

## Cairo and the Printing Press as the Modes in the Dissemination of Muhammad ‘Abduh’s Reformism to Colonial Malaya

Hafiz Zakariya<sup>1</sup>

Faculty of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia

**Abstract.** The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the emergence of Islamic reformism as exemplified by Muhammad ‘Abduh (d.1905) and Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935). These reformists urged the *umma* to revitalize their conditions –eliminate intellectual stagnation; to reform their morality, social life, economy and politics; and to reinterpret relevant aspects of the Islamic tradition to make it compatible with modern living. It not only made its way to the Middle East, but it also reached Southeast Asia. Muhammad ‘Abduh’s reformist ideas were brought to Malaya primarily through reform-minded students/scholars who studied in the Middle East, and the circulation of reformist writings such as *al-Manār* that reached audiences in Malaya. This paper examines the roles of Cairo and the printing press in the diffusion of Muhammad ‘Abduh ideas to Malaya

**Keywords:** Islamic reform, ‘Abduh’s influence in Malaysia, transmission of Islamic reformism

### 1. Introduction

Islamic ideas in the Malay world did not develop in isolation; rather, it was shaped and influenced by intellectual trends from the major centers of Islamic learning and activism in the Middle East. One influential intellectual trend from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century was Muhammad Abduh’s (Henceforth, ‘Abduh) reformism. It not only made its way to the Middle East, but it also reached Malaya. These ideas were brought to Malaya primarily through reform-minded students/scholars who studied in the Middle East, and the circulation of reformist writings such as *al-Manār* that reached audiences in Malaya. Most studies on Islamic reform in Malaya tend to focus on the intellectual history of reform at the expense of the processes facilitating its transmission. This paper, thus, examines the roles of Cairo and the printing press in the diffusion of ‘Abduh’s ideas to Malaya.

### 2. The Dissemination of ‘Abduh’s Ideas to Malaya

#### 2.1. Cairo

Cairo had played an important role in the religious development in Malaya due its pre-eminence status in the eyes of the Muslims in the British colony. Its reputation primarily derived from the presence of the oldest university in the Muslim world, Al-Azhar University. Indeed, Al-Azhar had attracted Muslims from the Malay world to travel to Cairo in pursuit of religious learning. It has been noted that a small *jāwi riwāq*(Malay-Indonesian students’ residence hall) had existed in Cairo since the second half of the nineteenth century. It was small and only provided eleven loaves every two days. There were very few people living in the *jāwi riwāq*, and the Shaykh responsible for its supervision was Shaykh Ismail Mohammed al-Jāwi [1]. Because not many Malay students came to study in Cairo at that time, Shaykh Wan Ahmad, the first known Malay student there, made personal efforts to encourage his Malay brothers to pursue Islamic learning at al-Azhar. Consequently, an increasing number of Malay students, particularly those who had studied in Makkah, came to study in Cairo. According to Mohd Redzuan Othman [2], the trend before World War Two was that

<sup>1</sup> + Corresponding author: Tel.: + (603-61965120); fax: + (603-61965072).  
E-mail address: hafizz@iium.edu.my

Malay students would go to Makkah first, then proceed to Cairo to continue their education. The experience of being in Cairo presented an opportunity to the Malay-Indonesian students to establish contacts with intellectual circles and become themselves familiar with Arabic-Islamic writings, which proved to be crucial in the formulation of their Islamic mentality. For those Malay-Indonesian students who sojourned in Cairo during the period in which the reformist trend was in ascendancy, their stint in Cairo was pivotal in exposing themselves to ‘Abduh’s reformist discourse. As a result, those who were inspired by reformist thinking returned to their places of origin and promoted such ideas there.

Shaykh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin (Henceforth, Tahir) is regarded as the first exponent of ‘Abduh’s ideas in the Malay world. Tahir (1869-1956) who came to Cairo in 1894 to pursue religious learning at al-Azhar University maintained that his years in Cairo opened his eyes, and were pivotal to his intellectual formation. Due to his love for this institution, he later added al-Azhari to his name. During his studious years in al-Azhar, he stayed at *riwāq al-haramayn* and earned an ‘*alimiyya*’ degree [3]. While in Cairo, Tahir had not only attended formal learning at al-Azhar, but also frequented many lectures delivered by Egyptian figures and reportedly had direct contact with ‘Abduh [4]. Even though there is no historical proof substantiating his contact with ‘Abduh, there are evidences indicating Tahir’s direct contact with ‘Abduh’s closest associate, Rashid Rida [5]. This is particularly obvious in Tahir’s book entitled *Kitab Ta’yīd Muttabi’ al-Sunna fī al-radd ‘alā al-Qāil bil-sunniyyatal-rak’ataīn qabla al-Jum’at*, in which, Rashid Rida through his foreword stated Tahir as his old friend [6].

Tahir played a significant role in the transmission of ‘Abduh’s reformism to the Malay world. Armed with his experience in Cairo and friendship with Rida, Tahir played a pioneering role in the publication of *al-Imam*, and served as its first founding editor. He also mentored many enthusiastic reformists who had yet to have extensive experience and exposure to the Middle Eastern intellectual trends. A case in point was Sayyid Shaykh Ahmad al-Hady (Henceforth, al-Hady). Al-Hady was first introduced to ‘Abduh’s thought by Tahir with whom he already had a close friendship before his trips to the Middle- East [7]. Al-Hady’s trips to the Middle East further enhanced his understanding of and fascination with reformist thought and enabled him to established contact with ‘Abduh’s disciple, Rashid Rida.

Tahir’s role in the transmission of ‘Abduh’s ideas extended beyond Malaya. In fact, he made significant contributions to its spread in Minangkabau. Tahir’s connection with Minangkabau was facilitated through three students who studied with him in Makkah during the later years of the nineteenth century (ca. 1897-1899). Upon their return to Minangkabau, these students emerged as prominent ulama and the leading voices of Islamic reform in the area [8].

By the second half of the twentieth century, the numbers of Malay students at Cairo had increased significantly. By 1925, there were about eighty students from the Malay Peninsula in Cairo [9]. This rapid increase was attributed to a boom in rubber production in Malaya along with the general economic improvement, which enabled more students to come to Cairo. Besides, the early twentieth century saw the emergence and proliferation of the *madrassa* in Malaya. The graduates of the *madrassa* had a tendency to pursue their education in Cairo instead of Makkah because the religious education in Cairo was more suitable to the *madrassa* system in Malaya in contrast to the Makkan system [10]. Furthermore, Cairo offered both religious learning and political experience and freedom, as testified by Haji Othman Abdullah, “In Makkah one can study religion only; in Cairo politics as well” [11].

In 1923, Malay-Indonesian students in Egypt had formed an association named al-Jam’iyya al-Khairiyya al-Talabiyya al-Azhariyya al-Jawa (The Welfare Association of Malay Students at al-Azhar, hereafter, the jam’iyya). Although the primary function of the association was to provide welfare services to the Malay students in Cairo, its formation was pivotal for the Malay-Indonesian students in Cairo by providing them organizational experience and exposure to students’ politics. As a result, they became more conscious of political issues. The jam’iyya also published their own journals, the most notable of which was the *Seruan Azhar* (The Call of al-Azhar) that received significant financial support from a wealthy student from Malaya, Haji Othman b. Abdullah . In addition to discussions on typical religious matters, the journal also dealt with overt political themes revolving around three major issues: Pan-Islamism, Pan-Malayanism (Union between Indonesia and Malaya), and anti-colonialism [12]. This provocative journal found its way into Malaya, but

was banned in Indonesia. In contrast to *al-Imam*, which was more cautious in discussing issues related to politics and British colonialism in Malaya, the *Seruan Azhar* represented a new height in the reformist tendency in Malaya in that it did not refrain itself from making overt political criticism of the colonial regimes in Malaya and Indonesia.

In Cairo, a Malay student integral to the jam'iyya was Haji Othman Abdullah (b. ca., 1914) He came from a very wealthy Malay family. Before proceeding to Cairo, Haji Othman, made his first pilgrimage in 1920 and stayed there for five years. Dissatisfied with learning in Makkah, Othman left Makkah for Cairo in 1925, to study at al-Azhar University. After being away from Malaya for about nine years, Othman returned to his homeland at the end of 1929. As Roff noted, as a result of Othman's long involvement with politically-conscious student circles in Cairo, those in authority in Malaya, considered his religious worldview as too unconventional and modern. Othman believed that there was an urgent need to transform the social, educational and economic conditions of the Malay society. Othman's major contribution lay in the realm of Malay politics where he took part in the formation of the Front of Young Malays (KMM), whose major aims were to rid Malaya of British rule, and to form a nation-state consisting of both Malaya and Indonesia [13].

Based on the above discussion, we can conclude that Cairo had played an important role as the guiding light for Islamic reform in Malaya. The agents for the transmission of reformist ideas to Malaya were Malay graduates who studied in Cairo and after returning to Malaya played a crucial role in reforming the Malay society. Secondly, reformist writings from the Middle East especially *Al-Manar*, which were in circulation in Malaya also contributed significantly in transmitting 'Abduh's reformist ideas in the country.

## 2.2. Printing Press

Printing press functioned as a significant means in disseminating ideas to a broader Muslim audience in various parts of the world. Without going into further details of the development of print technology in the Muslim world, it is apparent that the advent of print enabled Middle Eastern reformists to channel their ideas through printed books and periodicals, which helped to make their writings more easily available to the Malay-Indonesian Muslims. The Middle Eastern periodicals that played a crucial role in propagating Abduh's currents to the Malay-Indonesian world were *al-'Urwah al-wuthqā* and *al-Manār*. The former, a short-lived weekly newspaper, was jointly published by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh [14]. As for *al-Manār*, it was first published in 1898 in Cairo, and continued until 1935. Its backbone was Muhammad Rashid Rida, 'Abduh's closest associate and disciple [15].

The circulation of *al-Manār* in the Malay-Indonesian world had reportedly been relatively wide. In the Dutch East-Indies, despite the Dutch efforts to ban it from entering the country, it was regularly read in various parts of the region. In Malaya, the circulation was not merely limited to the Straits Settlements, which enjoyed greater freedom of religion, but it also reached Kelantan, a north-eastern Malay state [16]. Though *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā* was possibly not as widely circulated as *al-Manār*, it had indeed reached the Malay audience. A case in point was Haji Wan Musa, a prominent Muslim scholar, who subscribed both *al-Manār* and *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā* [17].

The relatively wide circulation of the Middle Eastern reformist literature in the Malay-Indonesian world was facilitated by a number of channels. Personal copies of *al-Manār* were obtained by some pilgrims and students who had been in the Middle East. In turn, they hand carried *al-Manār* to the Malay-Indonesian world. As the original copies of *al-Manār* were probably not readily available to most readers in the region, handwritten extracts were made and circulated to interested readers in the region [18]. A person who played a crucial role in circulating *al-Manār* in the Malay world was Sayyid Muhammad 'Aqil of Singapore. In Indonesia, the reformist writings were smuggled through certain ports where the Dutch supervision was lax [19]. Another means was through direct subscription to *al-Manār*. A case in point was Tahir, who subscribed to *al-Manār* from the inception of publication. Furthermore, Tahir also ordered many other reformist writings directly from the publisher in Cairo, most notably *Tafsīr al-Manār*. Copies of Tahir's correspondence with Dar al-Manār are available in the National Archives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia under the collection known as Shaykh Tahir's Personal Papers. In one of his letters to the publisher, Tahir brought to the attention of Rashid Rida that he was unhappy with the fact that he often received the *al-Manār* journal

and several other books that he ordered directly from the publisher late although he had been a regular subscriber of the journal since its inception [20].

The Malay-Indonesian Muslims were not mere passive consumers of the Middle Eastern writings. In fact, they were active participants in this religious discourse. As Jutta Bluhm informs us, there was indeed an interaction between *al-Manār* readers in the Malay world and the editors of the famous periodical. In this regard the Malay individuals from Malaya, Kalimantan, Sumatra and other parts of the region wrote seeking advice and offering opinion on a broad range of theological questions, economic and environmental problems, technological advances, issues of current political concern such as patriotism, and a range of other matters [21]. A case in point was Muhammad Bashuni b. ‘Imran, from West Kalimantan who wrote to Rashid Rida, to answer his queries on these important issues: Why are the Muslims in a state of weakness and decline and why other non-Muslim nations are advanced? Bashuni’s important questions led Shakib Arslan to write a series of articles in *al-Manār*, which were later published as a book *Why are the Muslims backward and why are others advanced?* [22].

*Al-Manār* also inspired the reformists to publish journals and other writings that promoted parallel reformist agenda in the Malay world. This was facilitated by the availability of a number of hand lithograph presses in Singapore in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [23]. Utilizing the available print technology the reformists promoted their ideas through publications, the most important of which was of *al-Imam* (1906-1908), published in Singapore in 1906. *Al-Imam* was modeled on *al-Manār* and most of the articles published in it were, in fact, translations and adaptations from *al-Manār*. However, *al-Imam* not only borrowed from *al-Manār*, it also contained articles addressing the local problems confronting the Muslims in the Malay world. Among them were the Muslims’ backwardness, their domination by foreign powers, their ignorance of modern knowledge, their laziness, their complacency, their conflicts and lack of cooperation among themselves [24].

Through *al-Imam*, the reformists contributed significantly in promoting reformist ideas not only in Malaya, but also in areas that were to become Indonesia. This was facilitated by wide circulation of the periodical in the region. According to Deliar Noer, *al-Imam* was circulated in Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi. Moreover, *al-Imam* had agents in Jakarta, Tjiandur, Surabaya, Semarang, Pontianak, Sambas, and Makasar [25].

Besides these important periodicals, reformists also published other forms of writings ranging from religious treatises to novels to promote their reformist agenda to a wider audience. The most prolific reformist who carried out this task vigorously was the multi-talented al-Hady, who translated several of ‘Abduh’s and Qasim Amin’s works into Malay [26]. Further, reformist ideas were also promoted through his best-selling novel, *Faridah Hanum*, published in 1926. Indeed, al-Hady’s narrative was significantly influenced by ‘Abduh’s and Qasim Amin’s ideas [27]. *Faridah Hanum*, a central protagonist in his best-selling novel is depicted as an ideal Muslim woman: beautiful, educated, literate in both English and French, independent and critical, a model to be emulated by Muslim women. The novel was a huge success and the first edition was sold out within a year, to be followed by many reprints.

Excluded from the newly-created Islamic bureaucracy which was almost exclusively controlled by the traditional ‘ulama, the reformists had to work from outside of the system. They found journalism and writing as a suitable ground to launch their criticism against the traditional Malay elite and ‘ulama. Through this channel they managed to promote ‘Abduh’s ideas to a wider audience and in the process helped its transmission in Malaya.

### 3. Conclusion

The late nineteenth to the early twentieth century represented a phase in history where Muslims throughout much of the Muslim world were confronted with new challenges and changes brought about by colonialism and modernity. These new challenges presented a dilemma for the Muslims – whether or not to embrace those “innovations” and would adoption of modern institutions affect their faith. Islamic reformism as exemplified by ‘Abduh, encouraged Muslims to adopt positive aspects of Western institutions and did not see it as objectionable from the Islamic standpoint. Moreover, it urged the believers to get themselves out of

their material and spiritual decadence by returning to the *Qur'an* and *Sunna*. Inspired by 'Abduh's reformism, the Malay reformists played a crucial role in its transmission in Malaya. Such transmission of ideas occurred as the result of a combination of various factors. It was facilitated by both "traditional" factors and new conditions associated with modernity. The agents for such transmission were Malay-Indonesian Muslim sojourners who were exposed to and inspired by 'Abduh's reformism and they in turn brought the reformist ideas home. The circulation of the reformist literature, especially *al-Manār* and *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqa* in the Malay world was instrumental in spreading the reformist influence in the region. Moreover, the introduction of steamships, and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 facilitated increasing contacts between the Malay World and the Middle East. In brief, a complex interaction of processes as analyzed in this work contributed to the diffusion of 'Abduh's reformism to the Malay-Indonesian world.

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