The life and works of Munsyi Abdullah
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Objective

Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, well known as Munsyi Abdullah is widely regarded as father/pioneer of modern Malay Literature. The primary motive of this article is to elucidate that Munsyi Abdullah was closely related to Tamil ethnic group and a Tamil Muslim of Arabian descendent. The secondary motive of this article is to explain his life and contribution to the Malay literary world.

Primary sources

The ‘Story of Abdullah’, known as Hikayat Abdullah has served as the primary source for producing this article (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 1974). This text is basically an autobiography of Munsyi Abdullah. However this text does not have much information about his early history. This leads to various interpretation and speculation about his life. However, he has written clearly about his acquaintances in his life from the perspective of a journalist.

Next, his story entitled, the tale of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi’s voyage from Singapore to Kelantan, known as Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi dari Singapura ke Kelantan (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 1967) is also widely used for writing this article. This story of voyage records Munsyi Abdullah’s travel experience from Singapore to the state of Kelantan, Malaysia. This literature clearly portrays the Malay Sultans, as well as the way they ruled the country and also the life style of the Malays at that time.

His journey to Kelantan was on 1838. He went there as a representative of the Chinese and European traders. At that the state of Kelantan was experiencing a lot of power struggle and internal political conflict. Thus, he had a chance to meet the Sultan of Kelantan to ensure that the Chinese and European’s business were not affected by the conflict (Coope.A.E, 1967, X). Apart from these two main sources, academic essays written by scholars about Munsyi Abdullah were also used as resources for this article.
The descendants of Munysi Abdullah

Munysi Abdullah was born in Malacca on 1796. His contribution to Malay literature is beyond measures. Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, a scholar has stated in her book that, Munysi Abdullah’s ideas in his literary works from 19th century brought a tremendous impact in the 20th century Malay literature (Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, 1997, 157). Thus, none of the Malay literary scholars have failed to refer Munysi Abdullah’s literary works. Even if there are, they will not be accepted as a true Malay scholar at that time.

His grandfather, Syeikh Abdul Kadir is of Usmani, Arab origin. He migrated from Yemen to Nagur (Nagoor), Tamil Nadu and lived there till end of his life. A.Hill, the scholar who translated the *Hikayat Abdullah*, is of the opinion that the term ‘Nagur’ originated from the word, ‘Nagar’. According to him, Nagar is a place in Mysore. He was probably unaware that Nagoor, (sometimes spelled Nagore) which is highly populated by Muslims, is a town in the Nagapattinam District, Tamil Nadu, India. It is located approximately 16 km south of Karaikal and 4 km north of Nagapattinam. A prominent five-acre Dargah (Muslim shrine) dedicated to the 16th century saint Nagore Andavar (literally means,”the Lord of Nagore”), also popularly called Meeran Sahib or Qadir Wali is located there, and serves as a pilgrim center (http://www.nagoredargah.com/about_dargah.html, referred on 3/5/2011). Besides, the word ‘Nagar’ is a Tamil form of a Sanskrit word which means a town or a residential area within a town (*Kriya*, 1992, 599). Furthermore Munysi Abdullah himself has mentioned that his father had a good command in the language of the Hindus, that’s Tamil. Apart from that he is also said to have recorded his business account in Tamil. This clears many doubts and confirms the fact that Syeikh Abdul Kadir, lived in Nagoor, Tamil Nadu and not in Mysore as assumed by A.H.Hill.

He taught Arabic language and Islamic religion to the Nagoor Tamils. Later, he got married to a Tamil woman from Nagoor. They had four kids, named as Muhammad Ibrahim, Muhammad Disa, Nur Muhammad and Zainal Abidin (Abdulla bin Abdul Kadir Munysi, 1974,2).

Following their father’s foot steps, the children too had a lot of interest in exploring various parts of world. After the death of the father, the children migrated to different countries. Among them, Muhammad Ibrahim migrated to Malacca. There, he married a Tamil Muslim
women nick named as Peria Achi / Paryaci. The term ‘Achi’ is commonly used by Tamils to address a lady of higher status in the society. According to Kamus Dewan the term, ‘Aci’ is used to address an elder Indian woman. It further confirms that this term is derived from Tamil language (Kamus Dewan, Edisi 3, 2000, 4). Till today this term is commonly used by Malays to address elder Indian woman. The Meanwhile ‘peria’ refers to the elder or the superior (Kriya, 1992, 766). As such the name Peria Achi may not have been the original name of the person. She is the daughter of a ulama (Islamic religious teacher), Syeikh Mira Lebai. They had a son and he was named after his grand father, Syeikh Abdul Kadir (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 1974, 2 ). It is rather interesting to note that it has always been a culture for Tamils to name the children after their grandparents. This shows that this family has maintain the cultural practices of their forefathers.

Syeikh Abdul Kadir also married a Tamil woman. They had two children, named as Muhammad Ali and Syarifah. He was appointed as ‘Khatib’ at a village called ‘Lobok Kepong’. Later, he was transferred to Sungai Baharu (Ibid, 3).

Due to some problems he divorced his first wife and came to Malacca where most of his relatives lived. His relatives arranged a marriage for him and he got married to a Tamil Muslim woman called Salma. Salma’s mother was a Hindu from Kedah, who later migrated to Malacca and converted to Islam. This couple had a son named, Munsyi Abdullah (Ibid, 4).

Some are of the opinion that Munsyi Abdullah’s mother, Salma is a Malay mix (Coope.A.E, 1967, X & Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 1974, 8). Unfotunately, there is no sufficient evidence to support this idea. Many of Munsyi Abdullah’s family members seem to have died in early age. Abdullah’s four elder brothers also died in infancy. Abdullah was the fifth son who suffered a severe attack of dysentery, but he is also the first to have survived (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 1974, 8).

Munshi Abdullah’s birth itself was a miraculous one, which must be stated here. After loosing four children, Abdullah’s mother Salma met a spiritual man, called Habib Abdullah. Upon knowing the reason behind Salmah’s sadness, he blessed the couple that with the blessings of Allah, the almighty, they will have a child. He told them to name the child after him, Abdullah. As said, soon a baby boy was born and they named the child as Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (Coope.A.E, 1967, X & Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 1974, 10-11).
The Family Tree of Munsyi Abdullah

Syeikh Abdul Kadir

Tamil woman from Nagoor

Muhammad Ibrahim
Muhammad Disa
Nur Muhammad
Zainal Abidin

Syeikh Abdul Kadir

Tamil Muslim women
Peria Achi / Paryaci

Tamil Muslim women

Salma
(Tamil Muslim woman)

Muhammad Ali
Syarifah
Munsyi Abdullah

Note

Male
Female

Direct Relation
Being the precious child, Abdullah’s mother never let him out or away from home. Thus, Munsyi Abdullah had no choice but stayed home and scribbled most of the time. Eventually, he acquired the ability to write very well at a very tender age (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 1974, 14). Even though Munsyi Abdullah’s grandfather is an Arabian; both his mother grandmother are Tamils. Furthermore, Munsyi Abdullah himself married a Tamil woman. Thus, there is no doubt that he has the consanguinity and Tamil blood ties from both father and mother.

For this reason many people from his era regarded him as Tamil. For example, in 1840 an English scholar called J. T. Thompson who well acquainted to Munsyi Abdullah has written about his personal appearance as follow:

“In Physiognomy he was a Tamilian of Southern Hindustan; slightly bent forward, sphere, energetic; bronze in complexion, oval faced, high nosed, one eye squinting outwards a little. He dressed icheen seluar, checked sarong, printed baju, square skull cap and sandals” (Thomson J.T, 1874, 5 & Hill A.H, 1970).

From this it is proven that Munsyi Abdullah looked like a Tamilian or Tamil Muslim. From the statement above it is understood that he wore the Malacca Tamil Muslim’s attire, which was adopted from the local Malay tradition.

**Munsyi Abdullah - A Malay**

There are still contradictions among the Malay scholars whether to accept Munsyi Abdullah as being a Malay or not. On the other hand, he did not even identify himself as a Malay or otherwise, in his writings. This has mounted various opinions and perceptions about him and his writings. One of it is that, his writings seem to insult the Malays because he himself is not one (Siti Hawa Haji Salleh. 1997, 158-161 & Traill, H.F.O’B. 1979, 69-70).

First of all, to analyze theses perception, we need to understand the status of Malay according to the Federal Constitution.

“Malay means a person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay customs and….”
Based on above, The Malaysian Federal Constitutions (Perlembagaan Persekutuan, 1970, Bahagian 12: Perkara 160, 183) describes a Malay must be a Muslim, who follows the lifestyle of Malays and speaks the Malay language as well as practices its tradition in daily life, including the Malays attire.

No doubt Munsyi Abdullah is a Muslim. J. T. Thompson’s notes elucidate that Munsyi Abdullah wore long pants, sarong, shirt, taqiyah and sandals. Furthermore, he describes Munsyi Abdullah as below.

“He had the vigor and pride of the Arab, the perseverance and subtlety of the Hindoo - in language and national sympathy only was he a Malay”
(Thomson, J.T. 1874, 5).

This clearly shows the fact that Munsyi Abdullah spoke the Malay language and had a lot of concern towards the nation. Based on the interpretation of the Malaysian Federal Constitution he qualifies himself as Malay.

**Family of Munsyi Abdullah**

Munsyi Abdullah had a late marriage. Unfortunately in the year of 1840, his wife passed away during a child birth. To add to the misery his daughter too died after a few years (Coope.A.E, 1967, X).

Anyhow, Che Zainal Abidin a Malay scholar who is better known as Za’ba has recorded some details of two of Munsyi Abdullah’s sons. According to him he elder son named Muhammad Ibrahim, while the younger is Che Khalid. Both of them are said to have served for the Johore government. It is also mentioned that Za’ba has met the elder son Muhammad Ibrahim before 1916, but never had a chance to meet the younger one.

According to his note, Munsyi Abdullah’s son Muhammad Ibrahim had the chance to accompany Sultan Abu Bakar (the son of Temenggong Ibrahim), to Europe. Like his father, Muhammad Ibrahim had excellent writing abilities. He is said to have served as an interpreter during a meeting between Singapore governor Sir Andrew Clarke and the Sultan of Perak. He wrote about this experience in his book entitled, *the voyage of Ibrahim Munsyi*. Za’ba claims that
he had a copy of this book. Unfortunately someone who borrowed the book did not return it to him (Coope, A.E. 1967, XVII-XVIII). Some details of this work is also to be found in an article written by Amin Sweeney and N.Philips (Sweeney.A & Philips.N, 1975, XXII-XXIII). According to Za’ba, both Munysi Abdullah’s sons did not have any son, therefore this lineage ended (Coope, A.E. 1967, XVII-XVIII).

**Education**

Being born in a family with strong Islamic believes and having a grandmother who worked as an Islamic teacher, it is not surprising to see Munysi Abdullah being well versed in Islamic religion (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munysi, 1974, 2-6 & Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, 1997, 160). His grandfather Syeikh Mira Lebai was also an Islamic teacher who had excellent knowledge in Islam. It is also stated that both his grand parents were teaching Al - Quran to the Indian / Tamil Muslim kids in Malacca (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munysi, 1974, 26-30).

Munysi Abdullah’s father was a very strict disciplinarian who raised his children very carefully. Munysi Abdullah learnt Arabic Tamil and Malay language from his father. Later on, he also had an opportunity to learn Hindi from the Indian military personnel who were sent to Malacca. They are the ones who gave the title ‘Munsyi’, which means a linguist. He had the privilege of having a title of such as a part of his name. Apart from that, he learnt Chinese language from a Chinese tutor called Siang-Sing (Ibid 30-32 & 127-128).

In 1815, for the first time Munysi Abdullah had a chance of being acquainted with missionary Europeans who came to Malacca. He learnt English from them and in return he taught Malay to them. In his book, he has stated his experience of teaching and learning the Malay language as ‘the Malays are the worst teachers and the Europeans are worst students’ (Coope.A.E, 1967, X & Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munysi, 1974, 118-121).

Lord Minto, the governor general of India, visited Malacca in 1818. During his visit, he met Stamford Raffles’s staff, including Munysi Abdullah. He was rather impressed with the fact that Munysi Abdullah could speak fluently in Hindi language. He was surprised and Munysi Abdullah for his proficiency in Hindi language (Coope.A.E, 1967, XIII & Abdullah bin Abdul
Kadir Munsyi, 1974, 118-121). It is evident that Munsyi Abdullah is a multi-linguist who had a deep knowledge in six languages such as Tamil, Arabic, Malay, Hindi, Chinese and English.

**Munsyi Abdullah’s Career**

Like his father, Munsyi had a good knowledge in Islam and the Malay language. He joined his uncle Ismail Lebai to work with Stamford Raffles. Their main task was to copy the classical Malay manuscripts. It paved the way to his literary career.

Raffles founded Singapore in 1819. Thus, Munsyi Abdullah continued working for him in Singapore. At the beginning he worked as a clerk for Raffles and later he was more like a personal secretary for him. They had a wonderful relationship (Coope.A.E, 1967, X & Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 1974, 72-75 & 116-117).

After the departure of Raffles to England, doing translation works for the missionaries became the prime job for Munsyi Abdullah. During this time he had to translate gospels and missionary books, including Bible. He played a significant role in translating the school books for missionary schools (Coope.A.E, 1967, XI).

During this time he became very close to the Christian missionaries. He even taught the Malay language for some of them such as C.H.Thomson and William Milner. He was regarded as a great Malay teacher among the missionaries. The new missionaries from England preferred to have him as their Malay teacher(Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, 1997, 160-161).

**The Malays’ reaction**

The close association with the missionaries created a lot of hatred and suspicion about Munsyi Abdullah among the Malays. They even nick named him as ‘Paderi Abdullah’, which means ‘Priest Abdullah’ (Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, 1997, 160-161 & Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 1974, 151-153). The Malays could not except the fact that Munsyi Abdullah assisting in translating the Bible. However, the Christian missionaries praised him to be an open minded and

On the other hand, it is said that Munsyi Abdullah corrected false notions about Islam found in the missionary’s work which he translated. For this reason, some of the Christian missionaries were upset and even furious towards him. One of them was Thomas Beington, a priest from Penang. Beington accused, Munsyi Abdullah of causing obstruction to convert the Malays into Christianity. He further claimed that Munsyi Abdullah has done some amendments while translating the New Testament. Beington even portrayed Munsyi Abdullah as, ‘…..an artful cunning Mahomettan’. In his book Hikayat Abdullah, Munsyi Abdullah claims that he his least affected by the negative picture painted against him both by some Muslims and Christian (Hanapi Dollah. 1985, 9 & Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, 1997, 161-162).

Translation works of Munsyi Abdullah

In 1835, Inter racial Chamber of Commerce was formed in Singapore. Munsyi Abdullah translated the rules and regulations of the chamber, but the chamber did not function as planned (Coope.A.E, 1967, XI). There is reference that, he has even translated a few Tamil books into Malay language. But there were no further details about it. However in 1838, he translated the story of Pancha Tantira written in Tamil into Malay language. This book entitled, Hikayat Panca Tanderan is available until now.

In 1830, he translated a classical Malay text entitled, Sejarah Melayu which was written in Jawi script into romanized Malay script. This book is about the Malacca Sultanate. This book is available in various recentions. One of the recentions was translated into Tamil language by the late Dr. Rama Subbaiah from the Department of Indian Studies, University of Malaya. It is entitled, Malaakka Mannargal Varalaaru(1968).

In 1837, he translated a book entitled, ‘Kitab Adat Segala Raja-Raja Melayu Dalam Segala Negeri’ (Customs of All the Malay Rulers in All States) from Jawi script into romanized Malay script. This book elaborates the Common Customs for all Malay Rulers. However, most of the customs are not followed by the rulers these days (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, 1974, VIII-IX).
Literary works of Munsyi Abdullah

Munsyi Abdullah’s first own literary work was done in 1830. This book is entitled, *Syair Singapura Terbakar*. The book includes details about the conflagration in Singapore and related matters. Next, in 1838 he wrote a book entitled, *Da’wail Kulub*. The famous book entitled, *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah Bin Abdul Kadir Munshi dari Singapura ke Kelantan* was also written in the same year. This book can be classified as a book of history, an autobiography and a story of voyage. Apart from this, the other famous work of Munsyi Abdullah is the *Hikayat Abdullah*, which was written in 1849. This book clearly describes the autobiography of Munsyi Abdullah, his experiences in life and his thoughts about the Malay community. Even though some would not accept it as a historical literature but there is no doubt that this work states a lot of historical events.


Language style (Malay)

It is true that classical language style can be found in his writings. Although, words such as ‘Maka’, ‘Syahdan’ had an impact in his works but they did not affect his the Malay writing style. The impact of colloquial style of the Malay language is hard to find in his literary works. However the above mentioned style of language can be found in his work whenever the is a situation where some foreign characters (especially English man) converse in Malay language. Otherwise, Munsyi Abdullah uses an appropriate language throughout his work (Coope.A.E, 1967, XV).
In general his writings portrays an excellent usage of the modern Malay language. This was the reason way his writings attracted the Malay literary scholars of the 20th century (Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, 1997, 157-158).

Munshi Abdullah’s View on Community

Munsyi Abdullah has criticized the life style Malay Rulers. Such critiques and condemnations are no new to the Malay world. The classical Malay text such as Sejarah Melayu and Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai too has this element. But it was done indirectly, in a polite way and subtlety (Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, 1997, 163-165).

A researcher called Trail believed that, Munsyi Abdullah criticized the rulers not as a Malay but as a Muslim who is passionate about the Malay language. However, this scholar was unaware that generally the Malays believed Munsyi Abdullah is Malay. Furthermore, it must be noticed here that the term Malays and Muslims are used as synonyms in Malaysia (Sweeney.A, 1987, 53).

He commonly criticized the Malay Rulers of practicing political injustice, repression, consuming opium and wasting time in cock fights. Hence, the Malays started disliking him. They insulted Munsyi Abdullah because they thought he is a henchman of British and an enemy of the Malays. In reality, Munsyi Abdullah has always shown himself as an assertive critique, whenever he felt discontent about some thing. He even criticized Governor Crawford, for not controlling the activities of a Chinese gangster group called, the Heaven and Earth Society (Coope.A.E, 1967, XVI-XVII)

Actually, Munsyi Abdullah simply wanted to bring about some awareness among the Malays concerning their language. He was mainly criticizing the Malays who fail to learn their mother tongue. He questioned the Malays, if they do not learn their own language how could they possibly learn the others. He often used satire approach to deliver his condemnations. In a way, Munsyi Abdullah merely wanted to bring about a revolution among the Malays (Ibid XVII).
Shaharuddin Maaruf, a Malay scholar did a thorough research on Munysi Abdullah’s condemnations. He is of the opinion that, Munysi Abdullah’s allegations were based on Islamic teachings for the goodness and development of Malays (Shaharuddin Maaruf, 1988, 24). The above statement is justified from one of the advises given by Munysi Abdullah to Tengku Temena. The advice followed below:-

“Dengarlah, Tengku, akan kebajikan candu itu. Pertama-tamanya iaitu haram dalam agama Islam; dan kedua membinasakan badan; dan ketiga, menghabiskan wang; dan keempat, mendatangkan malas... mengapa orang putih yang baik-baik dan kaya-kaya tiada makan? Bukankah dari negerinya datang itu?... dalam kitab dan qur’an sudah tentu haramnya itu, melainkan iblis sahaja yang suka akan segala perkara yang demikian itu”. (Kassim Ahmad, 1981, XII).

The last days of Munysi Abdullah

In 1854, Munysi Abdullah travelled to Jeddah by Arabian trading vessel to perform his pilgrimage. The vessel sailed to Sri Lanka and South India before reaching Jeddah. He wrote a book entitled, the tale of Abdullah Munysi’s voyage to Jeddah and he stated the details of the journey in that book. Unfortunately, he passed away before completing the book (Coope, A.E. 1967, XI). Munysi shared his happiness and joy about reaching Jeddah in this book in the form of a poem, these were some of his last few lines in his book.

It is known whether he passed away in Jeddah after or during his pilgrimage in Mecca. His uncompleted book was brought by his friend to Singapore. Later, it was published (Ibid). Even though Munysi Abdullah lived only for 58 years but his contribution remain valuable until now.

Conclusion

Munysi Abdullah was a Tamil Muslim, who had a close relation with Tamil ethnic group; he had a good knowledge of Tamil language and even married a Tamil woman. His contribution
in translations especially from other languages to Malay was really immeasurable. Most importantly, he remained as a Muslim even though he has translated many missionary books including their gospels and Bible.

Munseyi Abdullah’s literary works proclaimed his understanding and attachment to Islam. He elucidates the right teachings of Islam to the Malays. He was regarded as the ‘Father of Modern Malay Literature’ for his contribution in Malay language and literature. Munseyi Abdullah’s ancestors were Islamic religious teachers. Following the path, he also continued the same tradition. In this context, it would be good to note that, there is a theory that advocates that Indian Muslims were responsible to spread the Islamic religion in the Malay Archipelago. In conclusion, the Tamils particularly the Tamil Muslims can be proud of the fact that the person who bore such a genius (Munseyi Abdullah) is a Tamil woman.

**Bibliography**


8) http://www.nagoredargah.com/about_dargah.html


