

Survival of the Pondok Learning Institution in Malaysia

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Abstract

The pondok is Malaysia's earliest traditional Islamic learning institution. Its contributions, especially in the development of Islamic education in Malaysia specifically and Southeast Asia in general, cannot be denied. The pondok institution is an Islamic learning institution that has become an integral part of the Malay community and operates steadfastly despite facing numerous challenges due to the changing times and globalisation. The objective of this research is: To study the history of pondok institution in Malaysia and to identify the steps that have been taken to preserve the pondok institution as an Islamic learning institution in Malaysia.

This research will fully apply library research, by referring to books, journal articles and proceeding papers. The findings of this research will show that the pondok institution has garnered attention from various parties, including the government in ensuring the continuity of these institutions in Islamic education in Malaysia. The pondok institution has its own importance in spreading the teachings of Islam, as well as in Islamic education, though it faces numerous challenges especially in today's modernised world of education.

It is evident that the efforts carried out to ensure these institutions remain strong as a champion of Islamic education for the Malay community, especially in ensuring the survival of the pondok institution, is continued to this day. This is considering the fact that for generations, the pondok institution has contributed to intellectual activities, the spread of the religious and the development of Islamic knowledge to the Islamic community in general.

Key words: Survival, continuity, pondok, Malaysia, today

Introduction

The arrival of Islam and its development in the Malay Archipelago is said to have occurred in the 12th or 13th century. Its spread began in Sumatra, followed by Malacca in the 15th century and then on the Island of Java. In the early 16 century, Islam was a strong religion embraced by the people of the Island of Maluku, then continued with the Islamisation of Borneo and the

Philippines (Mohammad, 2008). However, scholars generally do not deny that Islam had spread much earlier than the emergence of the Samudera-Pasai government in the 13th-14th century, because during the time Islam had been well established and its dissemination occurred more notably (Othman, 2006).

The development and stability of Islam in this region is not only due to the efforts of the merchants and attitude of the Malays of this region who readily accepted Islam, but can also be attributed to the efforts of the Islamic missionaries among merchants, missionaries, ulama's, sufi's, kings and the military (Fadil, 1986). Since the acceptance of Islam, religious activities, knowledge and Islamic education were implemented wholeheartedly by the ulama and Islamic missionaries (Ishak, 1992).

Brief History on Traditional Pondok Learning

The pondok refers to an educational institution and teaching of Islam without a formal classroom whereby a *tok guru* or ulama teaches Islamic knowledge to students around him (Thukiman, 2002). The term pondok originates from the Arabic *al-Funduq*, which means temporary home, hotel or hostel. This term was borrowed and became part of Malay vocabulary that is specific to the pattern of traditional learning oriented to religion (Bakar, 1992). The pondok can also be defined as a place of learning consisting of a row of small houses or huts. The pondok is the residence of the students who have come with their personal belongings; they are in the shape of small houses or a long house of a similar shape (Ishak, 1995). These pondok are made of wood or bamboo and erected near the home of a pious person known as *tuan guru*, *ustaz* and *kiyai*, as well as near the *madrasah*, *surau* or mosque (Thukiman, 2002). The pondok system was established because there were *mursyid* teachers who received their education in Mecca, Egypt or India, or were graduates of renowned local pondok institutions, such as those in Patani, Kedah or Kelantan that are taught in a mosque, *surau* or *madrasah*. Because the teachings they provide attract the attention of students, especially those from afar, they stay for while around the mosque or *surau* and built small wood structures known as *pondok* (Bakar, 1992).

The *pondok* institution functions as a centre for the development of knowledge, is a focal point for the community and is a place that upholds the traditions that are taught by Islam. This development had brought change and advancement in the lives of the community in general (Mohammad, 2008). The *pondok* system in the Malay Peninsula is a system of learning, with students surrounding the teacher who is teaching them by holding kitab's and it is a system that has existed since the beginning of Islam, called *halaqah*, whereby students sit cross-legged in a circle listening to the teacher (Osman, 2000). The growth of *pondok* learning, especially in the Malay Peninsula was an evolutionary idea that centred upon the home, *surau* or mosque. The development of Islamic learning and education through such institutions occurred around the world simultaneously with the arrival of Islam to these areas (Ishak, 1995).

The geographical location of Kelantan and Terengganu, which are near Patani, has influenced the development of the *pondok* system in these states. This is because the *pondok* education system began in Patani and spread to Malay states like Kelantan and Terengganu (Hussein, 1989). In Kelantan, the earliest *pondok* was established in Pulau Chondong in 1820. It was

established by Hj. Ab. Samad Abdullah. Meanwhile, in Terengganu, it was established by Syeikh Ab. Malik B. Abdullah (Tokku Pulau Manis) in the early 18th century (Othman, 2006). The *pondok* learning institution grew and spread to other states in the Malay Peninsula such as Kedah, Perak and Selangor. Pondok students came from various places in the Malay Peninsula, including foreign students from Cambodia and Brunei. Among the renowned pondok teachers were Tok Kenali (Kenali), Tok Selehor (Tumpat), Tok Bachok and Tok Padang Jelapang (Kelantan), Tok Pulau Manis, Hj. Mat Shafie Losong and Tokku Paloh (Terengganu), Hj. Muhammad Taib al-Mas'udi (Titi Gajah), Hj. Muhammad Noor (Langgar), Tuan Guru Hj. Mohammad Ali (Pumpung), Hj. Muhammad Thamin (Kota Kuala Muda) and Tuan Guru Hj. Ismail b. Mustafa (Gajah Mati) in Kedah, while in Perak they were Syeikh Hj. Yunus (Malim Nawar) and Hj. Ab. Manan (Padang Rengas).

Preservation Of The *Pondok* Institution As An Islamic Learning Institution In Malaysia

- **Establishment of Internal Organisations to Strengthen the *Pondok* Institution**

Positive development can be seen in the development of today's traditional education system. If previously each *pondok* institution operated on its own, now this has changed as most are now moving collectively and in an organised manner. Several bodies and associations have been established to safeguard the welfare and development of these institutions. Among them are *Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia (YPPM)*, *Pertubuhan Hal Ehwal Sekolah Agama Kedah (HESA)*, and *Pusat Pembangunan Pondok Berhad (PPPB)* (Ismail, 2015).

The central government has recognised the *pondok* institution as one of the most important Islamic education institutions in Malaysia. Therefore, the government has founded a non-governmental organisation (NGO) the *Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia (YPPM)* on 1 August 2012. The foundation is under the patronage of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Mohd Najib Bin Tun Hj Abdul Razak and Dato' Dr. Mashitah Binti Ibrahim as the Executive Chairman of YPPM. The Foundation was founded to give recognition to *pondok* institutions that have greatly contributed to the development of Islamic education in Malaysia. It also recognises the contributions of *ulama's* and *pondok* teachers that have produced generations that are knowledgeable in religion and the Al-Quran, as well as produce many religious scholars. YPPM is not an association but is an NGO that helps and cooperates with government agencies, the private sector and other NGOs in expanding, advancing and developing the *pondok* learning institution (<http://yppm.org.my>).

In Kedah, *Pertubuhan Hal Ehwal Sekolah Agama Kedah (HESA)* was founded on 2 April 2008 and was approved as an organisation on 20 December 2011. The organisation aims to bring together religious and *pondok* schools in Kedah, raise contributions and funds for the welfare of registered religious and *pondok* schools, act as an intermediary with the state government, oversee the growth and current needs of religious and *pondok* schools, as well as receive complaints and references on any problems faced by these institutions. Until 2013, a

total of 76 religious education institutions, including religious schools, *tahfiz* schools, *pondok*'s, correctional schools and integrated schools have registered with the organisation (<http://www.hesakedah.org>).

In Kelantan, in an effort to uphold the *pondok* institution, *Pusat Pembangunan Pondok Berhad (PPPB)* was established in 1995 and registered under the Malaysian Companies Act. PPPB was founded to develop *pondok* institutions under its supervision, encompassing aspects of administration, finance, welfare, infrastructure development and basic amenities that need to be prepared. There are 14 *pondok* institutions that have registered with PPPB in Kelantan, while around 12 institutions have not registered (<https://epondok.wordpress.com/pondok-malaysia>).

- **Financial Assistance**

Previously, *pondok* institutions receive financial assistance from individuals and members of the public, *zakat* and *wakaf* for the purpose of management. Teachers at *pondok* schools do not have a fixed income and depend on contributions to survive. Besides this, these institutions also generate income by planting vegetables, which is done by the students, as well as through the sale of *Jawi* books that are produced by the teachers.

However, *pondok* institutions have received attention from the government, be it the state government or central government. The Malaysian government has given adequate financial assistance to *pondok* institutions. Recognizing the importance of upholding Islamic education in Malaysia, in the 2014 Budget, the government allocated RM50 million to assist religious schools and *pondok* institutions in Malaysia. This is considering many *pondok* graduates have contributed to the evolution of education and national development as they were able to continue their studies to higher levels, be it at local or overseas universities. Besides forging careers as teachers or *pondok* teachers, *pondok* graduates have also succeeded in professional fields such as becoming judges, lawyers, medical doctors, lecturers, engineers and even ministers and deputy ministers (<http://yppm.org.my>).

Meanwhile in the 2015 Budget, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Mohd Najib Bin Tun Hj Abdul Razak announced an allocation of RM25 million for the development of *pondok* institutions registered with the *Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri*. This is to ensure that the trajectory of these institutions will improve and realistic with the changing times (Ibrahim, 2014).

During *Ijtimak Pondok Malaysia 2016*, the Prime Minister announced a financial allocation of RM 2.5 million through *Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia (YPMM)* in upholding and strengthening *pondok* institutions in Malaysia. RM 500,000 from that amount was used to assist *pondok* schools that experiences disasters like floods and fires under the *Tabung Kasih Perdana Menteri*. Meanwhile, RM 2 million was allocated to intensify research on

pondok, as well as to implement instruments through social media as an operation to promote those institutions to the public (<http://canselori.umt.edu.my/?p=3376>).

- **Establishing Modern *Pondok* Institutions**

In ensuring the *pondok* institution can continue in today's current movement in Islamic education, several changes were implemented to these institutions. Befitting current demands without ignoring the primary purpose of the *pondok* institution, which is to provide complete Islamic education to the community and act as a missionary centre, several upgrades must be implemented. Among the changes needed are the renewal of educational materials and content by including general and skill-based subjects, renewing the education system and methodology, as well as expanding the function of a *pondok* institution beyond as an Islamic learning centre to a socioeconomic centre (Zakaria, 2010).

In Malaysia, a modern *pondok* was established in Kelantan, called the *Pusat Pengajian Pondok Telong*, Kandis, Bachok that began operations in 1984. It is monitored by the State Government of Kelantan and managed under *Yayasan Islam Kelantan (YIK)*. Its establishment is related to the changing of the times, place, situation and pressing needs felt by Muslims, especially in Kelantan. Apart from reviving the popularity of *pondok* institutions and fulfill in current educational needs, the establishment of the *Pusat Pengajian Pondok Telong* is aimed at producing *ulama* and Islamic scholars that can fulfill the need for active participation in the field of Islamic knowledge and as religious administrators. Among the modern characteristics practiced by this *pondok* is an exam-oriented assessment system, co-curricular activities, a proper timetable, selection in the entry system, an administrative organisation structure and students have the chance to pursue their studies to Islamic universities in the Middle East (Basri, 1990). Besides that, the *halaqah* method that was practised in the learning sessions of this *pondok* was replaced by classroom systems like modern schools. This is conducted to modernise the learning system applied in this institution, befitting its role as a modern *pondok* (Ali, 2016).

Pondok Sungai Durian, Kuala Krai, Kelantan has also taken the initiative to dividing learning sessions into two systems - traditional and modern. Its name was also changed to *Madrasah Muhammadiyah Sungai Durian*. In the traditional system, exams were introduced to enable students to continue their studies to higher levels, while not neglecting traditional methods like *halaqah* and lectures. Meanwhile, the modern system is based on a schooling system according to a syllabus by *Yayasan Islam Kelantan (YIK)* and some additions to balance it with the *pondok* learning syllabus. However, the traditional system is prioritised as it is important for producing students that are capable of mastering past *kitab's*, whether written by *ulama* from the Malay Archipelago or the Middle East (Hassan, 2008).

In Kedah, among the modern *pondok* established are *Madrasah Nurul Hidayah*, Kuala Ketil, *Madrasah Nurul Islah* which was formerly known as *Pondok Ustaz Bakar Parit Panjang*, Kupang, and *Madrasah Saadatul Wathoniah*, Kuala Ketil (<http://www.hesakedah.org/direktori/sekolah-pondok.html>). Besides these, other modern *pondok's* in Kedah are *Sekolah Menengah Agama Taufikiah Khairiah al-Halimiah*, which was

formerly known as *Pondok Pak Ya*, Padang Lumat and *Madrasah Misbahul Falah* or *Pondok Lanai* at Parit Panjang, Baling.

- **Organising *Ijtimak Pondok***

In 2014, YPPM organised the *Ijtimak Pondok Malaysia 2014* in Alor Setar, Kedah with the theme “*Pondok Institutions in the New Millennium : Challenges and Direction*”. The programme brought together 1300 *pondok* members, as well as local and international academic figures. The *Ijtimak* was organised to recognise the sacrifice and contributions of *pondok* members in producing students that are proficient in religion and to discuss the direction and future of *pondok* institutions, especially in Malaysia (<http://yppm.org.my>).The closing ceremony of the *Ijtimak* was officiated by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato’ Seri Mohd Najib Bin Tun Hj. Abdul Razak. In his closing speech, he announced a grant for RM 500,000 for finding and conserving old *kitab*’s and manuscripts that are renowned either locally or abroad. He also announced the allocation of 50 spots in universities for selected *pondok* students to pursue their education to local universities with a full scholarship from the government, while 50 places are reserved for *pondok* teachers to receive training at *Institut Pendidikan Guru*, Islamic Education Campus in Bangi, Selangor (Azmi, 2014).

In 2016, *Ijtimak Pondok Malaysia 2016* was held in Terengganu with several wards being given out such as *Anugerah Pondok Inovasi*, *Anugerah Tokoh Pondok*, *Anugerah Karyawan Pondok* and *Anugerah Sara Pondok* (<http://yppm.org.my>). The opening and closing ceremonies of the *Ijtimak* was officiated by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato’ Seri Mohd Najib Bin Tun Hj Abdul Razak at University of Malaysia Terengganu (Baharin, 2016).

In Kelantan, the *Ijtimak* of *Ulama’s* and *Pondok Teachers* of Kelantan 1437 H (2015) was held at *Madrasah Diniyyah Bakriah*, *Pondok Pasir Tumbuh*, Kelantan. The programme comprised of religious lectures, such as kuliah maghrib and discussions, dialogues, as well as talks on current issues (<https://epondok.wordpress.com>).

- **Effective Management and Development**

The survival of the *pondok* institutions of today depends on effective management and the role of *pondok* teachers who will determine the continuity of the learning system in *pondok*’s (Abdullah, 2011). Good management can ensure that the *pondok* institution will endure in current development. Efficient organisational management, a healthy environment and relevant curriculum can help *pondok* institutions continue to be involved in current Islamic education trends in Malaysia. Resource sharing, interactive learning methods and acceptance of current knowledge such as entrepreneurship, vocational skills and information technology will benefit the students and ensure they are up-to-date.

A complete database and directory must be developed to promote *pondok* education and its importance in education and current development. Accreditations, including benchmarks, should also be created to ensure the *pondok* institution develops alongside changes and the

current environment, encompassing the quality of teachers, leadership and infrastructural development (Ibrahim, 2013).

Websites have been developed by several renowned *pondok* in Kelantan, such as *Pondok Pasir Tumbuh (Madrasah Bakriyyah)* and *Pondok Sungai Durian (Madrasah Muhammadiyah)*. The websites disseminate information regarding the *pondok*'s and shares knowledge through writings, audio and video recordings.

The latest teaching and learning styles have been implemented without affecting the originality of the knowledge and method used for generations. Modern elements must be applied in the management of the *pondok* so that it is parallel to the present time and upholds the dignity of the *pondok* to a higher level. Today, technology is used to disseminate knowledge from *turath kitab*'s to the public, in which *turath* knowledge can be obtained through the internet. *Pondok* members are also able to upload lectures, discussions and other materials to be appreciated by the public. This development is crucial in spreading information on the *pondok* system and the unique knowledge and development of knowledge that occurs. Therefore, this Islamic missionary medium is becoming more widespread and can be reached by all members of the public that would like to delve deeper into this traditional learning institution (Ismail, 2015).

In Kelantan, most *pondok* institutions are still active and have used new buildings and infrastructural amenities. Modern buildings, either classes or dorms have also been built for students to study in a more conducive and comfortable environment (Abdullah, 2011). This step has indirectly shown that *pondok* institutions are still well received among the community to fulfil their need in learning Islamic knowledge. Assistance given for those purposes enable *pondok* institutions to continue and play a vital role in contributing to the development and sustainability of Islamic education especially in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

The *pondok* institution is a traditional Islamic education institution that survives to this day as a centre for missionary work and Islamic knowledge. Although these institutions face various challenges in continuing their survival in the world of modern education, the immense value of their contributions to Islamic knowledge cannot be denied. Although traditionally inclined, these institutions are still well received by members of the public for deepening Islamic knowledge.

The strengthening of these institutions today requires much commitment, support and ideas in realising these institutions so that they are relevant to current education. Various plans have been implemented with the support of the government in ensuring this traditional Islamic education institution continues to endure in contemporary Islamic education. Assistance in terms of finance, infrastructure and ideas have helped *pondok* institutions to dictate developments and improvements that ensure the institution can meet the needs of current Islamic knowledge. However, to ensure that these institutions remain a centre of Islamic education in Malaysia, systematic planning and governance is needed by *pondok* practitioners,

so that they continue to play a role in upholding Islamic knowledge and education in today's challenging era.

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