

ROLE OF AL-IMAM IN MALAY TRANSFORMATION UNTIL 1941

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Abstract—In Malaysia (known as Malaya or Federation of Malay States before 1963), Malay people can be considered as indigenous. Malaya had been colonized for more than 400 years since the colonization of Portuguese in 1511. At one time, some of the scholars especially the colonials described Malay as lazy people or not progressive. But most of the things changed once Malaya achieved independence in 1957 and those achievement were associated with nationalism. Apart from nationalism, transformation of Malay society was one of critical factors that led to Malaya independence in 1957. It was hard to gain independence if Malay society especially during the early period of pre-independence did not transform from a native that considered lazy and came from poor family as pictured by foreign researcher and scholars to an active and vocal community. But what were the factors that contributed towards the transformation of Malay society. Thus in this paper, the researcher found the early process of transformation that happened to Malay society until 1941. At the same time, this paper discovered the importance of newspapers those days especially Al-Imam which was published from 1906 to 1908 in shifting the people's paradigm towards Malay transformation. This research also discovered "who's who" related to Al-Imam that the writer feels had contributed to the development of early newspapers in Malaysia. "Product" of transformation amongst Malay also discussed in this research especially prominent personalities in journalism and radicals. Factors led to the emergence of those kinds of personalities including education also included in this paper.

Key word: *Al Imam, Nationalism, Malay Society*

I. MALAY SOCIETY: EARLY SCENARIO

During the last four to five centuries, foreign observers have held definite opinions about the Malays. Those opinions were directly formulated, without ambiguity. The Malays themselves had also an opinion on what they were, but that was not directly expressed. The Malay historical sources do not concern themselves with the problem. Nevertheless from them we can infer how the Malays think of themselves, their duties, their values and their culture as a whole. But foreign sources are full of accounts of the Malays. One of the best sources on Malay attributed to Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore and British Lieutenant Governor of Java and Bengkulu, had his first contact with the Malays in Malacca when he became Agent for the Governor-General in 1810 (SH Alatas, 1977: 38). It can be suggested that the study of the national character of the Malays had in Raffles a significant pioneer, despite the shortcomings of his method and conclusions judged by modern scientific standard. According to Raffles the Malays

did not achieve a high intellectual stage of development. He was particularly interested in the maritime codes of the Malays and their legal institutions. It was the absence of a well-defined and generally accepted system of law which according to Raffles was the greatest influence in the deterioration of the Malay character (Ibid).

II. ROLE OF AL-IMAM IN MALAY SOCIETY, 1906 - 1908

Malay language newspaper actually is relatively young compared to English language newspaper and Chinese newspaper in Malaysia (Lent, 1982). If government gazette hailed as first newspaper in English and Chinese monthly, Malay newspapers owes its beginning to the locally-born Indian Muslims of Singapore, which called Jawi Peranakan published in 1889 in Singapore. But in the whole Nusantara (Malay Archipelago), the first newspaper was *Soerat Kabar Bahasa Melajoe* which was published in 1856 in Surabaya Indonesia (Ahmat Adam, 1992). The writer point of view, the first newspaper in Malaya (peninsular) should be attributed to Seri Perak, which was published in 1893 in Taiping, Perak since Perak is one of states in Peninsular Malaysia. Back to the point of Jawi Peranakan, it was locally born offspring of unions between indigenous Malay women and South Indian Muslim traders. In late 1876, this group formed and association in Singapore, which in turn published a weekly called Jawi Peranakan (Lent, 1977: 258) A writer of the time described Jawi Peranakan as having a circulation of 250 by 1880, "ably and punctually edited, having with only one exception, been issued consistently on the day on which it professes to come out" (Abu Bakar, 1991). The paper was also responsible for spawning other newspapers during that time most of the periodicals were hand lithographed weeklies modeled initially after English language newspaper and later using Egyptian and Arabic news content. The result was that the most of the content did not relate to the Malay community. In July 1906, the mood of the Malay journalism began to change with the appearance of Al-Imam (Ibid).

Al-Imam was a monthly periodical published by a group radical Muslims in Singapore in 1906 (Ibid: 1). Those responsible for the edition and publication of the journal were mostly educated in the Middle East particularly in those parts of the world that, according to certain sources, they began to observe, and subsequently became interested in the Fundamentalist movement first founded by Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab (1703-1791) in Arabia. They were also inspired by the revolutionary ideology of Pan Islamism

founded by Syed Jamaludin Al-Afghani and by the zeal of the reformist disciples, Sheikh Muhammad Abduh and Syed Muhammad Rashid Ridza. This reformist movement which was based in Cairo, had its own organ called Al-Manar (The Lighthouse) published by Rashid Ridza in the period of 1898-1953. As the organ of an Islamic Reformist Movement, Al-Imam, was to great extent similar to that of Al-Manar both in form and content.

iii "BACKBONE" OF AL IMAM

1) *Sheikh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin*

When we talk on Al-Imam, the one name that can not be separated is, Sheikh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin or normally known as Sheikh Tahir Jaluddin. His contribution in Al-Imam can not be argued along with his partner, Sheikh Ahmad Al Hadi. Sheikh Tahir was born on 9th December 1869 in Sumatra and at the time of Sheikh Tahir's birth, the world was being convulsed by the upsurge of Western imperialism, reflected in the intense competition between European powers to acquire colonial possessions (Tate, 2001). The famously known Islamic reformist movement, Wahabi was close to Sheikh Tahir's life where he lived in the Sumatra community that against the establishment of the colonial presence in their places.

2) *Syed Sheikh Al Hadi*

Malay journalism actually owed a lot to Syed Sheikh Al Hadi especially during 1920s. He was the one who continued Al-Imam's ideology by producing *Al-Ikhwān*. Za'ba in other article entitled, "Modern Development of Malay Literature" said Sheikh Al Hadi hailed as the forerunner of the development of Malay literary. Sheikh Al Hadi known for his novels but in journalism known for his contribution in *Al-Ikhwān*. Sheikh Al Hadi was born in Kampung Ulu, Malacca of a family of mixed Arab and Malay blood which had land and property there. He had never gone to Malay school but in his boyhood was a pupil of Raja Haji Ali at Riau and later was sent study in Arabia and Egypt. For a time he sat at the feet of great theologian of modern Islam, Sheikh Muhammad Abduh of Egypt. Returning to Malaya towards the end of last century, he became shariah lawyer at the old religious court of Johor where being a *syed* and a learned man, he was much respected by the nobility. Among his elders and old friends throughout south Malay he was generally known as Wan Anum. Afterwards he collaborated with with Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin, a Sumatran Malay then fresh from study in Mecca and the Al-Azhar of Cairo, he became managing director and part-editor of Al-Imam in 1906.

A. *Al-Imam and Contemporary Politics*

The message and the mission of Al-Imam as we have seen was not confined to religious matters only, rather it widened its scope so as to include matters social as well as political. In his article on education, a writer quoting the Prophet's saying "acquire knowledge from the cradle to grave" Al-Imam warned knowledgeable people not to boast and reminded its reader of the fact that the destruction of Muslim nations of the past was due to their negligence in acquiring knowledge the writer criticized "orang-orang

besar" (the noble class) for their misdeeds and negative attitude towards the well being of their own people.

B. *Al-Imam's Criticism of Malay Society*

Al-Imam deemed it necessary to express freely its views and ideas asserting its opinions forcefully and effectively so that, at times, it delved into governmental matters. Consequently it is not unexpected to find that Al-Imam in the course of its comment was not reluctant in invoicing its finding whenever necessary in criticizing the government's planning and programming.

It maintained that constructive criticism are fact a sincere contribution that ought to be normally pursued and undertaken as a social obligation for the common of the entire umma (nation) however controversial the case might be.

C. *General Impact of Al-Imam*

When discussing on "impact" it is not only meant by impact to the audience or readers but to the broader or more general or even do not concern with readers or audience. Al-Imam critically observed that were among its own community those who had not only forgotten their religion and country but also their Lord, Allah Himself, thereby exposing themselves to be neglected, forgotten by Allah, Al-Imam warned that this graceful behaviors towards God's bounty will certainly caused into vanish from us.

In the world of journalism, the impact made by Al-Imam was inevitably of great importance and significance but not only within the Malay Peninsula but also abroad particularly in Indonesia. In the Malay Peninsula itself, the subsequent emergence of certain Islamic periodicals during the succeeding two decades was yet further evidence of the impression left by Al-Imam. One outstanding example was the periodical "Neracha" (The Scale) published in Singapore by Haji Abbas bin Muhammad Taha during 1911 – 1915. Haji Abbas bin Muhammad Taha had previously been an editor of Al-Imam and not surprisingly the policy of Neracha in religious matters was quite similar to if not identical with that of Al-Imam.

Roff (1994) commented that "the importance of Al-Imam in Malaya as a journal of influence was overrated. The extent of its circulation is problematical, but was comparatively small...Although it had a limited audience, it came into the hands of religious teachers in madrasah and "pondok" schools, where its opinion on such questions as the wearing of European style clothing, the payment of money from burial prayers, the taking of interest from savings banks and certain of the practices associated with "naqshabani" Sufism aroused considerable controversy.

II. MALAY TRANSFORMATION AND GROWTH OF MALAY INTELLIGENTSIA AND SCHOLARS UNTIL 1941.

A. *Influence of Islam and The "War" of Kaum Muda – Kaum Tua.*

The history of Islam in Malaysia, as is perhaps well known, dates back several centuries. It has claimed that Melaka played a major role in the Islamization of Southeast

Asia. But that as it may, there is paucity of material on the development of Islam in Malaysia for the period before the 19th century. The situation improves but slightly for the 19th century itself (Khoo, 1991). During that time, writings on Islam had depended heavily on oral sources. The 20th century has proved to be different. Not only is there a large corpus of material available in both English and Malay, as result of the emergence of more literate class amongst the Muslims early in the century led to the growth of a need to perceive religion in more logical terms. By 1930s, there were a few groups emerged who took a more academic and intellectual interests in Islam. Many of those participated actively in debates in the press but chose to remain anonymous. Malay educated who aired their views with even greater vigour in the Malays press but they tended to be more emotional than the English educated scholars. All that, however meant that Islam, in Malaysia, compared to the earlier centuries was given a new lease of life in the 20th century.

Apart from being the “foundation” of nationalism and also Malay transformation, “*Kaum Muda – Kaum Tua*” conflict was said to have begun with the publication of *Al-Imam*. That conflict continued right into 1930s and ceased only temporarily during the Japanese Occupation. But the issues raised from time to time which had relevance to the local Muslim society then ought to be seen in broader terms for they were not always specifically related to the confrontation between two clearly identifiable factions.

In early years, newspapers were regarded as a “tool” of nationalism to fight against colonialism. Even the newspaper regarded as part of the origins of the Malay nationalism in Malaya. Scholar, Abdullah Haji Afar regarded *Al-Imam* as “first step of Malay nationalism in the Tanah Melayu” influence played by newspapers in raising the nationalism were so crucial (Khoo & Jazamuddin, 1980). Roff (1994) addressed that periodicals “*Al-Imam* was part of the important factor in raising the nationalism among Malays. Although the existence of *Al-Imam* in newspaper industry was very short or nearly two years only, but the impact *Al-Imam* had brought can not be resisted. In the book, Roff emphasized on the idea of “*Kaum Muda – Kaum Tua*” where he regarded the idea as “innovation” and that were reactions towards the idea.

Growth of Malay Scholars and Intelligentsia

1) *Malay College of Kuala Kangsar*

It is widely known that, Malay College of Kuala Kangsar is one of the best school in Malaysia. It has produced a lot of national leaders and figures since its inception. The history of MCKK started in February 1904, when R.J Wilkinson who recently appointed that time as Inspector of Schools for the Malaya, wrote to the Residents General to propose “the establishment at a suitable localitiy in the Federated Malay States of a residential school for the education of Malays of good family, and for the training of Malay boys for administration to certain branches of the Government service” (Roff, 1994: 100). Kuala Kangsar, the royal capital of Perak had been suggested as the locality, where a day school already existed to train a small number of local boys for government employment and where Sultan Idris had

already promised his interest and encouragement. It is clear that Wilkinson envisaged a departure from the previous policy of reserving special educational opportunities there were exclusively for Malays of royal or aristocratic birth. Ambiguity on this point, however, dogged the scheme from the beginning. Except for Wilkinson himself, who expressed these views more clearly elsewhere, it is know how much acceptance they found among other British administrators or among Malay rulers, who might well have been disposed to raise some objections.

2) *Sultan Idris Training College (SITC)*

Sultan Idris Training College (SITC), now known as Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, UPSI, named in honor of the late Sultan Idris Ibni Raja Iskandar, was opened at Tanjong Malim, a small town just north of the Perak-Selangor state boundary, late in 1922. It had been some three years in construction but the result was striking; a fine set of teaching buildings and residential quarters accommodating 200 students and their teachers, with 80 acres of grounds. After that, additions were made until the college reached its maximum enrollment of nearly 400. The first teaching staff consisted of four Europeans, nine Malays and one Filipino who had been engaged in 1917 to teach basket work at the old Malacca and Matang colleges since closed (Ibid: 141). The students were drawn by competitive examination from village vernacular schools; the sons for the most part of peasant farmers and fishermen. In this SITC contrasted markedly with the only comparable educational institution in the country, the Malay College of Kuala Kangsa, MCKK, whose pupils as we had discussed, came mainly from the ranks of the aristocracy.

3) *Zainal Abidin Ahmad (Za'ba)*

Zainal Abidin Ahmad (Za'ba) made an addition to Roff's and Swettenham's view on Malay where in his article entitled, “The Poverty of the Malays”, published in *Malay Mail*, December 1st, 1923, Za'ba said the Malays as a whole are a particularly poor people. Poverty is their most outstanding characteristic and their greatest handicap in the race of progress. Poor in money, poor in education, poor in intellectual equipment and moral qualities, they cannot be otherwise but left behind in the march of nations. The word “poverty” as applied to them does not merely mean destitution of wealth riches. It means terribly more. The poverty of the Malays was an all-around poverty. It envelops them on every side. Intellectually, the Malays were poor in knowledge, in culture and in the general means of cultivating the mind. Roff added, Malays' literature was poor and unelevating, domestic surroundings from childhood were poor and seldom edifying, outlook on life was poor and full of gloom religious life and practice was poor and far removed from the pure original teachings of the Prophet. In short, Malays cut poor figures in every department of life (Ibid: 150).

4) *Abdul Rahim Kajai*

During the 1930s the steady stream of Malay-language periodical publication swelled to a flood. The main characteristic of this vigorous activity was perhaps the increasing commercialization and professionalism of journalistic enterprise in response to a growing audience for

cheaply priced popular reading matter. Newspapers from dailies to weeklies increased in number and in the range and depth of their treatment of contemporary affairs. Journalism was taken up as full time or part-time career by young Malays with literary aspirations and many others became accustomed to contributing to the vernacular press occasional articles or letters to the editor discussing topics of current interests. At one time, Malay journalism in 1930s was dominated by a series of metropolitan daily newspapers where Abdul Rahim Kajai, who from 1931 to 1935 edited the metropolitan newspaper, *Majlis*.

Declaring itself in his first issue to be a “national” paper, striving for “national unity” among the Malays, *Majlis* in an early editorial plunged directly into the central point at issue between the Malays and their colonial rulers in the 1930s, the extent to which people of other Asian races could be permitted to usurp the rights of Malays in their own land. At one point, editorial went on pointing out that the British had a solemn obligation to put Malay interest first and even criticizing the administration. The tone was hardly that of the militant nationalist, but the writing was clever and pointed as always with Kajai, and the moral was not lost. *Majlis* was frequently referred to and quoted by the Kuala Lumpur English-language press which, though it did not always agree with the “extreme” Malay position taken up, in general welcomed the appearance of “an intelligent vernacular press”.

5) Ibrahim Yaakob

Ibrahim Yaakob was himself a product of British colonial education. Ibrahim Yaakob was a student of the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC), which was set up by the British colonial authorities with the simple aim of creating a class of Malay functionaries and educationists who would help them maintain and manage the lower rungs of the British colonial educational system in Malaya. While the MCKK produced a number of compliant Malay clerks and peons (of royal birth, no less) to man the middle and lower echelons of the colonial bureaucracy, sister-institution the SITC produced a generation of educated and conscientious Malay youths who came to see their plight from a different perspective. From this group of newly conscious Malay youths a handful of radical young Malay journalists, writers, teachers and activists would emerge, who would later become the founding fathers of the Malay radical nationalist movement. Being denied the opportunity of being taught something really useful, Ibrahim opted for radical student activism instead.

6) Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy

In Malaysian history, the name of Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy is hardly ever seen and known. His contributions, works, ideas, thoughts and many more are being kept silence. But lately many scholars are giving much emphasize and doing research about Dr. Burhanuddin and his associates. The role played by Dr. Burhanuddin during pre-independent, during and post independent are very significant and should be noted by all people in Malaysia particularly because the truth should be presented in a very decent way. Moreover, when we look thoroughly about his ideas, writings, and activism, there are three major themes which he tried to emphasized and achieved. According to Kamarudin Jaafar,

the major themes of Dr. Burhanuddin are: (1) Islam, (2) Malay Nationalism, and (3) Independence. It is obvious that the education of him as well as the family background of him had a great influence and impact upon him.

It should be noted that during the Japanese occupation in Tanah Melayu, Dr. Burhanuddin was appointed as an advisor of the Malay Custom and Culture by the Japanese. Because of his high position, he used his authority to protect and assist a well-known Islamic religious school, which can be considered important in the development of history of Tanah Melayu (Malaysia) which is Ma’ahad al-Ehya as-Sharif, Gunung Semangol Perak. Regarding to this religious school, Dato’ Onn Jaafar, as the President of UMNO always referred Ma’ahad al-Ehya as-Sharif as a threat (danger) from the mountain (Ramlah Adam, 2004).

It is clear that Dr. Burhanuddin viewed nationalism as not an end but as a medium to the hereafter. And even he stated that nationalism he perceived is very wide and not rigid compared to others understanding of nationalism. But in the end, Rustam A. Sani argued that nationalism movement in Tanah Melayu as a movement of ‘failed nationalism’ because it is not based on Malay itself (Rustam, 2004)

III. CONCLUSION

A. Role played by Al-Imam towards Malay transformation.

In the religious aspect of life, Al-Imam played and outstanding role especially in cleansing and purifying the rituals and other matters of worship had been corrupted but yet observed by the community of that time. Corruption upon rituals is always thrown into religious teaching through innovations some of which are not only unhealthy but also heretical that they even expose their upholders to disbelief and infidelity.

Al-Imam was also responsible for spawning other newspapers during that time most of the periodicals were hand lithographed weeklies modeled initially after English language newspaper and later using Egyptian and Arabic news content. The result was that the most of the content did not relate to the Malay community. In July 1906, the mood of the Malay journalism began to change with the appearance of Al-Imam.

Most notably, dichotomy *Kaum Muda Kaum Tua* was said to have begun with the publication of Al-Imam. Those dichotomy was closely related to Malay transformation during period of 1906 until 1941. Al-Imam also said as first newspaper which boldly voiced the grievances of the Malays and at the same time sounded warning to them that if they did not change their attitudes and assert themselves, their position in their own country would be in jeopardy.

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