ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Development of Pondok and Madrasah in Kedah, 1909-1941

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ABSTRACT

Kedah is a state in the Federation of Malaysia formed in 1963. Between 1909 and 1941, Kedah was under British rule since the Federated and Unfederated Malay States in Malaya willingly or unwillingly came under British rule. Through the Anglo-Siam Treaty of 1909, Kedah was placed under British rule. This paper examines the development of Muslim religious educational institutions known as pondok and madrasah in Kedah from the year of signing the Anglo-Siam Treaty until the Japanese armies invaded and occupied Malaya in 1941. Under British rule, Islamic religious matters and Malay custom were under the jurisdiction of the Malay ruler of Kedah. The British ruled Kedah through the British Resident who advised the Kedah ruler in matters related to state administration, finance and security. The British educational policies enabled the Malays, whose religion had always been Islam, to establish and manage the pondok and madrasah in Kedah to teach and spread Islamic teachings to themselves and their children. Library research methods are used in this paper. This paper assumes that the development of pondok and madrasah in Kedah in those years was a response to British rule.

Key words: Religious education, pondok, madrasah, Kedah.

Introduction

In elucidating the development of Islam in Malaysia, some historians have a tendency to classify the stages for the development of Islam into before the British rule, during the British rule and after the British rule. Although the classification of the development of Islam in Malaysia into the three different periods is not totally accurate in describing what had happened to Islam and Muslims in Malaysia, it is easy to understand. Hence, with its focus on Islamic education in Kedah, this paper presents the development of Islam during the British rule in Kedah starting from the Bangkok Treaty of 1909 until the beginning of the Japanese occupation in Malaya in 1941. Generally speaking, the topic of Islamic education in Kedah during this particular period has not received much attention although many scholars and studies have paid attention to the history of Kedah. According to some historical documents, Kedah situated in the northern part of Malaya had received Islam much earlier than the other parts of Malaya. In addition, this short study on the pondok in Kedah is important because it presents the British attitude and tendency towards Islam in general and Islamic education in particular. This is in line with the general Western perception that the Westerners had come to the other parts of the world including the Southeast Asian region to change their societies from decadence to progress including changing the decadent education system into a progressive education system.

Background of the development of Islam and Islamic education:

Kedah is an old Malay state in Malaysia. It is as old as the other Malay states such as Funan in Indochina, Majapahit in Java and Sriwijaya in Sumatera. Historical artifacts found at Bukit Choras and Lembah Bujang, the archeological sites in Kedah, show the existence of an orderly community from the 2nd Century to the 15th Century A.C. The archeological findings from Lembah Bujang strongly indicate the existence of an orderly government in the 4th and the 5th Centuries which had attained widespread development from the 11th to 14th Centuries (Adi, 1991).

Kedah is said to have received Islam much earlier than the other Malay states in Malaya. In Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa, it is mentioned that Maharaja Derba Raja was converted to Islam by a Muslim scholar from Yemen named Shaykh Abdullah al-Yamani. However, that source does not mention the conversion date for the ruler. Another source entitled Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah written by Muhammad Hasan mentions that the conversion date for that ruler is 531 A.H. or 1136 A.C. With his conversion to Islam, Islam was...
considered as spread in Kedah (Muhammad, 1968). However, there is another view stating that Kedah became an Islamic region when its ruler and people accepted Islam in 1474 A.C. (Adi, 1991). This date 1474 A.C., when the ruler of Kedah converted to Islam, is mentioned in Aceh historical sources and in Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals). Hence, it is possible to conclude that although Islam was received in Kedah in 1136 A.C., Islam was widely spread in Kedah only from the 15th Century.

Located along the strategic sea trade route between China and Arab countries, Kedah was able to attract many foreign traders and to establish political and economic links with foreign partners. After Malacca came under Portuguese colonial rule in 1511, many traders, especially Muslim traders shifted from Malacca to trade in Aceh, Patani and Kedah. The British came to Kedah and occupied Penang in 1786. After the arrival of the British in Penang, Kedah became a more important state in the northern part of Malaya.

With the arrival of Muslim traders in Kedah, Islam directly or indirectly spread in Kedah. They Muslim traders who came to Kedah were Arabs from Hadramaut in Yemen. Some of them stayed for a short time in Kedah while others stayed for a long time. The Arabs from Hadramaut who came to Malaya were collectively called the Sayyids. They were considered as those who spread Islam in Malaya. During the late 18th Century, many of the Kedah royal families were linked with the Sayyids. For example, Buyong Adil (1981) mentions that the Kedah royal families linked with the Sayyids were Syed Ahmad Jamalullail and his son, Syed Harun Jamalullail who married Tengku Sufiah, the daughter of Tengku Dhaiauddin, Raja Muda Kayang who was appointed the head of Arau.

Besides the Arabs who came to Kedah and other parts of Malaya for trading and spreading Islam, the Muslims from India also came to Malaya for the same purposes. Some of the Muslims from India settled down in Malaya and married Malay girls and their offspring were known as Jawi Peranakan. Some of the Indian Muslims contributed to politics in Kedah. For example, during the reign of Sultan Abdullah (1778-1798) in Kedah, Jamal from India was appointed as the advisor to Sultan Abdullah and he was granted the title of Dato’ Seraja Wang (Muhammad Isa, 1991).

The Sultan of Kedah invited Muslim religious scholars from among the Arab Muslims to assist him in Islamic religious matters. They were considered more knowledgeable than the local Muslim religious scholars in the 19th Century. The post of Shaykh Islam was created to assist the Sultan of Kedah in Islamic religious matters. Shaykh Islam was placed directly under the Sultan of Kedah in administering and handling Islamic religious matters. Before the Second World War, the Sultan of Kedah had appointed three Muslim religious scholars to the post of Shaykh Islam. The first Shaykh Islam was Shaykh Muhammad Shayat, the Arab man whose tenure was from 1901 to 1903; Sayyid Abdullah Dhalan who held the post for about one year was the second Shaykh Islam; and Wan Sulaiman Wan Sidek whose tenure lasted over 30 years from 1904 to 1935 was the third Shaykh of Islam (Othman, 1979).

Before the Bangkok Treaty of 1909, Kedah was under Siamese patronage. As the patron, the Siamese King had the power to intervene in the administrative and political affairs of Kedah including in the selection and appointment of the Sultan of Kedah. For example, during the power dispute and struggle between the two sons of the Sultan of Kedah, the Siamese King intervened and appointed Tunku Abdul Hamid as the Sultan of Kedah instead of Tunku Kasim, to succeed their late father Sultan Zainal Rashid who passed away on June 21, 1882. In order to maintain good relations with the Siamese King, the Sultan of Kedah presented gifts including gold to the Siamese King in Bangkok. Sultan Abdul Hamid initiated and introduced some changes and improvements in the administration of Kedah (Mat Kasim, 1981).

The Bangkok Treaty of 1909 placed Kedah under British rule and the Sultan of Kedah had to accept the British Resident as the British advisor to the Sultan. In addition to the State of Kedah, the Bangkok Treaty also placed the states of Kelantan, Terengganu and Perlis under British rule and the Malay Sultan for each of those states had to accept a British Resident as the British advisor to the Sultan. These four Malay states came to be known as the Unfederated Malay States during British rule in Malaya. The British agreed to hand over some districts of Kedah to the Siamese King based on the Bangkok Treaty of 1909. Setul, Patani, Yala and Narathiwat were the districts handed over by the British to the Siamese King. The first British advisor for the Sultan of Kedah was W. G. Maxwell (Ibrahim, 1987).

The British administrators in Malaya wanted to expand their influence through education. They built English schools in Singapore, Penang and Perak for this purpose. The British administrators in Malaya also built Malay primary schools to eliminate illiteracy among the Malays as well as to prepare young Malays for blue-collar jobs in the Malayian administration and to become literate farmers and fishermen (Awang Had, 1991).

The Malay in Malaya were aware of the importance of education before British rule in Malaya. This was evident from the establishment of the first Malay school in Kedah in 1861. Sultan Ahmad Tajudin Mukarram Shah, the Sultan of Kedah, founded the Malay school on May 25, 1861 for the Malay children from the royal and aristocratic families. That first Malay school was funded by the Kedah state treasury in 1897 after the Kedah Chief Minister ordered so. Among the teachers for that Malay school were Ali Mu’min Munshi and Ahmad bin Kerani Maidin (Awang Had, 1980).
During the British rule in Malaya, the number of Malay schools was increased but the Malays did not respond positively to the Malay schools because they were more attracted to send their children to the pondok. Moreover, some of the Malays who considered the British administrators in Malaya as colonialists did not want to send their children to the Malay schools built by the British. These Malays thought that by sending their children to the Malay schools built by the British, they would be indirectly cooperating with the British colonialists whom they perceived or viewed as the enemies of Muslims and their religion, Islam. They also considered learning English as learning the language of the British unbelievers. They judged that it was sinful to learn English because that language was the language of unbelievers. In order to minimize the opposition by some Malays to the Malay schools built by the British administrators, Islamic religious subjects were introduced into the Malay schools (Awang Had, 1991).

The Malay schools were opened to Malay boys and girls but they were not placed in the same class even though they were in the same school. This restriction was imposed by Wan Sulaiman Wan Sidek, the Shaykh Islam of Kedah. During those days the number of Malay girls was much less than the number of the Malay boys attending the Malay schools (Ibrahim, 1987).

The Sultan of Kedah was responsible for the administration and preaching of Islam including Islamic education in Kedah. Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Abidin Muazzam Shah was said to seek the advice of his Islamic religious teacher named Shaykh Abdul Jalil al-Mahdani. It was reported that Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah established the Committee of Muslim Religious Scholars in 1904 to advise him on Islamic matters (Zakaria, 2001).

The development of pondok education:

“Historically, the pondok type of education began in Malaya at the beginning of the nineteenth Century in the northern Malay states of Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah and Perlis. It originated from Patani or Sumatera. Pondok education in Kedah is said to have originated from Sumatera while the pondok in Kelantan and Trengganu came from Patani.” (Ibrahim, 1994).

The pondok was an Islamic educational institution in Malaya including in Kedah. It was very important for the Malays to learn Islamic teachings for themselves and for their children by attending the pondok system of Islamic education. The main focus of Islamic teachings in the pondok system was to make their students know and believe in the six theological principles of Islam namely belief in Allah, His angels, His books, His prophets and His judgment of good and evil and in the life after death, and to make their students know and put into practice the five pillars of Islam namely the two declarations of faith, the five daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, obligatory alms and pilgrimage to Mecca for capable Muslim men and women. The pondok was headed by the most senior Muslim religious scholar who happened to have the power over the administration of the pondok, its curriculum and its administrative and teaching staff. Often, the land where the pondok was built belonged to that most senior Muslim religious scholar since he had initiated the establishment of the pondok on his own land or the land was donated to him by landowners who supported the establishment of the pondok in their areas. His personality and knowledge of Islam often became the main attraction for the Muslims to send their children to his pondok. When that famous pondok founder passed away and if the Islamic religious teacher who succeeded him was considered less capable, some of the students in that pondok would look for another pondok to continue their studies. Many a time the lifespan of a pondok stopped after its famous founder passed away.

The pondok in Kedah like the pondok in Kelantan and Trengganu offered Islamic education. In a way, the pondok could be considered as an extension of Islamic education offered by the Muslim religious teachers at mosques, suraus or balaisahs (the Muslim prayer places smaller than mosques) and homes. In the early 20th Century during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid, the Muslim religious teachers in Kedah were paid to teach the Koran to Muslims and their children. Shaykh Islam Wan Sulaiman Wan Sidek became the Muslim religious teacher to teach the Koran and Islamic teachings to the royal household (Mat Kassim, 1981).

With the spread of Islam in Kedah, the Muslims were very much aware of the need to educate their children on Islamic teachings. One of the educational institutions for spreading and teaching Islam in Kedah was the pondok. However, the exact date for the establishment of the first pondok in Kedah is not known. It was probably after the establishment of the pondok in Patani in the 18th Century. Some of the Muslims from Kedah went to Patani and joined the pondok there to learn about Islamic teachings. Due to some political problems in Patani after Patani was surrendered by the British to Thailand or to the King of Thailand after 1909, some Muslim religious scholars left Patani for Saudi Arabia and for the states in Malaya such as Kelantan, Kedah, Perlis and Trengganu. The Muslim religious scholars from Patani established the pondok in Kedah, and one of such pondoks was located at Gajah Mati in Kedah founded by Pak Cu Him (probably Ibrahim) from Patani. There were Muslim religious scholars in Kedah who were popular because of their Islamic religious learning. Some of them were Haji Ishak Hashim, Tok Sheikh Jarum and Mat Saleh Kelonghoi. The Muslims in Kedah were basically agriculturalists, especially as rice growers. Kedah was known as the rice bowl for Malaya.
In the years between 1910 and 1940, there were about twenty Muslim religious scholars in Kedah. Among them were Tuan Husain Muhammad Nasir, Haji Sulaiman Sidek, Haji Abdul Hamid Tobiar, Haji Abdul Rahman al-Jarumi, Derga and Haji Muhammad Saleh, Pulau Pisang. Almost all of them were founders of pondok in Kedah to spread Islamic teachings. The well-known pondoks were able to attract more students from Kedah and outside Kedah.

The pondok students “were sponsored by their parents or relatives. They were also given donations by local Muslims who called upon them to offer prayers on special religious occasions such as thanksgivings, praying for the dead, and other religious and customary ceremonies and festivals. The students also received alms from Muslim paddy growers during the harvest season. The students were considered eligible for alms because they were studying Islam.” (Ibrahim, 1994).

Regarding the income of the pondok teachers, they also received donations and alms from Muslim paddy growers in greater amounts than their students. “The students became the main source of income for the teachers. They collected donations and alms from their parents and relatives and other Muslim villagers who wanted to donate to the teachers.” (Ibrahim, 1994).

The pondok system of education in Kedah and in other states in Malaya did not introduce the examination system, did not charge tuition fees on the students and did not have any age limitations for pondok students. They could remain as pondok students so long as they wanted to stay and were able to live in the pondok. “The pondok teachers were included among the higher social class because of their religious knowledge and economic position.” (Ibrahim, 1994).

The Muslim religious teachers or scholars in the pondoks in Kedah did not welcome British rule in Kedah but they did not directly and overtly resist and oppose the British administrators in Kedah. They discouraged the Muslims from sending their children to the Malay and English schools built by the British and the Christian missionaries. They suspected that the British and Christian missionaries planned to erode or eradicate belief in Islam. However, when the British administrators in Malaya and Kedah introduced the Malayan Union in 1946, the Muslim religious scholars in the pondoks in Kedah joined other Malays who resisted and opposed the Malayan Union.

The development of madrasah education:

“Historically, madrasah education had its beginnings during the Abbasid Caliphate in the later part of the eleventh Century A.D. The madrasahs taught Islamic religious subjects and Arabic. In Malaya madrasah education began only in the first decade of the twentieth Century.” Among the pioneer madrasahs established in Malaya were Madrasah Masriah at Bukit Mertajam founded in 1906 by Mohd Salleh bin Baki al-Masri (1875-1971), Madrasah Hamidiah at Alor Star founded in 1908 by Wan Sulaiman bin Wan Sidek, and Madrasah Iqbal Islamiah founded in Singapore in 1907 (Ibrahim, 1994).

The madrasah education in Kedah and in other states in Malaya is attributed to the influence of Jamaluddin Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), the two influential Muslim modernists and reformists who advocated the need to reform and modernize Muslim education system in Egypt and in other Muslim countries.

Mohd Salleh bin Baki al-Masri (1876-1971) who founded the Madarasah Misriah at Bukit Mertajam in 1906 graduated from the University of Azhar. His madrasah was able to attract many Muslim students. Wan Sulaiman bin Wan Sidek founded Madrasah Hamidiah in Alor Star in 1908 and in 1920 he invited his good friend Sheikh Abdullah Fahim who studied in Mecca to become the teacher at Madrasah Hamidiah. The madrasah was named Hamidiah as it was desired to be associated with Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah of Kedah. This madrasah became the Islamic and Arabic centre in Kedah, Perlis and Penang.

Another madrasah was founded on June 19, 1936 and it was named Maahad Mahmud or Maktab Mahmud in Alor Star, Kedah. It was funded by the Zakat Fund in Kedah. Its first headmaster or principal was Sheikh Abdul Halim who graduated from the University of Azhar. In its early stage of development, Maahad Mahmud taught Islamic subjects and Arabic language. Later, Malay, English and some academic subjects were offered at Maahad Mahmud to their students (Ghazali, 1964), In 1951, the certificates granted by Maahad Mahmud to its graduates were recognized by the University of Azhar to join that university as its first year students.

The madrasah education system in Kedah and in other states in Malaya introduced the examination system to their students. In the case of Maahad Mahmud in Kedah, it followed the system and curriculum recognized by the University of Azhar as at par with the system and curriculum used by the madrasah in Egypt. Hence the graduates of Maahad Mahmud were eligible to be undergraduates of the University of Azhar beginning from 1951.
Conclusion:

The pondok education in Kedah began earlier than the madrasah education. Both systems of education offered Islamic religious subjects and Arabic language to their students. The difference between the pondok and madrasah systems of education is that examination was not introduced in the pondok education but was introduced in the madrasah education. The graduates from the pondok education in Kedah were not eligible to continue their studies at the University of Azhar. However, the graduates from the madrasah education namely from Maahad Mahmud were eligible to continue their studies at the University of Azhar beginning from 1951. Hence the two Muslim educational systems, namely pondok and madrasah were developed in Kedah from 1909 to 1941 although Kedah then began to come under direct British rule through British Residency commencing from 1909.

References