COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN PONDOK AND MADRASAH IN THE MALAY PENINSULA FROM THE EARLY 19TH – 20TH CENTURY: THE STRENGTH AND WEAKNESSES

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Abstract

Islamic Educational system in the Malay Peninsula started in the early 19th century. However, Islamic educational learning has started as early as when the Sultan accepted Islam after being taught about Islam by the u’lama. Pondok operation was mainly led by u’lama who gained experience through Mecca educational system. The syllabus was mostly on Islamic religion and nothing related to modern subjects. As compared to madrasah which emerged after pondok, its operation is more organized and the curriculum has included modern subjects, similar to English School. Both pondok and madrasah have their own strength and weaknesses which lead towards the continuation of National Educational System today.

Keywords: pondok, madrasah, traditional, modern, strength, weaknesses.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pondok educational system was a pioneer in Islamic Educational system in Malaysia. According to Che Omar Awang (1996), the term pondok as an educational system refers literally to the students’ lodging at the traditional Islamic institutions. In early days, Malay society learned Islam from the u’lama who were the frontrunner of pondok. Although the way of conveying knowledge was through lecture and in a very traditional way, it helps Malays to develop their understanding about Islam. Malays for ages were only familiar with Hinduism and Buddhism since they inherited these two religions from their ancestors. It is therefore important for Muslims to build better understanding about Islam in order to become a good Muslim. This however was not easy as British imperialism in the Malay Peninsula was not only focused on the economy but also affecting the social culture of the society in the late 19th to the early 20th century. It led to the imposing of English educational system in...
the society especially among the elite group because they will become a future leader of the state. At the same time, *kaum muda* who was inspired with what had been done by the British has upgraded traditional educational system by executing modern subjects. Bulliet, Richard. W. (1987) states that the *madrasah* is an educational institution devoted to advanced studies in the Islamic religious sciences. *Kaum Muda* believed it aligned with the teaching of Islam as Islam does not avoid modernization. The emergence of *madrasah* was believed to help the society not only in becoming a good Muslim leader who holds on to both Islamic and modern knowledge but also in helping to develop the country itself. Both *pondok* and *madrasah* have strength and weaknesses, which direct to the emergence of National Educational System today.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF PONDOK AND MADRASAH

Islamic religious schools in the Malay Peninsula evolved during the early 19th century from a loosely organized, informal form represented by the Sekolah al-Quran, to a better organized residential *pondok*, and finally, to a more organized *madrasah*. *Pondok* was known as a traditional educational system, which adopted Mecca educational system. Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor & Wan Mohd Tarmizi Wan Othman (2011) say that *pondok* educational system was known after masjid becoming the place where Islamic teaching was taught and also the centre for Muslim community. It was founded by individuals from the Malay Peninsula, Patani and Indonesia, who brought along the experiences from their studies in Makkah. The first *pondok* was built by Tok Pulau Chondong or Abdullah around 1820 in Kampung Sireh. (Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, et.al, 2012: 1159). In contrast, *madrasah* was known as a modern educational system which adopted Cairo educational system. It was founded by Muslim modernists, who were exposed to the idea of Islamic modernism particularly in educational aspect brought by Muhammad Abduh from Cairo. Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi was among the Muslim modernists who used to upgrade Islamic educational system in the Malay Peninsula to become more systematic and organized. (Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor & Wan Mohd Tarmizi Wan Othman, 2011: 70)

Instead of secular and vernacular schools, Malay parents preferred *pondok* and *madrasah* education because they believed that these systems could educate their children to be good Muslims. In *pondok*, they were taught religious subjects, which were considered as fard ‘ain for all Muslims. Among the components are faith (*akidah*), Islamic Law (*syariah*) and Honorable Morals (*akhlas*). *(ibid: 59)* Although the traditional *pondoks* have almost disappeared, their contribution to the intellectual development of the Malays should not be underestimated. According to Mohd Fadil Mohd Yusof, et.al, (2013), the main role of *pondok* institution is to provide religious instruction and to deepen the community’s understanding of Islam. Moreover, it is closely related to the Malay-Muslim identity and often acts as the axis of the Malay social life.

In *madrasah*, modern subjects were integrated with religious subjects. Although *madrasah* was not favored by *Kaum Tua*, they still obtained supports from Malay society who realized that the new curriculum introduced by Muslim modernists would bring them out of backwardness. *Pondok* and *madrasah* were complementing each other in providing the best education for Muslims from as early as the 19th to the early 20th century. Rosnani Hashim, et.al (2011) state that Qur’anic reading is a prerequisite to *pondok*. Both *pondok* and *madrasah* were the continuation of the earlier educational system, which was Sekolah al-Quran. Due to this continuation, religious school still exists
until today although in a different curriculum and is fully sponsored by the government or religious council. It is however crucial to note that both pondok and madrasah have their own strengths and weaknesses that lead to their expansion and decline from the early 19th to the early 20th century.

THE STRENGTHS OF PONDOK

Pondok educational system, which was founded by ‘ulama gave opportunities to the Malay society to seek Islamic knowledge in a more organized way compared to Sekolah al-Quran. Although it was considered as traditional educational system, it still received supports from the local people, even from the neighboring countries. Muslims were very much in need of learning Islamic knowledge because it was the only way that could lead them to be a good Muslim. Its strengths include several factors that will be discussed below.

In pondok, other than learning about Islamic knowledge, Malays were taught how to respect their elders. It was reflected from the fullest respect that was given to their tok guru, who taught them. U’lama acquired full respect and detained extraordinary approval from the society. (ibid: 104) The respect accorded to him by people is also, though to a lesser extent, accorded to his students, associates and family members. In pondok, they considered what came out from tok guru’s mouth as true and they would not reject it.

Nor Adina Abdul Kadir and Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor (2012) claim that u’lama was the most influential group in the community and with deep understanding of the revealed knowledge, they applied the knowledge and spread among Muslim community. Therefore, the learning process in pondok is known as taqlīd since students will follow and accept all that come from tok guru without any arguments. In addition, students helped the tok guru in padi planting without any pay in order to show their gratitude and full respect towards tok guru who taught them. Without a doubt, pondok had produced many u’lama that could lead Malay society towards the right teaching of Islam. It is because before the arrival of Islam, the Malay society has adopted many aspects from Hinduism and other cultures. Even when Malays have converted to Islam, they were still practicing elements of Hinduism in their life. Therefore, u’lama who graduated from pondok have carried a heavy burden to guide the Malays to the real teachings of Islam.

Pondok was the best institution where children could learn Islamic knowledge compared to secular and vernacular schools. Pondok was a savior among the parents, who were concerned with the flourishing of Christian missionary in the secular and vernacular schools. According to Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, et.al (2012):

“While content to leave the ‘Islamically’ oriented pondok education unimpaired, the British promoted Malay vernacular education. The Malays deeply distrusted the British intentions in founding Malay schools, which had dispensed with Islamic lessons and suspected used as a front for propagating Christianity; besides, the real need of the Malay peasant was the labor of his children in the fields.”

British people’s main target was to propagate Christianity through education. Therefore, only pondok could preserve Malays’ faith in Islam from the influences of Christian missionaries. Through
pondok, Malays who were interested to further their studies abroad, particularly Makkah were given better opportunities. Pondok was a founding institution, where Malays could learn Islam before they study intensely in Makkah with u’lama from various fields. Pondok was known as a founding institution because it only used Malay translation from Arabic as a medium and kitāb which an interpretation from the local u’lama. U’lama, ustāz, imām, and qadī were produced from pondok educational system. Even though they would not have opportunities to get a job in the British government, their intention was to serve themselves towards the teaching of Islam to the Malay society. Though they taught the Malay society without financial remuneration but they felt happy with that contribution because they believed that only Allah would reward and bless them. Their objective was the flourishing of Islamic knowledge in the Malay Peninsula.

At the end of 19th century, pondok also played an important role in creating social awareness among the Malays. They started to think on what was beneficial for their society, for example in terms of economy; they should compete with other races in order to make sure that they can escape from poverty that they inherited from their forefather; and in education; traditional educational system that they have gone through was not applicable anymore since it would not accommodate a better life in the future. They were influenced from the idea of Islamic modernism from several magazines such as Seruan Azhar, Pilehan Timur, Sahabat, Saudara and others. These strengths lead to the flourishing of the pondok in the Malay Peninsula. Malay society supported the foundation of pondok because it was the best education for the Muslims. However, the stability of the pondok was not sustainable due to its weaknesses in several aspects.

THE WEAKNESSES OF PONDOK

It was clear that; pondok was unable to provide the demands of a young nation, at least in the economic sphere. Pondok did not promise a good job and high salary for the students after they completed their studies. Usually, they became an imām, ustāz, qadī, and some of them remain working in the village. Although pondok was still supported by several people particularly Kaum Tua, its weaknesses were widely disputed. Taqlīd was a method of learning which was practiced in pondok. This type of learning was adopted from Mecca learning system. According to Rosnani Hashim, et.al (2011), the traditional curriculum of Islamic schools under discussion was text-book centered. Students have to obey what comes out from tok guru’s mouth. No question and answer session as well discussion were encouraged. They added that the teacher normally did not entertain questions in order not to punctuate his lessons. In addition, students in pondok did not have opportunity to improve and challenge their understanding about that knowledge, rather than acknowledging what they receive. This way of learning made them dissatisfied with what they have and make them lazy to work hard in their life.

Memorization of the subjects was another part of pondok’s method of learning. Regardless of age, they need to memorize all the subjects irrespective of whether they understand it or not. As a consequence, student felt bored on what they have done since they did not understand it. In addition, tok guru merely repeated the same topic continuously, because he has no teaching planning that he could follow. Wan Zahidi Wan Teh (1992) says that, this style was not suitable at all, particularly in the modern time, because all information need to be specific and systematic in order to achieve its objective. It leads to the emptiness of the pondok, when students were not interested anymore and started leaving the pondok.
Pondok did not provide basic facilities such as tables, chairs, blackboards, and others. Students need to sit on the ground for hours to listen to lectures. U'lama used to teach religious subjects in pondok based on their level of proficiency in Arabic and also based on their knowledgeable in that particular subject. For example, if he is expert in Arabic language, his method of teaching was reading in Arabic and translating the readings into Malay. (Rosnani Hashim, et.al 2011: 102) They need to listen carefully since tok guru did not write on the blackboard. It easily made them tired and sleepy, and subsequently led to the annoyance of the students in the process of learning. Therefore, this kind of learning discouraged children to go and study at the pondok. Almost all pondoks were established at the rural area of east and north of Malay Peninsula. It was difficult for people in the urban areas or other parts of the states to go and learn at these pondoks. Not all students could afford to go out of their place since most of the Malays were poor. Besides that, transportation was very limited to reach these pondoks easily. Therefore, they preferred to support their family by working at their hometown rather than to study at pondok.

On top of that, though Islam has made it obligatory for men and women to seek knowledge, pondok itself did not provide a chance for women to study there. In the Malay society, it became awkward when women go out to study, because women are not allowed to expose themselves in the society. Girls were taught on how to stitch, then when they reached the age of puberty and were competent in doing house chores, their activities will be controlled or determined by the parents. (Ramli Saadon, et.al 2016:81) They did not have the opportunity to study, instead sat at home to learn how to be a good wife and a good mother from their own mothers. Knowledge-wise, they could not make any contribution to the society. Therefore, there was no point for them to seek knowledge, which was useless for them as their role in the society was very much limited.

Pondok did not impose examination to the students. This means that, students will learn all the subjects but their potential would not be tested by the tok guru. It was difficult to determine which students were really excellent in their studies and who could not catch up with those subjects. They added that the informal nature of the pondok system had, for some time, been an impediment to further education of its graduates in formal institutions of higher learning. Therefore, in the pondok system, priority was learning by heart for the seeking of blessing from Allah S.W.T. Due to the weaknesses in the pondok, people sought other alternatives that could overcome all the problems in pondok. Then, with the establishment of modern religious educational system or known as madrasah by several Malay modernists, it was a great hope to the Malay society, who was upset with the performance of pondok as it failed to provide the best education for the Malay society.

THE STRENGTHS OF MADRASAH

In the early 20th century, madrasah in the Malay Peninsula was founded by several Muslim modernists, who thought that pondok was not the best learning institution anymore. In the modern time, there must be a new institution, which could provide Malay students with not only a guidance on how to be a good Muslim but also prepare the students on how to be an intellectual and professional person as well. Its strengths could challenge the secular and vernacular schools. Rosnani Hashim, et.al (2011) claims that:
“In incorporating innovations and other necessary ingredients into the curriculum, it should be considered that students in the traditional Islamic system, like their counterparts in the Western-oriented system, are being prepared to contribute to nation building and should therefore possess all the requisite knowledge, skills and values that will enable them to function well in that role.”

In madrasah, students were not only required to study Islamic knowledge, but also modern subjects which was usually taught in the British schools. According to Roff, William R. (2004) unsurprisingly, the Madrasah al-Iqbal al-Islamiyyah has sometimes been described as a secular school with some religious subjects. Both subjects were complementing each other. While students study modern subjects, they would learn how to be a good citizen by contributing their ideas to develop their society and country. Other than that, the importance of religious knowledge was to ensure that in the future, the students may not only become good citizens but also good men, where they could assist the development of their society and country with good morality.

In madrasah, students may be provided with facilities, which were not provided in pondok. These facilities were free of charge. In early time, the madrasah has put on a certain amount of fees, but as it was objected by the community, it was then made free. (ibid: 10) They could sit on the chair and write on the table. They may also listen to the explanation from the teacher and write down the notes that were written on the blackboards. The classroom has a dividing wall to segregate one class from another class. These facilities did encourage students to study hard.

Examinations were imposed in the madrasah. It means that, each of the students would sit for examinations to determine their potentials. Only students, who passed these examinations, would be allowed to go the next level of study, whereas students who failed they would remain on the same level until they re-sat for the next examination. Classes were graded, and promotion was by examination. Students who graduated from madrasah got opportunity to further studies in the Middle East and since 1930s, there were 25 students a year getting scholarships from Saudi Arabia. (ibid: 11) In addition, by implementing examinations, students in the madrasah would be serious and work hard in their studies in order to ensure that they would pass all examinations.

In madrasah, students would learn in the classroom, which was based on the different levels of studies. It was easier for students to focus and catch up with all of the subjects. If they passed the examinations, they would go to another stage of which the subjects will be harder than the previous ones. In addition, there is no age limit for learning in the madrasah. Sabri Said (1983) stated that, since the madrasah did not set an age limit, school leavers and even graduates from Malay schools who had not gained access into secular schools found this avenue to be the only option for secondary education. Madrasah was opened to women, who were never allowed/acknowledged by the pondok before. These enabled women to have opportunity to seek knowledge like men. Muslim modernists believed that, there was no discrimination on women in all aspects of life particularly in education. Therefore, in the future, there would be more women who could contribute to the development of the society and country.

The period between the early 1950s and the turn of 20th century were called the golden age of Islamic religious education. The madrasah produced a steady supply of teachers and religious
officials. (Abdullah Ishak 1987:36) Several factors which contribute to this were the role of the Kaum Muda in raising awareness of the Malays on the importance of education. Kaum Muda or Young Generation means those who disagree with the conventional way of the Kaum Tua or Older Generation. (Nor Adina Abdul Kadir & Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, 2012: 1259). In addition, there was also prestige attached to being religious teachers and officials in the religious councils that were mostly established in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Madrasah was the best alternative of modern religious educational system in providing both religious and modern knowledge in its curriculum. It was favored, almost by the Malay population since it promised a better life in the future. Madrasah is much more favored among the parents since their children have better opportunity to further studies in higher institution even abroad. Its greatest system in educating the Malays during that time has been criticized by people because of its weaknesses in several aspects.

**THE WEAKNESSES OF MADRASAH**

Although madrasah was a modern religious school and better than pondok, it still has weaknesses in terms of its administration, syllabus, and curriculum. According to Roff, William R. (2004) the administration and management were poor and often reliant solely on the founder and his assistants, with no board of trustees or governing body. This type of educational institution which was introduced by Muslim modernists to assist the Malays in creating a better life in the future was not always entirely successful.

Madrasah did not have uniformity in terms of its curriculum and syllabus of studies. This means that, different madrasah has different curriculum and syllabus. Madrasah did not have any specific syllabus and no certification system was applied, thus creating difficulties among the students afterwards. (ibid: 17). Problems occurred, when some of the students who transferred to other madrasah would have difficulties adapting to the new curriculum and syllabus since it differed from their former madrasah.

Although madrasah was usually located at a waqf land, but adequate financial resources were necessary for the regular maintenance in terms of electricity, water supply, and other technical problems or needs. Usually, the financial condition was unwarranted, reliable on small fees from poor parents, aids, endowment, and sometimes receiving slight donations from the religious division. (ibid: 17) However, the endowment from the society was not enough to cover all the maintenance. Additionally, it was impossible to collect fees from the students since they were not from rich families. Due to these problems, madrasah could no longer be sustained. Kitāb used in madrasah were usually imported from the Middle East. Its language was too high, and students faced difficulties in understanding it. There were not many local ‘ulama, who could produce kitāb that was easier in terms of its language and explanation that can be used in madrasah. Therefore, there were some madrasah who hired teachers from the Middle East and even Africa to explain these kitābs to the students since there were not enough local teachers, who could teach these kitābs because of their lack of mastery in the Arabic language.

Teachers in the madrasah were not graduates from any teaching institutions. Therefore, they were not well trained and had no experience to educate students in the madrasah. Problems which could occur were lack of understanding by students on what was taught by the teachers either in religious or modern subjects. In madrasah, there was no termination system. Students, who failed in
their examinations, would not be terminated from the madrasah. They would remain and continue their studies in the same madrasah. This way of practice was not good for the students, as it discouraged students to work hard to complete their studies based on the time given.

Only a few madrasahs were opened for women. This showed that madrasahs were not prepared to educate women. Most of the madrasah before including Madrasah al-Haji Taib, educated male student over 1920s, but in contrast, al-Mashur taught female by founded special asrama (hostel) in early 1930s. (ibid: 12) There were still limitations on women education in the madrasah, where they could not get the same rights as compared to men. Education for women was not really emphasized in the society since people still believed in the taboo that women’s place was at home.

SUMMARY

From the early 19th to the early 20th century, the Malay Peninsula had gone through two educational systems, which benefited the Malay society. Both pondok and madrasah establishments were not originally from the Malay Peninsula. These educational systems were adopted from Middle East, namely pondok from Makkah and madrasah from Cairo.

The establishment of pondok in the Malay Peninsula was not created by the local ulama but rather ulama from Patani and Indonesia. This is because pondok educational system was founded earlier in Patani and Indonesia. They adopted Mecca learning system since they were experienced in their studies in Makkah for many years and sought Islamic knowledge from ulama in Makkah. From these invaluable experiences, they implemented in their own countries an educational institution known as pasentren in Indonesia or pondok in Patani. The expansion of this educational system grew because of their enthusiasm in disseminating the Islamic knowledge; they travel to neighboring countries such as the Malay Peninsula to spread Islamic knowledge to the local people.

Pondok flourished in the Malay Peninsula as it received support from the local people. Some pondok in Perak was even supported by the royal family as well. Although it played a major role in educating the Malays, most pondok did not give an opportunity for women to learn Islamic knowledge. The reason was its priority was towards men to seek knowledge rather than women, whose place was at home. This belief was embraced by a group of people known as Kaum Tua. They were very conventional and made it difficult to introduce new concepts in the Malay society.

Pondok could not promise a better job for its students in the future other than preaching what they have learned to others. Some of them, who had strong financial resources would further their studies in Makkah, studying with famous ulama in various fields since what they have learned in the local pondok was only the basis to prepare them for higher studies. Students, who returned from Makkah increased from year to year, and its increasing number indicated that Islamic education has won the hearts of the Malays instead of secular and vernacular schools.

The decline of pondok in the early 20th century, had introduced revolution in religious educational system, where modern religious education has replaced pondok because pondok did not fulfil the criteria of modern educational system. Madrasah was founded by several Malay modernists namely Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, who believed that madrasah was the best
model since its curriculum could prepare Malays with both religious and modern subjects, which were not provided either in pondok or even secular and vernacular schools.

The foundation of the madrasah was adopted from Cairo, since Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Syed Sheikh al-Hadi were influenced by the idea of Islamic modernism, which was brought by Muhammad Abduh. Through this idea, they believed that; by modernizing the Malay educational system, it would help Malays to get a better life in the future rather than being in poverty and backward compared to other races.

Through madrasah, Muslims have opportunities to continue their study abroad particularly at al-Azhar since it was the best religious institution in the world. In al- Azhar, they would be involved in publishing magazines to propagate the idea of Islamic modernism, besides nurturing the spirit of nationalism in the society. After completing their studies, most of them returned to their hometown and worked as teacher and religious officers in religious councils.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Malays have always appreciated pondok and madrasah educational system in the Malay Peninsula as a social and religious asset, although both were originated from the Middle East. Both educational systems were the continuation from the earlier Islamic learning system which started with Sekolah al-Quran. The foundation of pondok had demonstrated a good sign, where Malays began acquiring Islamic knowledge since they had no such opportunity due to the few number of 'ulama available.

The establishment of secular and vernacular schools in the Malay Peninsula was a threat to pondok since they could not provide modern subjects as was provided in secular and vernacular schools. This led to the innovative ideas in the religious curriculum, brought by Malay modernists or Kaum Muda, but their ideas were not well received by mainstream educators, who belong to Kaum Tua group. Most of the madrasahs continued with the old curriculum which consisted primarily of religious subjects, whereas the rest apply the new curriculum, which integrated religious and modern subjects. The introduction of secular education heightened the concern of many traditional or conservative teachers or educators, particularly the potential threat it could create to Islamic-based education. Transformation in education is necessary in order to suit the local need.

Nevertheless, what is evident is that education for the Malay Muslims of Malay Peninsula could not have taken its form today without the influence of Islamic education from the Middle East, the pondok and madrasah as well as modern educational methodologies.

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