AL-ARQAM: PIONEER OF NASYID ART IN MALAYSIA, 1975-1997

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Abstract
The purpose of this research is to discover Al-Arqam accomplishments as a pioneer of nasyid in Malaysia starting from 1975 until 1997. Increasing awareness in practicing Islam as the way of life gave Al-Arqam the opportunity to establish the first nasyid group named Nada Murni. The appearance of this nasyid group has become one of the initiatives for the people to enjoy entertainment in accordance to Islamic values and principles. This research implemented qualitative approach by analysing primary and secondary source gained from Malaysian National Archives and the library. The findings suggested that Al-Arqam was the first local group to introduce nasyid as an entertainment in Malaysia and their approach developed interest and awareness about Islam into the Malay society. Consequently, Al-Arqam started to commercialise their group as one of their socioeconomic activity by establishing music production company under the surveillance of Al-Arqam department of culture. Besides, the government also played their role to support nasyid as an entertainment by using the mass media platforms such as Rancangan Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), radio dan organising nasyid competition. Unfortunately, nasyid entertainment in Malaysia reached its dispirited momentum when Al-Arqam was banned by the authorities, somehow gained their momentum back by establishing contemporary nasyid group and culture. Therefore, this research is conducted to ascertain the ingenuity of Al- Arqam in pioneering nasyid culture by establishing their very own nasyid group into the world of entertainment in Malaysia.
Keywords: Al-Arqam, Nasyid, Nada Murni, Raihan, Rabbani

Introduction
The emergence of Al-Arqam around 1970 as a socio-religious based group played an important role in changing the social structure of the Malay community in Malaysia. Originally, Al-Arqam was just a *halaqah* or *usrah* group that discussed matters related to *fardu ain* only. However, the development of modernism that permeated into the community cause annoyance towards Ashaari's lifestyle to the Malays. Arising from this, Ashaari realized that the demands of religious education was very important in the life of the community. Therefore, the establishment of Al-Arqam is to uphold the word of Allah by practicing the true Islamic way of life in oneself, family, community, and country as well as all aspects of life (Muhammad, 1985).

In forming a society that has an appreciation of Islam in life, *dakwah* is the most important thing in Al-Arqam. Muhammad (1985) stated that *dakwah* according to Al-Arqam is *amar ma'ruf nahi mungkar* which is to invite to goodness and prevent from committing evil. In other words, it is an effort to create a community that lives religiously, Al-Arqam plays the role of a da'ie or preacher who calls the community back to the religion of Allah. Therefore, the variety of *dakwah* methods and strategies performed to the community makes Al-Arqam as one of the pioneer groups in the field of *dakwah* in Malaysia. One of the *dakwah* methods pioneered by Al-Arqam is through the art of nasyid entertainment. The development of the entertainment industry from the West prompted Al-Arqam to fulfill the desires of the people who want entertainment. Therefore, Al-Arqam created a nasyid group called Nada Murni to show the community how to entertain in compliance with Islam.

However, the embargo of Al-Arqam in 1994 by the National Fatwa Council dismantled the Al-Arqam *dakwah* network throughout the country. As a result, the system of social life founded by Al-Arqam finally found a dead end. Even so, the struggle of Nada Murni *dakwah* did not stop there when they took steps to repent and abandon the teachings of Al-Arqam. From then on, the emergence of Nada Murni with a new face gave a fresh air in the history of nasyid entertainment art which has long been considered classic and traditional. Their appearance is considered a pioneer of contemporary nasyid which led to the glory days of the nasyid industry in Malaysia.

Research Methodology
This study was conducted using qualitative method that includes observation, research, comparison and evaluation in analyzing the documents and facts. Researchers focused on the analysis of primary sources in the form of documents and manuscripts obtained from archives such as records, files, diary entries, collections of old newspaper clippings and magazines. Among them are the collection of Goverment Gazette (1994), *Al-Munir* newspaper collection (1984), *Mingguan Islam* (1987) and *Watan* (1989), *An-Nida'* magazine collection (1990) and *Galaksi Minda* (1994). In addition, researchers also analyzed secondary sources in the form of library materials such as books, journals, scientific writing, articles, and other related publications which materials are available in UPSI, UKM, USM and UPM libraries. In addition, references from journal websites such as *Journal of Islam in Asia* and SCOPUS. Next, the researchers also conducted oral method through individual interviews appropriate to this study. Finally, the researchers used chronological method in providing an understanding of the sequence of events related to the title of the study.

Literature Review
Within 2 decades of the banning of Al-Arqam, there is no denying that there were studies conducted related to Al-Arqam. However, various studies and writings conducted led to the special dark side of the irregularities and misguidances committed by the members of Al-Arqam. Exposure to the Al-Arqam *dakwah* movement was done in general and not specifically done by the dakwah movement through the entertainment art of Nada Murni nasyid. Among the studies conducted by Kareelawati (2002) related to the Methodology of *Dakwah* to New Brothers. A study conducted on the activities of Al-Arqam *dakwah* which was against new relatives directly without directly about *dakwah* through nasyid.

Ann Wan Seng (1997) in his study of Al-Arqam as a socio-religious movement in Malaysia. In this study, the researcher emphasizes on the background, organizational structure, goals of the struggle, social, economic and political systems. Researchers state that

in the current Islamic revival in Malaysia, Al-Arqam became one of the groups that should be given attention, especially in the effort to create an Islamic community that led to the formation of the Islamic State. The *dakwah* movement has become one of the main steps in Al-Arqam to provide awareness to the community on the importance of living based on religion. However, the movement of Al-Arqam *dakwah* through the art of nasyid entertainment was not studied in detail and thoroughly.

Lazim (2004) also studied the movement of Al-Arqam, especially from the aspect of malpractice and heresy and the government's efforts to deal with it. The researcher states that the concept of *dakwah* according to Al-Arqam is done through oral, written and moral from the members of Al-Arqam. Even so, researchers focus more on *dakwah* activities through studies such as lectures, talks, *tazkirah* and conversations between Al-Arqam members and the general public. In addition, the development of print media under the control of Al-Arqam also became a role in disseminating Al-Arqam *dakwah* through writings such as pamphlets, newspapers, books and posters. Even so, the concept of *dakwah* through the art of nasyid received less attention from researchers.

Abdul Rahman (1992) conducted a study related to the traditional Islamic movement in Malaysia by focusing on the background and development involving educational, economic, *dakwah* and socio-cultural activities in Al-Arqam. Apart from that, the researcher also focused on the concept of Imam Mahdi in the Islamic view and on the claims of Al-Arqam which led to its deviation. At the same time, exposure to the Al-Arqam *dakwah* movement was done in general without focusing on the art of nasyid, especially to the group Nada Murni.

In fact, another study conducted by Farahwahida (2005) led to the effectiveness of the implementation of *fatwa's* in dealing with the heretical teachings of Al-Arqam. The researcher delved into several topics related to the implementation of *fatwa's* that had been gazetted and identified the weaknesses of the authorities in curbing Al- Arqam from continuing to grow. In fact, the procedure and process of forming a *fatwa* related to the heretical teachings that exist in Malaysia were also stated. Therefore, in this study, the researcher did not focus specifically on the movement of Al-Arqam *dakwah*, especially involving *dakwah* through the art of nasyid entertainment.

Based on the literature review directed, the researchers found that writings and researches had given less focus and explanation related to Al-Arqam as a pioneer to the contemporary nasyid art in Malaysia. Therefore, a specific study was conducted by researchers to provide a comprehensive picture and exposure to the movement of Al-Arqam *dakwah*, especially in the field of nasyid entertainment that triggered a phenomenon in the music arts industry around the 1990s.

Early Development of Nasyid in Malaysia

In the beginning, the element of Islam in songs started from the application of the culture from the traditional Muslim community. The community at that time was exposed to the Islamic art of singing and entertainment that were both classic and traditional, accompanied by music and not only in the villages of Malaya (Yulika, 2016). In some states, religious songs were mentioned in various terms but the forms and practices were very similar to each other. *Nazam* or *Naban* is the famous poetic melody in Terengganu, Pahang and Melaka, while Marhaban and Qasidah are the singing of *selawat* and praising Allah is famous in Kelantan and Kedah. Apart from that, *Ghazal* and *Hadrah* are famous in West Coast states such as Johor. This culture is practiced in Malay customs in the nature of Islam as shaving ceremony, a thanks giving ceremony to celebrate the birth of a child, the Prophet's birthday celebrations,

infused with poem recitals, poetry, prayers and remembrance in the form of singing (Zaroum, 2018).

Therefore, the influx of cultural influences from outside caused evolution in the melody of religious songs. The early emergence of nasyid in the archipelago began with the rhythm and melody of desert-style singing influenced by the culture of Middle Eastern societies such as Egypt and Syria. In this regard, Zain (2006) wrote that the existence of the earliest nasyid groups were established from Indonesia such as Orkes Nur El-Suraya (1977) and Orkes Sinar Murni (1979) while in Singapore were Al-Mizan (1977) and Al-Jawaher (1979). At the same time, the dakwah groups found in Malaysia also did not escape the influence of nasyid entertainment art which includes Al-Arqam that has a nasyid group named as Nada Murni.

Establishment of Al-Arqam Nasyid Group
The rise of Islam in the Middle East throughout 1980 exposed the Malay society to the influence of the culture from foreign countries. During the period, the Malays in Malaysia regarded Middle Eastern countries as a model to the rise of Islam including in the aspect of entertainment (Zain, 2006). The exposure and culture were brought by Malay graduates who received education from Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The three important figures who graduated from Al- Azhar University in Egypt were responsibled for the establishment and development of the Al-Arqam Foundation located in Al-Arqam villages throughout Malaysia which are Mohd Rosdi Yusuf, Sheikh Abdul Rahim Ahmad and Mokhtar Yaakob (Abdullah, 1997). Al-Arqam Foundation began to establish in 1975, then advanced rapidly in the field of education in the developing the community.

Along with the development and entry of Western entertainment around the 70s, Al-Arqam introduced Islamic entertainment through nasyid to students of Al- Arqam Foundation in guidance of Al-Azhar graduate figures. Eventually, the performance of nasyid in Al-Arqam has grown and started to receive response from the members in the village of Al-Arqam, Sungai Penchala. Nasyid became a practice in Al-Arqam, especially among adolescent members. Nasyid was performed at school in the morning assemblies, events, Islamic celebrations and even being hummed leisurely through the day (Yulika, 2016).

Originally, the first Al-Arqam nasyid group was named the Putera-Putera Al-Arqam and the group consists of 10 people led by Asri Ibrahim. The earliest songs produced and performed by them are *Masyarakat Islam Telah Bermula, Tanpa Agama, Islam Yang Telah Berkembang, Di Pondok Kecil,* dan *Di Sini Kami Berkumpul*. During their early performance, they chose to a capella which means they sang without instrumental accompaniment. They performed at Al-Arqam lectures and they were only recognized among the members of Al-Arqam village in Sungai Penchala. Along with the rapid socio-economic development of Al-Arqam, they took the step as well and advanced forward in the entertainment industry.

Ashaari took the inititive to strengthen Al-Arqam by creating *syukbah* which means department in their organization that served to manage in various aspects of administration. Each *syukbah* will be led by a leader who is called a *Mudir*. One of the *syukbah* is the Al-Arqam Cultural Syukbah led by members of the Syuyukh Council in the Al-Arqam organization. Al-Arqam nasyid group was managed under this *syukbah* which aimed to carry out cultural activities to preach through nasyid. The improvement of technology and facilities in Al-Arqam allowed the nasyid group to be more advanced in improving the quality and diversity of nasyid performances. Their songs were accompanied by music and even sang with various forms of

sound such as bass, harmony, children's voices and interspersed with poetry readings, poems and short stories.

The establishment of the Al-Arqam Information Bureau made the Al-Arqam nasyid group move forward with the production of cassettes and albums. At that time, they still use the same name which was the Sons of Al-Arqam and sometimes introduced themselves as *Syukbah* Cultural Al-Arqam. The information bureau served to spread information such as dakwah material to the public using print and electronic media and expos (Bakar, 1983). Therefore, Al-Arqam has several printing and publishing centers in Al-Arqam villages throughout Malaysia. The centers are operated by *Asoib* International Ltd. and *Abuya* Mind Agency as well as using the Desktop Publishing System (Abdullah, 1997). In this regard, Al-Arqam nasyid group moved further when they released their first album called *Kelahiran* through recording publication. Among the earliest songs released in the album are *Maulana*, *Ya Robbi Salimma, Sifat 20, Sampailah Waktu, Bila Izrail* and *Harapanku Pada-Mu Subur Kembali.*

The development of Al-Arqam's social and economic structure provided an opportunity for their members to spread *dakwah* activities throughout Malaysia and even globally. Al-Arqam *dakwah* activities were carried out in a large scale such as in the study ceremonies, Islamic day celebrations, weddings and expos open space for Al-Arqam to highlight the art of nasyid entertainment. Through this development, nasyid entertainment has gained place and attention from Al-Arqam members and even received response from the local community. Due to that matter, many Al-Arqam students began to show a deep interest in the art of nasyid entertainment.

In addition, the demand for Al-Arqam nasyid performances increased nationwide. This accomplishment made Al-Arqam nasyid group change its name from the Sons of Al-Arqam to Nada Murni. The group remained to consist of 9 original members led by Mohd Asri Ubaidullah. The other 8 members are Isman Nadim, Rahmat Shafie, Mohd Faizal Osman, Yusuf Sabri, Rosman, Amin, Hamzah and Hashim Ngadiman. During each performance, members of Nada Murni group still retain their appearance and identity as a members of Al-Arqam. They wore black robes and turbans which were the typical attire of Al-Arqam members.

The Development of The Nada Murni Group

Along with the advancement of technology, Nada Murni varies their forms of nasyid performances and song instruments. The combination of traditional and modern music as well as the various types of melodies and voices made Nada Murni obtained the attention of the community. Accordingly, in 1987, they released their first album eversince using Nada Murni as the group name. The response to the song which accompanied by music was very encouraging from Al-Arqam members and the general public who listened. Among the earliest songs that got a touch of music were *Bisikan Aidilfitri, Cahaya di Ufuk Timur, Kasih Sayang, Balada Makkatul Mukarramah, Untukmu Rasulullah* and *Munajat*.

Apart from that, the meaning and arrangement of lyrics in the song also played a vital role in attracting interest and attention of the listener. Since the launch of the first album in 1987 until 1997, Nada Murni has published more than 200 songs in 20 albums. Part of the total number of songs were produced by Ashaari Muhammad (Ibrahim, 2008). Although the songs sang by Nada Murni sounded Islamic and spiritual in nature, there were also some songs that brought an agenda behind the lyrics such as the song *Bila Abuya Pulang* and *Malaysia Indah* that referred to the confidence and belief of Al-Arqam members who have been declared astray by the National Fatwa Council. The production of songs by Nada Murni also

needed to go through a screening process from Al-Arqam leadership, especially from Ashaari Muhammad (Ibrahim, 2008). Only songs that had been approved by the Al- Arqam leadership will be allowed to be performed at Al-Arqam cultural events and can be published in the form of media and electronics.

Therefore, Al-Arqam under *Syukbah* Culture has established a music production company called OVA Production Sdn. Bhd. to expand the influence of *dakwah* through nasyid by Nada Murni. Among the products released were cassettes, video tapes, and song books, especially for the production of Nada Murni nasyid songs. Apart from Nada Murni, the nasyid groups that were also under the auspices of OVA Production are The Zikr, Nada Murni II, Suara SMAKL, Shotussofwa and Qatrunnada. The Zikr is one of the most prominent groups after Nada Murni. The group was originally made up of five people, namely Nazri Johani, Abu Bakar Mohd Yatim, Che Amran Idris, Azahari Ahmad and Amran Ibrahim.

Meanwhile, Al-Arqam created a cultural village located at Al-Arqam Foundation Sungai Serai in Selangor to smooth out the management in an effort to elevate *dakwah* through nasyid entertainment. In addition, various events involving nasyid performances were held such as the annual nasyid competition organized by Al-Arqam Foundation throughout Malaysia. At the same time, the demand for Nada Murni nasyid increased from Al-Arqam villages throughout the country, including abroad at that time. The celebrations and expos organized by Al-Arqam made nasyid a must have performance. Nada Murni at that time only had one vocalist, Mohd Asri Ibrahim, causing the entry of Munif Ahmad as the second vocalist of Nada Murni. Munif's inclusion as the second vocalist of Nada Murni gave them the opportunity to fulfill several requests for nasyid performances at one time. They will split into several groups and join the students of the Al-Arqam Foundation from the nearest Al-Arqam village to form a complete nasyid group. This strategy enabled them to gain influence and fans throughout the village of Al-Arqam including local University students.

At that time, Nada Murni songs were hummed and sang by young people until they were considered to be on par with the existing group of artists (Herman, 2015). The rhythm of Nada Murni nasyid met of community interest especially young people in government higher education institutions where they compete to establish their own nasyid group. Their motive were driven by the urge of *dakwah* to provide an Islamic alternative entertainment in the campus for the students who was influenced by rock and metal music. Yulika (2016) wrote the groups that exist are the Badarudin group or known as Badar at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Nahwan Nur (now known as Mestica) at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

Development of Nasyid in Malaysia
The role of Nada Murni and nasyid groups from foreign countries brought a positive impact on the development of nasyid industry in Malaysia. The community welcomed the performance of spiritual songs with the organization of various programs and competitions involving nasyid performances (Muhammad, 2009).

Apart from that, the government efforts in supporting nasyid performance throughout the country through various media platforms such as television, radio and organization of events and competitions. For instance, one of the competition held was the National Level Nasyid competition which was organized by the Rancangan Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). Apart from that in 1991, National Nasyid Festival was organized by the Islamic Affairs Division (BHEAIS), the Prime Minister's Department now known as the Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM). Starting from that, JAKIM has organized the festival 11 times until 2006.

In addition, JAKIM also organized an international nasyid festival named MABIMS (ASEAN) held in Kuala Lumpur in 1996 (Hatim, 2020). At the same time, nasyid songs are also broadcast on IKIM FM radio channel throughout the day. To celebrate the development of nasyid which was a phenomenon at that time, IKIM FM organized the IKIM Nasyid Award competition as the culmination of the IKIM Nasyid Chart program which was first held in 2004. In addition, there are several radio channels also make nasyid as the main song in channels such as SALAM FM and NASYID FM. Other than that, the government through the Minister of Communications also used nasyid as a medium to spread *dakwah* in the world of television broadcasting. This Week's Nasyid Show (NMI) and Nasyid TV published by JAKIM Electronic Media and Broadcasting Division become one of the approaches to the community to choose more useful entertainment arts.

As a result of the government's encouragement and cooperation in efforts to elevate the art of spiritual entertainment, nasyid is growing and gaining a place in the hearts of the community, especially among teenagers at that time. Therefore, the nasyid groups that existed at that time received response and attention from the community, especially nasyid groups born in their own country such as Nada Murni and The Zikr. However, the group's backwardness from the mainstream makes the community thirsty for the growing art of nasyid entertainment. The ban on Al-Arqam by the Malaysian government to some extent affected the development of Nada Murni and The Zikr which operate under the Al-Arqam organization.

Nasyid After the Ban of Al-Arqam
The banning of Al-Arqam by the Malaysian government in 1994 had a huge impact on Nada Murni and other nasyid groups under the auspices of OVA Production Sdn. Bhd. The nasyid groups were disbanded in line with the ban on Al-Arqam (Herman, 2015). The society at that time was gloomy from the entertainment of nasyid art for several years. Amidst the atmosphere of a society that craves nasyid entertainment, Raihan group appeared in October 1996. Raihan is a group of The Zikr which has been rebranded and operated under its manager, Farihin Abdul Fattah (Yulika, 2016). The establishment of Raihan gives new spirit and breath in the world of nasyid entertainment art in Malaysia. Raihan is seen as a pioneer of local contemporary nasyid, leading to the phenomenon of the glorious era of nasyid entertainment in Malaysia (Ghani, 2006).

The emergence of Raihan by bringing fresher and contemporary nasyid songs received response from the local community, especially students of institutions of higher learning. Raihan's first album in 1997, the album *Puji-pujian* sold 3.5 million units worldwide (Zaroum, 2018). These achievements led to awards such as Best New Artist, Best Nasyid Album, Best Vocal, and Album of The Year at the Malaysian Music Industry Awards. Realizing the rise of The Zikr, Nada Murni was also encouraged to return to the world of nasyid entertainment art after a long absence. Finally, in 1997, a former member of the Nada Murni group formed two nasyid groups named Rabbani led by Mohd Asri Ibrahim and Hijjaz led by Munif Ahmad (Syahrul, 2004).

Raihan, Rabbani and Hijjaz are a contemporary nasyid group that arose from gloom as a result of being entangled with the error and prohibition of Al-Arqam. All three groups are housed in a new publishing company. Raihan Group is run by Farihin Abdul Fattah as a producer at Emerald Record company. While Rabbani is managed by Sokhibul Fadhil Sabikin under the auspices of Permata Audio Production and Hijjaz is operated by Waharp Yusof under the company Telaga Biru Sdn. Bhd. All three groups. They not only came up with new

names, but also came up with a more inclusive identity towards the surrounding community. They no longer wore robes, turbans and scarves as the identities of the members of Al-Arqam before. They made an appearance wearing a baju Melayu, trousers and a black kopiah looks casual and friendlier with people around (Yulika, 2016).

The phenomenon carried out by the three groups provides encouragement and encouragement to the emergence of other nasyid groups as a link of heritage in the world of nasyid entertainment arts in Malaysia. Among the nasyid groups that emerged after that were In-Team, UNIC, Nowseeheart, Brothers, Mirwana, Mestica, Mawaddah and Saujana. The resurgence of nasyid groups not only enlivened the entertainment arts of the country, in addition it emerged on the awareness of wanting to highlight entertainment in Islam.

Conclusion
Despite the dark side of the establishment of Al-Arqam leading to its ban, there are some services and contributions to the social development of Malaysian society that can not be denied. The development of nasyid entertainment art pioneered by Al- Arqam played an important role in public awareness to choose entertainment that is more beneficial than the influence of Western entertainment. The emergence of local nasyid group not only provides an alternative to public preformance entertain but also provide opportunities for local children to highlight the religion, culture and customs of the Malays. Indeed, Al-Arqam through the group Nada Murni and The Zikr in Malaysia should be highly regarded as the trigger for local nasyid entertainment art without looking at its dark side from another angle.

Acknowledgement

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