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ARABIC SPEAKERS IN ASIA: MIGRATION, MULTILINGUALISM AND IDENTITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Abstract

Arabic is commonly associated with the Middle East and North Africa. Yet its influence extends into South and Southeast Asia, where it functions not only as the sacred language of Islam but also as a vehicle for education, migration, and intercultural communication. This paper examines the often-neglected presence of Arabic-speaking communities in India, Malaysia, and Indonesia – contexts marked by deep-rooted Islamic traditions and complex multilingual realities. Despite the dominance of research focused on Arabic in the West, Arabic in Asia is situated within long-standing networks of trade, pilgrimage, and transnational scholarship. The 21st century has introduced new dynamics, including increased Arab migration, the global circulation of Islamic media, and growing enthusiasm for Arabic language acquisition. These developments challenge monolithic views of Arabic and reveal its multifaceted role in shaping identities and linguistic practices across the Global South.

Keywords: Arabic language, multilingualism, South and Southeast Asia, migration, Islamic identity.

Arabic's entry into South and Southeast Asia dates back to the early centuries of Islam, particularly through maritime trade and Sufi missionary movements. By the 8th century, Arab traders had reached the western coasts of India, including Gujarat and Kerala, establishing commercial and religious ties that led to the foundation of enduring Muslim communities (Jacobsen 2009, 15-18). Similarly, by the 13th century, Arabic had become a language of religious scholarship in what is now Indonesia and Malaysia, thanks in part to the influence of Yemeni and Hadhrami Arabs (Mhd Omar and Najid 2022, 171-180).

The Hadhrami diaspora, originating from southern Yemen, played a particularly prominent role in the dissemination of Arabic language and culture in Southeast Asia. Settling in places like Aceh, Java, Malacca, and Johor, these Arab families often occupied elite religious and political roles, maintaining Arabic as a heritage and scholarly language (Mobini-Kesheh 1999, 17-23). Their descendants today usually retain Arabic surnames and genealogies while speaking local languages such as Malay, Javanese, or Tamil (Jacobsen 2009, 15-18).

Colonial educational reforms introduced by the British and Dutch often marginalized Arabic in formal curricula. But Arabic maintained prestige through Islamic religious schools (madrasas) and transregional networks of Islamic scholarship (Azra 2004, 9). Students from South and Southeast Asia frequently traveled to Mecca, Medina, and Cairo, where they acquired Arabic as a second language and often returned home as religious authorities (Ryding 2014, 141-142).

Thus, Arabic has long functioned as a language of literacy, ritual, mobility, and elite identity, even in regions where it is not spoken as a native tongue. This background is essential to understanding the layered and often symbolic status of Arabic among today's multilingual populations in the region.

The 21st century has witnessed new patterns of migration that have introduced native Arabic speakers into the social fabric of South and Southeast Asia. Unlike earlier historical links based on religious or trade-based mobility, recent migration is driven by a variety of factors, including education, diplomatic assignments, interregional business, and, in some cases, forced displacement.

In Malaysia, Arabic-speaking communities have grown significantly in urban centers such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang, partly due to Malaysia's reputation as a moderate Muslim country that offers

high-quality higher education in English and Arabic. Arab students from countries such as Yemen, Iraq, Egypt, and Libya increasingly enroll in Islamic universities and international institutions in Malaysia, with some eventually settling and integrating into local communities (Mhd Omar and Najid 2022, 171-180). According to Mhd Omar and Najid, the presence of Arab expatriates in Malaysian academia and business has led to increased visibility of the Arabic language in public signage, the food industry, and media (Mhd Omar and Najid 2022, 171-180).

Indonesia has also attracted Arab-speaking migrants, particularly students and religious workers. The country hosts several institutions of higher learning that offer Arabic-medium instruction, including state Islamic universities and pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) that maintain strong ties with Arabic-speaking scholars abroad (Azra 2004, 1-5). While the presence of large, settled Arab diasporas (such as the Hadhramis) dates back centuries, more recent arrivals from the Gulf and Levant regions bring with them different linguistic practices and ideological orientations, sometimes leading to intra-community distinctions between "native" and "new" Arabs (Nurish 2024, 5-6).

In India, Arabic-speaking migrants are fewer in number, but their presence is nonetheless notable in cities like Hyderabad, Mumbai, and Delhi. These individuals often work as religious instructors, Arabic teachers, or employees of Gulf-based companies. India's large labor diaspora in the Gulf has also reversed the direction of linguistic influence, as returning workers sometimes bring back Arabic phrases, codes, and identities, creating hybrid linguistic registers, especially among Muslims (Mukherjee 2016, 5-12).

In all three countries, Arabic-speaking migrants often remain linguistically and socially distinct, navigating life in environments dominated by local languages such as Malay, Bahasa Indonesia, or Hindi/Urdu. Many settle temporarily and participate in tight-knit transnational communities, where Arabic serves as a *lingua franca*. However, contact with the host societies inevitably leads to processes of code-switching, borrowing, and identity adaptation.

These developments reveal the emergence of non-native Arabic-speaking spaces in Asia, shaped by transnational flows, educational networks, and urban multilingualism. Unlike older diasporas that often fully assimilated into local cultures, these new Arabic-speaking presences retain strong ties to their countries of origin and engage in selective integration. The result is a form of "translocal Arabic" that interacts with local linguistic ecologies in complex ways (Albirini 2016, 8-11).

In South and Southeast Asia, Arabic occupies a unique sociolinguistic position: it is simultaneously a revered sacred language, a foreign tongue, and a symbol of cultural and religious legitimacy. National language policies in such countries as Malaysia, Indonesia, and India generally classify Arabic as a foreign language. But its status is often elevated in religious and educational contexts due to its connection with Islam.

In Malaysia, Arabic enjoys institutional support within the framework of Islamic education. The national curriculum includes Arabic as a compulsory subject in Islamic religious schools (*sekolah agama*), and public universities offer degrees in Arabic language and literature. However, this institutional presence does not necessarily produce fluent speakers, as Arabic instruction often emphasizes grammar and Quranic reading over oral proficiency (Mhd Omar and Najid 2022, 171-180). Moreover, Arabic in Malaysia is usually taught as *fusha* (Modern Standard Arabic), disconnected from any spoken dialects. Language policy thus reinforces the sacralized and decontextualized role of Arabic, often limiting its use outside religious settings (Azra 2004, 9-11).

Indonesia follows a similar pattern. While Arabic is taught in many pesantren and state Islamic universities (UINs), it is rarely used outside religious or academic contexts. The Ministry of Religious Affairs promotes Arabic as a core component of Islamic education, but the approach remains highly text-based (Azra 2004, 11-12). Government policy does not view Arabic as a tool for intercultural communication or economic engagement, but rather as a marker of Islamic identity and piety. This has resulted in what Albirini terms "ritual multilingualism," where Arabic holds symbolic authority but is not integrated into daily linguistic practices (Albirini 2016, 3-5).

In India, Arabic is classified as a foreign language and receives limited state support. However, several madrasas and private institutions continue to teach Arabic, particularly in Muslim-majority regions like Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, and Hyderabad (Mukherjee 2016, 5-12). Arabic is included in the curriculum of some Islamic seminaries affiliated with the *Darul Uloom* network, and a few Indian universities offer Arabic language programs. Nevertheless, Arabic remains highly compartmentalized,

used almost exclusively in religious rituals, formal prayer, or scholarly study. It is often replaced in everyday life by Urdu or Hindi, even among religious elites (Mukherjee 2016, 6-8).

Despite the limitations imposed by language policy, Arabic retains high symbolic capital, especially in contexts where Islam intersects with national identity. In Malaysia and Indonesia, for instance, Arabic script (*Jawi*) has cultural prestige and is used in religious inscriptions, signboards, and ceremonial documents, even though few people can read or understand it fluently (Mobini-Kesheh 1999, 128-137). This reflects what Ryding (2014) calls the "ideologization" of Arabic, i.e., where the language functions less as a communicative tool and more as a signifier of religious and moral authority (Ryding 2014, 7-9).

At the same time, language policy tends to draw a strict boundary between Arabic as a liturgical language and the national vernaculars, thereby constraining the space for Arabic to develop as a living spoken language. Yet, as the next section demonstrates, Arabic still plays a dynamic role in shaping multilingual identities, particularly among younger generations exposed to Arabic through migration, media, and digital platforms.

Arabic-speaking communities in India, Malaysia, and Indonesia are participating in rich multilingual ecologies, where language is closely tied to social identity, religious affiliation, and cultural mobility. In such environments, Arabic is rarely a dominant or home language, but it remains a strategic linguistic resource that individuals and communities use to construct, perform, or negotiate identity.

In Malaysia, many Hadhrami-descended Malays continue to identify with Arab heritage through names, rituals, and selective use of Arabic phrases, even when their dominant spoken language is Malay (Jacobsen 2009, 1-5). For younger generations, especially those studying Arabic at religious or tertiary institutions, the language often becomes a marker of upward social mobility and religious literacy. The distinction between *fusha* (Modern Standard Arabic) and colloquial dialects plays an important role: fluency in *fusha* is often associated with scholarly status, while knowledge of spoken dialects is viewed as practical or street-level competence (Mhd Omar and Najid 2022, 171-180).

Among Arab expatriates in Malaysia, identity is often negotiated in transnational terms. As Freitag and Clarence-Smith (1997) note, many Arab migrants maintain strong emotional and economic ties to their countries of origin while adapting selectively to Malaysian norms. Code-switching between Arabic, English, and Malay is common in daily interaction, reflecting layered identities shaped by religion, class, and migration status. In elite circles, the ability to navigate multiple registers – religious Arabic, academic English, and local Malay – signals not only competence but also belonging to a global Muslim cosmopolitanism (Freitag and Clarence-Smith 1997, 1-7).

In Indonesia, Arabic often serves as a symbolic resource rather than a communicative medium. Young Indonesians engaged in Islamic activism or *dakwah* movements may incorporate Arabic terms into everyday speech (e.g., *akhī, ukhtī, jazākallāh*) to perform pious Muslim identities, even if they are not proficient in the language (Albirini 2016, 4-9). In this way, Arabic functions as a semiotic resource that indexes religious commitment and pan-Islamic solidarity, rather than linguistic fluency per se (Albirini 2016, 1-5).

Meanwhile, members of Arab-Indonesian families – especially those with Hadhrami lineage – may claim a distinct identity as Arab despite being culturally and linguistically assimilated into Indonesian society. As documented by Mobini-Kesheh (1999), such identities are often reconstructed genealogically rather than linguistically: Arabic language loss does not negate Arabness, which may instead be affirmed through kinship networks, religious authority, or ritual practices.

In India, Arabic is rarely used in spoken interaction outside of religious institutions. However, it still plays a key role in identity formation among Muslim minorities, particularly those who have worked or studied in the Gulf. According to Mobini-Kesheh (1999), returning migrants often adopt Arabicized speech patterns or expressions that signify exposure to Arab culture. This phenomenon is evident in Kerala, where Gulf migration created hybrid linguistic forms that incorporate Arabic vocabulary into Malayalam (Kottaparamban 2019, 406-416). Here, Arabic serves as a prestige code, symbolizing modernity, religiosity, and international experience.

Across these contexts, Arabic is thus not only a language of tradition but also one of aspiration and performance. It allows individuals to align themselves with broader transnational Muslim identities, access opportunities for education or work abroad, and to distinguish themselves within local religious hierarchies. However, this process is rarely uniform: generational differences, gender, class, and educational background all influence how Arabic is learned, used, and valued in multilingual settings.

In India, Arabic has historically been confined to religious institutions, such as madrasas and seminaries, where it is primarily taught for the reading of classical Islamic texts. Arabic is not commonly spoken as a native or community language, yet it maintains a vital, if symbolic, role. The city of Hyderabad serves as an illustrative example. Known for its Islamic heritage and sizable Muslim population, Hyderabad is home to several madrasas and Islamic universities where Arabic is a medium of instruction for religious studies (Kottaparamban 2019, 406-416).

In recent decades, Arabic's sociolinguistic role has expanded due to return migration from the Gulf countries, especially among workers from Kerala and Uttar Pradesh. This Gulf migration has created a feedback loop: returning workers bring not only remittances but also Arabic vocabulary, dress styles, and cultural practices that influence local Muslim identity (Kottaparamban 2019, 406-416). In many cases, families encourage their children to learn Arabic to facilitate future employment or integration in the Gulf, even if the language remains mostly functional or symbolic (Albirini 2016, 1-5).

Despite its increased visibility, Arabic in India remains largely compartmentalized, with Urdu or regional languages such as Malayalam or Hindi serving as the dominant communicative codes in everyday life. Arabic, here, functions as a language of aspiration, valued for its religious significance and potential mobility but rarely used in informal settings or local governance.

In Malaysia, Arabic enjoys a complex sociolinguistic status. On one hand, it is institutionally supported through Islamic schools, public universities, and religious programs. On the other hand, Arabic is increasingly commodified through language centers, media, and tourism. The cities of Kuala Lumpur, Shah Alam, and Penang have seen the emergence of Arab-owned businesses and Arabic signage, especially in neighborhoods frequented by Middle Eastern tourists and expatriates (Azra 2004, 9).

Arabic is also seen as a language of religious prestige. Its presence in sermons, Islamic radio stations, and television channels reinforces its authority as a spiritual language, even among those who do not understand it fluently (Ryding 2014, 7-8). Some Islamic movements in Malaysia promote the increased use of Arabic in everyday religious life, seeing it as part of a return to authentic Islamic practice (Azra 2004, 1-7).

However, Arabic's role in Malaysia is not without tension. While some embrace it as part of Malaysia's Islamic identity, others perceive its growing influence as an imposition or a threat to Malay cultural sovereignty. The debate over *Jawi* script (Arabic-derived Malay orthography) in education has reignited discussions over identity, religion, and national language (Azra 2004, 3-7).

Indonesia presents one of the most layered landscapes for Arabic use in Asia. The historical presence of Hadhrami Arabs, especially in regions such as Java, Aceh, and South Sulawesi, has left a deep imprint on Islamic institutions, mosque architecture, naming patterns, and family genealogies (Mobini-Kesheh 1999, 17-22; Jacobsen 2009, 1-7). Although most Hadhrami descendants today speak Indonesian or Javanese as their first language, Arabic remains a powerful symbolic and ancestral language.

Arabic is also a central component of Islamic education in Indonesia. Pesantren students often receive intensive instruction in classical Arabic, although proficiency levels vary widely. In addition, modern Islamic universities have introduced Arabic-medium programs in theology and law (Azra 2004, 1-8). Outside formal education, Arabic influences youth culture through the growing popularity of Islamic YouTube channels, *nasheed* music, and *dakwah* influencers, many of whom are peppering their speech with Arabic terms to signal religiosity and belonging to a transnational *ummah* (Azra 2004, 1-9).

Interestingly, while Arabic is not widely used in daily communication, it emerges prominently in public religious rituals, greetings, and online discourse. As in Malaysia, Arabic in Indonesia is both revered and stylized, with clear distinctions between academic Arabic, Quranic recitation, and casual borrowings in Pop-Islamic culture (Mhd Omar and Najid 2022, 171-180).

The study of Arabic speakers in Asia – particularly in India, Malaysia, and Indonesia – reveals a multifaceted and evolving linguistic landscape that defies simplistic categorizations. Arabic in these contexts is not merely a liturgical language confined to religious domains, nor is it the vernacular of large native-speaking communities. Rather, it operates as a layered resource – historical, symbolic, aspirational, and transnational.

Historically, Arabic entered South and Southeast Asia through trade, religious scholarship, and the diaspora networks of Hadhrami Arabs. Today, its presence is renewed and reshaped by educational mobility, Gulf migration, digital Islamic media, and transnational flows of people and ideas. The arrival of new Arabic-speaking migrants – students, teachers, diplomats – has created enclaves of spoken Arabic

use, often intersecting with existing Muslim communities that hold Arabic in high symbolic regard but lack daily fluency.

In all three case studies, Arabic plays a significant role in complex processes of identity negotiation, particularly among younger generations. Whether used as a marker of piety, modernity, or Arab ancestry, Arabic remains socially powerful, even when it is functionally limited. Its role as a semiotic and ideological tool – rather than a widespread means of communication – confirms the need for nuanced approaches to multilingualism, recognizing symbolic capital alongside linguistic competence.

Language policy frameworks in these countries often relegate Arabic to religious instruction, failing to capitalize on its potential as a medium of intercultural communication and global connection. Yet, Arabic persists through informal learning, popular culture, and the strategic agency of individuals who adopt it to position themselves within wider Muslim networks.

In conclusion, Arabic in Asia should not be viewed as a marginal or foreign import, but as a living thread woven into the region's historical and contemporary fabric. Understanding its place in multilingual and multicultural societies such as India, Malaysia, and Indonesia not only challenges dominant narratives in Arabic sociolinguistics but also opens new pathways for studying how language, identity, and mobility intersect in the Global South.

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