

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### Sayid Muhammad Al-Sagoff In Johore- Ottoman Sovereign Relations

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#### ABSTRACT

This article discusses a renowned figure, Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff from the al-Sagoff family lineage. The arrival of the Arab community from Hadramaut to the Malay World led to a relationship between them and the local society. Among the Arab community are the families of al-Sagoff, al-Junaid and al-Kaff who made religious, economic and administrative contributions to the local society. The purpose of this article is to study the influence Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff had on the relations between Johore and the Ottoman sovereign. He was one of the wealthy and famous Arab merchants who inherited his family wealth and owned various businesses based in Singapore. Al-Sagoff was once appointed as Consul for the Ottoman sovereign in Singapore and was representative for the Malay population to apply for assistance from the Ottoman sovereign. Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff also had a close relationship with Sultan Abu Bakar of Johore. The whole of this research uses a qualitative approach with method of historical study. The conclusion is that Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff had an influence on and contributed to relations between and Johore and Ottoman Sovereign in strengthening their respective positions and influence.

#### **Key words:**

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#### **Introduction**

Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff was one of the grandsons of Sayid Abdul Rahman al-Sagoff, a merchant who came from Hadramaut to Singapore in the year 1824. Sayid Abdul Rahman set up a firm *Alsagoff and Company* in the year 1848 to manage a large part of the Straits Settlements exports such as timber, rubber, sago, coconut, cocoa and coffee to Arab and European countries. This firm also traded in local goods. He also owned cargo ships, plantations, motor companies, wood factories and his firm became one of the biggest companies in Singapore at that time (Saadiah, 1979; Syed Mohsen, 1963 ; Wright, 1908 ; Song, 1967 ; Freitag, 2002). Alsagoff and Company also carried out shipping activities from Singapore to Batu Pahat and from Singapore to Muar and Malacca.

Sayid Abdul Rahman also owned cargo ships to freight goods for import and export. He was a respected figure in the community. After his demise, his business was continued by his son, Sayid Ahmad who married Raja Siti, daughter of Haji Fatima, a wealthy woman from Sulawesi. This marriage expanded his business between Singapore and Sulawesi and increased the wealth of the al-Sagoff family (Wright, 1908). Sayid Ahmad who inherited the wealth of his father and his mother-in-law strengthened the position of the al-Sagoff family and became very wealthy owning big businesses, steamships and cruise ships. Sayid Ahmad died in Singapore in the year 1875 and his whole wealth was inherited by his son, Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff (Saadiah, 1979 ; Roff, 1964 ; C.O 273/126).

Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff was trained to continue his father's and grandfather's tradition. He owned land and businesses in Johore and Pahang. Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff also had relations with regional leaders such as the Sultan of Siak, Sultan of Langkat, Sultan of Pontianak and the Governor of the Straits Settlements. He was a figure who frequently contributed to the society, particularly in Singapore. Among his good works was the founding of SMA Wakaf Funds and Muslim Trust Fund Association. In addition, Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff also donated to the Alsagoff Arab School, Outdoor Dispensary and The Muslim Orphanage in Singapore (Syed Mohsen, 1963).

As a prominent figure with a big role in the development of the Muslim community, Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff also sent aid to the society of Aceh for their resistance against the colonial Dutch. The war in Aceh was supported by the Arab descendants in Singapore. They did not hesitate to give aid because most of the Arab descendants in Singapore were from the millionaire class. As much as \$100,000 was collected for the Aceh

cause to fight the Dutch. The al-Sagoff family raised the funds and the Haji Fatimah Mosque became the centre for the movement where people donated. Anthony Reid in his writings explained the role played by Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff:

*“All the most fanatical musliman attended this mosque, heard weekly report on Atjeh affairs from one of the agents of Sayyid Muhammad al-Sagoff and offered prayers for the success of Atjehness arms”* (Reid, 1994).

*Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff and the Johore Government:*

The al-Sagoff family who first set foot in Singapore, that is, Sayid Abdul Rahman and Sayid Ahmad apparently focused on business in Singapore only and did not expand their influence to Johore. In the year 1858, the Johore government's centre of administration shifted from Teluk Belanga in Singapore to Johor Bharu. However, the royal family remained in Singapore until the year 1889. It was at this time that Sultan Abu Bakar had good relations with Arab merchants in Singapore, particularly Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff, who was the wealthiest and most prominent merchant in Singapore.

There were a few Arab families in Singapore, namely al-Kaff, al-Juneid and al-Sagoff. In contrast to the others, al-Sagoff family had an interest in Johore. How his good relationship with the Sultan began could not be ascertained, however, the frequency of him accompanying Sultan Abu Bakar on his overseas trips justified the relationship between them. As a consequence of this relationship, Sultan Abu Bakar sent Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff together with his Minister, Datuk Menteri Johor to Pahang in the year 1887 to deal with the issue of land concessions and business there (Saadiah, 1979).

Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff was so close to Sultan Abu Bakar of Johore, so much so that he was entrusted to help and manage the Sultan's financial affairs and act as his lender whenever the Sultan made his frequent trips to Europe. Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff was conferred a medal of honour for royalty (Pingat Darjah Kerabat Johor) in the year 1886. This medal was issued for the first time in 1886 and Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff was a recipient, even though in all the six lists for the conferment, he was the only non-royalty to receive the medal meant for royalty only. This shows the high appreciation given to Sayyid Muhammad al-Sagoff by the Johore government (Saadiah, 1979).

As a person who was close to the Sultan and had served him well, Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff was granted a land concession at Kukub in the year 1878. The land concession was 60,000 acres in area and was located in South-Western. Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff later named it Constantinople Estate (G.A 253/24). Granting of land concessions to persons of Arabic descent had begun since the rule of Sultan Hussein Shah (1819-1835) in Singapore. In the year 1825, Sultan Hussein Shah appointed his representative Sayid Aqil in Pulau Kerimun which covered the areas of Ungar, Buru and Sugi for mining activity. Chinese and Malays worked in those tin mines (Matheson, 1982).

A similar thing happened with Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff. He applied to Sultan Abu Bakar for a grant of agricultural land. His application was approved by Sultan Abu Bakar who allowed Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff himself to choose the location of the land as he desired. Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff who lived in Singapore then started sailing to Johore towards the western direction and not to eastern Johore, as land in the east was already explored by a wealthy Chinese trader named Wong Ah Fook. Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff went to Kukub which was located in South-Western Johore and submitted his application to Datuk Penggawa Barat, Datuk Abdul Samad bin Ibrahim. In the year 1878, Sultan Abu Bakar consented to grant the land concession to Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff (Saadiah, 1979).

*Management of Kukub Land Concession by Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff:*

Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff made efforts to develop Kukub as an agricultural land, by planting crops such as gambier, pepper, betel, sago and coconut. Another opinion stated that he planted rubber, sago, coconut, coffee, pineapple and cocoa (Syed Mohsen, 1963). At the management level, Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff operated the Kukub land concession from Singapore as he was still residing in Bukit Tinggi Singapore, though he visited Kukub from time to time. Sayid Muhammad continued to reside in Singapore because he had to operate his family firm *Alsagoff and Company*, besides it being easier to manage business in Singapore, an important regional trade centre.

With agricultural activity, Kukub played its role as a supplier of agricultural products to Singapore. Shortage of gambier and pepper in Singapore led the Chinese to plant these in Johore. In the year 1895, Johore had 3,760 acres planted with coffee, pepper and gambier. Thus, the Kukub land concession supplied agricultural products to Singapore, when 4,000 acres of land were planted with sago and cocoa (Makepeace, 1921). In addition to agriculture, Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff also expanded his efforts by exporting the agricultural products to Arab countries and Europe. Among these exported products were rubber, sago, cocoa, coffee, coconut and pineapple. (Wright, 1908).

His family business, Alsagoff and Company managed and marketed agricultural produce from the Kukub land concession. This firm used its own ships to transport the agricultural produce to be marketed in Singapore and internationally. Besides, sea transport was easier to connect to Singapore as there were several rivers around the land concession such as Pontian Besar River, Pontian Kecil River, Permas River, Air Masin River and Jeram Batu River. According to the 1878 letter of agreement for the Kukub Land Concession, the government would build roads at the concession river to facilitate Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff in loading and transporting the agricultural produce. Sayid Muhammad was required to merely state navigational information to the Johore government (Sohaimi, 1997).

*Ottoman Sovereign Consul in Singapore: Manifestation of Johore - Ottoman Sovereign Relations:*

Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff was widely experienced and frequently visited Europe and Jeddah on business trips. And the Ottoman Sovereign had confidence in him so that he was appointed Ottoman consul representative in Singapore in the 1880's (Reid, 1967). Earlier on, the British voiced its concern should Muhammad al-Sagoff be appointed as the Ottoman Turkish Consul in Singapore. Based on British records, he had visited Europe and gone to Istanbul to meet Sultan Abdul Hamid II to lobby for candidacy and support as Consul in Singapore (C.O 273/126).

The British also disputed the necessity for such a position because the Ottomans did not have any commercial interest in this region, especially in Singapore. In addition, the number of Ottoman subjects in Singapore was negligible. Sayid Mohammad al-Sagoff was also seen as a highly-esteemed and pious Muslim. Thus, the British was uneasy with this position as he had the potential to influence public opinion, especially in the management of pilgrimage (Haj). It was feared that he might use his close position with the Ottoman and present a threat as well as create bigger problems (Reid, 1967).

A British officer by the name of R.H Maxwell knew Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff as someone with liberal views and able to socialise freely with Europeans. However, he alleged that the management of *Alsagoff Singapore Steamship and Co.* contributed to the congestion of pilgrims at Jeddah (Gobee & Ariaanse, 1994). Maxwell was of the opinion that the British should be more sensitive towards this problem and on the ground that there was no interest to justify the position of Ottoman Consul in Singapore, he objected to the said appointment (C.O 273/126).

The British were clearly worried about individuals such as Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff who had a close relationship with the Ottoman, more so that he might be appointed as Consul and was able to wield his influence on the Malay community. In the year 1893, Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff accompanied Sultan Abu Bakar of Johore to the Ottoman Sovereign in Istanbul. Sultan Abdul Hamid II conferred the Ottoman medal of highest degree to Sultan Abu Bakar and medal of second degree to Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff (C.O 273/126). The background of Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff showed that he was a renowned figure, both regionally and internationally. He had also escorted Sultan Abu Bakar to the Ottoman Sovereign at Istanbul in the years 1879 and 1893.

In addition, Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff personally travelled to Istanbul in the year 1884, to garner support from Sultan Abdul Hamid II for the position of Ottoman Consul in Singapore. In the year 1892, representative of the Aceh government, Sayid Dzin transmitted a letter to ship captain Ertogroul and Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff to be delivered to the Ottoman Sovereignty appealing for help from the Ottoman Sovereignty for Aceh's resistance to Dutch occupation. Aceh was confident that al-Sagoff possessed the capacity to represent Aceh in meeting the Ottoman Sultan. The British admitted the close relationship between Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff and the Ottoman Sovereign and was monitoring his moves, particularly in his efforts to be the Sovereignty's Consul in Singapore (Reid, 1967; C.O 273/126).

Alsagoff Singapore Steamship and Co. owned by Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff in Singapore operated the transporting of pilgrims from the Malay World to Mecca. In the year 1874, this firm had managed to transport 3476 pilgrims to Mecca, 2250 of whom were from the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) (Saadiyah, 1979; Sohaimi Esa, 1997; Freitag, 2003). Contract-tickets were introduced to the pilgrims as loans for the ship fare. However, the condition for the loan was to sign an agreement to choose to repay the loan or to work in the Kukub plantation. A total of 200 pilgrims signed the agreement in the year 1889 (Wright, 1908; M. Dien Majid, 2001).

Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff's business in operating the pilgrimage transport to Mecca caught the attention of the Ottoman Sovereignty which was responsible for administration of Mecca and Medina. Ottoman Sovereignty suggested that al-Sagoff firm improve its regulations for the pilgrims. The agreement in the contract-tickets introduced was required to be altered and to be stipulated clearly in English and Malay so that the pilgrims could understand the contractual obligations. The contract was also to stipulate that the pilgrims indebted to the firm were not allowed to work outside the Kukub plantations. (M. Dien Majid, 2001).

The British also requested conditions in the al-Sagoff *contract-tickets* introduced to be improved. (M. Dien Majid, 2008). This recommendation was the consequence of objections by the pilgrims from Singapore to the British Consul in Jeddah. They were dissatisfied with the high charges imposed for the fare from Mecca to

Jeddah. The shipping company involved had limited bookings fewer than that prescribed. This was in contradiction of stipulations ordered by the Ottoma Sultan to prohibit bookings in Mecca and allow option to choose (Rush, 1993). The involvement of al-Sagoff in transporting pilgrims to Mecca indirectly gave the opportunity for interaction between him and the Ottoman administration.

The Kukub plantations mentioned above refers to the concession at Kukub granted by Sultan Abu Bakar in the year 1878 to al-Sagoff. The surface area of the land concession was 60,000 acres located in South-western Johor. Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff was also granted the right by Sultan Abu Bakar to issue his own currency in the 1870's. This currency was for use only in the Kukub land concession. It comprised of \$2.00, \$1.00, 50 cents and 25 cents. Printed on it were the words Constantinople Estate in Malay, Tamil and Chinese on the left, right, up and down. These writings showed that this currency was used by various races. In the middle was printed in Jawi the words "Dengan kebenaran Duli Yang Maha Mulia Maharaja Johor" (By consent of His Royal Highness the Maharaja of Johore) and "Pemberian Tunai Kepada kuli-kuli yang membawa not ini" (Cash Disbursement for Coolies who bear this note). Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff's signature and official seal were on this currency (Saadiah 1979).

As a result of the imprint Constantinople Estate on the currency, a comparison was made between the currency issued by Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff and that issued by the Turkish Ottoman Sovereignty. This study examined the design of the Turkish currency issued in the 1880's, during the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II with the design in the same period of the currency issued by Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff at Kukub. On examination, the researcher finds that there is a marked similarity between the two currencies, in terms of the word 'Constantinople' (in Roman letters) (Saadiah 1978/1979; Pamuk, 2001). The currencies issued during the rule of Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) and Sultan Abdul Majid II (1839-1861), also bear the imprint قسطنطينية (*Qistintiyah*) or Constantinople (Pamuk, 2001; Cezar, 2005). Although Ottoman Turkish influence is not clearly ascertained to be seen in the currency issued at Kukub, the equivalent values of the two currencies is an interesting discovery for this working paper, besides the relation between Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff and the Johore-Ottoman Sovereignty.

#### Conclusion:

Research shows that Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff had a strong influence on Johore and the Ottoman Sovereignty. Moreover, he was a renowned Arab merchant in Singapore and Johore. He also had a close relationship with Sultan Abu Bakar so much so that he was granted a land concession at Kukub in Johore. In addition, Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff was also close to the Ottoman Sovereign following his appointment as Ottoman Consul in Singapore as well as his role in transporting of Malay pilgrims to Mecca. Manifestation of this two-way relationship between the parties showed the significant role of Sayid Muhammad al-Sagoff.

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