

## Estranged from the Ideal Past: Historical Evolution of *Madrassahs* in Singapore

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### *Abstract*

*This article examines the historical evolution of the madrassah in Singapore as against its ideal Islamic past. We argue that a few broad processes have brought the estrangement of the present day madrassah from its ideal concept and practice in the medieval times. First was the nature of Islam that was propagated in the Malay Archipelago. This has to a large extent left certain tendencies in thought, which had stunted reformist movements at a later period. Next was the growing threat of Christian missionary movements which were reinforced by the role of British colonialists in marginalizing and delimiting the development and growth of the madrassah into an integrated educational institution. Last but not least are the secular-based expectations and policies that were implemented by the post-colonial state of Singapore which further relegated the madrassah institution within the mainstream national objectives.*

### **Introduction**

'*Madrassah*' is legally defined in Singapore today as 'religious school'.<sup>1</sup> While a simple rendering in contemporary administrative language does point to *madrassah* to mean a 'school' yet, as such, it is not necessarily accurate. Concepts of 'religious education', 'religious instruction' and 'transmission of knowledge and wisdom' were so closely intertwined in the historical understanding of the word *madrassah*, which make it almost a misnomer to reduce *madrassah* to simply embody 'religious school'. Many contemporary Muslim scholars have argued that such conceptual inaccuracies in describing many Muslim educational institutions today are products of the truncation of present thought systems from the original 'greater' Islamic legacy.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, to comprehend the extent of differences between the *madrassah* in the original prototype which existed in the 11th century and the *madrassah* in Singapore today, this article embarks on a comparative historical analysis of both types of educational institutions. However, before indulging in the historical development of the *madrassah* in Singapore, it is worthwhile to narrate how Islamic knowledge was disseminated and preserved during the medieval period in order to demonstrate how the *madrassah* in Singapore has departed from its ideal concept.

### ***Madrassah* Institutions in the Medieval Period (AD 750–1350)**

Prior to the development of the *madrassah* system, other educational institutions had existed in the Muslim world, i.e. the *Halqah* (Circle School), the *Maktab* or *Kuttab* (Writing Schools), the Palace School, the Mosque School, the Bookshop School and

the literary salons. The establishment of these institutions signified an increasing demand for knowledge due to the intellectual development of the society. The Mosque School, which by far was the first and largest genre of such schools, could no longer serve as a lodging place for both the increasing number of teaching staff and the students. To address this predicament, in 1067, the vizier of the Saljuk Sultan, Nizam-al-Mulk, established the first *madrassah* in Baghdad, which provided all the essential needs for learning, such as an *Iwan* or lecture hall, a mosque for students and public worship, lodging for teachers and out-of-town students, kitchen and dining hall, food storeroom and general storage room.<sup>3</sup>

In medieval Arab-Islamic language, the term *madrassah* (plural *madaris*) is derived from the Arabic word *darasa*, which means ‘to study’ or ‘to read’. But the second form of the verb, *darrasa* (used without a complement), means ‘to teach law’. The term *tadris* (verbal noun) means the ‘teaching of law’; the plural *tadaris* refers to ‘professorship of law’. The term *dars* denotes ‘a lesson or lecture on law’ and *mudarris* signifies ‘the professor of law’. Before becoming a *mudarris*, the student must be able to defend his thesis in disputations and obtain a licence to teach (from one master-juriconsult) and issue legal opinions. Such an expert in Islamic legal matters is called a *faqih*—‘student of law’ or a jurist. ‘Student of law’, in the context of the historical development of the *madrassah* means studying the *Shariah* (canonical law of Islam) from a particular ‘school of jurisprudence’ or ‘school of thought’. The science of law or the knowledge of comprehension and understanding of that law is called *Fiqh* (jurisprudence).<sup>4</sup>

The *madrassah*’s identity as an educational system par excellence, a new type of ‘school’ specializing in jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) especially, must be understood within its socio-historical context. It is obvious that this specialization was not merely for a scholastic endeavour. Rather, it served to guide the administration and legislation of the Muslims at that time. In Islam, the state is subjected to the authority of the Divine Law, i.e. the *Shariah*, which renders the primacy of legal knowledge over others. Thus, the *madrassah* in the medieval era produced juriconsults who could aspire to be professors of law or assume the ‘prestigious’ vocations of the *mufti*, who had the authority to issue legal opinions. Significantly, the privilege was conferred only on the student of law (jurisprudence) and not students of the Quran and *Hadith*. *Madrassah* in the traditional definition refers to a college of higher learning, specifically a college of law/jurisprudence. Graduates of the *madrassahs* then were effectively useful for the administration of many Islamic states at that time.<sup>5</sup>

## **Reconfiguration/Reconstruction of Islamic Education in Singapore**

### *The Nature of Propagated Islam*

To comprehend why and how *madrassahs* in Singapore depart from the medieval ideal, as discussed above, a brief survey on the origin of Islam in Malaya and how it influenced the educational aims of *pre-madrassah* and *madrassah* institutions in this region is imperative.

First, it is important to state that Islam was an ‘imported’ code and belief system within the Malay world. Whilst there are a number of theories on the origin of Islam in the archipelago, the argument that Islam was actively spread by the *Sufi* orders and was originally a court phenomenon are most authoritative.<sup>6</sup> Under the reign of Prince Malik al-Zahir of Pasai, the *Sufi* order of Islam, introduced from Gujarat and south India, spread from Pasai to the other parts of the Malay archipelago, reaching Malacca

in 1409. There are three characteristics of the *Sufi* doctrine, namely, significant emphasis on character and self-development, such as the importance of having a pure heart, being sincere and striving for an ascetic way of life; specific forms of worship are a necessity such as *wirid* and *zikir* (chanting of prayers); and lastly it subscribed to a theological philosophy on God and Man called, *Wahdatul Wujud* (Unity of Existence) which theorizes the differential existence between the Creator and the Creation. In short, Islam was translated as a personal and ritualized affair. In terms of school of jurisprudence, most of the Muslims in the archipelago belong to the *Shafi'i* school and this can be attributed to the Arabian thesis that explains that Islam in Malaysia came from the Arabs of the Hadramaut whose dominant school was that of the *Shafi'i*.<sup>7</sup>

Another important feature of development of Islam in the Malay archipelago was its association with the royal court. In the Malay tradition, the kings were highly regarded. With the advent of Islam, the concept of kingship was fused with the Quranic concept of God's vicegerent, resulting to a loyalty akin to religious obligation. This might explain why the Malay rulers were able to contribute towards a wider diffusion of Islam in the archipelago. The development of formal educational organizations in Malaya was motivated mainly by religious zeal encouraged by the rulers who had embraced Islam.<sup>8</sup>

One of the earliest types of an informal Muslim educational institution in Malaya was the Quranic school. This type of education started in the halls of royal palaces where the religious teacher was engaged to teach Islam privately. It was also conducted in the homes of religious teachers, in mosques or in the *surau* (prayer halls); purely on voluntary efforts. The students were taught the Arabic alphabet since Arabic was regarded as the language of 'Islamic religion and theology'. A famous Malay writer and teacher, Abdullah Munshi, describes vividly the situation:

In those days, the opinion of everybody was that it was improper to give instruction in the Malay language because it is our language. Moreover, since our forefather's time nobody had ever started a school for teaching the Malay language; only for studying the Quran. It was right to learn Arabic, because of its value for the purposes of religion and theology, and this language alone was regarded as important by Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

However, the teaching of Arabic language was carried out merely with the objective of familiarizing the Malays with the Arabic pronunciation for the reading of the Quran during prayers. They were not taught to learn the Quranic principles to comprehend their social, moral, political and economical roles as espoused in the Quranic concept of *khalifahtul ard* (vicegerent of God on earth). The students were taught about how to perform the five daily prayers, fasting, pilgrimage to Makkah, articles of faith, some forms of supplication and Arabic songs. Despite the narrow approach to Islamic education, the students could proceed to learn the Malay language, which was then written in *jawi* script, and in time be appointed as teachers.<sup>10</sup>

The next phase of educational development in the Malay society upon the subsequent spread of Islam was the *pondok* system, which perpetuated the myopic approach in educating Islam to the students. Derived from the Arabic *funduq*, which means an inn or hotel, this institution was at the same time a boarding institution in which the students stayed in simple huts built around the teacher's house. It was a private institution established by a religious teacher who offered to teach Islam and the students stayed in *pondok* for a number of years until they had completed all the subjects taught and mastered all prescribed texts. Subjects taught in *pondok* were *Tauhid* (theology on the Oneness of God), *Tafsir* (Quranic exegesis), *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), *Hadith* (collections

of sayings of the Prophet), *Nahu* (Arabic grammar), *Tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism) and *Tarikh* (Islamic history). The key difference between *pondok* and medieval *madrassah* was that the latter trained students in practical jurisprudence through discussion and active engagement while the *pondok* system concentrated on basic instruction of Islam through memorization and repetition. Moreover, the *pondok* system aimed primarily at preparing students to be familiar with the basic 'rituals' of Islam, concentrating on the devotional worship.<sup>11</sup>

In both the *pondok* system and the Quran schools, teachers were the 'narrators' while the students were the 'receptacles' who would be 'filled' by the teachers, since teachers were regarded as 'spiritual guides' of the Muslim society. In some cases, the teachers had popular reputation of being *berkat* or blessed.<sup>12</sup> Such educational institutions, which remained until today, stunted the development of producing critically conscious students. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to note that the *pondok* system did contribute, to a significant extent, towards a progressive eradication of myths and legends which were pervasive in Malay texts and society during the Hindu era.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Containment of Efforts towards Islamic Reformation*

With royal patronage and active missionary efforts of the Sufis, *pondok* and Quranic schools flourished in Malaysia from the 14th till late 19th century. However, their adherence to constricted methods of teaching Islam was not left unchallenged. By the turn of the new century, Muslim reformists expressed discontentment with the *pondok* system as being too narrowly focused on the *fard 'ain* (obligatory creed) or focusing on religious instructions which did not prepare the Muslim youths for socio-economic changes and new employment created by the British colonialists. With the hope of reviving the medieval educational institutions, Muslim reformists introduced what was then perceived as a 'modern' type of Muslim educational institution, the *madrassah*. Roff explained that

it is in fact in the field of the new education that the immediate impact of the reformist group may be most clearly seen, both in its encouragement of religious schools of a more ambitious and elaborate kind than had hitherto existed and in the formulation of a system of education which, ideally, would take account of the need not only for a purified Islam but for modern secular knowledge as well.<sup>14</sup>

In the context of the Malay archipelago, this group of reformers was called the 'Young Group' (*Kaum Muda*), the progressive type, in contrast to the 'Old Group' (*Kaum Tua*), the conservative type.<sup>15</sup> The ideas of *Kaum Muda* (reformist) originated from the Middle East. These were local reformers such as Syed Syekh Ahmad Al-Hadi and Sheikh Muhammad Tahir Jalauddin, who having spent some time in Makkah and Egypt came into contact with reformist ideas and movement in Cairo as a result of the activities of Muhammad Abduh and the Al-Manar Circle. Sheikh Muhammad Tahir, as a matter of fact, was a close friend of Rashid Rida, the student of Muhammad Abduh. The reformist promulgated the idea that Islam is compatible with reason and modern science, calling for the reopening of the door of *ijtihad* (critical interpretation) in understanding the Quran and the *Hadith*. According to them, it was only with such efforts could innovation and economic development of the Muslim world be enhanced, *taqlid* (blind following) eliminated and blind imitation of the West eradicated.<sup>16</sup>

The task of reformism was primarily 'religious' and educational. It endeavoured to substitute the rudimentary and repetitious theological learning, which was clouded

with doctrinal misunderstanding and superstitious belief, with a 'new' kind of Islamic teaching, based on rational and intelligent re-interpretation of truths contained in the Quran and *Hadith*, combined with a modern educational programme which met the needs of the Malays in the colonial era. The new programme was equally important to abjure blind acceptance of intermediary authority. In a nutshell, *Kaum Muda* was open to changes, accepted modernity and 'Western' ideas that were not against Islamic teachings. They were thus regarded as 'modernist' while *Kaum Tua* was in favour of all that was traditional, unchanging and secure.<sup>17</sup> The *Kaum Muda* also pioneered the establishment of the first modern *madrassah* known as *Madrassah Al-Iqbal* in 1907 in Singapore that was considered a 'modern' *madrassah* because it was similar to a national school in its organization yet appealed strongly to the ideals of the medieval Islamic past. It offered primary education (*ibtidai*) and secondary education (*thanawi*) and some even provided higher education (*aliyy*). It had a compatible curriculum with that of national schools in independent Singapore, except that the latter did not include 'religious studies' in its curriculum.

*Madrassah Al-Iqbal* offered recitation of the Quran, composition and essay writing, reading and writing, ethics, worship and rituals, Arabic grammar, Arabic linguistics, geography, history, mathematics, English and town planning. In terms of pedagogy, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Hadi abandoned the memorization method of study, the narrow curriculum objectives and initiated student activities such as debates and rhetoric. He also redefined the *madrassah* academic year and introduced a new system of examination.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, both *Madrassah Al-Imam* and *Madrassah Al-Iqbal* did not receive positive responses from the Muslim public in Singapore who felt that *Kaum Muda's* ideas were contradictory to Islam due to its emphasis on rationality, reflecting the mentality of the general Muslims in Singapore towards reformism in that period of time. The *madrassah* closed in 1908.<sup>19</sup>

The closure of *Madrassah Al-Iqbal* did not mean that reformist idea was totally effaced but it was certainly contained and watered down. As an alternative, *Madrassah Al-Maarif* was established in 1936. Its Sufi-inclined pioneer, As-Sheikh Muhammad Fadzlullah Suhaimi, was exposed to Sufistic ideas when he studied at the University of Al-Azhar in 1912. He was also among the active advocators of greater freedom for women to receive education. *Madrassah Al-Maarif* embodied traits of a reformist type through the inclusion of *non-religious* subjects in the curriculum. The *madrassah* is established solely for girls. Most importantly, the emergence of this new breed of *madrassah* marked a departure in structural organization and the intellectual tradition introduced by the Islamic reformers.

The new breed of *madrassah* maintained several features introduced by Islamic reformism whilst rejecting its radical and wholesome ideals. On one hand, it represented the beginning of formal Muslim education. The structure of this *madrassah* was generally characterized by its systematic organization, such as fixed curriculum period, division of educational levels into primary and secondary, as well as existence of facilities such as chairs and tables for students. As for the enhancement of intellectual tradition, the *madrassah* incorporated other 'non-religious' subjects, such as mathematics and science (and other subjects depending on respective *madrassah*) in addition to subjects on Islam. This was especially so for the post World War II (WWII) period.<sup>20</sup>

However, it should be noted that there were *madrassah* in Singapore that did not incorporate the 'non-religious' subjects until a later period of time. *Madrassah Al-Junied*, for example, included English, Malay, mathematics and science in its curriculum only in 1966, 39 years after its existence, and it offered the 'O' level examination for the first

time in 1973.<sup>21</sup> All in all, unlike the ideals set by the reformers towards producing students who could function effectively in both secular and religious spheres, the new breed of *madrassah* was solely concerned with the churning out of unspecialized graduates who would in turn function as teachers of theology, Islamic laws and the Quran as well as *imams* (prayer leaders) in mosques. Such objectives had brought about a serious delimitation of the role of *madrassah* which, as we shall see later, was later reduced to a mere 'religious school'.

#### *Christian Missionary Schools as a 'Threat'*

The British colonial government had started educational activity in Malaya since 1816 but delegated educational responsibility to the Christian mission bodies. It showed interest in education only when the Straits Settlements became a Crown Colony in 1867. Mission schools were opened to children of all races with the aim of providing 'a general education and a better standard of moral life based on the tenets of Christianity'.<sup>22</sup> In 1819, the missionaries went about to establish schools for Chinese and Malay children. In fact, Malay vernacular education in the Straits Settlements came into existence at the same time that English education was first initiated by missionaries. The British government took over such schools at a later period especially during Governor Cavenagh's administration. A pioneer among the present secular government English schools was the Raffles Institution (originally known as the Singapore Institution), which was founded only in 1823. Another day school for the Malays was opened at Kampong Glam by Mr B.P. Keasberry of the London Missionary Society.<sup>23</sup>

The mission schools were not designed to overtly convert pupils to Christianity, although they did aim to inculcate Christian values with the hope of probable conversion in the future.<sup>24</sup> Such schools were assisted by the secular British government despite their evangelical mission. Ironically, the Bible was also used as a schoolbook in Malay schools where Quranic lessons were held. This had invited protests from Muslim parents. Consequently, Malay parents refused to send their children to the Malay vernacular schools. In 1872, A.M. Skinner, first Inspector of Schools, tried to improve vernacular education but faced 'hostility that sprang from fear that their [Malays'] children might lose faith'.<sup>25</sup> A similar situation was reported in the Federated Malay States. For example, in Pahang, the District Officer reported that the natives would send their children miles away to learn and recite the Quran or seek religious instruction. They were apathetic to secular education, for fear of foreign and Christian bias, resulting in their turning to Islam instead. The Malays saw little advantage in vernacular education with Christian elements in it unless the vernacular education led to further instruction in English that could help Malay children in getting government jobs.<sup>26</sup>

Besides fear of 'Christianization', the development of secular education in the Straits Settlement in the 19th century further stimulated the enhancement of religious education among the Malays. As we have seen from the earlier sections, the education of the Malays was centred upon the Quran and basic rites of Islam prior to the advent of colonialism in Malaya. *Religion* in that sense was a central feature of the Malays or Muslim education in Malaya. Examples of this were the two Malay vernacular schools, Abdullah's School at Kampong Glam and the other at Teluk Blangah, established in 1856, which encountered apathetic response from the Malays. The Abdullah's School was reverted to a Quranic school and was reorganised by A.M Skinner in the 1870s who saw the importance of the Quran in Malay life, especially in education. He re-established the Malay vernacular school in 1871, not as a new type of

school but as ‘supplementary’ to the existing system; Malay vernacular schools were founded on the Quran classes. The British government was not inclined to promote the Quran as the focus but wanted to persuade the Malays to attend the vernacular schools. The primary objective of Malay vernacular schools was based on instruction in Malay while teaching of the Quran was meant to be secondary. Rules set for the schools were as follows:

- (a) The Quran may be taught in school but kept strictly separate from Malay (language).
- (b) The morning lessons must be devoted to instruction in Malay. The Quran must be confined to the afternoon.
- (c) The government allowance to the teacher is made on account of the Malay lessons only. The parents should assist in paying the master for teaching the Quran; the teacher may otherwise refuse his instruction.<sup>27</sup>

As a result of these developments, afternoon religious schools were created since instruction on Quran was conducted outside school hours.

At this juncture, it is worthwhile to note that the Malay vernacular schools were obviously not established to provide education on Islam to the Malay children even though they were built from the Quranic schools. This was because Quranic schools’ main curriculum focused on Arabic recitation of the Quran and not the provision of education on Islam comprehensively. Hence, the development of Muslim religious schools or the *madrasah* was prompted by the absence of education on Islam in the government educational institutions, growth of secular vernacular and English schools and the effective activities of Christian missionaries.

The *madrasah*, for that matter, flourished within a socio-historical context, that is the lack of availability of education on Islam in the Malay vernacular schools and Malay parents finding government schools inadequate and inconsistent with their beliefs in the importance of religious education.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, a ‘new’ type of Muslim education system, which incorporated Islam and modern *secular* knowledge in its curriculum by the *Kaum Muda*, was introduced into the Muslim community. It is ‘new’ not in the Islamic concept of knowledge, since Islam does not differentiate in importance between worldly science and doctrines of faith. The reformist version of school was ‘new’ to the Malays in Malaya due to its organized system of educational institutions as well as inclusion of ‘non-religious’ subjects in the curriculum compared to the traditional Muslim educational systems such as the Quranic schools and *pondok* which focused primarily on Islam as *religion*, detached from the daily affairs of life. However, as mentioned above, due to the nature of Islam that was inculcated amongst the Malay populace, the education on Islam provided by all *madrasahs*, although reformatory, was not significantly different from that of the traditional *pondok* system. Such a phenomenon became almost cast in stone till the rise of the new post-colonial government.

#### *Government Policies and Objectives for the Education System in Post-Colonial Singapore*

From a constant figure of six Muslim schools from 1950 to 1956, the number of *madrasahs* doubled by the time Singapore attained self-government in 1959. The number of Muslim schools and students attending such institutions further mushroomed during the period of merger between Singapore and Malaysia (1963–1965), with the highest number reaching 28 Muslim schools in 1962.<sup>29</sup> A summary of the increase in the number of Muslim schools is presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Ahmad Sonhadji listed 45 Muslim educational institutions in Singapore in terms of *madrassah*, *Sekolah Rakyat* and *Sekolah Agama* but many are no longer in existence. The term *madrassah* was not a common term used in the early 20th century. He explained that *madrassahs* were called *sekolah Arab* (Arabic school) during WWI and WWII. The term 'Arabic schools' was used in the *Straits Budget* to describe several religious institutions in Malaya.<sup>30</sup> Such terminology was maintained in the Education Report until Singapore attained self-government in 1959. Two main reasons may explain the association of the *madrassah* with Arabic identity. First, the medium of instruction and the books on Islam used by *madrassahs* were primarily in Arabic language. Even though *madrassahs* offered Malay and English as the medium of instruction, Arabic language still played a dominant role. As we have seen from Table 1, the term 'Arabic School' was also officially used in the *Department of Education Annual Report* from 1950 until 1966. Obviously the primary language used as medium of instruction in the school gives the school its identity.

Secondly, Muslim teachers and philanthropists from Arab lineage such as the *Al-Sagoff*, *Al-Junied*, *Al-Kaff*, *Al-Attas*, *Al-Idrus*, *Al-Habsyi*, *Balfaqih*, *Bamadhaj* as well as the *Ba'awi* were responsible for the setting up of many religious institutions such as the *madrassah* in Singapore. Although Muslims of Indian and Pakistani origins did contribute towards education on Islam in Singapore, the Arabs played a significant role by establishing charitable and religious institutions such as the mosques, schools, an orphanage and a dispensary.<sup>31</sup> Many of the Arabs in Singapore were from Hadramaut and many of them made fortunes in Singapore as owners of vast real estate and leading traders and they assimilated easily into the Malay society. Their economic strength explained why many *madrassahs* were built on *waqf* lands donated by Arab philanthropists. Their high social status was also accorded to their Arab origin which was associated with being the descendants of Prophet Muhammad. Since a number of the Arabs set up schools for the provision of education on Islam, such schools were associated with their Arab founder such as *Madrassah Al-Sagoff* and *Madrassah Al-Junied*.

TABLE 1. Growth of *Madrassah* in Singapore, 1950–1966

Year	1950–1956	1959	1960	1961	1962–1966
Term used in the Official Education Report	Arabic Schools	Religious School (Arabic)	Religious School (Arabic)	Sekolah Ra'ayat (Religious Schools Arabic)	Sekolah Ra'ayat (Religious Schools Arabic)
Number of <i>madrassah</i> reported	6	14	20	24	26 (average)
Total number of students	870 (average)*	1830	3217	3926	4173 **

Source: *Department of Education Annual Report 1950–1956* and *Ministry of Education Annual Report 1959–1966*.

\*The figure is calculated from the total enrolment in 1953, 1954 and 1956. Information is not available between 1957 to 1958.

\*\*The figure is an average from the total enrolment from 1962–1966.

Note: After 1966, *madrassah* was no longer reported in the Education Report. Starting in 1959, the Education Report indicated that all Religious Schools (Arabic) were partially aided by the government.



TABLE 2. Growth of *Madrassah* in Singapore, 1987–1996

Year	1987–1990	1991–1996
Term used in the Official Education Report	Islamic Religious School	Islamic Religious School
Number of <i>madrassah</i> reported	8	6
Total number of students*	1645	2051

Source: *Education Statistics Digest* from 1987–1996.

\*The figure is an average from the total enrolment from 1987–1990 and 1991–1996 respectively.

In 1959, the People's Action Party (PAP) formed the first popularly elected self-government in Singapore. It inherited from the British colonial administration a highly fragmented education system, organized along secular and communal lines. In the effort to build a sovereign state and facilitate the creation of a national identity, the PAP government had to restructure the various education institutions and bring them under a national system. In the 1960s, national schools were established with the following objectives:

- i. To ensure that our children learn a common, basic core of knowledge and skills that would prepare them for employment and further training.
- ii. To give our children a common educational experience which would help build national identity and social cohesion, with multi-racialism and meritocracy as the cornerstones of our nation.<sup>32</sup>

Basically, national schools have dual objectives of supporting economic growth and promoting social integration, as part of nation building and the development of a modern industrial economy. Since then, the evolution of Singapore's education system has been one of continuing effort in shaping the system towards achieving these twin objectives. By the 1980s, the PAP government had effectively depoliticized many educational issues of the early years of political independence. It had successfully promoted English as the primary medium of instruction with 'mother tongue' as a compulsory second language for all primary and secondary students. In addition, the government nationalized all vernacular schools and integrated all schools towards nation-building objectives. It also introduced activities that were aimed at instilling national identity and enhanced social cohesion, such as, flag-raising and pledge-taking ceremonies in all schools.<sup>33</sup> The only exceptions to this system were the Muslim religious schools, the nine licensed *madrassahs*, and a school run by the Seventh Day Adventist Church which, through time, began to be out of tune with the mainstream-national objectives and marginalized from receiving aid.

In 1998, the Singapore government began to seriously raise its growing concerns of *madrassahs* departing from the overall objectives of the state which sparked off the Compulsory Education (CE) debate. In the words of the Minister of Education,

Those who opt out [referring to those not attending national schools such as the *madrassah* children], would not receive the quality education necessary for good jobs, and would not be able to integrate well into the social and economic system.<sup>34</sup>

Two years later, such statements were followed by another sharp criticism by the Prime Minister of Singapore who stated that the issue is not:

about *madrassah's* future, but the future of Muslim children . . . 'Do you want them to grow up all being religious teachers and religious preachers, or do

you want them to be trained in IT, to be engineers, doctors, architects, professionals? If the *madrassahs* were training 100 or 200 students a year, I think we can live with that. But if you are training 400, 500, 1000, 2,000 in full-time *madrassahs* or in full-time religious education supplemented by some secular subjects, what will be the future of the Malay community? ... I cannot say, however, that some *madrassahs* may not close because we want to have standards.<sup>35</sup>

For most Malay Muslims, then, such statements by the leading political authority came as a shock. Many had regarded '*madrassah*' as *sekolah agama* or 'Religious schools' from primary to secondary education designed to produce 'religious teachers' and, if possible, scholars. Being a purely *Religious school*, the general expectation was that *madrassah* students may learn but need not excel in subjects such as mathematics, science, English and Malay languages in their curriculum. Such was how Malay Muslims' conception of *madrassah* in Singapore had departed far from its ideal Islamic past. The consequence of such conception was costly for the *madrassah* and the Muslim community in general. The *madrassah* was perceived by the national leaders as a burden to the Singapore economy, society and security.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

The *madrassah* in 20th century Singapore was significantly different from the *madrassah* in the original prototype that was established in the medieval Muslim era. The *madrassah* in Singapore evolved into becoming a mere 'religious school' which primarily focused on education and instruction on Islam. Such schools did not develop into colleges of law (jurisprudence) unlike the *madrassah* in the original prototype.

Furthermore, *madrassah* in Singapore did not fully embrace a developed concept of integration of knowledge. For example, efforts by *Madrassah Al-Iqbal*, which incorporated 'non-religious' subjects (e.g. geography, mathematics and English) in its curriculum, were frowned upon by the Muslim public in Singapore who felt that the *Kaum Muda*'s ideas were contradictory to Islam due to its emphasis on rationality. Although such subjects were incorporated at a later period, they were, however, sidelined within a curriculum that stressed more on Arabic-based subjects. In short, the *madrassah* in Singapore did not have a vibrant and extensive educational scholarship unlike the medieval *madrassah*. Its narrow approach towards teaching Islam could be attributed to the manner in which Islam was spread in the region, which constructed Islam as a religion of worship and rituals within the personal sphere. The threat of Christianization via the English language and vernacular schools as well as the growth of secular national education in Singapore in the 20th century further transformed the ideals and practice of *madrassah* into mere 'religious schools'.

## NOTES

1. *Administration of Muslim Law*, Cap. 3, No. 87.
2. See Syed Muhammad Al-Naquib Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*, Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), 1980 and Anne Sofie Roald, *Tarbiya: Education & Politics in Islamic Movements in Jordan and Malaysia*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994, p. 52.

3. Ahmad Shalaby, *Sejarah Pendidikan Islam*, Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 1976, pp. 84–85 and Mehdi Nakosteen, *History of Islamic Origins of Western Education AD 800–1350*, Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 1964, pp. 49–50.
4. C.E. Bosworth, E. Van Donzel, B. Lewis and Ch. Pelliat, eds, *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. V, Leiden: Brill, p. 1127.
5. George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981, pp. 187–223.
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7. Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, Vol. I, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 397.
8. Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim, 'Islamic Education in Singapore', in 'Seminar of Islamic Education in Singapore', Singapore: Muslim Society of University of Singapore, 1966, p. 13.
9. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 14.
10. Rosnani Hashim, *Educational Dualism in Malaysia: Implications for Theory and Practice*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 19–20.
11. Khoo Kay Kim, 'Perkembangan Pelajaran Agama Islam', in *Pendidikan Ke Arah Perpaduan: Sebuah Perspektif Sejarah*, ed., Awang Had Salleh, Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti, 1980, p. 8.
12. Hasan Madmarn, *The Pondok and Madrasah in Patani*, Malaysia: University Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1999, p. 56.
13. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1974, p. 64.
14. William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967, p. 66.
15. The labels *Kaum Tua* and *Kaum Muda* can be interpreted in many ways. *Tua* literally means 'old' while *muda* means 'young', hence the 'old-fashioned' and the 'new' or 'modern' respectively. *Kaum* means 'family', 'people' or 'community'. However, to translate the groups mentioned as a 'party' such as a 'political party' as defined in Western terms would be a term of abuse to the concept of *Kaum Muda* and *Kaum Tua*. They never developed into a political party. They had a nucleus of ideas and attitudes held more or less in common but not necessarily in entirety. The ideas of *Kaum Muda* were associated with Islamic Reformism. In fact, these labels were given to the groups reflecting such ideas rather than the groups calling themselves to be such. In addition, the terms 'Progressive' and 'Conservative' used are basically social categories.
16. William R. Roff, 'Kaum Muda—Kaum Tua: Innovation and Reaction Amongst the Malays, 1900–1941', in *Papers on Malayan History*, ed., K.G. Tregonning, Singapore: *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 1962, pp.169–170.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
18. Chee Min Fui, 'The History of Madrasah Education in Singapore', Unpublished M.A. dissertation, National University of Singapore, 2000, p. 13.
19. Although *Madrasah Al-Iqbal* represented the first reformist *madrasah* in Singapore, it is uncertain whether it represented the first *madrasah* ever built here. Ahmad Sonhadji introduced *Madrasah As-Sibyan* at Bussorah Street but did not quote its date of existence. See Ahmad Sonhadji Mohd, 'Pendidikan Islam di Singapura' in *Mahrajan-60*, Singapore: Madrasah Al-Junied, 1987, p. 66.
20. Rosnani Hashim, *Educational Dualism in Malaysia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–29.
21. Interview with the Vice Principal of *Madrasah Al-Junied* on 17 July 2001.
22. Francis H.K Wong, and Yee Hean Gwee, *Official Reports on Education in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States 1870–1939*, Singapore: Pan Pacific Book Distributors, 1980, p. 4.
23. *Department of Education Annual Report*, 1949, p. 2.
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25. Moshe Yegar, *Islam and Islamic Institutions in British Malaya: Policies and Implementations*, Jerusalem: The Magness Press, 1979, p. 237.
26. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 77–78.
27. Chelliah, *A History of The Educational Policy of The Straits Settlements with Recommendations for a New System Based on Vernaculars*, Federation of Malaya: The Government Press, 1947, p. 64.
28. Rosnani Hashim, *Educational Dualism in Malaysia*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
29. *Ministry of Education Annual Report 1962*.
30. Ahmad Sonhadji Mohd, 'Pendidikan Islam di Singapura', *op. cit.*, p. 69.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
32. Singapore, *Report of the Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore*, 2000, p. 7.

33. There is a very extensive body of literature on the history of education and education institutions of Singapore. For an updated survey see Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, London: Macmillan, 1996.
34. *The Straits Times*, 1 March 1998.
35. *The Straits Times*, 2 May 2000.
36. For details on the compulsory education issue and its implication on Muslims and *madrassah* in Singapore, see Dayang Istiaisyah Hussein, 'School Effectiveness and Nation-Building in Singapore: Analysis of Discourses on Madrasahs and Why Madrasahs Stand Out From National Schools', Unpublished M.A. dissertation, National University of Singapore, 2003.