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The Pondok Institution in Malaysia and The Transformation Towards Sustainability

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Abstract

The pondok institution is the earliest formal education system ever established in Malaysia particularly and the entire archipelago. This institution has made vast contributions that are invaluable to the development of Islamic education since its establishment until the present. Its legacy and the monumental role it plays in the propagation of Islam and the dissemination of Islamic knowledge is evident in the numerous respectable religious scholars it has successfully produced thus far. Nevertheless, a transformation is inevitable as this institution faces an increasing need to adopt technological advancements in this era of globalisation. This transformation which will encompass several aspects is indeed important to ensure the sustainability of this institution in the years to come.

In addition, this study will discuss the transformation process that will ensure the sustainability of the pondok institution in Malaysia. To achieve this particular objective, this research will utilise the qualitative method which encompasses library research to compile the necessary data. The compiled data will then be analysed according to content to produce the research findings.

The research findings show several transformations which include administrative affairs, facilities as well as teaching and learning (T & L) methods that need to be incorporated into ensuring the sustainability of this institution. The establishment of more modern Islamic studies institutions seek to rival the present traditional pondok institution. Due to this, it is imperative that the latter strives towards sustainability by undergoing a much-needed transformation to ensure its rightful place in the field of Islamic education and the community at large. With this transformation, the pondok institution will be able to retain its *turath* elements and remain relevant in these modern times. Moreover, it will also be able to compete with other institutions which provide Islamic education.

Keywords: Transformation, Proposal, Pondok Institution, Sustainability, Islamic Education.

Introduction

The states that had first accepted and embraced the Islamic faith in Malaysia or as previously known as the Malay Peninsular were Kedah (9/10 AD), Pahang (11 AD), Kelantan (12 AD), Terengganu (13 AD) dan seterusnya Melaka (15 AD) (Abidin, 2012). The dissemination of the Islamic faith was not merely due to the efforts of the merchants that conducted trade with these states nor was it due to the ready acceptance of the Malays to embrace Islam. More importantly, it was due to the tireless efforts of numerous parties which include the missionaries, religious scholars, sufís, and the rulers who had played an important role in the Islamization process of the archipelago at the time (Fadil, 1986). When the Islamic faith was accepted by the community, the religious scholars and the missionaries tripled their efforts in ensuring the successful dissemination of Islam (Ishak, 1992). In the beginning, the mosques, royal palaces, homes of religious scholars, surau were fully utilised in the propagation of Islam. However eventually, the religious teachers and scholars took the initiative to establish the pondok institution as a centre for formal Islamic education and the propagation of the Islamic faith.

The pondok institution with its formal Islamic education system plays a significant role in contributing to the transmission of knowledge, conservation of traditional Islamic values, as well as producing potential religious scholars and forming a community that has been deeply ingrained in the Islamic faith (Ramli, 2016). This particular religious institution also aims to produce students that are highly knowledgeable in Islam, possess excellent character and able to guide the surrounding community to embrace Islam wholeheartedly. The main aim of the establishment of this pondok institution is to produce a community that will truly practise the Islamic faith in its entirety (Tuah, 2012). The pondok institution places great emphasis on knowledge, morality and discipline. As a direct consequence of this emphasis, this institution has successfully produced religious scholars as well as individuals highly knowledgeable in religious matters, possess high moral calibre and fully capable of resolving disputes within the community at large (Rahim et. al., 2015).

Problem Statement

The pondok institution has experienced numerous challenges and decline when more modernised education institutions were established in Malaysia since colonization. These problems provide the ímpetus for the transformation of this pondok institution to ensure its sustainability as the leading Islamic education institution. At present, the pondok institution has to compete with *madrasah*, *tahfiz*, schools and universities. Another factor that led to the decline of pondok institution is the systematic education system offered at the other religious institution that compells parents to send their children to madrasah and schools rather than the former. These institutions such as madrasah and schools have introduced specific subjects that relate to the current syllabus which are relevant to the current times and assess the academic abilities of the students through standardised tests. Furthermore, another contributing factor that led to the decline of the pondok institution is the current mentality of society that believes that the graduates of this institution does not have any potential for success compared to graduates of schools and madrasah. In fact, they would rather send their children to schools and madrasahs as they perceive that these institutions will provide a better future for their offspring (Ishak, 1990).

The identity and excellence of a pondok institution depends on the credibility and charisma of the *Tuan Guru* and the other teachers teaching at the said institution. However, in the event the *Tuan Guru* who had established the respective pondok institution eventually passes away the said institution will be at a loss as there is no one deemed worthy to replace him and continue the legacy of disseminating the Islamic faith. Unfortunately, this has been considered the norm as there had been no initiative to rectify this situation (Ramli & Bakar, 2013; Manaf, 2001).

The pondok institution have been perceived to be lagging behind in terms of modernization as it still retains its traditional methods that have been passed down through the generation of various religious scholars (Ismail, 2014; Rahim, 2010). Furthermore, the pondok institution no longer appears to be developing as it once did during its peak. This is mainly due to its reluctance to undergo change and adapt to the mainstream education system. Currently, the establishment of the present pondok institutions are a modern adaptation of the tahfiz studies and no longer bear any semblance to the conventional pondok system of the past (Abdullah, 2018).

In addition, the present education system of these traditional pondok institutions that are solely based on the conventional methods such as *talaqqi* and *halaqah* have certain weaknesses. These weaknesses include a disorganized curriculum, inadequate time allotted, an inadequate teaching staff that do not possess the necessary pedagogical knowledge as well as not focusing on the level of knowledge or capabilities of the individual student in mastering the subjects being taught (Ghani, 2016). Moreover, another leading factor that led to the decline of the pondok institutions was the emphasis on fardhu ain at the expense of fardhu kifayah. Besides that, there was the issue of accreditation of the pondok institutions. Since there was no accreditation, the pondok students were deprived of the opportunity of furthering their studies at the tertiary level which led to fewer career opportunities in their respective fields (Ishak, 2019).

Research Methodology

This study uses the qualitative methodology. The library research is a data compilation method that uses the data or evidence as well as studying the documents and records relevant to the study (Shaffie, 1991). This study focuses on the analysis of the contents and based on the descriptives. The researcher has to analyse the documents thoroughly to discern the contents are relevant to the study in question (Jazmi, 2012).

The research is conducted by analysing the available literature which includes books, journals, thesis, working papers and proceedings. The compiled data are analysed according to content to gain the necessary information pertinent to the research in question.

Literature Review

The pondok institution is the earliest centre of formal education ever established in the archipelago around 19 AD. This institution was established to fulfill the demands and needs of the Muslim community that needed the appropriate religious knowledge and guidance particularly on matters related to *akidah* and acts of worship (Rawi, 2015). The Islamic faith was able to stave off the influence of Christianity and Western elements during colonization with the establishment and strong presence of the pondok institution. The pondok institution was the main factor Christianity failed to make its presence felt among the Malay community at the time. This institution plays a rather significant role in becoming a centre in establishing

akidah, syariat and empowering the minds of the Malay-Muslim community during the colonization era (Abdullah, 2019). The education system of the pondok institution was also able to provide enlightenment to the surrounding community whereby it has also successfully produced various renowned religious scholars that have brought a tremendous impact to the community.

Currently, the total number of active pondok institutions in Malaysia that still practice the traditional methods are approximately one hundred. These pondok institutions are still making a significant contribution to the development of Islamic education in Malaysia although they are still lagging behind in certain aspects. Nevertheless, the pondok institutions are still important and relevant to the present Islamic education based on the positive response of the community as well as the immense contributions in inculcating Islamic religious knowledge and mindset that are based firmly on Islamic syariat (Rawi, 2015).

According to Ismail (2016), it is imperative that the pondok institution undergo a much-needed transformation to keep abreast with the technological advancements without disregarding its present traditional identity. Certain factors such as the sharing of sources, an interactive teaching and learning method, the acceptance of relevant subjects such as entrepreneurship, vocational and information technology are vital as they will give an edge to the students of the pondok institution as they join the mainstream communi. Furthermore Ibrahim (2013) emphasized the importance of establishing a database and directory which will promote the pondok education system and its significance in the current education system and national development. Moreover, the issue of accreditation and establishment of standardized benchmarks are of utmost importance in ensuring the pondok institution will no longer be left behind. Certain aspects such as a high quality and reputable team of knowledgeable scholars, credible leadership and adequate infrastructure are pertinent to the establishment of a credible institution. Therefore, it is imperative that the pondok institution strive to address these issues in its quest to be on par with the other modern pondok institutions and regain its glory as a religious knowledge centre of excellence once again.

The Proposal to Transform the Pondok Institution in Malaysia

There are several proposals on the transformation and improvement of the pondok institution to ensure its sustainability in these modern times particularly in keeping abreast with the current educational level in Malaysia. By undergoing such changes does not mean that the pondok institution has lost its relevance nor does it mean its contributions thus far are not appreciated as the said institution has made significant contributions in the development of Islamic education in Malaysia. Nevertheless, through this transformation process the pondok institution will be further enhance and be on par as the other institutions of Islamic studies. The following proposal are as follows

The Management Aspect

The survival of the pondok institution is reliant upon having an effective management as well as the tireless efforts and dedication of the scholars themselves. The concerted role of all parties involved will guarantee the success of this pondok institution as this will determine the direction and sustainability of the pondok education system. Besides that, the pondok institution is able to compete while keeping up to date with the current changes affecting education system (Abdullah, 2011). Furthermore, when the institution is being

managed effectively and efficiently it will enable the institution to become more stable and become better as time passes by. Certain factors such as having an effective management leading the organisation, a conducive environment and a relevant curriculum will enable the pondok institution to go forward and keep abreast with the present Islamic education level in Malaysia.

The management of the pondok institution is a process which involves the systematic management of the education board of the pondok institution and requires invaluable human resource management and the necessary infrastructure. All the abovementioned aspects ensure the aims of the institution are fulfilled effectively and efficiently. Although the present management has its strengths but there is always room for improvement. Certain changes need to be made to ensure that the pondok institution regains its stature as a centre of excellence in Islamic education. Moreover, the misconception held by society that the pondok institution is outdated and bears no relevance to current educational scenario needs to be torn down. This is important as the pondok institution possesses vast potential as it fulfils the demands of the current Islamic education. According to Kompri (2018) a systematic management system is an important element of any organisation or institution to ensure its effectiveness and relevance in the current situation. However, in general most pondok institutions still do not possess an effective management system and are still adamant on clinging on to the conventional method. Although Dhofier (1990) stated that certain pondok institutions have successfully managed to have a systematic and efficient management board, this is not the case for the majority of pondok institutions at present.

The pondok administrative must take the initiative to build a rapport with the surrounding community as their support is crucial to the success of the pondok institution. With the established rapport with the community, the pondok administrative will be able to gain future support, improve the level of expertise, and recommendations on future improvements of the management of this pondok institution. The management of the pondok institution should also co-operate with all involved parties in the coordination, planning as well as evaluation of the management to ensure the smooth running of the said institution and changes made are relevant to the needs of the current times. The patrons of the pondok institution comprising state level and also at the national level should also collaborate and play their respective roles accordingly. This will ensure that aspects pertaining to the management of this institution can be improved which in turn will lead to a much better and productive religious institution.

Pondok associations such as Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia (YPMM) and Pusat Pembangunan Pondok Berhad (PPPB) in Kelantan are able to decide on further improvements of the education system of the pondok institutions. As the patron of the registered pondok institutions, certain steps can be taken to implement certain initiatives in improving the teaching and learning methodology. Among the initiatives include looking for funding for the facilities and infrastructure which will help upgrade the quality of education at these pondok institutions. In addition, the organising of workshops, seminars and training should be conducted on a consistent basis which will foster a sense of co-operation and also an exchange of ideas between the management and the scholars. Through this, the education system of the pondok institutions can be improved and keep abreast with the modern times. The management also should encourage the scholars to further their education which will enhance their knowledge and expertise in their respective fields. As a result, the pondok

institution will be at par with the other institutions of Islamic studies which puts an emphasis on providing the best education to society for the betterment of the *ummah*.

On a global scale, in tandem with the establishment of Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia (YPPM), the traditional methodology such as the *halaqah* method will be retained as a way of improving the pondok education system. In the efforts of retaining the traditional methods of the pondok education system, the relevant parties should provide complete support towards improving the traditional method and also *turath*. These aspects are crucial in the efforts of upgrading the education system of the pondok institution and it entails the co-operation of all parties such as the pondok association, the management, the scholars and the students themselves. The pondok associations should provide full co-operation to YPPM in framing and resolving issues related to the pondok education system particularly the teaching and learning methods, curriculum, syllabus, infrastructure and management. Through this, the relevant parties will be able to resolve any arising problem and in the process, it will lead to the improvement of the Islamic education in Malaysia of the pondok institution.

The Education System

Initially, the pondok institution had successfully produced a highly intellectual Malay community which led to the Islamic education revolution that is modernised and systematic. The fundamentals of Islamic knowledge based on the *turath* studies has elevated the ranks of the pondok institution to become a centre of excellence in Islamic studies (Abdullah, 2016).

The pondok educational system also emphasizes the relationship between theoretical and practical which aims to inculcate strong Islamic values. By doing so, the students will be highly attuned to the significance of gaining the blessings of Allah SWT in whatever they do and also will be conscious of their actions while being capable of being independent, disciplined and possess high moral character. The open concept otherwise known as *'umumi* is the focus of the pondok education system and it encourages everyone from all walks of life to seek knowledge. This approach is parallel to the democratic concept of education which is based on the prioritization and importance of education towards Muslims, the idea of an exchange of knowledge and also ideas, as well as the individual right to education (Rahim, 2015). According to Abdullah (2018), the benchmark of academic excellence for pondok institution includes the aspects of teaching methodology, the good behaviour of students toward their teachers, the rapport between teacher and students, and the good manners in which students display in their quest of acquiring knowledge from their respective teachers.

Generally, the subjects being offered at the pondok institutions include Nahu, Saraf, Fiqh, Usul Fiqh, Tafsir, Tauhid, al-Quran, Hadith and Tasawwuf which comprise of important subjects being offered at other pondok institutions in the archipelago. It is evident that certain standards exist since the subjects offered are similar across the board. However, the scholars have the autonomy to decide the system and syllabus such as the books being used and subjects offered. Meanwhile, an appointed body will determine an unofficial syllabus. As a result, each pondok institution will have its own unique syllabus based on the discretion of the *Tuan Guru* in charge. However, this leads to a lack of standardization in terms of deciding the syllabus that will be implemented in the respective pondok institution. The stark difference of syllabus used by different pondok institutions is dependent upon the capabilities of the respective *Tuan Guru* and his students as well as the community (Abdullah, 1987).

It is apparent that there is an increasing need for the standardization of syllabus for all pondok institutions by the pondok development associations such as Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia (YPMM) and Pusat Pembangunan Pondok Berhad (PPPB) in Kelantan to ensure that high quality of education is being provided at these pondok institutions. This is crucial because it is necessary to produce highly knowledgeable and qualified scholars or individuals who will be at par with other graduates since a single unified syllabus will be used. Therefore, there is a great need for further studies and also discussions between relevant parties which include educational experts, pondok institutions, patrons or pondok associations and also the religious authorities to develop Islamic education in Malaysia by creating an appropriate curriculum as well as syllabus.

Presently, the focus of this pondok institution is the study of classical scriptures or otherwise known as the yellow scripture (*kitab kuning*). Moreover, the hallmark of the education system of pondok institutions is based on *turath* studies. *Turath* studies is still considered relevant in these modern times as it builds the good moral character of students while producing a learned individual in Islamic religious knowledge. Besides that, the *turath* scriptures are still the main source of reference of Islamic studies at universities. The pondok scholars also play a pivotal role in contributing to the wealth of knowledge in *turath* studies at various levels such as schools and universities (Abdullah, 2018). Nevertheless, it is of great importance that the pondok institution open its doors to the study of other scriptures which are contemporary besides focussing on *turath* scriptures. This paradigm shift is necessary due to the changing times we live in today. Moreover, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the current practices and the determination of certain issues. Thus, the pondok institution should have a combination of the study of *turath* and the contemporary ones as this is vital in developing a critical evaluation of the serious issues affecting the world today. Besides that, Zakaria (2010) stated that the necessary upgrading or improvement should be in terms of the development of new teaching and learning materials which includes general subjects, skills, entrepreneurship and also improving the existing education system and educational methodology. A sense of openness should be the common practice as this will only lead to the improvement of the current traditional education system of the pondok institution. Eventually, the pondok institution will be at par with the other religious institutions and able to make immense contributions to the community at large as it previously did in the past.

The management of the pondok institutions with the help of associations in Malaysia such as YPMM and PPPB which supervise the pondok institutions in Malaysia should take the necessary measures to standardize the use of materials used at the institutions. At present, there is a lack of standardization in terms of materials used. It is of utmost importance that this serious matter be dealt with immediately to ensure a systematic education system be implemented. This will guarantee that the students of the pondok institution will acquire the same level of knowledge and expertise as their counterparts from other religious institutions while bridging the gap between students of different pondok institutions.

The management of the pondok institution should also take the initiative to implement an examination-oriented system. Currently, the students of the traditional pondok institution with the exclusion of the modern pondok institutions, have to take the initiative to register themselves for major examinations at other institutions that are registered. This is because their traditional pondok institutions do not formally evaluate their students' level of knowledge in their respective fields. This deprives the students the opportunity of furthering their studies to gain the necessary academic credentials in religious studies. Therefore, it is extremely important that the traditional pondok institution begin to make

changes in the right direction by implementing the examination system although at present it does not put any emphasis on any type of formal assessments.

Financial Assistance

Generally, there is a high cost involved in managing any kind of institution and it normally includes management, welfare, utilities, as well as infrastructure. Clearly, continuous financial assistance is crucial to ensure the smooth running of an organization particularly the teaching and learning process. The institutions which have registered with the relevant authorities such as the pondok development associations, the state Islamic authorities or *Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia* (NGO at the federal level) will not experience any problem in getting financial assistance from them but that is clearly not the case for the ones not registered with the authorities. The latter usually face an uphill struggle in terms of generating their own income to operate their institution as the financial aid received from private benefactors might not be consistent. Thus, the majority of pondok institutions are heavily dependent upon financial aid in the form of zakat, wakaf, and donations made by generous donors which comprise the society at large, NGOs, foundations, associations and corporate bodies.

The government either the federal or state government should allocate an allowance particularly for the teachers or scholars of the pondok institution as the imam and bilal of mosques receive such allowances. This allowance could be given on a monthly basis particularly for the ones working in the religious field such as those at mosques of every state in Malaysia. At present, the scholars or teachers of the pondok institution are basically working for free. However, with the allowance allocated for them will help ease any financial burden they may face. Besides that, with the assurance of a monthly allowance their minds will be at ease and they can fully focus on imparting religious knowledge without the pressure of finding other means to generate income for their livelihood.

Furthermore, by upgrading the quality of the present infrastructure at the pondok institution that are generally traditional this will create a more conducive environment for all involved. Although it is an undeniable fact that the relevant authorities do provide certain financial aid, it is usually in the form of "one off" and it is not consistently provided on a long term basis. This usually compels the pondok institutions to generate its income by seeking donations or infaq from the generous segments of society. Unfortunately, the funds they receive from generous benefactors remain inadequate in the face of mounting costs such as management, maintenance and the construction of new infrastructure. Clearly, it is imperative that financial assistance be provided on a consistent basis by the relevant authorities to ensure that good quality education is being provided with adequate facilities and infrastructure that comply to all the health and safety regulations and policies. Therefore, it is vital that the pondok institution seek numerous avenues of financial aid to enhance the quality of education of the institution as it plays a monumental role in raising the awareness of the importance of Islam and increasing the knowledge of the masses towards the Islamic faith.

Registration

The establishment of pondok institutions that have not registered with the relevant bodies such as the religious authorities has become a problem in terms of information management, monitoring and distribution of aid to these institutions. The government, especially the relevant agencies, strive hard to ensure that these pondok institutions do

register. This is to guarantee that these institutions receive the proper aid and other benefits from the government. Nevertheless, these pondok institutions do not want to be tied down with certain policies nor do they want to be under the scrutiny of the government. Moreover, another factor that prevents pondok institutions from registering is the confusion faced by the management over the strict compliance of management conditions set by the learning institutions as well as compliance over the conditions of building as set by the Fire & Rescue Department (Zaidi, 2017). In addition, another reason the management of the pondok institution is hesitant to register is the fear that the authorities will take control of the institution and interfere with its operations (Jaafar, 2018).

Furthermore, the other factors include the fear that the teaching and learning activities will change based on the policies stipulated by the relevant authorities. For instance, the pondok institution will be expected to provide a new subject focusing on acquiring a set of skills i.e., entrepreneurship. The pondok management believes that by implementing such a subject will inadvertently deviate from the true focus of the pondok institution which is to produce religious scholars and learned individuals. Besides that, these pondok institutions are more at ease when they are being given free rein to conduct their business of teaching Islamic knowledge as they see fit based on the level of expertise of their teachers and chosen syllabus without being under the scrutiny of the relevant authorities.

As a result of not registering with the relevant authorities, the pondok institutions find it difficult to receive the necessary financial assistance which can help in improving the quality of education. Besides that, the religious authorities also find it challenging to resolve matters related to the pondok institution such as the management of the construction site of the pondok institution which do not comply with the standard and specifications set by the relevant bodies as well as the issue pertaining to *wakaf* land that has not been registered (Jaafar, 2018).

The Utilization of Technology

These days, the advancement of technology particularly the Internet has been widely used to disseminate knowledge of the *turath* religious books or scriptures. The students of the pondok institution are able to upload talks, lectures, discussions and so forth for public consumption. This development is vital as it allows for almost everyone to share and receive knowledge especially religious knowledge. As a result of technological advancements, Islam has been able to spread far and wide particularly to those segments of society that are curious or have the need to gain more knowledge about the Islamic faith as well as information about the traditional pondok institution (Ismail & Othman, 2015).

This is evident when the lectures of renowned religious scholars particularly about the *turath* scriptures are recorded and uploaded into Youtube as well as other social media sites such as Facebook and Whatsapp. The initiatives taken such as the live streaming of religious lectures on Facebook is also rather common and popular among the masses. All these efforts are commendable and is indeed a positive step in ensuring that Islam is spread widely to everyone. Thus, the traditional pondok institution should follow suit and begin to incorporate technology as a means to disseminate knowledge pertaining to the Islamic faith and other related matters. Moreover, it is vital that the institution realises the benefits of technology in the propagation of Islam on a more holistic level.

Furthermore, the learning of scriptures with the aid of technology will make the learning process smoother and easier as it is most convenient. Therefore, it is important that the pondok institution begins to see the significance of incorporating technology into the teaching

and learning process as it will only benefit those who are eager to acquire religious knowledge as well as opening the eyes of society that the pondok institution does indeed keep up with the times.

Conclusion

The pondok institution has maintained its tradition of *turath* studies that have been passed down from one generation to another. Although the era of globalisation presents its own set of challenges, this institution will proceed to strive relentlessly to become a well-respected centre of Islamic education which propagates Islam in this region. Nevertheless, the pondok institution should undergo the necessary transformation while retaining its traditional values to become at par with the other mainstream Islamic institutions.

Transformation is greatly required in certain aspects which include management, education system, registration, and the use of technology. All parties involved must take drastic action and make a concerted effort in ensuring that improvement is made in a systematic manner with regards to the aspects mentioned above. These aspects have to be given the utmost priority as this will enable the pondok institutions to be at par with the other modern learning institutions such as madrasahs, colleges, and tahfiz institutes. In addition, the transformation will elevate the status and reputation of the pondok institution as the earliest established Islamic learning institution in Malaysia. This transformation will not deviate from the original purpose of the pondok institution in terms of disseminating knowledge but it will have a tremendous impact on the standardization and development of the pondok institution to achieve even greater heights in the long-term.

This process of transformation or paradigm shift has to involve numerous aspects to keep abreast with the current times. In order to ensure the pondok institution is providing the same quality of religious education as the other institutions, it is pertinent to adopt certain changes or updates that are relevant and appropriate. All the abovementioned measures are crucial as the pondok institution still bears relevance in these modern times as a well-respected and renown religious institution in the region in terms of the dissemination of Islamic knowledge and the propagation of Islam not just in Malaysia but in the archipelago as well.

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