

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MALAY SOCIETY IN PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL TIMES: THE IMPACT OF ISLAM ON MALAY EDUCATION

(Transformasi Masyarakat Melayu pada Zaman Prakolonial dan Kolonial: Dampak Islam terhadap Pendidikan Melayu)

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Abstract

This article discusses Islam as the fundamental means in the transformation of Malay society during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Historical analysis is employed to analyse the historical circumstances which influenced the continuity and changes taking place in Islamic education. The transformation of Malay society was shaped by Islam as a way of life. The main factors contributing to the process of transformation are literacy and education. According to history, the impact of knowledge and progressive values are only noticeable among the Malays after Islam had become the dominant religion in the Malay Archipelago in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. Though Islam had flourished as a religion, Islamic education did not reach the scale at which it could be labelled mass education until the late 19th century. This is due to the improvements made in Islamic institutions of learning as a result of the influence of modernity associated with a Western orientation. In this respect, it can be argued that a Western orientation helped to transform Islamic education into mass education, where literacy is concerned.

Keywords: transformation, Malays, Islam, education, pre-colonial

Abstrak

Makalah ini membincangkan situasi Islam sebagai asas kepada proses transformasi dalam masyarakat Melayu pada zaman prakolonial dan kolonial.

Analisis sejarah digunakan bagi menganalisis proses sejarah yang mencorakkan kesinambungan dan perubahan dalam pendidikan Islam pada zaman tersebut. Proses transformasi dalam masyarakat Melayu sebahagian besarnya dicorakkan oleh amalan Islam sebagai cara hidup. Faktor utama yang menyumbang kepada proses transformasi ialah literasi atau celik huruf dan pendidikan. Berdasarkan sejarah, masyarakat Melayu mula menunjukkan dampak yang ketara dalam ilmu pengetahuan dan nilai-nilai progresif setelah Islam menjadi agama massa dalam kalangan penduduk di kepulauan Melayu pada abad ke-15, 16 dan 17. Walaupun Islam berkembang pesat, pendidikan Islam masih belum berkembang dan hanya menjadi pendidikan massa dalam masyarakat Melayu pada akhir abad ke-19. Natijahnya, proses penambahbaikan terhadap institusi pendidikan Islam dilakukan berdasarkan penerapan nilai-nilai moden yang disesuaikan daripada orientasi Barat. Walau bagaimanapun, penerapan orientasi Barat ke dalam pendidikan Islam membawa perkembangan kepada tahap pendidikan massa, terutama dalam aspek literasi.

Kata kunci: transformasi, Melayu, Islam, pendidikan, prakolonial

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of all societies, including Malay society, is always associated with progress, reflecting a significant change in form, structure, nature and orientation from the circumstances in a particular time to a latter period. However, if the manifestation of changes is minor or not substantive, it can be considered to be merely a continuity, which is still better than stagnation. It is generally agreed that the main element in the process of transformation of Malay society during pre-colonial and colonial periods was Islam, which had been adopted by the Malays as a way of life. The conversion of a Malay ruler to Islam was a historical development that had a major impact on the transformation of Malay culture as a whole, as all his subjects would follow suit and convert to Islam as well. This resulted in changes in the society, laws and morals.

However, it can be argued that the manifestation of progress and transformation associated with Islam should not be limited to the general application of Islamic beliefs or Tauhid and Islamic practices. Instead, the more common criterion which reflects a more universal view is the transformation and progress in education among the Malays in general. Thus, this paper discusses the circumstances relating to Islam as the fundamental means in the process of transformation in Malay society during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. It analysis the historical circumstances that shaped aspects of continuity and change in Islamic education.

PRE-ISLAMIC MALAY CIVILIZATION

Civilization can be defined as an advanced state of cultural, intellectual and material development in human society marked by progress in the arts and sciences, the extensive use of writing, and the appearance of complex political and social institutions. It can be said that the Malays had achieved certain degree of civilization even in the seventh century. This is evident through the existence of the great Malay Empire of Srivijaya and its monarchical system of , its social structure of ruling class and subjects, and its governmental instruments such as chieftains, laws and so on (Tarling, 1992:173-76).

The existence of great and influential political entities in the region such as Srivijaya and Malacca is also a reflection of the advancement achieved by the Malays in seafaring activities. The Malays were undoubtedly accomplished seafarers and this is reflected in their confidence at sea. The geographical centrality of the region in eastern trade and navigation was of great significance. Many centuries before Europeans dared challenge the fierce Atlantic Ocean, the south Pacific and the Indian Ocean served Man; the Malay Archipelago was the central intersection of the sea routes. With this natural advantage, it brought the Malays opportunity to develop their seafaring skill for fishing. More significant was their involvement in trading activities which developed on the regional and international level. In fact, it is believed that as early as the seventh century, the Malays built ships capable of sailing to India. The expansion of trade throughout the region was utilized by the Malays to increase their political influence, especially under the Srivijaya and Majapahit empires in the ancient period (Andaya and Andaya, 1982:1-36).

The importance of the region in trade also reflected the significance of the Malays. The Malay language was recognized as a lingua franca throughout the Malay Archipelago in the seventh century. This is not merely a baseless claim as the Malay language is spoken by the inhabitants of the majority of the countries in Southeast Asia. This is because the majority of the native inhabitants of the region are descended from the Malayo-Polynesian or Austronesian family (Barnard, 2004: 56-75). Nevertheless, the Malay civilization has long been characterized by the importation and adaptation of ideas and institutions from outside. In the pre-colonial period, Malay traditional practices, orientation and values were closely associated with Indian and Islamic culture. In fact, the Malay language was also subjected to Indian and Arabic influences. With the exception of the English language, presumably, it can be argued that two-thirds of the vocabulary in the Malay language are derived from Sanskrit and Arabic. The assimilation of those languages into the Malay language was an evolutionary process. Such influences did not transform the Malay language into an Indian or Arabic language. Malay culture is not simply

the product of imported ideas. Nevertheless, enormous contributions came from outside the Malay world. An obvious indic influence on Malay culture can be seen in monarchy, religion, customs and the arts.

The extent and nature of the evolution of the arts, especially in sculpture and architecture, provide a wealth of tangible evidence. Except for inscriptions, there is no other indigenous written record to document the history of Indic influence. Wherever Indic culture penetrated, new art forms and techniques were introduced as an essential part of new religious faiths. This is reflected, for example, by the building of Borobudur temple in Java. Moreover, it is understood that the mysticism and magic of Indian religions appear to have been the chief attraction to these imported beliefs to the Malays whose culture was deeply steeped in animism. The Indian beliefs—Hinduism and Buddhism—offered a cosmic explanation of the universe and of man's place in it to supplant the patchwork of existing animist practices and beliefs (Tarling, 1992:304-22).

THE RISE AND SPREAD OF ISLAM

Although the Indic Influence had long been an integral mechanism and energized Malay society for more than a thousand years before Islam, Malay civilization is much indebted to the rise of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. Indian religions seemed to have transformed Malay animism. Nevertheless, the Indian religions had a limited effect on Malay society because they are less concerned with worldly affairs. The coming of Islam to the Malay Archipelago opened possibilities of greater ties with the outside world. Furthermore, from the Muslim point of view, moving from polytheism to monotheism is also regarded as an advancement in human civilization. Although there were skirmishes between the Muslims and the other side, the spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago was possibly one of the most peaceful process of mass conversion in the history of religion.

Islam offered a constructive mechanism to inspire Malay civilization in terms of worldly affairs, with Malay becoming the language of knowledge and intellectualism. This was realised in part through writings on Islamic religious affairs in the Malay language. The Malay religious writers adapted the Arabic alphabet to suit the Malay language. This Malay-Arabic writing script is known as Jawi. It has five additional letters for the sounds “ch”, “ng”, “p”, “g” and “ny” to accommodate the absence of those sounds in the Arabic alphabet. Such adaptation was necessary for the accurate spelling of Sanskrit terms in the Malay language containing the consonant g, such as “syurga” and “negara”. The only absent consonant in the Malay Jawi script related

to Sanskrit is “v” because this particular consonant is adapted as “w” in the Malay language, as can be seen in the words “dewa” (deva) and “nirwana” (nirvana).

After the introduction of the Jawi script, the Hindu epics derived from the *Ramayana and Mahabharata* were recorded in Jawi, examples being Malay classical texts such as *Hikayat Seri Rama*, *Hikayat Pendawa Lima* and *Hikayat Si Miskin*. Previously, the Hindu texts were only read by the Brahmins and were recited to audiences at the palace. It is believed that the emergence of these written texts coincided with the emergence of Malay texts related to Islam such as *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*, *Hikayat Ali Hanafiah*, *Hikayat Nabi Muhammad* and the like.

On the other hand, despite Malay civilization having adopted Islam, pre-Islamic elements continued to exist in Malay tradition. Islam in the Malay Archipelago was overshadowed by syncretism or the preservation of pre-Islamic practices in combination with Islamic practices, may not have been acceptable elsewhere in the Muslim world. The Malay rulers continued to wield the power of the Indian god-kings, as is still evident in the regalia and language of Malay courts. The Malays might express reverence for an assortment of spirits in any particular prayer or religious festival but end it with: ‘There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet’ (Hooker, 1988:131-59).

In the beginning, those Malays who were able to acquire literacy were closely associated with the ruling class, that is, with the Malay rulers in their palaces. Although literacy among the Malays was not widespread during the pre-colonial period, it was probably still greater than before the spread of Islam to the Malay Archipelago. Possibly, the use of the Malay language in a much more extensive way in writing, such as for conveying Islam, certainly increased its scope and increased literacy among members of Malay society. Under such circumstances, the learning and the teaching of Islam were no longer limited to any particular group in Malay society, in contrast to the pre-Islamic period, where the teaching of Hinduism was dominated by the Brahmins.

Islam, on the other hand, encourages members from all classes of society to be involved in the teaching of religion. Certainly, literacy is always the prime criteria for this purpose. This condition provided the opportunity for all members of society to acquire Islamic religious knowledge. Literacy among the Malays was inspired by the determination to be able to read the Qur’an even if they were not able to understand Arabic in the beginning. Subsequently, the Arabic alphabet was adapted for the writing of the Malay language, resulting in the creation of the Jawi script. This was to accommodate the Malay language to be extensively used as a medium for teaching and learning in Islamic studies by the Malays. Consequently, the teaching

of Islam in Southeast Asia, with the exception of Myanmar, was conducted in Malay, while Islamic texts were written in the Jawi script. Even today, the Malay language is used as the medium for Islamic religious studies, not only by the Malays but also the non-speakers in Southeast Asia such as in Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand (Ibrahim *et al.*, 1982:1-48).

The scope and the aspect of Malay Islamic religious writings in the 16th and 17th centuries CE display the advanced level of knowledge and thinking of the writers. These writings cover theology, fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), sufism and so on. The writings on theology and sufism display complex knowledge because they also adopt a philosophical approach. They also prove that the Malays began to be exposed to complex matters which were developed into matters of discussion. In the first half of the 17th century, the Malays, especially in Aceh in northern Sumatra, had been exposed to the discussion concerning *wahdatul wujud* (unity of existence) and *wahdatul shuhud* (unity of witness; apparentism), with Hamzah Fansuri and Shamsuddin al-Sumatrani in favour of the former philosophy, and Nuruddin al-Raniri and Abd al-Rauf al-Singkil in favour of the latter (Azra, 2004:80-86). This religious discussion is highlighted because it became the aspect most relevant to the religious education of the Malays. The historical development in Aceh shows the existence of Islamic teaching institutions offering the teaching of Arabic and a more advanced form of Islamic education. The institutions that provided such education are known as *pondok* (literally: hut) schools among the Malays, and as *pesantren* in Java. These traditional educational institutions also provided religious education at elementary level. The intention was for students to learn to read and recite the Qur'an, and to be instructed in the basics of Islam as the *tauhid*—the principle of monotheism which underlies the Islamic faith—prayer and fasting. Teaching in a particular *pondok* school was conducted by a teacher with the help of his senior students (Madmarn, 1999:1-32). Eventually, it became common practice for elementary education to be conducted by an individual teacher in his house, and it would normally take two years for a pupil to complete his or her studies (Elias, 1980:32).

However, this traditional type of education was far from enough to promote literacy among pupils because most knew only how to read the Qur'an but did not understand its Arabic meaning. The most common method for acquiring literacy was to learn to read the Qur'an. In order to assist readers to identify and pronounce the words in the Qur'an, all words were normally equipped with diacritical marks. However, this had a limited impact on the ability to read Malay Jawi religious texts, even if the students were able to complete their study by reading the whole Qur'an. This is because other Malay written manuscripts, including traditional Malay religious

books, did not have diacritical marks. Thus, acquiring the ability to read and write the Jawi script required specific training. Moreover, this kind of elementary education cannot be termed mass education because it was only available to the upper class. Formal religious education was not compulsory in this traditional system. Therefore, it is doubtful that the Malays, especially at the lower rungs of society, were able to complete their religious education even at the elementary level. Furthermore, once a child reached his early teens, this was seen as the beginning of adulthood. In those days, it was considered the right age to begin working, and the individual would be expected to assist his parents in their occupation, normally in the agricultural sector (Othman, 1980:38). Religious education for adults would continue only in mosques, by a teacher, usually the imam—the prayer leader who led the congregational prayers in a village. However, attendance at such religious education sessions was normally small, since this was not obligatory.

Thus, advanced education that incorporated reading and learning of the Jawi script, Arabic language and religious matters was available only at the *pondok* schools. Nevertheless, this traditional institution did not result in mass education, even though it had become established in the Malay Archipelago since at least the 18th century. This was because admission to the *pondok* schools was still based on a student's personal commitment and encouragement from his parents. The number of students in such schools who acquired a more advanced religious education was still small, compared to the population in a particular place or village where a particular *pondok* school had been established. Moreover, students acquired their education through listening to the teacher who recited from a book and provided verbal explanation due to the limited numbers of copies of books in those days. This method of teaching is known as *menadah kitab* (literally: catching the book). Consequently, most of the students were only able to read but were not confident in writing. This continued even after the introduction of modern education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Gullick, 1991:264-72).

Islamic Education and Western Influence

Western influence on Malay society is perceived as having contributed to the decline in Islamic practices among the Malays. Western influence is seen through the introduction of Western laws and the secularisation of the political system and education. Secularism is often regarded by Muslims as deviating from Islam since secularism is the exclusion of religion from civil affairs. Most Malays, especially those concerned with the preservation of Islamic identity, saw that under the influence of secularism, Islam would become less prominent in Malay society. Although they

admitted that a better structure and organisation of Islamic education had been developed under a secular system, the reality was that Islam had become only a minor element in the curriculum. This led to a decline in the importance of Islamic education among the Malays, who had received intensive instruction in Islamic matters under the traditional system. According to Rahimah Aziz, during the westernisation of Johor, traditional Islamic education, which emphasised the ability to memorise the Qur'an, was assimilated into a Western secular system of education based on the understanding of Western concepts and ideology (Aziz, 1997:229-31, 240-1).

This particular statement reflects the general thinking of many religious Malays who viewed the introduction of secular education as diverting the Malays from an intensive education in Islam. It appears that there is some truth in the claim if the historical development in Johor is taken into consideration. On one hand, it appears that this secular education flourished if compared to religious education due to the increased number of schools in Johor. In 1883 there were five secular schools and only one religious school. There was no government-funded religious school in Johor before the 1880s, when the first government religious school was established. In fact, the first school established in Johor was an English school, which taught Malay and English. We have no information of the other aspects of education at the school. This first school is mentioned in the Straits Directory, and was named the Johor Free School (*Singapore and Straits Directory*, 1873:6-7); it was possibly similar to the English free schools established in the Straits Settlement.

However, this common view that secular Malay education had a damaging impact on Islamic religious education in Johor during Abu Bakar's reign has to be re-examined. There is some truth in the Muslim point of view that the political importance of Islam was undermined by the introduction of Western secularism. However, there is no straightforward evidence for the perception that there was a decline where Islamic education in Johor during Abu Bakar's reign is concerned. In reality, there is no concrete evidence that before the introduction of Malay secular education, there is no concrete evidence that the Malays in Johor in particular, and in the Malay states as a whole, had received intensive religious education prior to this. The traditional system of Islamic education in Johor had not been as intensive or advanced as assumed by Rahimah Aziz. The acquisition of a religious education was at the basic level and focused on reading the Qur'an, and the learning of essential knowledge related to the pillars of Islam and the faith.

Not only in Johor but also throughout the Malay Archipelago, the teaching of Islam both at the elementary and advanced levels was conducted in the Malay language rather than Arabic. Even until the end of the 19th century, the acquisition

of Islamic knowledge in Arabic was only available for those individuals who were willing to travel to Mecca. It is also notable that Malays students were not expected to memorise the entire Qur'an. This particular practice was only widespread in the Arab world and in Islamic institutions on the Indian sub-continent. Even before the 1880s, there is no evidence of the existence of an advanced Islamic teaching institution in Johor offering the teaching of Arabic and a more advanced form of Islamic education. Those institutions that provided an advanced education, known among the Malays as *madrasah* or *pondok* schools, were normally found in the north-eastern part of the Malay Peninsula (Gullick, 1991:297).

Islamic education, was promoted more intensively after the introduction of formal, secular education in Johor in the early 1880s. In fact, there is no evidence that Abu Bakar, in introducing secular education, intended to replace religious education because Malay pupils were expected to have completed the standard religious education before they were admitted to the school. This was based on Abu Bakar's own experience in his early education in Singapore, before attending Keasberry's school for his formal education (Sulaiman, 1940:12-13). Most pupils who acquired both religious and secular education were his contemporary Malay officials and their children. For instance, Major Mohamed Said Sulaiman, who was born in 1876 and later became personal secretary to Sultan Ibrahim, was committed to completing his religious education while attending the secular Malay school at Teluk Belanga in Singapore, before pursuing his education at an English school in Singapore in the 1880s (Basri and Harun, 1978:89).

Moreover, secular Malay education cannot be regarded as the only factor diverting the Malays from religious education. It had been mentioned before that there was no formal or compulsory religious education imposed on children in traditional Malay society. On the contrary, there is evidence that Islamic education among the Johor Malays was much improved upon the initiative of the education department established by the Johor government during Abu Bakar's reign. In the 1880s, the Johor government began to introduce formal institutions to promote Islamic education. The first school specifically designated for this purpose was established in the early 1880s (*Singapore and Straits Directory*, 1882:127).

In fact, it is believed that the first religious school in Johor was the first religious school in the peninsula in modern times to be established with the funding of a Malay government. The introduction of formal religious education and the expansion of such schools provided a greater opportunity for Malay pupils to acquire Islamic education. The *pondok* schools in the northeastern states, on the other hand, were only established through personal initiative, or were associated with a particular

Malay chief, or even a Sultan, on a private basis due to their personal interest. Religious education of the *pondok* schools did not provide mass education, even though they had been established in those states since at least the 18th century. This was because admission to these *pondok* schools was still based on the student's personal commitment and encouragement from his parents. The number of students in those schools who acquired a more advanced religious education was still small, compared to the population of those states.

It is necessary to point out here that the development of religious education under the direct initiative of the Johor government was effective in the expansion of religious education. This was not previously available to the Malays in Johor or the peninsula in general. With the founding of new towns, Islamic education in Johor further expanded. In the 20th century, these schools were supervised by the Department of Islamic Education and were run as complementary to the Malay secular schools. These religious schools were normally located in mosques or in the same buildings as the Malay schools (Basri, 1988:5). In state schools, the session for religious education was normally in the afternoon, with the Malay school in the morning session. This practice has continued until today and has become common practice in other states in Malaysia.

It is also obvious that many Malays failed to note the extent to which vernacular education, which emphasised literacy in the Malay language, could benefit Islamic education, compared to the traditional approach. The main subjects taught in the Malay schools, not only in Johor but also in the Malay Peninsula, were reading and writing in the Malay Jawi script. This is because, generally, the Malays acquired their Islamic education with Malay as the medium of instruction. Thus, the pursuing advanced religious knowledge would be through extensive reading of Malay religious books, rather than attending instructional sessions in mosques. Johor's religious schools used several Malay classics as textbooks, which were also used by advanced-level institutions in the northern states. Even in the *pondok* schools, most students were exposed to religious books in Malay, written in Jawi, before acquiring proficiency in Arabic. In fact, Islamic education in all religious schools was under government supervision and still employed this approach. It could be argued that the scope and syllabus at religious schools in Johor were not as advanced as those of the *pondok* schools because teaching was still focused on intensive use of the Malay language. However, with the curriculum more advanced than in the earlier elementary religious education, these school provided effective exposure to Islamic education.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that Malay civilization in the pre-colonial period was influenced by Indic and Islamic influences. The most dynamic aspect of Malay civilization is the Malay language itself, due to its flexibility to incorporate Sanskrit and Arabic languages without any compromise to its integrity. In fact, compared to Sanskrit, the Malay language has been far more dynamic, whereas Sanskrit has now stagnated.

The rise of Islam and its spread in the Malay Archipelago brought further advancement to Malay civilization. The most important contribution to Malay civilization was the increase of literacy in Malay society. This provided the basis for mass literacy and mass education, which provided an impetus for the rise of modern civilization in this region.

Islam had become the fundamental base in shaping education among the Malays during this period, and yet the scale of education was not yet at the level at which it could be labelled “mass education”. In fact, Islamic education can only be considered to have reached the level of mass education during the colonial period in the late 19th century, due to the improvement of the circumstances in Malay education stemming from modernisation associated with a Western orientation. In this respect, it can be argued that a Western orientation was constructive to transform traditional Islamic education into mass education, which in turn contributed to the promotion of literacy in the society as a whole.

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