AL-ITQĀN

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The Response of Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi (1867-1934) To Educational Concerns among the Malays in Malaya

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Abstract

The impact of British colonization on Malaya brought about various demographical changes among the Malays. Under the British colonization, the Malays were left behind in the state of backwardness and stagnation. Syed Sheikh al-Hadi (1867-1934) was one of the pioneers of the Malay reformists during the colonial period who observed the backwardness state of the Malays and felt responsible to bring changes in the condition and the way of thinking among them. This study attempts at investigating the approaches of Syed Sheikh al-Hadi in reviving the backwardness of Malay society through his educational reform. He believed that through education, the backward state of Malays can be improved to become a progressive nation. For the purpose of the study, the paper focuses on selected issues approached by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi related to educational concerns in the Malay community. Four major issues will be highlighted, namely his opposition to blind imitation (*taqlid*), the elimination of superstition (*khurafat*) and innovation (*bid'ah*), the establishment of the *madrasah* system, and the importance of knowledge and education among the Malay women. The ideas of Syed Sheikh al Hadi on these issues had brought about the significant influence on the Malay society during his time. The study found that Syed Sheikh al-Hadi has contributed remarkably to the progress and development of the Malays in Malaya through the educational field particularly in his writings and establishing educational institutions. It was also traced that Syed Sheikh al-Hadi was greatly influenced by the educational reform in Egypt and brought the idea back to Malaya.

Keywords: Syed Sheikh al -Hadi, Malaya, Malays, education, reform.

Introduction

The presence of British colonial power in Malaya led to the decline of the Malays' progress and development. This situation awakened Syed Sheikh al-Hadi to bring an improvement and changes in the Malay society. In his approach, al- Hadi was very much influenced by the educational reform particularly advocated by Muhammad Abduh in Egypt. He applied the

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idea to restore the Malay community from the state of stagnation and declination towards development and progression.

During al-Hadi's period, there were two styles of education; the Western educational system administered by British and the traditional religious educational system advocated by the Malay religious leaders. The Western education put a great emphasis on sciences and worldly knowledge and neglected religious aspects. Meanwhile, the traditional religious education only focused on religious aspects and neglected the worldly knowledge. Thus, al-Hadi sought to reconcile between these two systems of education. He believed that the religious and worldly knowledge are complementary to each other for the development of progressive nation. At the same time, he also concerned about the conservative teachings of *Kaum Tua* in Malaya at that time and criticized their teachings as the main cause of Muslim degradation. That is why in his emphasis on education, he focused on the wrong understanding of religion which had led to downfall of Islam. He advocated a new form of knowledge and freedom of thought in the Malay society. By doing so, al-Hadi exposed people to differentiate themselves between true Islamic teachings and the false ones.

Al-Hadi's concern about the importance of knowledge for the Malays was obviously traced throughout his writings in magazines, such as *al-Imam* (1906-1909), *al-Ikhwan* (1926-1931) and *Saudara* (1928-1941). These magazines obviously reflected his ideas on the importance of knowledge among the Malays. Al-Hadi stated that;

> Education is the dawn of the faith whilst knowledge is its sun that reveals the darkness; it is the secret that only the wise could comprehend. Knowledge is the weapon by which victory in the battle fields of life can be achieved; it is the connecting factor which brings most of the people to their destination of greatest and excellence. Knowledge is in fact the treasury of truth and the reservoir of wisdom; it is the proper channel towards perfection, the light which when it occupies the two human vessels –the heart and head- will illuminate all over the country.[1]

The purpose of his remark was to encourage the Malays to seek knowledge through a proper education. The proper education, according to al-Hadi, is built upon the knowledge based on the *Qur`ān*, *Sunnah* and

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[1] Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, "Muqaddimah", *Al-Imam,* 2-3, quoted in Adibah Sulaiman, *Syed Shaykh Al-Hady's Concept of Knowledge and The Transformation of Education of The Malays* (Phd.Thesis. International Islamic University Malaysia, 2011), p. 182.

reason or *ʿaql*. It should be free from blind imitation (*taqlid)*, superstitious belief (*khurafat*) and bad innovation (*bidʿah ḍalālah*). Meanwhile, the main goal of education is to bring goodness to the world and the hereafter. It is at this juncture, al-Hadi tried to remove the dual system of education namely; modern and traditional religious knowledge so that the Malays would benefit both types of knowledge. The integrated model of education which is a combination between the modern and religious educational system advocated by al-Hadi is expected to produce a balanced personality of Muslims who are neither secular nor rigid and could bring about development in the society within the framework of Islam. Al-Hadi observed the urgent need to reform the Malays' mindset and position. This paper highlights four major issues with regard to his educational concerns; firstly, his opposition to *taqlīd*, secondly, the elimination of the practice of superstition (*khurafat*) and innovation (*bidʿah*), thirdly, the establishment of *madrasah* system and fourthly, the importance of knowledge for the Malay women.

Intellectual Background of Syed Sheikh al-Hadi

Syed Sheikh bin Syed Ahmad bin Hassan bin Saqqaf al-Hadi, often recognized as Syed Sheikh al-Hadi or al-Hadi was born on 26 November 1867 at Kampung Hulu, Melaka to a Malay mother and Arab-Malay father of *Haḍrami* descendent.[1] There is an insufficient account of the early life of al-Hadi, thus, most of the contemporary researchers rely on Syed Alwi's writing about his father. The history of Arab-Malay of *Haḍrami* descendent can be traced back to the immigration of Arabs to Malaya. It was reported that al-Hadi's great grandfather, Saqaf al-Hadi probably migrated to Malacca in the late 18th century.[2] The Arab-Malay families are highly respected by the local Malays for their bloodline and religious merit. In the Malay community, those who have a surname *Syed* or *Syarifah* for women is regarded as carrying on the lineage of the Prophet's family. Furthermore, the Arab immigrants in Malaya were closely related to the arrival of Islam in the Malay world. These are evidences indicating that al-Hadi came from a notable and religious family which was highly respected by the Malay community.[3]

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[1] Hafiz Zakariya, "Al-Hadi's Contributions to Islamic Reformism in Malaya" in *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?* Edited by Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk and Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim (Boston: Brill, 2009), p. 204.

[2] Ibrahim Abu Bakar, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya: The Life and Thoughts of Sayid Sheikh Al-Hadi (1867-1934),* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1994), p. 50.

[3] Hafiz, "Al-Hadi's Contributions…", p. 205.

Al-Hadi had spent his early lifetime in several places before dedicating the final phase of his life in Penang. Hence, his life can be divided into three main phases. The first phase of his life is referred to his early childhood where he spent his life and received his early education in Malacca before his father brought their family to Pulau Penyengat, Riau. He was adopted by Raja Ali Kelana, a member of Riau royal family. Al-Hadi also went to Kuala Terengganu and enrolled in *pondok* which used a traditional way of teaching and learning Islamic knowledge.[1] The second phase of al-Hadi's life began by his visits to Egypt. In Egypt, al-Hadi was exposed to Muhammad Abduh's works and ideas of Islamic reform. His return from Egypt to Malaya marked his third phase of life where he propagated educational reform among the Malays.[2] Prior to his great impression on Abduh's idea of reform and revival of Islam, al-Hadi had started making a reform to improve the conditions of the Malays.

In terms of educational background of al-Hadi, there were two phases of education that he had gone through. The first phase was his early education where he spent most of his youth learning religious knowledge in the Malay Archipelago. The second phase was during his visits to the Middle-east which became a milestone in the development of his thought on the idea of educational reform. The early education of al-Hadi was basically related to his study on the Malay and Arabic language, and religious sciences. He began his earlier education in Malacca under his father's instruction, Syed Ahmad al-Hadi who taught him Malay, Arabic and fundamental Islamic knowledge. At the age of seven, al-Hadi moved to Pulau Penyengat, an island located in Riau.[3]

Al-Hadi travelled to the Middle East to accompany the royal aristocrats for the purpose of performing pilgrimage and further their studies in Mecca, Medina and Egypt.[4] During al-Hadi's visit to Egypt, he was exposed to Jamal al-dīn al-Afghānī (1839-1897), Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905) and other Muslim reformists' idea of *iṣlah* (reform). He indulged himself in their writings. Za'ba reported that al-Hadi had a direct contact with ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā in Egypt.[5] This has resulted in a great admiration of al-Hadi on Muḥammad ʿAbduh's progressive idea. After his return to Malaya, al-Hadi worked together

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[1] Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism...,* pp. 53-54.
[2] A further discussion on these three phases of Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi's life will be detailed in the next section.
[3] Hafiz, "Al-Hadi's Contributions...", p. 205.
[4] Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism…,* p. 57.
[5] Ibid, p. 58.

with his other fellow comrades such as Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin to continue the idea of reform in the Malay society.[1]

Al-Hadi's Opposition to the Principle of *Taqlīd*

According to Ibn Manzur, *taqlīd* is derived from Arabic term *q-l-d* which technically means to put something around the neck.[2] *Taqlīd* is also defined as to imitate or copy, and was seen as accepting and following the views of someone whose opinion itself was not regarded as proven true. The rise of *taqlīd* has provided the laymen with definitive answer pertaining to all their legal queries. This avoids them from confusion in the complexity of disagreement *(ikhtilāf)* among the scholars of different school of jurisprudence *(madhāhib).*[3]

In the Malayan context, the Malays tend to blindly adhere to some pertinent concepts held by their ancestors and those concepts are usually related to the Malay cultures and civilizations.[4] The emergence of *taqlīd* in the Malay community was due to several reasons, for instance, the agrarian lifestyle of the Malays and the role of traditionalist groups as exponents of *taqlīd.* The Malays during the colonial period was considered as agrarian community which required more on the physical ability, and the intellectual ability was not given priority. The lack of the intellectual ability was an obstacle for the development of the society. Moreover, the nature of education in Malay vernacular schools at that time only enabled the Malay peasants to read, write and do simple calculation to survive their everyday life. They were not trained to maximize their intellectual ability as the colonial rule was afraid of the rise of educated and intellectual Malays who would go against them.

During al-Hadi's time, the religious education was led by the Malay traditionalist scholars through *pondok* system, and their methodology of teaching was based on *taqlīd* or rigidity and blind following with no emphasis on critical thinking and analytical approach. The Malay traditionalist scholars claimed that the use of reason is contradictory to Islam and argued that it was impossible for one to make independent

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[1] Hafiz, "Al-Hadi's Contributions...", p. 209.

[2] Ibnu Manzur, *Lisān al-ʿArab,* (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1986), p. 3718.

[3] Abdul-Rahman Mustafa, *on Taqlid: Ibn Al Qayyim's Critique of Authority in Islamic Law,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 6-8.

[4] Adibah Sulaiman, Ezad Azraai Jamsari, Kamaruzaman Jusoff, Noor Inayah Yaakub, Wan Kamal Mujani, Wan Mohd Hirwani Wan Hussain and Zinatul Ashiqin Zainol "Malay Society of the Late 19th and Early 20th Century: Blind Imitation vs Independent Reasoning", *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research*, vol.7 (2011): pp. 7-8.

reasoning *(ijtihād)* as this exercise had discontinued since several centuries ago.[1] Al-Hadi was opposed to this culture of *taqlīd* as it was against the spirit of the *Qur`ān* which emphasized on the importance of reason. He observed that some of the Malays scholars at that time were qualified to be *mujtahids* due to their well-versed in Arabic language as well as Islamic traditions. However, they chose to simply adhere to previous opinion without any reasonable justification. Al-Hadi, therefore, criticized this kind of attitude and claimed that they should deduce directly from the divine sources instead of relying solely on the previous scholars' opinion.[2] Al-Hadi affirmed that Allah created man as a rational being, and bestowed upon them the intellectual and rational faculty which made human being the very best creation.[3] Thus, he called upon the Malays to use their rational faculty and intelligence in order to understand the teachings of the *Qur`ān* and the *Sunnah* instead of blindly following the instructions without understanding the real meaning and purposes of Islamic principles.

Al-Hadi emphasized on the usefulness, reasonableness and practicability of Islamic principles and practices in relation to the pillars of Islam.[4] In his book *Ugama Islam dan Akal* (Islam and Reason), al-Hadi provided a deep discussion and analysis on the purpose of the pillars of Islam. Although Muslims are taught about those pillars or obligations and know them since they were children, apparently most of them only perform them for individual benefits or simply imitate what others have done.[5] Hence, al-Hadi urged Muslims to use their intellectual ability to seek the philosophical wisdom as well as the spirit behind each and every practice of `ibādah. He also emphasized that every `ibādah is not only for the individual betterment but also for the societal development.

Al-Hadi denounced the derivative belief, unquestioned obedience and blind imitation or *taqlīd* to be practiced by the Malay community. He demanded the Malays to employ their rational ability and reason to seek the truth and understand about God's injunctions and prohibitions.[6] In addition, he argued that any religious interpretations of the early Muslim scholars that were in conflict with the faculty of reason and the

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, *Ugama Islam dan Akal,* (Pulau Pinang: Jelutong Press, 1931), p.66.

[4] Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism,* p. 125.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., p. 80.

circumstances of his time needed to be re-evaluated and re-interpreted according to the *Qur`ān* and the *Sunnah*.[1] This is because the Malays during his time tended to depend blindly on the teachings and opinions of certain religious teachers without referring to the *Qur`ān* and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet. The society also tended to belief and imitate something that was deemed fit in their life and culture without questioning the reason and its validity. He critically wrote in his work *'Ugama Islam dan Akal'* (Islam and Reason),

> Indeed, God's curse in *al-Qur'an* upon those who do not open and free their mind from shackles of thought. Hence, their mind is useless without checking the truth of certain matter, but only blindly following the act of their descendants and previous community![2]

During al-Hadi's time, he observed that the Malay community did not concern much about the interpretation of religious beliefs and practices. It was deemed unnecessary for them as they preferred to follow the sayings of their religious teachers and leaders. This kind of attitude led to the problem of *taqlīd* or blind following, stagnation and rigidity of thinking among them. The religious beliefs and practices were seen as obligatory ritual only without seeking the spirit of philosophical wisdom behind them. In response to this scenario, al-Hadi advocated the Malays to explain their religious beliefs and practices in a rational as well scientific argumentation especially in defense them against the non-believers so that Islam would be more acceptable to the modern minds of the people.

In his opposition to *taqlīd*, al-Hadi encouraged the implementation of *ijtihad* in which he considered *ijtihād* as the means to the intellectual development of Islamic thought. He believed in the progressive, dynamic, and rational character of Islam. Al-Hadi was critical of those Malay traditionalist scholars who believed in *taqlīd* and discouraged any new and creative thoughts. He acknowledged the role of human reason and it led him to proclaim that the door of *ijtihād* should not be closed and it is the duty as well as the right of the qualified scholars to apply the principles of the *Qur`ān* to the problems of their time. Al-Hadi argued that Islam honours reason and imposes on Muslims to use their intellect to discover and acknowledge the existence of God and His

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[1] Adibah Sulaiman, "Malay Society of the Late 19th and Early 20th Century: Blind Imitation vs Independent Reasoning", p. 10.
[2] Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, *Ugama Islam dan Akal,* p. 27.

omnipotence through the study of this magnificent universe.[1] Hence, al-Hadi did not oppose sciences in education but encouraged to combine it with the Islamic teachings.[2]

The Elimination of Superstitious Beliefs and Practices *(Khurafat)* and Innovation *(Bidʿah)*

The superstitious beliefs and practices *(khurafat)* were deeply rooted in the Malay culture for centuries. George Maxwell in his book *In Malay Forests* described the origin of Malay superstitious beliefs and practices and how the Malays retained them alongside their Islamic belief to be part of the Malay custom;

> The Malays of the Peninsula … are now without exception followers of the Prophet – decidedly unorthodox in many ways, it is true, but unshakable in their adherence to what they consider to be essentials of their religion: recognizing the "Law of the Custom", the *Hukom Adat*, the traditions of many centuries of paganism and Hinduism on the one hand, and on the other hand the often conflicting claim of the "Law of the Prophet", the *Hukom Sharaʿ*, their more recently acquired code – and always ready to make a compromise between them.[3]

This is because the belief system of the Malays before the arrival of Islam was influenced by paganism, Hinduism and Buddhism. After they embraced Islam, remnants of superstitious beliefs and practices still existed in Malay cultures and customs. There are several examples of superstitious practices in the Malay culture. *Semangat Padi* (The Spirit of Rice-paddy), for instance, is a belief that there is a spirit who guards and flourishes the paddy field. The Malay peasants performed *Upacara Semangat Padi*, a ritual connected with the planting and harvesting the rice paddy to show respect and thankfulness towards *Semangat Padi* hoping for abundance of the harvest. This ritual was conducted and led by *Tok Bomoh,* a Malay shaman, who sought assurance from the spirit to take care of the paddy field. The ritual involved a combination of recitations of Hindu *mantera* (invocations) and *Doa Selamat* (Islamic Supplication) in Arabic.[4]

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[1] Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, *Ugama Islam dan Akal,* p. 17.

[2] Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism,* p. 40.

[3] Robert Day McAmis, *Malay Muslims: The History and Challenge of Resurgent Islam in Southeast Asia.* (Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), pp. 50-51.

[4] Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, *One Hundred and One Things Malay,* (Singapore: Patridge Publishing, 2016),

Aside from superstitious belief, the Malays also believed in and practiced innovation *(bidʿah)* as parts of their culture. The concept of innovation *(bidʿah)* can be classified into two classifications, the good innovation *(bidʿah ḥasanah)* which is in line with religious teaching and the bad innovation *(bidʿah ḍalalah)* which is against the religious teaching and leads to religious heresy. The superstition *(khurafat)* was fallen under the second category of *bidʿah,* that is, the *bidʿah ḍalalah.* Henceforth, the focus on the innovation *(bidʿah)* in this section is the bad innovation *(bidʿah ḍalalah).* There are a few factors for the emergence of *bidʿah* in the Malay society, for instance; the lack of religious knowledge, the misunderstanding on religious matters, the influence of shamanism and the belief in supernatural powers and magic[1] , such as, belief in an unseen power that controls the world. This has led to the belief that every matter in this world, such as, mountains, rocks, trees etc. has a spirit.

Man became afraid of this as they believed it can cause a good or bad impact on human's life[2]. Al-Hadi criticized this negative attitude among the Malays and their lack of understanding of Islam. For instance, instead of relying on Allah's power, they asked help from other unseen matters. They visited graveyard or asked help from shamans for blessing and abundance of wealth. This kind of practice, according to al-Hadi, would be a hindrance for the physical and intellectual developments of the Malays and made them becoming a weak nation. Therefore, al-Hadi emphasized on removal of any practice of *shirk* among the Malay community at his time.

Al-Hadi observed that the best way of reforming the mindset and superstitious as well as *bidʿah* practices among the Malays is through an educational reform. For him, the first step was to cleanse Islamic teaching from any elements of *shirk*, *khurafat* and *bidʿah*. In order to eliminate these elements, al-Hadi emphasized on the need for a proper understanding on the concept of *tawhīd*. In his book *Ugama Islam dan Akal* (Islam and Reason), he discussed about the significance of *shahādah* as a foundation of Islam and it needs to be internalized in one's heart and externalized in actions. In addition, al-Hadi reminded Muslims to have a firm and strong belief in

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https://books.google.com.my/books?id=AdZcCwAAQBAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s. Accessed on 11 August, 2017.

[1] Fadzli Adam, Firdaus Khairi Abdul Kadir & Abd Hakim Mohad, "Al-Bid'ah al-I'tiqadiyyah: Faktor Kemunculannya Dalam Masyarakat Melayu dan Ruang Dakwah yang Masih Terbuka*", Seminar Antarabangsa Dakwah & Etnik 2014: Da'wah & Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Perspective,* (2014).

[2] Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, Ugama Islam dan Akal, p. 68.

God, and not to fear other things except Allah. He affirmed that the strong belief in God would prevent man against any type of *shirk*. He stated;

> When a person has a firm and strong belief in his heart that God knows whatever man does, and that God, who is most powerful, can take any action at any time against anyone who goes against His commandments as revealed to His prophet, his feeling and knowledge become the greatest barrier preventing him from doing whatever is prohibited by religion[1].

When a person possesses a strong faith in God, he will practice Islam in accordance with the *Qur`ān* and Sunnah of the Prophet (p.b.u.h), and avoid any practice which is against the Islamic principles. For instance, the ceremony of *Semangat Padi* which was conducted based on the model of Hindu's rituals should be abolished and replaced with the recitation of *duʿa* or Islamic supplications asking for Allah's blessing to increase the *rizq* (sustenance) and paying the *zakāt* as a part of showing gratitude to Allah for the harvest.

The Establishment of the *Madrasah* System

In general, there were three types of educational system existing in the Malay community during the colonial period, namely, the traditional religious schools (*pondok* schools), the Malay vernacular schools and the English schools. Initially, the Malays' education began with the *pondok* system.[2] The *pondok* system is based on the traditional method of learning which is known as *menadah kitab* (opening book) and memorizing the syllabus.[3] The earliest *pondok* system emerged in the East Cost of Malaya, particularly in Kelantan and Terengganu including Pattani, a province in Southern Thailand.[4] Meanwhile, the Malay vernacular schools were built mostly in rural areas where the Malay peasants lived in. Instead of

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[1] Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, *Ugama Islam dan Akal*, 67-68. Translation provided in Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism in Malaya*, p. 79.

[2] *Pondok which* literally means a small hut build from wooden, refers to dormitories in which the students, predominantly the male, live in. The design of the dormitories often was built in simple huts clustered around the home of the teachers. Refers Farish A. Noor, "The Role Played by Religious Schools of Malaysia in the Development the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)", *The Madrasa in Asia: Political Activism and Transnational Linkages*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), p. 191.

[3] Ibrahim Abu Bakar, "Islamic Modernism in Malaya", p. 103.

[4] Farish, A. Noor, "The Role Played by Religious Schools of Malaysia in the Development the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)", *The Madrasa in Asia: Political Activism and Transnational Linkages*, p. 191.

producing well-educated Malays, the purpose of Malay vernacular school was to promote literacy in the Malay community. The Malay vernacular schools offered four years of elementary study consisting of learning the basis of reading, writing and simple calculation. For the British government, it was unnecessary to provide a further education for Malays because they wanted the Malays to focus on their agrarian life and activities. Upon completing the elementary level, the Malays returned to their normal life as literate farmers or fishermen.[1] The English schools, on the other hand, aimed to promote the Malay ruling class to participate in the British government in Malaya. Those who graduated from the English schools were given privilege to become an officer in the British administration[2].

Although the education opportunities do exist in the Malay community, it however did not give much help towards the progress and development of the Malays. While the *pondok* system only emphasized on religious education through the traditional way of teaching, the modern education such as the Malay vernacular schools only served the basic needs for knowledge, enough to produce literate Malay agrarians. They do not acquire further modern knowledge such as English and science which could change their status of life. For the ruling class who enrolled in English schools, they were influenced and inclined towards the Western and secular way of life. Instead of helping the community, they served the British colonial rule who governed Malaya. This situation led to the dissatisfaction of al-Hadi towards the nature of the existing educational system during his period of time. His discontentment towards the traditional religious education and modern education led him to establish a *madrasah* system.[3]

Al-Hadi's philosophy of education was based on an integrated knowledge between religious and modern science. He believed that the *madrasah* system could be the means to realize his idea towards educational reform. There were mainly three *madrasahs* where he managed to manifest his ideas; First, *Madrasah al-Iqbal* (1907) in Singapore; Second, *Madrasah al-Hadi* (1917) in Malacca and thirdly, *Madrasah al-Mashoor* (1919) in Penang.[4]

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[1] Ooi Keat Gin, *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to East Timor,* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), p. 833.
[2] Martin Rudner, Malaysian Development: A Retrospective, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1994), p. 287.
[3] Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism…,* p. 100.
[4] Ibrahim Abu Bakar, Rosnani Hashim (editor), "Sayid Shaykh Al-Hadi Reform of Islamic Education in Malaya*" in Reclaiming the Conversation: Islamic Intellectual Tradition in the Malay* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2010), p. 103.

After his return from the Middle-East, al-Hadi had resided in Singapore where he began to engage himself with *Madrasah al-Iqbal* by offering a new and different style of religious education. However, this *madrasah* only lasted about one or two years before being closed due to the administrative problems.[1] Al-Hadi, later on moved to Malacca where he established a new *madrasah* called *Madrasah al-Hadi* alongside with his companions' supports, Haji Abu Bakar bin Ahmad or Haji Bachik.[2] However, this *madrasah* did not receive a relatively positive response from local society due to the 'unorthodox' way of educational thought which seemed too advanced for that period of time. Many were reluctant to send their children because they were afraid of being influenced by al-Hadi's ideas.[3]

Although the two previous *madrasahs* could not last longer due to several issues, al-Hadi still continued his mission to improve the Malay educational system. He decided to settle down in Penang where he dedicated the rest of his life. In Penang, al-Hadi offered his service to *Madrasah al-Mashoor* located at Kampung Jawa Lama.[4] He was appointed as a headmaster where he fully utilized his role to upgrade the school system, syllabus and teachers towards modern Islamic education. The medium of instruction was in Arabic for the religious subject such as *tafsir al-Qur`ān, ḥadīth* and Islamic jurisprudence. The only non-religious subject is English. During his tenure as a headmaster, he invited a few of his fellow comrades whom among the Malay thinkers and reformers such as Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin, Sheikh Abdullah al-Maghribi and Haji Bachik. His son, Syed al-Alwi, also served the school as an English teacher from 1921 to 1923 since he had attended English school in Singapore. After about six years later, al-Hadi resigned from his post in *al-Mashoor* school and pursued his passion in journalism and publication.[5] This *madrasah* is still operating until today and has produced several important Malay figures and scholars such as Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy[6] and Abu Bakar Asy'ari.[7]

The establishment of *madrasah* system was a huge transformation for religious education in Malay during that time. It adopted a new approach of

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Hafiz, "Al-Hadi's Contributions…", p. 210.

[4] Ibrahim, "Sayid Shaykh Al-Hadi Reform…", p. 104.

[5] Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism…,* pp. 106-107.

[6] Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy was the third president of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). See. Ibid.

[7] Abu Bakar Asy'ari was the former Imam of Perlis State Mosque. See.Ibid.

education at that time. Technically, the *madrasah* system introduced the examination system, the records of students' attendance and achievements. The students have a regular timetable, the school uniform and received the school certificate upon their completion of study. This systematic approach of education was totally different from the traditional religious education which was normally conducted in the mosque or the house of religious leader (*imām*) with a more flexible style.[1] The lesson in *madrasah* was conducted in a classroom where every student was provided with a chair and a desk. This was opposite to the traditional religious education where the students sat together on the floor circling their teacher. In academic aspect, the *madrasah* provided an integrated education where the students received both religious and worldly knowledge at the same. The students were encouraged to be critical and analytical, and they were free to enter into a dialogue and debate with the teachers.[2]

The *madrasah* system continued to flourish all over Malaya and it was indirectly due to al-Hadi's contribution in reforming the educational system especially for Malay community. There were also *madrasahs* originated from *pondok* which converted their educational system towards an integrated knowledge. Besides al-Hadi's *madrasah,* among the earliest *madrasah* established in Malaya were *Madrasah Saadiah Sahhiah* (1914) in Perak, *Madrasah al-Muhammadiah* (1915), *Madrasah Pasir Mas* (1918), *Madrasah Pasir Putih* (1918) were built respectively in Kelantan. In Kedah, there was *Madrasah al-Hamidiah* (1935), *Madrasah al-Khairiyah, Pokok Sena* (1933).[3] In a nutshell, the widespread of *madrasahs* in Malaya proved that it was successfully able to gain the attention and positive response from the Malay community. Many Malays especially the new generations were aware of the importance of gaining knowledge to improve themselves for a better life.

The Importance of Knowledge and Education among the Malay Women
During the colonial period, especially before 1945, the educational opportunities for Malay women were very limited. There were several factors responsible for this scenario, such as, the attitude of the parents towards girls' education. The conservative style of parenting in the traditional Malay community educated the girls that their place was at home doing the domestic chores. Women were perceived as being intellectually

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[1] Adibah Sulaiman, "Syed Shaykh Al-Hady's Concept of Knowledge...", p. 180.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Sufean Hussin, *Pentadbiran Dalam Pembangunan Pendidikan*, (Pahang: PTS Publication, 2005), p. 419.

inferior and expected them to be submissive to their parents and husbands.[1] In opposed to that perception, al-Hadi recognized the women's rights and their position in the Malay society. He critically addressed the issue of women's emancipation through his several writings, for example, in the *"Hikayat Faridah Hanum* (The Story of Faridah Hanum)*", "Kitab Alam Perempuan* (The Book of Women's World)*"* and several other articles published in magazines such as *al-Imam* and *al-Ikhwan*. Al-Hadi wrote in his article entitled *"Berubah Pemeliharaan Anak-Anak Perempuan itu Sangat-Sangat Dikehendaki"* (An Urgent for Changes in the Upbringing of Girls) published in *al-Ikhwan* magazine about the urgency of the development of Malay women intellectuals.[2]

Women should be able to balance between their physical needs and intellectual development because the sound mind is in the sound body. Al-Hadi gave an example of the way Western people bringing up their children. The boys and girls are active physically and mentally. They have been encouraged and given a freedom to be active physically through physical exercise and sport activities. This is because they believe that a strong body helps to maintain an excellent mind. For having this principal has led them to become a successful nation.[3] Thus, instead of locking themselves at home, women could engage in sport activities and exercise to ensure their health, fitness and active.

Al-Hadi believed that the development of women's intellect is necessary and crucial for the betterment of the society. If women's mind is weak and inadequate, their values will diminish. In addition, the women play a significant role in the society. Al-Hadi criticized men for restricting and limiting the function of women to only producing children and doing house chores. They did not realize that they were born from the womb and raised by the mother's hand, and she is a woman. Hence, for the children, it would be impossible for them to acquire a proper training and discipline and to obtain useful knowledge unless the mother is capable to prepare such education to succeed in life.[4] Since a woman is the 'first school' for children, each of them should be equipped with adequate knowledge through proper education

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[1] Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism…,* pp. 148-149.
[2] Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, "Berubah Pemeliharaan Anak-Anak Perempuan itu Sangat-Sangat" in *Al-Ikhwan Magazine*, V.2, (1930): pp. 43-48.
[3] Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, "Changes in the Upbringing of the Girls Are Urgent" in Alijah Gordon (ed), *The Real Cry of Syed Sheikh Al-Hady: With Selection of His Writings by His Son, Syed Alwi.* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1999), pp. 226-227.
[4] Ibid.

and training. Furthermore, al-Hadi highlighted about the social unit called family. From one family to a collective of households and eventually constitute a community. The person who is in charge and familiar with the family matter and household activity is a woman. Thus, al-Hadi asserted in his writing,

> If the women were to be stupid and without adequate knowledge, they would be spurned by their own husbands and members of their households. However, if the women possess adequate knowledge and enlighten mind, they would be able to run their homes properly and put their households in order. For each member of the extended family to conduct themselves properly, then the conduct of the whole community will be proper. From this we can see how women with intellect and knowledge are useful in uplifting the life of their community.[1]

Al-Hadi is recognized for being a pioneer for producing several Malay novels such as *"Hikayat Faridah Hanum", "Hikayat Taman Cinta Berahi"*, *"Hikayat Anak Dara Ghassan", "Hikayat Puteri Nurul Ain"* and *"Cetra Rokambul"*. In these novels, the women protagonists were portrayed as a young, beautiful, educated, intelligent, charming, moralistic, and courageous to represent women who strive for their proper status, right, role and education.[2] In *"Hikayat Faridah Hanum"*, for example, the heroine of the novel by the name of Faridah Hanum was portrayed as an educated person, religious, knowledgeable, beautiful, and charming. For her knowledgeable nature, she knows her right as a woman and nobody can interfere in that. This can be seen through her dialogue. However, we disagree on the judgement set up by men upon us that we are useless in the community assembly, except for becoming a *kuda tunggangan* (Malay idiom refers to as a mean to achieve something or fulfill the desire), a cooker and washing clothes; because we realize that we also a human similar to men, and we have been given a reason to acquire knowledge like men.[3]

Al-Hadi wanted to raise awareness among men that women were neither sexual object nor to be restricted at home doing house chores only. God has endowed for both male and female intellectual faculty, thus women are also having a right and capability to gain the same understanding and knowledge

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[1] Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, "Changes in …", p. 227.

[2] Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism…,* p. 136.

[3] Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi, *Faridah Hanum* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1985), p. 115.

like men does. The novel also displays a love story between Faridah Hanum and the male protagonist by the name of Syafik Affandi. During al-Hadi's time, it is against the Malay customs for a man and a woman to fall in love with each other before marriage. The marriage should be arranged by family and the girl should follow her parents' choice of her life partner. The important point that al-Hadi wanted to highlight is the right of woman in marriage, that she has the right to determine and know her future husband. Thus, he asked the parents not to force their daughter into marriage but to consider her opinion too.[1]

The traditional Malay perceived women as bad omen and often associated with demon, ghost and evil by the name of *Pontianak, langsuir* and so on. A barren wife is considered as a bad woman because she cannot serve the purpose of marriage, that is, to have children. The mystics stories are always circulated around pregnant women and women in labor, thus they are dangerous and need to be avoided.[2] Al-Hadi has aware of these negative perceptions on Malay women and believed that it was only education that could change and improve their image and status. The educated and knowledgeable women would be able to live in respectable and honorable way.[3]

From his writing, it is understandable why al-Hadi was very enthusiastic in voicing out the importance of education for women. He believed that the development of women's intellectual is essential as it is one of the important factors for the community to progress. Thus, he strongly encouraged the society not to overlook this matter.[4]

Conclusion

This study highlighted the approaches of al-Hadi in reviving the Malay society from a state of stagnation towards a progressive society through his educational reform. Observing the backward state of Malays at his time, al-Hadi felt the responsibility to bring changes in the condition and their way of thinking. In doing so, he received inspiration from another reformists' idea during his visit to the Middle East. The main principle of their reform was to bring back the real teachings of Islam and adopt them to the modern Muslim society. Al-Hadi transmitted this idea of

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[1] Ibrahim, *Islamic Modernism…,* p. 145

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 146.

[4] Alijah Gordon, *The Real Cry of Syed Sheikh Al-Hady: With Selection of His Writings by His Son, Syed Alwi*. (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1999), p. 227.

reconciliation between traditional teachings and modern approaches through his educational reform in Malaya. For him, the cause of backwardness among the Malays was due to their religious stagnation and their negligence of the real teaching of Islam.

He believed that through education, the state of the Malays can be improved from stagnation and backwardness to become a progressive nation. Thus, there is no doubt that al-Hadi has contributed immensely in the field of education especially for the Malay society. In short, al-Hadi's contributions to educational reform can be listed as following. Firstly, he was among the earliest Malay thinkers who employed the use of reason in the interpretation of the *Qur`ān* and the *Sunnah*. Secondly, al-Hadi had corrected the Islamic faith *(aqīdah)* of the Malays and their practices from superstitious beliefs and practices by putting a great emphasis on the role of *tawhīd*. Thirdly, al-Hadi had reformed the traditional way of religious teaching by adapting the modern and systematic teaching approach through *madrasah* system. Last but not least, al-Hadi was responsible for the Malay women's emancipation and their position in the society.

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