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The Influence of Islamic Religious Education and British Administrator's Views on The Education System in Malaya

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Abstract

The majority of British administrators adhere to the philosophy of logical positivism (later known as logical empiricism), referred as an understanding that emphasized on the use of the intellect as the main approach to obtain accurate scientific facts based on meticulous and systematic research methods. This philosophy rejects the proof of a fact from the source of revelation as it is considered not relevant in proving the history and has created a bigoted and queried views towards the Malay community in Malaya. This article focuses on the analysis of the British administrators' views on the system of education in Malaya, which include religious and secular education, and to determine the influence of Islamic religious education on the community. The methods used were historiography, comparative method and content analysis. The study found that the British administrators had underestimated the contribution of Islamic education system in Malaya and considered the failure of Malaya in achieving its high civilization was due to the adherence to Islam which was considered as irrelevant and outdated. Hence, to improve these weaknesses, Western education system was seen as an appropriate step to internalise secularism into the thinking of the Malays in Malaya.

Keywords: Philosophy of Logical Positivism, Education System, British Administrators, Islam, Malay Community

Introduction

The thinking of the British administrators was derived from the doctrine of the Orientalism; a political ideology that aims to colonize and destroy the Eastern culture, especially Islam, thus highlighting Western civilization as great and dominating the whole world (Rahman et al., 2017). According to Said (1977), orientalism is a method of understanding the Eastern world based on the observations from the Western society. Said's view includes three different but interrelated ideas, which are:

- 1) The orientalists refer to individuals who teach, write a work or do a series of researches related to the Eastern world. They consist of anthropologists, sociologists or philologists.
- 2) Orientalism is a method of thinking based on the differences of ontologism and epistemology between the Eastern and Western worlds.
- 3) Orientalism is a Western method of dominating, restructuring and controlling the Eastern society. For them, it is important to create statements about the Eastern world especially related to religion, teaching and mastering the Eastern world and then change them according to their wishes.

Lughod (2001, p. 103) also has the same opinion regarding orientalism, as she mentioned;

The way in which the Orient has been represented in Europe through an imaginative geography that divides East and West, confirming Western superiority and enabling, if not actually constituting, European domination of those negatively portrayed regions known as East.

The views of Said (1977); Lughod (2001) clearly show that the Western colonialists aimed to control over the Eastern world through religion, culture and intellect, and afterward implanted the ideology of secularism into the thinking of the colonised society. According to al-Attas (1978), the traditional enmity between Christianity and Islam originally existed through the mission of territorial expansion and military attacks. It then turned to 'intellectual warfare' which aimed at the knowledge and thinking of Muslims as the main target to be defeated. As he explained:

The confrontation between Western culture and civilization and Islam... has now moved on to the intellectual level and we must realize, then, that this confrontation is by nature a historically permanent one. Islam is seen by the West as posing a challenge to its very way of life.

(Al-Attas 1978, p. 99)

The infusion of Western thought through education in the Malay society was seen as one way to strengthen the power of colonisation over Malaya. This policy aimed to separate the community from the spirit and tradition of Islam in all affairs of life. According to Baharuddin (2011), Stamford Raffles was a pioneering scholar in developing the framework of colonisation at the early stages of British colonisation. The effect resulted in the separation of knowledge, especially religious education which was previously a compulsory subject to be studied at that time. This effort was then continued by the succeeding orientalists like Wilkinson, Winstedt and Swettenham, who were British administrative officers serving in Malaya.

Winstedt for example, had been appointed as Assistant Director of the Malay Education who specifically responsible for the Malay schools located in the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements. In 1916, Winstedt were sent to the islands of Java and the Philippines to study their school system and to make suggestions for improvement in the form of a report on the lessons for the Malays in Malaya (Roff, 2003).

To complete this study, the author focused on two objectives, namely to study the views of British administrators on the education system in Malaya, including religious and secular

education, and then identify the influence of Islamic religious education on the Malay community. This study is important because it can provide understanding and awareness to the Malays about the influence of Islam, especially in the education system in Malaya.

The Basis of British Administrators' Assessment on Education System

According to Rahman et al (2016), the Western scholars had been fully influenced by the secularism approach which rejected religion as the source of knowledge and the truth in human life, instead religion was said to be the cause of human suffering. Hassan (1986) viewed the philosophy of mastering knowledge based on the Western secularism was developed from the philosophy of Humanism. This philosophy regards human development as only to fulfil personal satisfaction regardless of any religious consideration. Progression in life requires human beings to rely entirely on the use of reason. As a result, this philosophy has given birth to a large number of scientific discipline paradigms in creating a materialistic civilization as follow:

- a) A paradigm is free to evaluate a scientific study. An orientalist needs to make himself free from religious beliefs when conducting research through various fields of knowledge. By holding up to any religious approach, a person will be restricted from conducting critical evaluation related to his religion.
- b) Philosophy of logical positivism (or empirical positivism); it is a scientific study used by the orientalist scholars to obtain scientific fact precisely and correctly based on a fairly systematic and thorough research methods (Mahmud, 1997). As Abdullah (2000) explained, this approach referred to the attitude of the orientalists who rejected religion and supernatural things which can't be seen and handled by the senses.
- c) The philosophy of historicism; it highlights the development of history as an important aspect of human existence. This philosophy considers religion to be archaic and rejected as proof of academic facts. According to Meinecke (1956), in order to understand a historical fact, the researcher needs to do a thorough research on the occurred event. Such research should be based on a skeptical point of view and reject any divinely based ideology, especially Islam.

Goldziher (1981) believed that any study based on religion should be considered to be of poor quality and lack of academic value. Any study related to Islam should not refer to the Qur'an or the work of the Islamic scholars, rather use the historical reality of Muslims to know the true picture of Islam. Any critical analysis of Islam should be made using higher criticism approach. This approach was initially used to prove the errors found in Christianity, then extended to be used in Islam. This approach aims to prove the error of the contents of the Qur'an and Sunnah as to picture Islam as a deviant teaching. The element of secularism thought contained in this approach clearly stipulates that any historical event that occurs in Muslim society needs to be evaluated skeptically in order to obtain any particular facts.

The British Administrators' View on System of Education in Malaya

According to Sidhu (1985), Stamford Raffles was the person entrusted to infused Western education system during the period of his service in Malaya. As a result, religious education had been completely separated from the formal education system. Among the subjects introduced were mathematics, science, commerce, medicine and so on, all these were separated from religious education which focusing on learning al-Quran, al-Hadith, faith, the rules of *fiqh* *ibādah*, *mu`āmalah* and others. Pa (1991) viewed the education system

introduced by the British as a form of dualism; the segregation between the national school and religious school streams. In fact, educational programs practiced in the West was seen as not suitable to be applied in Malaya as it put emphasis on the approach of secularism; separating the worldly knowledge from the the religious knowledge.

Roff (2003), in this matter mentioned that during the rule of the British, there were four primary schools established in Malaya, including the vernacular schools of Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English. However, at the same time there were also active religious schools which were operating separately, such as the *pondok* schools, madrasahs and other local religious schools. The existence of various school streams at that time, according to Lebar (1992), was due to the 'division and order' policy of British administrators, who refused to formulate the National Education Policy. If this measure was implemented, it could undermine the position of the British in Malaya. This Western education system had been gradually accepted by the community, especially the Muslim aristocrats. In fact, this group also considered this education system to be the best and should be maintained even after achieving independence.

According to Salleh (1974), every Muslim student would formally attend a religious school class in the afternoon compared to the Western education system which was taught in the morning. As a result of the emphasis, there was a huge gap between religious and Western education, which created exclusive sessions to teach religion, such as in the afternoon sessions for the primary and, and at certain times during the school period for the lower secondary schools. Meanwhile, at the upper secondary level, it was an alternative and not a compulsory subject (Mukmin, 2009). The writer also argued that even this kind of education system was implemented in the Malay schools, religious aspects as embedded in this subject were not emphasized. Baki (1981) also stated, any school which was operating under the Western education system received greater financial allocations compared to the religious schools, even the Malaya religious sholars made a conclusion that the religious schools were neglected at that time.

According to Roff (1980), among Winstedt's contribution in the field of education in Malaya was a complete report in 1917 which had become the main source of reference throughout the process of the Malays education until 1950s. The report put forward the concept of rural bias and had determined the process of education for the Malays in the last quarter century. According to Roff (1980, p. 139):

In his way, he did more to circumscribe Malay educational progress, and to ensure that the Malay peasant did not get ideas above his station, than anyone else before or since. It was his accomplishment of this within a greatly improved organizational framework that appears to have given rise to a persisting illusion that real educational reform dates from 1917.

Roff also added:

Winstedt regarded the vernacular schools as essentially vehicles for only the most elementary instruction. A small and privileged group might go on from this to higher, but still elementary, education in English. For the mass of the peasantry, what was important was to reduce the number of years spent in receiving education and to give vernacular instruction a strong manual and agricultural bias.

(Roff 1980, p. 139)

According to Philip (1974), the purpose of the British administrators providing education to the community was not aiming at making them intellectuals, but merely to inherit the traditional jobs from their parents, or highly likely to make the children a little bit more educated than them. Meanwhile, graduates from the English schools were mostly from the aristocrats, who were then appointed as subordinate officers and administrators only. They were regarded as dogbodies for the British administration who would help to smoothen the communication with the locals especially with the Malays. British's effort of training the Malay community was to make them as successors after the independence of Malaya. As a result, the policies of British colonialism would continue to develop in governing this country (Rahman et al., 2019).

The Specialty of Religious Education System in Malaya

There are two benefits of the religious education system in Malaya; first, the use of *Jawi*, and second, the establishment of *pondok* educational institution. First, the contribution of the early Muslim scholars was the introduction of the Malay *Jawi* script which was originated from the Malay language, later used as the main instrument for the development of Islamic knowledge in the Malay World (Ahmad, 2018). The selection of local language as a medium for the dissemination of religious knowledge had been done by previous Islamic scholars such as the creation of Urdu writing in India and the Persian writing in Iran based on the Arabic language, with some improvements made according to the suitability of the area of the locals.

As Othman (2006) explained, the use of *Jawi* writing was beyond the original purpose of its creation as a medium to spread Islam, until it was recognized as an important medium of communication (*lingua franca*) throughout the Malay region. Daud and Muammar (2009) stated, this recognition illustrated the process of maturity in *Jawi* writing such as the production of translated works from the Middle East by Sheikh Nurudin al-Rānīrī through *Dūr al-Farā'id bi Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id*. This work is a translation of the original work of *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafiyya* by Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī. Yet, he contributed approximately 50 per cent of his own thinking in this translation work and adjusted it according to the context of the Malay world.

Another works written by Sheikh Nurudin al-Rānīrī was *al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm* which was related to jurisprudence, and *Bustān al-Salāṭīn*, which was related to constitutionality. As a result, these *Jawi* writings had spread to all corners of the Islamic world such as in Mecca, Bombay, Istanbul and Cairo. In fact, these works were also recognized for their writing quality in several Western scientific centers such as at the Middle Eastern Studies and Near Eastern Studies (Othman & Ishak, 2000).

Second, it is the role of the Patani *ulama* in the establishment of *pondok* institutions in the Malay world. This group had made a very significant contribution to Islamic educational institution in terms of strengthening and streamlining the institution compared to the previous education system. Al-Fatani (2011) stated, among the famous Patani scholars were Faqih Wan Musa Mohd Salleh al-Laqihi; the first known scholars to appear in Patani, Sheikh Daud Abdullah al-Fatani, Sheikh Hasan Ishak al-Fatani and Sheikh Abdul Samad al-Falimbani.

According to Abdullah (2001), the establishment of the *pondok* system of education in the Malay World was appropriate and acceptable by the locals through its method of enculturating knowledge. Another special feature of *pondok* educational institution was that the education system was privatized, free from the control of the government. This situation

allowed the scholars to conduct the study sessions independently without being influenced by any party which has specific agenda and interests. This privilege had made the *ulama* at that time as agents of changes and intellectuals of the ummah who were aware and sensitive to current issues occurred within a society. Meanwhile, the method of *pondok* study was both theoretical and practical, as well as open to all by giving the opportunity to anyone regardless of family background and age factor (Abidin et al., 2019).

The cooperation between scholars and the local community has made the *pondok* educational institution a major stronghold to defend the sanctity of Islam from the Western colonial attacks. Rahman and Shukri (2011) mentioned that the Patani *ulama* who settled in Mecca and Medina were labelled as the early figures who had been raising the spirit of nationalism to a number of Malay students in the Middle East, which finally brought into awareness about the suffering experienced by the community of the Malay Archipelago during the occupation of Western colonialists.

The reputation of the Patani *ulama* such as Sheikh Daud Abdullah al-Fatani, Sheikh Abdul Samad al-Falimbani, Sheikh Muhammad Nafis al-Huda, Sheikh Muhammad Nawawi al-Jawi, Sheikh Wan Ali Kotan and many others had attracted most of the Malay students to continue studies at *pondok* educational institution, then continued to further studies at centers of Islamic Studies in the Middle East. As Othman (2006) explained, the effects of furthering their studies in the Middle East countries, students had been exposed to the struggle of Pan-Islamism under the leadership of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ‘Abduh, a movement fighting for the liberation of the Islamic world from the clutches of the Western colonialism.

The Effects of Infusing Western Thought on the Education System in Malaya

The infusion of the Western thought by the British on the system of education in Malaya had left the community with a long-lasting effect. The British were planning a long-term action plan to control the development of the education system in Malaya, which were:

- a) The establishment of a dual education system which was loaded with secular values to reduce religious values in all fields of science and education, as well as to reduce the popularity of the *pondok* education institution in Malaya (Mukmin, 2009).
- b) Introducing a vernacular education system which was based on racism, and they were the Malay vernacular school, Chinese vernacular school and Tamil vernacular school. This policy was an attempt to split the unity of the nation in Malaya so it did not become a threat to the Western colonial powers. (Basri, 2010).
- c) Introducing a system of *Rumi* writing which had higher commercial value and to eliminate the influence of *Jawi* writing system that was proven to be the most important medium for the spread of Islam in the Malay region (Fadzil, 2012).
- d) Applying subjects and syllabus in the Malay schools by highlighting the British as the initiator of civilization in the Malay Peninsula particularly and the Eastern countries in general (Winstedt, 1988).

Rahman et al (2017) explained that the implementation of this Western education system clearly marginalized the spirit and tradition of Islam, when the subjects previously considered important in the education system had been abolished. In fact, the *Jawi* writing and spelling system was also abolished as a measure to limit the mastery of Islamic knowledge. This is because the writing and spelling system was the main medium in the activities and knowledge tradition of Islam in the Malay world.

Mukmin (2009) also believed that the effect of emphasising the education system in Malaya after independence was the production of Rahman Talib Report (*Laporan Penyata Rahman Talib*) in 1960. Among the important contents included in the report was the proposal of using Malay language as medium of instruction in high schools, meanwhile three languages; Malay, Chinese and Tamil languages, were allowed to be used as medium of instruction in primary schools. However, English subject must be taught at all levels of the schools. Meanwhile, Islamic subject should be taught in schools with more than 15 Muslim students. This report also suggested to repair the Malay, Chinese and Tamil primary school buildings and trainee teachers should be placed in these particular schools.

Conclusion

As a result of this study, the writing of this article is important in explaining that Islamic religious education brings a great influence into the education system in Malaya, especially to the Muslim community in shaping a true Muslim personality. Islam is a religion based on the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. All Civilizations which developed based on these two main foundations have all aspects of perfection in human life including belief systems, law, science, economics, science and technology, arts, literature, and many more. This contribution of Islamic religious education has produced many great Islamic scholars until now and acted as the successor to the previous scholars in spreading Islam in this country. In addition, the idea of strengthening *Jawi* writing is seen to ensure that this heritage is preserved by implementing various appropriate programs.

From another angle, the author explains that the approach of British administrators in evaluating the Islamic religious education system in Malaya is based on the philosophy of logical empirical positivism, which is an understanding that emphasizes the full use of reason. As explained earlier, this philosophy rejects the proof of a fact using a source of revelation because it is considered irrelevant in proving the history of human civilization. As a result, every writing from British administrators on the influence of Islam in education has given rise to a dubious view to the point that all Islamic scholarly procedures can be disputed for their truth.

The British also labeled the Malay community as weak in all aspects such as lagging in terms of modernity due to adherence to Islam, which is considered irrelevant to current developments. Thus, the implementation of the Western education system in Malaya is seen as the right step to apply secularist thinking into the life of the Malay community. The author explains the cause of the failure of the British in understanding the Malay community is because it adheres to European-centered thinking that is Euro-centrism which elevates the European race as civilized compared to other races covering the Asian continent, and many more.

The authors also believe that when the British made the Euro-centric approach as a yardstick to study the history of Malaya, there were actually failed to understand the Malay community, therefore became biased in explaining matters regarding Islam in the Malay Archipelago. In addition, the British attempt to eliminate the influence of Islam in the Malay community was difficult because Islam was ingrained in the lives of the Malays.

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