Being Modern in Penang:Muhammad bin Hanif and the Penang Story

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As has been demonstrated so richly in this conference, Penang is in many ways the perfect site for studying Indian Ocean trajectories. In the early 19th century, while Singapore gazed resolutely eastward, Penang was almost an Indian port: a city which belonged more closely to the Indian world, gazing westward to the Bay of Bengal. In this conference alone, we've learned of the Indian influence in Bujang Valley; the surprising similarities between Parsis and Babas; the cultural, diasporic and mercantile networks that sprawled across the Indian Ocean. We are at no loss for evidence of a wider, deeper transnational history of Penang, and of its place in the Indian Ocean and the world. This paper is more concerned with the place of the Indian Ocean and the world in Penang's history.

Scholars of Penang's urban development have emphasized the decline of George Town since the 1980s. Some argue that 'the key to the future of George Town lies in its past'—in reinventing the city through 'urban heritage tourism'. This is a tempting approach, and one with strong precedent. Since the mid-1980s, Singaporean urban planning policy has shifted towards revitalizing an older, more culturally diverse urban fabric—Chinatown, Little India, Kampung Glam—in an attempt to venerate its cosmopolitan Asian past. Singapore and Penang were bustling polygot centers of cultural, commercial and social interchange. Their cosmopolitan qualities arose seemingly out of the shared experiences of maritime trade, of linguistic and cultural hybridity produced in the collision of diverse migrant cultures, and of the exposure to European colonial intervention.

So it's this modern, cosmopolitan, multicultural heritage which is to play an important role in the future of Penang's past. Penang 'has it all', according to the *Tourism Penang* website: a 'fascinating fusion of East and West, Penang embraces modernity while retaining its tradition and old world charm. These are reflected in its harmonious multiracial populace and well-preserved heritage buildings...' These qualities of the port city are enduringly attractive. The predecessor to our conference back in 2002, entitled 'The Penang Story: A Celebration of Cultural Diversity', sought to revive Penang's past in a way which celebrated its marvellous plurality. Today, almost ten years on, we are all deepening the work of that conference, so my paper urges this effort onward while hoping to recall the care and critical nuance of Tan Liok Ee's keynote speech in 2002: that attempts to generate a single story of Penang's past—*the* story of its 'harmonious multiracial populace', its cultural and religious plurality, its modernity, its cosmopolitanism—can take us some of the way, but may not, in the end, furnish the whole story. To do this, I wish to say a little about Muhammad bin Hanif.

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It is surprising how little we know about Muhammad bin Hanif, given that he appears alongside some of the most prominent Malay political and literary figures of late colonial Malaya. Muhammad bin Hanif was born sometime in the early twentieth century in Penang. He is listed as a translator in the Majallah Guru from its very first issue in 1924. Sometime in the late 1930s,

he surfaced in Kuala Lumpur, working alongside Malay journalists Samad Ahmad and Ibrahim Yaacob, in the offices of the prestigious Malay periodical, Majlis. During the Japanese Occupation we find him causing mischief with Ahmad Boestamam. Later on in the 1950s, he was elected to the Executive Committee of PAS, and would rub shoulders with icons of the Malay literati, Keris Mas and Ungku Aziz, in the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

My primary aim in this brief presentation is to set Muhammad bin Hanif and some of his work in the context of pre-war Penang, where he spent most of his formative years. I'll discuss briefly some aspects of Penang in the 1920s and 30s which seem relevant to understanding his ideological makeup.

First we have the confluence of Malay-language journalism, the rise of Malay printing, and Islamic reformism emanating from the Middle East. Penang's unique freedom of press during the 1920s was also important to the fortunes of Islamic publishing. As predominantly non-Malay and non-Muslim settlements, neither Singapore nor Penang had authoritarian religious establishments such as those which existed in the Federated Malay States. There were only Muslim Advisory Boards which had no power to enforce religious norms or proscribe unorthodox literature. William Roff thus likened Penang in the 1920s to a sanctuary or 'sniping post' for those who were in conflict with religious authorities in the Federated States.

Penang was also particularly exposed to the anxieties of the Depression. Both Singapore and Penang's economic interests were largely extra-Malayan, for they were distribution hubs, turned outwards to an immense and wealthy area stretching from the Madras coast to China. This made them especially vulnerable to shocks in world trade. There were also internal complications. The British had encouraged the expansion of the Malayan rubber industry to the detriment of self-sufficiency. By 1929, almost half of all cultivated land was planted with rubber, and—ironically for a land so rich in paddy—rice had to be imported with rubber revenue. Rubber prices fell at the end of the decade, coinciding disastrously with severe crop failures. Starvation and economic perdition ensued. The Depression thus had profound effects upon the population, and acutely sharpened Malay consciousness about economic questions from the early 1930s onward.

Demography also mattered: this is a familiar story. In the Straits Settlements, Chinese outnumbered Malays by a factor of almost 3 to 1. In Penang the bulk of retail trade seemed to lie in Chinese hands. But as we know it was also the English-speaking Chinese who wielded political power. Penang's *Saudara*, a periodical published by Islamist reformer Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, helped galvanize Malays on these matters. Throughout the 1930s, *Saudara* and other Malay periodicals helped forge ever stronger connections between economic weakness and political irrelevance in the minds of Penang Malays—a lesson which, we shall see, Muhammad bin Hanif took straight to heart.

In the postwar period economic concerns took on increasing political and religious urgency. The war had stimulated Malay political activity on an unprecedented scale. I don't have time to go into the establishment of the Majlis Agama Tertinggi, or MATA, but very briefly, it was a reformist Islamic body formed in Gunung Semanggol in 1947 dedicated to Malay political and economic uplift. It mooted proposals for a planned economy, a Malay National Bank and an Islamic university. Under MATA, politics, economics and Islam came together institutionally and ideologically as perhaps never so clearly before.

At this point, we can turn to Muhammad bin Hanif himself. In important ways, Muhammad bin Hanif was thoroughly a product of the Penang of the 1920s and 30s. He lived through the Great Depression. He became involved in the world of print at a time when Penang had just become a preeminent center of Malay and Islamic publishing. Literate in English, Arabic and Malay, he would have read and contributed to a great range of local papers. He would have been able to read texts which might have been proscribed in other Malay states. He would have had plenty of time to observe the dominance of Chinese merchants in Penang trade, to understand the position of Penang within the empire and its position as a great regional trading hub; and to see, as many Malays of his generation did, that rural Malays were falling behind. It seems almost inevitable that he would forge out on his own.

Several months after the formation of MATA, Muhammad bin Hanif published three really interesting texts: one political, one economic, one Islamic. First, the *Kamus Politik*, a dictionary of politics. A month later, a Sunday paper called the *Economic Melayu* (Malay Economics), and a month after that, an Islamic weekly called the *Suluh Kemajuan* (Torch of Progress). In this brief presentation, I am only able to focus on the *Kamus Politik*, though I will offer some brief comments on the *Economic Melayu*. All three are dealt with at greater length in a forthcoming article.

By Muhammad bin Hanif's own estimation, the *Kamus Politik* was a sell-out success; but the *Economic Melayu* did not do well initially, because, as he puts it, 'the Malays were then attracted by the glare of politics and could not yet appreciate that economics was the real thing.' I don't have time to discuss this periodical, but I'll just say here that it addressed itself directly to the task of rectifying Malay economic irrelevance through education. It offered agricultural advice, how to run businesses, latest methods of Malay fishing, that sort of thing.

But his *Kamus Politik* is, for me, a much more compelling and uniquely modern text. Written in Jawi, the Arabic script for Malay, it's perhaps the first of its kind on the peninsula. There are Indonesian precedents, but they're romanized, and they also tended to be compiled from European dictionaries and encyclopedias. Muhammad bin Hanif's *Kamus* was not. He states in his introduction that he was prompted to personally compile his dictionary because of the number of political terms entering Malay, which were little understood by most Malay readers. Muhammad bin Hanif's dictionary is thus as much a sketch of language as it is of an individual, of the mind of a Malay coming to terms with a rapidly changing world.

What immediately strikes the present-day reader is how modern are many of the terms and concepts Muhammad bin Hanif defines in his dictionary, and how plugged in he is to a remarkably global landscape of ideas. Muhammad bin Hanif's dictionary is a snapshot of modern thinking in Malay-speaking Penang. It contains definitions of over 700 words deemed 'new' and 'political' in the Peninsula. Many of the terms with the longest definitions are staple political concepts from the experience of world war: *Absolutism, Fascism, Communism, Atlantic Charter, Anarchism, Imperialism, Autocracy, Entente*, and *Bolshevism* have among the longest definitions. There is also a deep intellectual engagement with empire. Muhammad bin Hanif was particularly interested in the colonial mandate system; the entry for *Dominion*, at 39 lines, is the longest, with comparably lengthy definitions for *mandate*, *trusteeship*, and *Commonwealth*. These were English words; more natural to the Jawi script were many Arabic political and

ethical terms to be found in the *Kamus*, such as *ijtima*, *ikhtilaf* and *ijtihad*.

There is also an awareness of current developments on the other side of the Indian Ocean. The Kamus offers a definition of *hartal* as an Indian word; there is no mention of the October 1947 hartal that shut down Malaya for the day. Instead, a *hartal* is 'a general peaceful strike; a term from the Indian language and a method of peaceful struggle as promulgated by Mahatma Gandhi to oppose colonialism in India.' In Muslim solidarity, Muhammad bin Hanif offers a sympathetic definition of Pakistan, formed less than two months earlier: 'A free (*merdeka*) Islamic state which is made up of many colonies of Muslim brethren, such as Baluchistan, the Sind, the Northwest Frontier Province of India and the Punjab. Pakistan means Tanah Suci, Land of the Pure…'_ His entry for *rusuhan* (riot) references not the UMNO demonstrations against the Malayan Union or any other local conflagrations, but instead defines it as 'chaos, confrontation, killings, quarrels and hostilities between two groups or races, such as those between Hindus and Muslims in India.'_

And there is Muhammad bin Hanif's sense of local politics. His dictionary defines and struggles with the language of new politics in a nation extricating itself from colonial rule. Some entries deal with common Malay words which have acquired new meanings in a political age. For example, the word 'element', given as *unsur*, is defined as 'a substance or thing; but in politics it means *kaum* or *suku*'—tribe or ethnic group. Another example: in politics, *suara* no longer simply meant 'voice' but *kehendak*, *kemahuan*, or desires and wishes.

It's through these definitions that Muhammad bin Hanif's political convictions come through most clearly. He was pro-Malay, and also pro-Muslim. He was anti-Communist, perceiving the Communists as intrinsically violent; he was also convinced that Communism was a fully Chinese phenomenon. Through ambivalent about the British, he was a firm devotee of democracy and its procedures, defining it as a method of governance which enabled the people to keep tabs on the work and conduct of government functionaries. Despite his democratic sympathies, however, in 1947 he clearly stood with the conservative, Anglo-Malay Federation proposals rather than the more radical left-wing alternative Peoples' Constitution.

Most of all, he did not believe in extending citizenship to non-Malays. His definition of citizenship was careful, but categorical. 'Although every *penduduk* can be said to be part of "the people", not all can become *orang negara* because not all of them have the rights of citizenship'. These rights included the power to make laws of administration in a country and to have a say in the execution of justice. This, he thought, could not be given to non-Malays, the *bangsa dagang* among whom he lived, worked and wrote, in Penang.

In this last sense, the surprising modernity of Muhammad bin Hanif's dictionary was harnessed to shore up and explicate deeply parochial concerns. The Kamus for me is interesting precisely because it is so self-consciously modern and global, so tuned into world developments and ideas. But Muhammad bin Hanif also perceived with startling clarity the extreme localness of his project: that his attempts to define to his readers, but above all to himself, these international, abstract political systems—feudalism, democracy, anarchy, communism—were a way of making an informed decision on the most local level about the sort of life one wished to have. Muhammad bin Hanif seemed to grasp that politics and economics were about life and the organization of one's social and moral wellbeing.

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At a time when Penang's global future is being enthusiastically planned in the image of its past, it may be worth considering exactly what that past was, as opposed to what we, in order to produce heritage, want it to be. Muhammad bin Hanif lived through a period in Malaysian history of great change and rupture, in a place that has historically indeed been uniquely outward-looking. His intellectual output could not have been what it was had he not tapped into an extremely global world of ideas, had he not lived through a world depression, or been so well-read. Yet, through globalized, cosmopolitan and literate Penang, Muhammad bin Hanif harnessed the wider modern world to the most local, parochial interests. There is no evidence that he ever left Malaya, though within the peninsula he was exceedingly well travelled. The borders he crossed in his ideas and thoughts made him less, not more, cosmopolitan. He was multilingual, but used his English-language facility to berate non-Malay-speaking Penangites for not speaking Malay. And despite the ambient reformist spirit pervading Penang Islam, he was regarded by many, especially during his time in PAS, as *kaum tua*—an old-school Islamist conservative.

Yet it seems to me important to recognize that the extreme globalism and outward-looking orientation of Penang, which its new UNESCO-oriented heritage no doubt hopes to emphasize, should be just as capable of producing rootless cosmopolitans and globetrotting revolutionaries as it is of producing insular ethnonationalists. Border-crossing can sharpen, rather than elide, ethnic or tribal loyalties; proximity to other races can nurture sympathies as easily as antipathies. We might sometimes decry or deny ethnic parochialism as antique remnants of a world too modern, too cosmopolitan for such primitive loyalties. But it seems difficult to deny that Muhammad bin Hanif was, despite and because of Penang, incredibly modern. How, then, ought this conference to help me understand his modernity? I have offered a small part of his life story here as a foil, and I hope, as a spur to further discussion.