daughter with his Malay wife. The granddaughter from this child is supposedly buried in Singapore's Chinatown, but other versions claim her grave is in Penang. A man named Habib Ahmad bin Nuh claimed to be the saint's son, his body buried in the western part of Singapore. His name was written as "Daeng Awong Sulong," which was likely a title and not a real name.

Like other Muslim saints, he is surrounded with many magical tales. The belief in saintly miracles in Islam includes a specific set of miracles associated with parts of the body, such as "Eyes that see things far away, with vision penetrating walls at great distances" and "Legs that walk on water upon air; or that take only a few steps to cover great distances" (Surattee 2008, 19–20). One tale describes how he healed the broken leg of a child with a prayer, and another tale describes him transforming water into milk for a hungry child (Surattee 2008, 39). When he was given a diamond ring, he threw it into the sea, and later called it to return to him (Rivers 2003, 108).

Magical stories surround his burial place. When Habib Nuh died in 1866, he was buried on Palmer Hill (owned by John Palmer and Company), "at the very exact place Habib Nuh spent countless nights in communion with God" (Yahya and Alhabshi 2023, 3). The tomb miraculously survived a bomb dropped from a Japanese plane, for only the front door of the building was damaged (Surattee 2008, 43–44). A story I was told by three different Singaporeans describes how bulldozers preparing to demolish the

tomb for the construction of the East Coast Parkway would not start. As one study explains, "Even after the contractors requisitioned new bulldozers, the same thing happened: the bulldozers would not move" (Surattee 2008, 44). Singaporean Muslims were outraged at the threat to the tomb, much like the Chinese outcry over plans to destroy the Bukit Brown cemetery, the largest Chinese cemetery outside of China, in 2011 (Jianli 2014, 22). In the case of Habib Nuh, the tomb and its buildings were preserved and the road was rerouted (Surattee 2008, 44). One Singaporean Muslim told me that not only were the bulldozers inoperable, but that several workers fell ill and died.

Pilgrims visiting Habib Nuh perform rituals common in pilgrimage across much of the region. These traditions include reciting the Qur'an, as well as leaving items at the gravesite. As one of the Muslim caretakers of the site told me, "It is *sunnah* to leave flowers. When one leaves flowers, something alive, it is a benefit to the deceased." *Nazr*, leaving food to thank the Habib (Habib Nuh), includes yellow glutinous rice (*pulut*) and biryani, and bringing food for visitors, are both practices that continue. As one man explained to me, it is because giving food to people is *sunnah*. As he put it, "These are good deeds connected to *karamah* (miracles)." Because Habib Nuh liked to give food to people, pilgrims continue his actions, memorializing the most famous saint of Singapore.

4. Conclusion

The mosque next to Habib Nuh was built on the remains of an old village. During the *hawl* for the saint, and during the last ten days of Ramadan, it sees between nine and twelve thousand people. Tents are brought in and *ziyara* to the tomb takes place after *tarawih* prayers. People visit Habib Nuh and Habib Abdurrahman Al-Habsyi (d. 1867), one of the earliest *qadi* in Singapore (some say he was the first *qadi*). The shrine, which was built in 1996, was paid for by Sayyid Mohammad Nong Chi, and later the Muslim Trust Fund Association (MTFA) took over management of the site. The caretakers of the site have historically distributed food. As I was told, only permissible acts and traditions are permitted at the tomb. Examples of things that are not allowed are asking the saint for lotto numbers or burning incense. However, the burning of Hadrami scent to "make a nice scent" is allowed. The scent, which has mystical connotations, elicits memories of a past now gone and reminds pilgrims of "the connection of sweet fragrances to piety" (Feener and Laffan 2005, 197). As one Singaporean told me about Singapore, "The whole place has changed. But Habib Nuh remains."

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