THE ROLE OF MADRASAH EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE: A STUDY ON THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF MADRASAH EDUCATION IN A SECULAR STATE AND PLURAL SOCIETY

BY

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INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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ABDULLAH BIN OTHMAN

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in Islamic Civilization

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ABSTRACT

Madrasah education faces enormous challenges in Singapore, a secular State with a multi-racial, multi-religious society, that is dependent on competent human capital in knowledge based economy. In addition, madrasah education faces an uphill task dealing with multifaceted challenges in the areas of curriculum development, management, finance and wakaf status vis-a-vis the function of MUIS and the religious elites. This thesis attempts to analyse these problems from different perspectives which offers new outlooks to these challenges. These include the study on the historiography of madrasah and Islamic education and the analysis of the major problems. The issues relating to the philosophy and practice of madrasah education in a secular state and plural society are given special attention. Instead of viewing these problems from a pragmatic window and problem solving approach, this study will address the fundamental issues in a philosophical and conceptual manner. The major problems faced by the madrasah education in Singapore also occur in Muslim majority countries that have very different social, economic and political backgrounds. The most profound problems are probably the confusion in knowledge and the problem of leadership. The confusion in knowledge has resulted in the inability to put things in its proper places. This could have taken roots from the Western colonizers that have persisted until today. Consequently, this leads to the debilitating intellectual crisis inflicting all levels of the Muslim community. Therefore, Muslims should rediscover and experience their own traditions to deconstruct and eradicate the colonial mentality. Thereafter, Muslims should be confident and capable enough to reconstruct the educational framework based on the proper Islamic worldview.
البحث

اينما اختلف الاتجاه الارشدي في محتوى البحث، كان الهدف عامة هو تحقيق وظائف هامة في السياق العملية، خصوصاً في مراحل التعليم والتدريب. ذلك وفقاً لما قاله فيلمس، بما أن التعليم والتدريب يتطلبان اعداداً جزئياً من الممارسات التعليمية والمتوافقة مع معاييرها، فضلاً عن جزئياً من الممارسات التدريسية والتفافية مع معاييرها. 

وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، هناك العديد من الامور التي تميز بالأعمال، وهى مجال، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وهي مجالات، وه
I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Masters of Art (Islamic Civilization).

……………………………
Yusoff Mohamad
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Masters of Arts (Islamic Civilization).

……………………………
Hikmatullah Babu Sahib
Examiner

This dissertation was submitted to the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) and is accepted as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts (Islamic Civilization).

………………………………
Torla Hj. Hassan
Dean, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Abdullah Othman

Signature……………………………….                        Date…………………………...
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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# ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMLA</td>
<td>Administration of Muslim Law Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCES</td>
<td>Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDIS</td>
<td>Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE</td>
<td>Compulsory Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPDD</td>
<td>Curriculum Planning and Development Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETD</td>
<td>Educational Technology Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCE</td>
<td>General Certificate Education Examination</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBPM</td>
<td>Jabatankuasa Bersama Pendidikan Madrasah</td>
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<tr>
<td>JCM</td>
<td>Joint Committee of Madrasah</td>
</tr>
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<td>JMM</td>
<td>Jawatankuasa Madrasah Masjid</td>
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<tr>
<td>KBE</td>
<td>Knowledge Based Economy</td>
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<tr>
<td>MUIS</td>
<td>Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura</td>
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<tr>
<td>MENDAKI</td>
<td>Council for the Development of Singapore Muslim Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>MMC</td>
<td>Madrasah Management Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIE</td>
<td>National Institute of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERGAS</td>
<td>Persatuan Ulama dan Guru-Guru Ugama Singapura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSLE</td>
<td>Primary School Leaving Certificate</td>
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<tr>
<td>RK</td>
<td>Religious Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RED</td>
<td>Religious Education Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>REU</td>
<td>Religious Education Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAP</td>
<td>Special Aided Plan</td>
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<td>SEAB</td>
<td>Singapore Examination and Assessment Board</td>
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INTRODUCTION

The discussions relating to madrasah education in Singapore have been ongoing for decades but the debates were more intensified in the intervening years of 1998 to 2000. Although the madrasah issues have been discussed among the Muslim community for an exceedingly long period of time, it is unfortunate that until today, significant breakthroughs and achievements have not been attained.\(^1\) Events and controversies, particularly during the years mentioned, have made it crucial, if not imperative, to analyze urgently these problems from totally new dimensions as well as developing different modes of thinking and approaches to the whole problem. Now, the issue does not only interest the Muslim community in particular, but also the society at large including non-Muslim communities as well as the Singapore government.

Several senior figures in the government had stated in the years 1998 to 2000 that madrasah are becoming less relevant in a secular state with a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious society. They argued that by enrolling themselves in the madrasah, Muslim children would be disadvantaged, segregated and isolated from the other races and that they should instead pursue their education in mainstream schools.

\(^1\) Madrasah are widely regarded by the Muslims here as an emblematic institution and play an important role in preserving the Islamic heritage and identity. Unfortunately, until today the community has not reached a consensus on the best possible model for the madrasah education. Sadly, there are still many grievances by the community over the quality of madrasah education. The controversies relating to compulsory education in the years 1998 to 2000 due to the concerns raised by the government have generated debates of very different nature. The issues are now focused not only on the quality of madrasah education but on the need and purpose of its existence. The government has adopted a stand that the madrasah and its education system may not be suitable in Singapore context unless it undergo drastic changes. They introduced the compulsory education system where all children would be required to attend government or government-aided schools for the first six to ten years of their education. However, if the children wish to study in the madrasah, they must sit for the national examinations (PSLE) after 6 years of primary education. These students from madrasah must achieve a certain percentage of passes for the madrasah to be allowed to continue its operations. If this minimum standard cannot be achieved, then the future of the madrasah concerned may be at stake.
They believe that all young Singaporean children must be given the exposure to interact and communicate openly and effectively with the other racial and religious groups.

They also mentioned the high attrition rate of madrasah students. Only a handful of the madrasah students compared to the initial enrolment managed to complete the education at secondary level and eventually sat for the national examinations. And even fewer managed to perform well in the examinations.\(^2\)

They argued that the curriculum of the madrasah is outdated and the desired outcomes of such education are not appropriate for a small country which has limited natural resources and thus heavily dependent on human capital. The education system, according to them, must be able to adapt to the rapidly changing technology and knowledge based economy. They are concerned that madrasah graduates would find themselves irrelevant with the training and qualifications obtained from the madrasah and thus will not be able to meet up with the challenges and expectations of the new and vibrant economy. They fear that the graduates from the madrasah will find significant difficulties to secure themselves jobs and these in turn will result in other sorts of related problems.\(^3\)

However, having mentioned the above, the government declared their stand explicitly that they will not close the madrasah. Nevertheless, they encouraged the

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\(^2\) The statistics presented by the Education Minister and published in the local paper (Straits Times, 28 Dec 1997 and 26 Jan 1998) were very startling indeed. It definitely portrayed to the Singapore public at large for the first time a very negative image of the madrasah. For details of the figures see Nor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng, eds., *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Singapore Madrasah Education in Singapore*, (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Marshall Cevendish Academic, 2006), 152. Hereafter cited as *Secularism and Spirituality*. The analysis of this information will be done by the writer in Chapter 3.

madrasah administrators to review thoroughly the madrasah education and carry out major changes to the curriculum so as to make the madrasah more relevant to the rapidly changing economy. At the same time, the government urged the Muslim community to review the criticisms and feedback with regards to the madrasah education in order to improve the situation. They also inveigle Muslim parents to send their children to government schools instead of the madrasah.⁴

The madrasah have met with many challenges and obstacles for decades and have been on major crossroads for some years. The interventions taken by the governmental and non-governmental agencies in the next few years will have a direct and immediate impact not only on the madrasah in particular but on Islamic education for Singaporean Muslims in general with long term implications and ramifications. The year 2008 in particular will be the acid test of madrasah’s performance in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). The examination results and madrasah’s performance in this examination for that particular year onwards will be made public and cross-examined by all concerned. It will be a yardstick to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the madrasah. The status and future of the six madrasah will be at stake if the students’ performances at the PSLE fall below expectations.⁵

This study will concentrate only on the full time madrasah (hereafter called madrasah). There will be minor deliberation on the part-time madrasah education. The controversies and more important aspect of religious education here currently descend

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⁴ The government had initially mooted the idea of a compulsory education for the first 4 years of their primary education. This implies that madrasah can no longer accept students at primary 1. However, due to the very strong objections by the Muslim community led by the religious elites namely PERGAS, it changed the policy and excluded the madrasah with conditions attached. This was a case and a rare occasion indeed when the government changes it stance once made public. See Secularism and Spirituality, 161-162.

⁵ This was decided by the Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore (CCES) formed by the government. See Secularism and Spirituality, 39.
on the madrasah. The study on the madrasah provides the measure and indication of the status and future of Islamic education in this country. If the problems and challenges in the madrasah are effectively resolved, then the part-time madrasah will probably and eventually benefit as well.

I. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The thesis will first study the historiography of madrasah education in Singapore. There are already works on this area by a few writers, but they may lack the critical analysis of the important period, events and ideas. This study will therefore entail the writing of madrasah history based on the selection and evaluation of the relevant materials and the presentation of these materials into a narrative that is subjected to a systematic method of criticism. The historiography will provide the backdrop so that the subsequent discussions are addressed within the appropriate contexts.

A review and analysis of the major problems faced by the madrasah education from micro and macro perspectives will be done. This would provide a good overview of the various problems and challenges looking from internal and external environments involving various agencies and individuals. Many of these problems have existed for decades and have not been resolved until now. Several fundamental issues that are very complex will be selected and analysed to be understood in greater detail.

While there are wide interests among the Muslim intelligentsia and the Muslim public on madrasah education in Singapore for many decades, the focus has mostly

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6 For an introduction of the beginning of Islamic education since the early days of Islam in the Middle East and later in Singapore, see Ahmad Mohd Ibrahim, “Islamic Education in Singapore” paper presented during a seminar on Islamic Education in Singapore by University of Singapore Muslim Society, September 17-19, 1966. Hereafter cited as “Islamic Education in Singapore” 1966; “The Madrasah in Singapore – Past, Present and Future”, 7-11.
been on technical and pragmatic issues which were directed towards formulating practical solutions to immediate problems. Unfortunately, these approaches have proven to be ineffective to solve the madrasah problems concretely and conclusively. There is a need to understand these issues beyond common domains which are pragmatic and problem solving in nature. There is a necessity to delve into the metaphysical dimensions and perspectives that are spiritual, philosophical and conceptual in nature. This would allow discussions on madrasah education to gain profundity and depth particularly in the areas of the philosophy and objectives of madrasah education in a secular state and plural society. The thoughts of authoritative Muslim scholars in the field of Islamic education and some contemporary writers would be analyzed and these will be juxtaposed with the current problems and challenges. The analysis and comparison however, would be done within context and their ideas appropriated because these scholars may come from different socio-political circumstances. At the end of the exercise, the various concerns will be consolidated and the key areas contributing to these major issues and problems will be identified. These key areas will be elaborated in some detail such that it may be thoroughly analysed and comprehended.

The writer believes the objectives of the M.A. thesis may be achieved in this study. However, this thesis will not elaborate on the detailed aspects of the curriculum content and its development in the madrasah education system. Although this area is extremely important and relevant, it cannot be covered well in this particular exercise. A comprehensive study on such concerns may be done at greater depth later as a follow up to this thesis. In addition, there is also a critical need to re-evaluate the teaching and learning of academic subjects like English, Mathematics and Science in the madrasah. Particularly, we need to understand the philosophy and methodology of
these subjects and how they could be associated, appropriated and integrated into the religious sciences. By doing so, we would be able to teach academic subjects in a more integrated and effective manner in the madrasah.

II. OUTLINE OF THESIS

The study will begin with a brief description and analysis of the history of the madrasah education in Singapore. In particular, the writer will analyse critically the roles and interests of the British colonial masters in introducing the dual education system thus replacing the unitary education system for Muslim. The character of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) as the law affecting Muslims and MUIS as statutory board and the highest authority on Islamic matters in secular Singapore will also be studied. The major problems affecting madrasah education as a result of internal and external factors will be highlighted and analysed. The concerns of the Singapore government, the role of the madrasah administrators and the needs and expectations of the Muslim community on religious matters will also be examined.

The more important aspect of the study is the analysis of these problems and issues faced by madrasah education and formulating the future agenda of Islamic education in the country. In the process of doing so, the writer will incorporate important ideas and concepts relating to the meaning and purpose of knowledge, the curriculum content, educational methods, the Islamization of knowledge and the role of leadership. These will be discussed in relation to a secular State with a plural society. At the end of the exercise, the writer will present some ideas that may effect fundamental changes to the philosophy and methodology of madrasah education in Singapore.
There will be a total of four chapters in this thesis. The main outline of the thesis will be as follows:

Introduction

Chapter 1
The historiography of the madrasah and Islamic education in Singapore

Chapter 2
Analysis of the major problems and challenges faced by the madrasah

Chapter 3
The dynamics relating to the philosophy and practice of madrasah education in a secular State and plural society

Chapter 4
The future of madrasah education in Singapore

Conclusion

The writer wishes to reiterate the point that the issues concerning madrasah education in Singapore need to be studied from new dimensions, which may offer fresh and interesting new outlooks. Instead of viewing it from a pragmatic window and problem solving approach, this study will address more fundamental issues such as the concept of knowledge, the meaning and purpose of education and the Islamization of knowledge as well as the effective role of leadership. The writer believes that only after these issues have been discussed and understood thoroughly; follow up actions may be done to develop the curriculum and instructional methods for the madrasah.
CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE MADRASAH AND ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE

The early history of Islamic education in Singapore is unknown to many Muslims in Singapore including those who are actively involved in madrasah education in their various capacities. This is unfortunate and problematic because efforts towards improving Islamic education should be based on proper understanding and analysis of the history, ideas, efforts and legacy of the early Muslims, the British, key institutions and players that influenced the religious education landscape until today. This chapter will dwell on the learning of Islam and madrasah since the early thirteenth-century to the present day.7

Four stages in the historiography of the madrasah and Islamic education in Singapore may be delineated, i.e. the pre-colonial period (13-18th century A.D.), the colonial period (19-20th century A.D.), post-colonial period (20th century) and lastly from the 1980s onwards with the active involvement of several Muslim organizations particularly MUIS.8 Particular attention will be given to the last stage i.e. the observable trends from the 1980s onwards, when the laws pertaining to the madrasah was passed by the Singapore government in parliament and later the formation of the Religious Education Unit in MUIS before the end of that decade. During this period,

7 The writer has identified these concerns based on his experience interacting with various individuals in the madrasah fraternity while working as an education officer in the Religious Education Department, MUIS for almost five years from March 1992 to February 1997. The writer has analysed and understood these problems better from the historical, philosophical and conceptual perspectives while being a full-time student in ISTAC from 1997 to 2000. While writing this thesis, the writer was actively involved (until now) in establishing and managing several Islamic education centers and a private Islamic college.
8 This could be an original attempt to delineate the madrasah history into 4 stages. Previous writings and discussions on this subject by others may not address the matter using this approach.
we will observe some spectacular changes in trends resulting in a surge in public confidence in madrasah education. We will also describe the government reaction and intervention as a result of this phenomenon.

**I) PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD (13-18TH CENTURY A.D.)**

The Muslims migrants, who came to Singapore in the thirteenth century, were mainly from Arabia and India. They were both traders and missionaries. They were experienced merchants as well as very earnest in their efforts to propagate the religion. Although there were no formal religious educational institutions or programs, the informal educational activities conducted by the early missionaries were very effective. They were so successful that the rulers themselves became convinced and willingly embraced the religion followed by the elite ruling class and the rest of the population. The newly converted rulers and community elites were actively supporting religious activities. Learning activities were carried out in the halls of the royal palace, mosques, suraus (a designated public area for congregational prayers and learning of the religion in small groups) and homes of the religious teachers or the students. The teachings were focused mostly on the religious creed and the practices. The approach and methodologies adopted and employed by the missionaries had blended well with the dominant cultures and traditions within the right context and circumstances. This had made the understanding, appreciation and acceptance of the religion by the indigenous people convenient. The education and Islamization

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9 The people who brought Islam to South East Asia were most probably from Arabs and Indians origins. However, there are varying opinions from which part of the Arab world and India. Also the exact period for the coming of Islam is also not certain. For an elaborate discussion on this, see H. Meuleman, Johan, “The History of Islam in South East Asia: Some Questions and Debate” in K.S. Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali Islam ed., *South East Asia, Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century*; (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2005), 22-38. Hereafter cited as ‘The History of Islam in South East Asia”; Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam Dalam Sejarah Dan Kebudayaan Melayu [Islam in the History and the Culture of the Malays]*, (Petaling Jaya: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, 1990), 17-24.
processes of the people in the island were very effective and successful. Malays who were formerly largely Hindus, Buddhists or Animists were successfully convinced and converted to Islam in large numbers.

However, the generations of Muslims after this was more contented and interested in practicing and preserving their religious beliefs rather than to propagate them. By this stage, the majority of the indigenous people were already Muslims. They were mostly adhering to the ‘aqīdah of Al-Ashʿārī and Al-Māturīdī and the teachings were basically ārkān al-Imān, ārkān al-Īslām and taṣawwuf. At this stage, the active propagation of the religion amongst the local Muslims to attract others of different beliefs was not as significant as compared to the earlier missionaries. There was no concerted effort to convey Islam to the Chinese and Indian migrants who came to Singapore later. As such, until today, the majority of Muslims in Singapore are Malays.

II) DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD (19-20TH CENTURY A.D.)

The British colonized the island from 1819 to 1965 (for about 146 years). Besides controlling the trade and economy, they were more interested in establishing Christian missionary schools and churches rather than stopping the teaching and learning of

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10 The Christians during this period had successfully conquered other parts of the Malay Archipelago resulting in the fall of the Muslim rulers. This resulted in decreases in political influence of Islam in the region and the growing presence and influence of Christianity. Malacca fell to Portuguese on 1511 A.D. and later to the Dutch on 1641, Manila to the Spaniards on 1521 and Indonesia fell to the Dutch on 1594. On 1768 British occupied Penang. These happened mostly in the 16th - 18th century A.D. See Muhammad Abdul Rauf, *The Muslim Mind*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2001), 280-281.
Islam or impeding the religious activities among the Muslims.\textsuperscript{11} According to Meuleman:

Generally speaking, Great Britain did not interfere much in the administration of justice among its Malay subjects and left this task to the Sultan and other pre-colonial, indigenous leaders. It also treated Islamic jurisprudence as the principal source and decisions among its Muslim subjects.\textsuperscript{12}

William Roff also commented that the British did not interfere with the Islamic education because Islam did not exert much influence on the political and public affairs. The religious elite or ‘ulemā’ were also not very organized to be considered a political threat. The Arabs who were respected by the Muslims then were also loyal to the British.\textsuperscript{13} Stamford Raffles in 1823, laid down rules that was agreed by the Sultan and Temenggong such that,

in all cases regarding the ceremonies of religion, and marriages, and the rules of inheritance, the laws and customs of the Malays will be respected, where they shall not be contrary to reason, justice and humanity. In all other cases the laws of the British authority will be enforced with due consideration to the usages and habits of the people.\textsuperscript{14}

During the early nineteenth century, the Qur’ān schools were popular and studies were mostly conducted in the mosques, suraus and homes of teachers and students. Focus was given to the recitation and memorization of the Qur’ān. With emphasis on rote learning, there was little effort at getting learners to understand or comprehend the sacred text. The British colonials were largely responsible for initiating and propagating the Malay schools. They began using the Qur’ān schools as

\textsuperscript{11} In the 19\textsuperscript{th} century A.D., secular education began to develop in the Straits Settlement in Penang, Singapore and Malacca with the establishment of Government English Free School and Mission schools. The mission was to promote Christianity and secular education. These were funded substantially by the government. For more details on the teaching and learning Islam during the early days among Muslims in Singapore, see Zahoor Ahmed F. Hussain, “Growth of Islamic Education in Singapore” presented during the seminar on Islamic Education in Singapore, 1966.

\textsuperscript{12} “The History of Islam in South East Asia”, 36.


the starting point and the foothold for their endeavors. These schools were then regulated and the teaching of the Qur’ān and Malay language was separated. The Malay language schools were under the purview of the government and held in the morning while the Qur’ān lessons were left to the private individuals to be taught after school hours in the afternoon. While the government paid the Malay language teachers, the Qur’ān teachers were paid by the parents. This was the first initial attempt to demarcate the teaching of language and non-religious subjects from religious education. A small number of Qur’ān schools continued their traditional ways and received the support of parents who still wanted the teachings of Qur’ān to be the dominant aspect of the curricula.

Consequently, there arose two distinct types of education system amongst the Muslims thereby creating a dichotomy between the Malay schools and the Qur’ān schools. While the Malay schools no longer exist today, the dichotomy first established by the British colonizer is still entrenched and exists until today. As S.M. Hossain notes:

By dividing education into secular and religious education and by establishing separate institutions for both divisions, the British scheme of dual education replaced the unitary Islamic system of education resulting in perennial discord among products of the two systems.15

This policy became more apparent in the early part of the 19th century A.D. and clearly demonstrated the British government policy of not stopping but not supporting the religious education among Muslims. The role to provide religious education was assumed by a few Arabs and a few local Malay individuals. This policy of not supporting the religious institutions, first initiated by the British government, is still upheld by the present government.

However, it would be interesting to note that Islamic studies was introduced in the Malay schools from 1958 onwards (the country was under self rule) when Islamic studies was offered as an examination subject for the Cambridge/Malayan Certificate.\(^{16}\) This was a unique situation where Islamic studies were introduced in Malay vernacular schools which had secular curriculum. This was in vogue until the closing of the last Malay schools in the 1970s due to declining in popularity and low student enrolment.\(^{17}\) It is also interesting to note that the subject Islamic Religious Knowledge (IRK) was introduced in the government schools as an examinable subject in the 1982 but unfortunately the policy was rescinded a few years later.\(^{18}\)

It is worthy to note that the six madrasah still in existence and active now were built during the colonial period. None was built in the post independence era particularly with the presence of AMLA in 1966. Why was AMLA written and enacted? While this law was popularly accepted as a positive development for the Muslims, why where there no new madrasah established after 1966? Was AMLA written more to regulate or to control and inhibit the activities of the Muslims especially with regards to madrasah education? The answer to these questions will not be deliberated in this thesis but would be an interesting area of study.

\(^{16}\) Kongress, 60.
\(^{17}\) The period before independence from the British and until the independence of Singapore (1956-1965), saw a tumultus relationship between Malaysia and Singapore. This had to some extent, influenced some of the policies with regards to religious studies in the secular schools. Malaysia being a Muslim majority country and adopting Islam as State religion would embrace a policy that liberally incorporates Islamic studies in the school curriculum. However, Singapore has a Muslim minority and no official religion, thus making it difficult to have religious studies in its secular curriculum. For some discussion with regards to the merger of Singapore into Malaysia, see Mohamed Noordin Sopiee, From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation, (Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press, 2005), 112-115; Also see Kevin Y.L. Tan and Tio Li-ann, Tan, Yeo and Lee’s Constitutional Law in Malaysia and Singapore, 2nd ed., (Butterworths Asia, 1997), 888-889, hereafter cited as Constitutional Law. The issue with regards to secular State and religion will be discussed again with greater detail in Chapter 3.

\(^{18}\) Students may still take Islamic Religious Knowledge (IRK) classes. But these are normally held outside curriculum time. They may also sit for the examination for this subject but the results may not be used for entry into tertiary institutions. These classes are not popular any more and many schools no longer offer this subject. See Constitutional Law, 890-892 for the reasons religious knowledge was introduced in the curriculum and later taken out.