

Religious Education in Malaya-Malaysia: A Lesson from the Indian Modernization

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Abstract: Teaching and learning religious education in Malaysia was identically traditional oriented. This article explores the influence of the Indian modernization on the religious education in Malaya (presently Malaysia) before the independence. The objective is to examine the major aspect of such an influence and to highlight its effects on religious education at both primary and secondary schools in Malaysia today. Library and archive research methods were used to examine the social atmosphere at that time. The study shows that Indian modernization especially in education had an impact on several reform advocators in Malaya but it has not been discussed in depth until now. As such, a further research would benefit everybody, especially those who engage in education sector in Malaysia today.

Key words: Religious education, Modernization, Malaya, Malaysia, India

INTRODUCTION

The 19th century saw a changing state of affairs where many parts of the Muslim world, such as in the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia were drawn against colonists from Europe. Against such a backdrop, a number of Muslim scholars emerged to meet head-on the challenge of colonization and modernity. This study focuses on the response of Syed Ahmad Khan as it appears he was among the means to inspire the Malay reformists to bring change in Malaya. Although the educational reform in Egypt was regarded as the most important thrust to the Malay reformists' thoughts on restoration of their community, their concern for the Malays' progress was also considerably influenced by the ideas of modernization upheld by Ahmad Khan. To him, as maintained by Allana (1988), the Muslims of India must have the willingness to adapt themselves to the modern era through total immersion in modern education, which has to be via Western learning and knowledge, as it is a basis for the Muslims to regain self-respect (Yasin, 1982).

This article examines Ahmad Khan's new ideas on education and how it further spurred the Malay reformists to imitate and transform the traditional oriented religious education in Malaya into a new system that strike a balance between the religious autonomy of faith and the needs of modern realities. The modernization programmes in India became one of the key formative backgrounds to them in their effort to improve the conditions of the Malay community of the time. Although the Malay reformists did not have direct contact with Ahmad Khan, they were probably impressed with him. This assumption can be inferred from Ahmad Khan being featured on the cover of one issue of the Malay reformists' magazine entitled *al-Ikhwān* (The Comrade) in year 1931. According to the policy of *al-Ikhwān* (Anon, 1926), its cover photo was strictly confined to those who had had significant role and contribution to the religion, nation and country.

Education in India: Its Reform and Modernization:

The process of reforming and modernizing India to suit the needs of modern time ascribes to Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), the pioneer of modern India. According to Hussain (1970), Ahmad Khan was "a great admirer of his maternal grandfather" as his early upbringing was under the care of the latter, a high-ranking officer in India. In his childhood, Ahmad Khan schooled at the old-style primary schools (*maktabs*) to learn the Qur'an and this is coupled with the education he received at home by his mother (Graham, 1974; Allana, 1988). She was regarded as his model of a good character when he says, "if people consider these things, they will be able to understand what a high-minded, virtuous, gracious-mannered, wise, far-sighted and seraphic lady my mother was, and what influence such a mother can have exercised upon a child whom she brought up" (Hussain, 1970). Ahmad Khan's early childhood, according to Graham (1974) and Hussain (1970), saw that he was loath

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towards learning. The death of his father and brother in 1838 and 1846 respectively, however, altered his attitude towards education and his conduct in life. The change was also brought upon by his employment at the East India Company, where he learned the importance of education from the British (Baljon Jr., 1949).

Edwardes (1967) asserted that another contributing factor that led to a radical change in his attitude was the 1857 mutiny. The revolt was in fact a reaction towards the British policies that aims at modernizing the entire traditional system of India that includes the political, economical, social, educational, religious and ethical aspects. From the viewpoint of Baljon Jr. (1949), during that critical time in India, Ahmad Khan was in a dilemma between his loyalty to the British and his sympathy for the Muslims. He took up the responsibility of reconciling the British and the Muslims since to him, the root of mutiny centred round misapprehension between the two parties. He worked on writing *Causes of the Indian Revolt* (Graham, 1974) and *Loyal Muhammadans of India* to explain conditions that are pertinent to the mutiny and to show Muslims' loyalty to their government. Though Ahmad Khan was faithful to the British, Allana (1988) contended that he was at times critical towards them for their condescending attitude, especially after the mutiny, towards the Muslims. The appalling political, educational and social conditions of the Muslims prompted him to impress upon them to make changes within themselves in order to excel over other races.

In fact, the 1857 revolt led Ahmad Khan to insist that Muslims must have the willingness to adapt themselves to the modern era through total immersion in modern education (Allana, 1988). As such, 1859 saw that he established a secondary school (*madrasah*), which taught only Persian, in Moradabad. He then set up another school for both Muslims and Hindus, who were taught English, Urdu Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit. He further inaugurated the Translation Society, which aimed at translating works from English into Urdu, in 1864. From Ghazipur he carried with him the Society, which renamed the Scientific Society. Its magazine, *The Aligarh Institute Gazette*, played a role in creating a mutual understanding between the government and the public people (Hussain, 1970). Ahmad Khan's affection towards the European system of education and his faithfulness to the rulers, according to a Baljon Jr., were due to his realization that he required their co-operation to make his vision becomes a reality (Baljon Jr., 1949).

Ahmad Khan's stay in England from 1869 to 1870 for the purposes of studying its system of university education and collecting material for a reply to Western prejudice to Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) showed him a better tool to improve the decadent state of Muslims, i.e. via social and educational reforms. In his attempt to execute social reform, he published a magazine entitled *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* (Refinement of Morals) in 1870. Its aim was "to make the Muslims of India desirous of the best kind of civilization, so that it shall remove the contempt with which civilized peoples regard the Muslims, and the latter shall become reckoned among the respected and civilized people in the world" (Baljon Jr., 1949; Hussain, 1970). This objective was stemmed from the necessity of raising awareness in the Muslims of their own problems in his time. Ahmad Khan paid an attention to the idea of modernization as this, to him, would ensure that Muslims could face modern challenges (Allana, 1988).

As far as educational reform is concerned, it was stemmed from the awareness to put the Muslims in India at par with the Hindus in term of progress. Ahmad Khan maintained that the Muslims showed a lack of interest in English and higher education, and as such, they were lagging behind the Hindus, who were well-equipped with modern knowledge, and who filled almost all positions at government offices (Ismail, 1989; Baljon Jr., 1949). Soon after his return from England, he set up Committee for Educational Advancement of the Muslims to investigate the Muslims' reasons for opposing to send their children to government schools. According to his study, Muslims were disinclined for the government schools due to the latters' lacking educational system, which did not meet the religious needs of the Muslims (Baljon Jr., 1949). He believed that "if the Muslims wished to preserve their ancient learning, to profit from modern science, and to impart to their children an education adequate to meet both their spiritual and material needs, there was no course open to them but to devise an educational system of their own" (Hussain, 1970).

Having acknowledged the value of modern education, Ahmad Khan promoted Western learning and knowledge, which he regarded as a basis for the Muslims to regain self-respect (Yasin, 1982). His vision was materialized through the establishment of Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College (MAOC, presently is university) at Aligarh in 1875. It, as Hussain (1970) states, was a modern-secular religious institution as it modelled its educational system according to that of colleges and universities in England. Baljon Jr. (1949) further explains that the Aligarh College had its own rules, regulations and policy. MAOC integrated Western modern science and Islamic values in education, which was to be the best mediator to solve Muslims' appalling state of affairs (Yasin, 1982; Allana, 1988; Chaudhary, 1968). The introduction of modern Western knowledge into the college, and coupled with the teaching of religion, was in fact to attract the Muslims' attention to a new-style school and to gain their undivided support (Edwardes, 1967). The system of education in MAOC prepared students to attain to a higher standard of education that would secure them job employment. At the college, students must choose and learn only one of these various branches of knowledge that include literature, mathematics, moral science, natural science, and Islamic theology. This is to give them a deep understanding of the knowledge. In fact, this was not the norm of government schools in India where students are taught several

knowledge (Hussain, 1970). Ahmad Khan's ideas on reforms were, to a certain extent, found to be similar to that of 'Abduh's, especially pertinent to the importance of modern science and the use of reason (Yasin, 1982). They both were given attention by the Malay reformists, as Ahmad Khan's and Abduh's educational reform impressed them and hence inspiring them to bring it in Malaya.

It is apparent that several Muslims were happy with Ahmad Khan's new college (Allana, 1988; Chaudhary, 1968) as it, in their eyes, concentrated on both the development of one's character building that is benefited from the religious knowledge and the worldly needs of their time that inherent in the modern science (Hussain, 1970). However, the majority of Muslims opposed the learning of modern knowledge. They criticized Ahmad Khan as he promoted one's full use of reason and he lacked interest in blind imitation (*taqlid*) (Edwardes, 1967; Ismail, 1989). Besides, several Muslims outside of India also criticized Ahmad Khan. al-Afghani, for instance, attacked against him in *al-'Urwat al-Wuthqa* (The Indissoluble Bond) via his article entitled *al-Dahriyyun fi al-Hind* (*The Materialists of India*) as follows (Baljon Jr., 1949):

He passed on himself as a naturist (materialist) and proclaimed that the only existence is blind nature, that God does not form part of this being (this is a manifest error), and that all the prophets were naturists who did not believe in the God of the scriptures (God forbid); he called himself a *Nechari* (naturist) and began to attract sons of the rich, who were thoughtless youths... His ideas were agreeable to the English authorities, and they, seeing in him a useful instrument to demoralize the Muslims, began to praise and honour him, helped him to build the college in Aligarh, and called it the college of the Muslims, that it should be a trap in which they might catch the sons of the believers in order to rear them in the ideas of this man Ahmad Khan Bahadur.

The above statement shows that al-Afghani did not agree with much of what Ahmad Khan holds to as they are a clear departure from true concept of Islam. The ideas of Ahmad Khan as a naturist could astray his fellow men from the right path of Islam. The role that he took up in building the college in Aligarh which can be a tool to indoctrinate his misleading ideas to the children of the Muslims ideas could be another mitigating factor that prompted al-Afghani to condemn Ahmad Khan. Criticism and condemnation, however, did not stop Ahmad Khan from pursuing his vision. The traditional system of education must be refined to suit with modernity, and this has to be carried out through a modern style school. Thus, MAOC modelled its educational system according to that of in England. This is somewhat different from what was implemented in Malaya as its model of education imitated that of in Egypt.

Educational Reform in Malaya:

It is a fact that the Malay reformists of the early 19th century in Malaya were influenced by the educational reform of the Middle Eastern modernists. The former's concern for the Malays' economic, educational and scientific progress was also considerably impressed with the ideas of modernization upheld by Ahmad Khan of India. It is, however, unclear whether his model of school had an influence on those reformists or not but his modernization programme in education which aims at improving his community was acknowledged by them. Although they did not have direct contact with Ahmad Khan and they all never met, the former was apparently impressed by the latter's modern secular school as mentioned under the cover photo of *al-Ikhwan* dated 16 June 1931 that the latter was "the philosopher of the nation who set up the Aligarh College in India." Apart from that, the statement of Ahmad Khan that "man is not only a social animal, he is essentially a national animal... man is capable of co-operative endeavour, but if he does not partake in the solution of national problems and demonstrate national love he is lower than the dumb animals" (Hafeez, 1970), is somewhat similar to that of the reformists' principle that a man is rather be dead if he is incapable to make any distinct contribution that can benefit himself, his people and nation.

It follows that the educational reform in India was also regarded as an important thrust to the Malay reformists' thoughts on the restoration of their community. The Malay reformists saw the need for Malay revival since there were similarities between the conditions of Muslims in India and in Malaya. The British intervention in Malaya and the decadent state of the Malays deeply disturbed them and this spurred them into action. They disseminated their thoughts on reformation to spark a revival movement in Malaya. They believed that transformation of the Malay community into a progressive nation requires an intensive involvement by the press and journalism. Through their writings, they instilled their ideas on the importance of knowledge onto the Malays and urged the latter to embrace reforms with an open mind (SP.24/1; SP.24/3). They utilized the platform of magazines namely *al-Imam* (The Leader), *al-Ikhwan* (The Comrade) and *Saudara* (The Brotherhood), books, novels and narratives to disseminate their ideas on how to make progress in politics, economy and society. *Al-Imam* offered the latest foreign news and met the demand and interest of its readers. It injected the Malays with the spirit of revivalism and adapted themselves to the challenge of the modern life (Zainal Abidin, 1941).

Al-Imam was founded at the most opportune time as the Malays did not seem able to move with the times. Inspired and influenced by the revivalist movement of Egypt and India, the Malay reformists disseminated the thoughts on pan-Islamism, religious reforms and modernism. The *al-Imam* was a platform for the intellectuals to evaluate critically the socio-religious aspect of the Malays. They were persuaded to renounce thoughts and

systems that were no longer relevant to the age (A. Ghapa, 1988). The main thrust of the reformists' thoughts on educational reform brought about a mixed reaction among the people in Malaya. Their ideas about it did not sit well with the traditionalists or Old Faction (*Kaum Tua*) whilst support was gained from those who were called Young Faction (*Kaum Muda*) or modernists. The Young Faction was an emerging group of Muslims who were inspired by the Muslim reformists of Egypt (Abu Bakar, 1981; Anon, 1908a). They were responsible for the setting up of Madrasah al-Iqbal al-Islamiyyah at Seligi Road in Singapore in 1907 (SP.24/3). It was the first modern religious school (*madrasah*) pioneered by the Muslim modernist of Malaya (Tan, 1961).

Even though the *madrasah* was only a primary school, it was an important starting point in making headways in the educational reforms. The new *madrasah* stemmed from a new concept of education system. It made use of a curriculum that integrates all subjects in one single system of education. This differed somewhat from the normal education system of that time. Although the *madrasah* was only a primary school, it had an efficient system of rules and regulations, and a clear vision. The *madrasah* became the first school in Malaya and Singapore that taught revealed and acquired knowledge within one system. Arabic, religious knowledge and English were taught in the *madrasah*. At that time, the teaching of the Arabic language and religious knowledge was conducted in *pondok* while English language was confined to English schools such as Raffles Institution (Anon, 1907; Wan Mohd. Shaghir, 2004). Muslim children who studied at *pondok* or traditional religious school would refuse to learn English as they deemed it profane and irreligious. It seemed natural then for them to reject the system of *madrasah* education as established by the Malay modernists. Although the majority of the Malays opposed the new *madrasah*, it received a different response abroad. In a letter sent by a reader in India to a press in Egypt, he regarded Madrasah al-Iqbal as an aspiration to the Muslims in India. They too believed that a *madrasah* was a good tool to improve the status of Muslims (Anon, 1908b).

Due to a great deal of resistance from the Malays, the *madrasah* was eventually closed down in 1908 (Tan, 1961). The failure of Madrasah al-Iqbal was because of its lack of financial support and more importantly, the concept driven by the group of Malay modernists was simply too novel and unnerving to many. The closure of the *madrasah* did not demotivate the Malay reformists to continue the propagation of ideas on modernism and reforms. In 1915, they established Madrasah al-Hadi in Banda Kaba, Malacca with the help of a wealthy local, Haji Abu Bakar b. Ahmad or known as Haji Bachik. The school aimed at promoting the true teachings of Islam that was address the needs of modern day (SP.24/3; Tan, 1961). Similar to the case in Singapore, the system of the modern religious school (*madrasah*) was very new to the common people and the traditional scholars of Malacca. The teachings implemented at the *madrasah* were undeniably ahead of time (Talib, 1998). The people of Malacca who held many of the traditional values did not receive the new *madrasah* warmly. They severely criticized and condemned it (SP.24/3). They were convinced that reforms and modernism would destroy the traditional ideals of Islam. Traditional religious scholars took advantage of the situation and influenced the people to jeer at the 'new-styled *madrasah*' (Tan, 1961). The Malays boycotted sending their children to the *madrasah* as they were critical of the ideas of reforms. The conflict deteriorated which brought to the closure of the school (Zainon, 1979).

The confrontation between the modernists and the traditionalists of Malacca compelled the former to look for another state that would support them and their ideas on reforms. Penang was the chosen state for its political condition. It was under direct British rule with no Malay ruler. In Penang, a school that could accommodate the new system of religious education was founded at Masjid Melayu, Acheen Street in 1916. It was known as Madrasah al-Qur'an. Its principal task was to teach al-Qur'an and religious knowledge that are deemed as individual duty (*fard 'ayn*) to the children since religious education was the main concern of Arab-Acheh community in Penang. The Penangites responded positively to the new and modern *madrasah*. Before long, the number of students multiplied. In 1918, the *madrasah* was relocated to Kampung Jawa Lama to meet the needs of the community of that area. The *madrasah* laid stress on religious subjects as well as Arabic. Increasing student enrolment necessitated another relocation the of the *madrasah* to Tek Soon Street (SP.63/4).

Syed Shaykh Ahmad al-Hady and Shaykh Muhammad Yusuf al-Mashoor, an honoured scholar and chieftain in Jelutong, were collectively responsible for the transformation of Madrasah al-Qur'an into a new system and institution (SP.24/3; Wan Mohd. Shaghir, 2004). The school at Tek Soon Street was renamed as Madrasah al-Mashoor al-Islamiyyah or al-Mashoor Arabic School. Their efforts were financially supported by Haji Bachik, as the site originally belonged to him. In addition, a few others also had a part to play in the establishment and maintenance of the modern *madrasah* (SP.63/4). After the transformation, the response towards the *madrasah* was still positive and remains to be so until today. The *madrasah* was the earliest school in Malaya teaching Arabic and Islamic religious knowledge using Arabic. English was also taught at Madrasah al-Mashoor (SP.10/32).

The founding of Madrasah al-Mashoor in Penang was another attempt of having an effective educational institution for the Malays. The school did not charge any fees, as it was funded by the endowment board and the donation of the community (Anon, 1929; Rahim, n.d.). The school was equipped with a blueprint, which spelt the duties of every committee members of its administrative board. The members were selected based on some stringent criteria to ensure their capability to supervise the running and management of the school. Other than

detailing the duties of the Madrasah al-Mashoor's administrators, the blueprint provided a general guideline to the school policies to ensure its survival (SP.10/20). The failure of the modern religious schools in Singapore and Malacca respectively served as valuable lessons for the reformists in establishing a better educational institution equipped with board members and an improved policy document. The running of a school would better managed by a group of board members, as compared to being supervised by one individual, as practised by the *pondok* system (Shafie, 1980), and probably in almost all other religious schools of that time.

The setting up of Madrasah al-Iqbal, Madrasah al-Hadi and Madrasah al-Mashoor is seen as an experiment to transform the system of education from the 'concept of separated disciplines' into an integrated one through the introduction of modern sciences into a religious school. The teaching of these sciences was seen to be able to equip students of that time with a holistic and sound education. The religious knowledge would facilitate their proper understanding of Islam, and the modern science would train them to compete with others in this modern age. However, the failure of many Arabic schools of the time, to include Madrasah al-Mashoor, to achieve their aims and objectives brought to the proposal to establish an Anglo-Malay School in 1930. It was regarded as an alternative approach to the existing Arabic schools because the latter with its present system did not achieve the desired outcome nor did it produce the qualities of students that it had set out to do. In addition, the schools did not have a sound system of education, as offered by the English schools (Anon, 1930a; al-Sayyid Shaykh, 1929).

Besides the failure of the modern Arabic schools, it is apparent that several Malay scholars of that time did follow such a new-styled model of educational institution. They introduced English into their own schools. English was thus found in Arabic schools such as Madrasah Hamidiyyah, Alor Star (1908) (Jawatankuasa Penulisan, n.d.), Madrasah al-Muhammadiyah, Kota Bharu (1917) (Ismail, 1988), and Madrasah Khairiyah, Parit Jamil (1920) (Saman, n.d.). These schools become the epitome of reform in Malay education. The effort to set up an Anglo-Malay School did not in anyway mean that the reformists changed their high regard for Arabic schools but they were simply disappointed with the failure and ineffectiveness of the Arabic schools (*madrasah*) in Malaya. The problems were to be solved by recruiting qualified and experienced teachers. Implementing this, however, was too costly since most of those teachers would be foreigners. The existing Arabic schools employed teachers based on their piousness rather than focusing on their qualification and experience. The reformists themselves were disillusioned with the failure of almost all Arabic schools to recruit qualified Arab teachers (Syed Shaykh, 1930).

The Anglo-Malay School was deemed necessary as children from Malay families were not able to get into English school, and thus the former provided them the opportunity to learn English, Malay and religious knowledge that were taught at the English, Malay and traditional schools respectively (Anon, 1930a; al-Sayyid Shaykh, 1929; Syed Shaykh, n.d.). It is indicated in *Saudara* (Anon, 1930b) that the objectives were to equip the Malays with sound religious knowledge and to arm them with knowledge that is in line with the modern demand. This was to place them in a position of advantage as the knowledge could be utilised to benefit their community. Students, who received education from English schools, were known to adapt better to modernization and had more chances in getting jobs as they were equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills (Anon, 1928b).

It was indicated that the Chinese and Indian communities enjoyed such privileges as they had set up their own private English schools. As such, they were able to lessen their dependence on English government schools. On the other hand, the Malays were not given much opportunity to acquire English education. Although the educational policy of that time offered the Malays with scholarships to enable them to receive higher education in Europe, they, however, could not even learn elementary English at the government schools (Celestial, 1925; Anon, 1930c). Several ideas to be implemented in the Anglo Malay School, according to al-Sayyid Shaykh (1929), included the teaching of religious knowledge using the Malay translation of Arabic works. English would also be taught in accordance with government policy. Instead of hiring foreigners as needed by Arabic schools, the Anglo Malay School only needed to hire local people to teach Malay and English subjects.

The idea of such a school that would teach Malay and English to the Malay children was only materialized into a reality after a few years. The hope was not doomed to disappointment and did not end in vain and futile as an individual man in Singapore, i.e. Sulaiman Ahmad, established a Malay English School in Singapore in the late 1934. Its founding was regarded by Sulaiman (1934) as his service towards his own people and the nation. The objective of the school was to equip the Malay children with Malay and English, hence facilitating them to exercise a sound translation. The school in Singapore may explain the possibility that the founder was inspired by the reformists' view that English education and an Anglo-Malay School are indispensably important for the Malays. The reformists were supposedly inspired by "the philosopher of the nation who set up the Aligarh College in India" that is known as Syed Ahmad Khan.

Conclusion:

Although there was no clear contact between Syed Shaykh and Syed Ahmad Khan, it is proven that the former was impressed by the latter's success in bringing reform and modernization. Syed Shaykh differed from Ahmad Khan in their emphasis on the level of study. While the latter gave attention to high education, he emphasized on elementary and primary intellectual learning. However, both of them recognized the importance of providing English for the Muslims. Syed Shaykh concentrated on educational reforms that were based on a concept of knowledge. To him, the introduction of English into religious education could equip the Malays with both the traditional and modern knowledge, hence enabling them to compete with other well-educated and well-developed nations, while securing their employment at government offices.

It is probably right to say that the environment of his time undoubtedly provided much of the driving force behind his reform of the religious education. The educational reform of Syed Shaykh is regarded by several modern scholars as a benchmark of intellectual transformation of Malaya. The modern religious education was a deviation from the norm of Malays who separated the traditional knowledge and modern sciences. Syed Shaykh was appalled by such actions of the traditionalists and this had further strengthened his thought on their values both. The modern religious schools would therefore cater the task of teaching the Malay children both the traditional and modern knowledge. This is in fact what happens in Malaysia today.

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