



DIVERSITY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND  
TEACHING STYLES AMONG *ASĀTIZAH* OF FULL-  
TIME MADRASAHs IN SINGAPORE

BY

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## ABSTRACT

This research seeks to confirm the prevalence of diversity in Islamic thought and tradition among *asātizah* teaching in full-time madrasahs in secular Singapore. Delving into the perspective of students on issues ranging from general preference of learning approaches to explicit issues pertaining to Sufi-Salafi divide, the research attempts to let the first-hand recipients of Islamic knowledge and education in these private institutions to provide a honest and straightforward picture of what their respective *asātizah* are like in terms of their teaching styles and messages. Another primary focus of this research is to address how these teachers convey the issues of having differences of opinion among scholars of past and present, as portrayed in their teaching styles and as understood by students through the learning approaches provided in class. One main instrument was developed to collect data, which is a questionnaire adopted from various researches, writings and studies pertaining to the subject matter. The findings indicate an existence of a certain degree of diversity among *asātizah* of full-time madrasahs in Singapore. Respondents have given various accounts of experiences that they have gained from their madrasah education, especially those who have been in at least two different madrasahs throughout their knowledge seeking journey. Based on the answers given by these respondents, while *asātizah* are sometimes divided in the way they teach and the perspectives that they convey one important aspect of Islamic education i.e. possessing good morality is agreed by all. Furthermore, these students have unanimously agreed that not everything that these *asātizah* convey in class are regarded as the definite truth. This is especially agreed by those who have realized the existence and prevalence of having differences of opinions and disagreements on certain aspects of religious practices and rituals. While most of the data findings provide the necessary information needed, a few of the respondents were rather hesitant in providing their answers to some controversial questions, in addition to others who hardly had much idea on what and how to answer them. Even so, the researcher has found that the answers given by the respondents vary in terms of level of understanding of these individuals on certain issues and questions raised to them.

## خلاصة البحث

سعى هذا البحث لتأكيد مدى انتشار التنوع في الفكر الإسلامي والتقاليد الدينية بينمعلمي المدارس الإسلامية في جمهورية سنغافورة. حاول البحث أن يخوض وجهة نظر الطلاب حول قضايا التعليم التي استعمل عنها معلومهم في المدرسة، حتى مناهجتعليمهمفي مناقشة موضوع الاختلاف في الإسلام، خصوصا المسألة التي تدور حول تقسيم الصوفي والسلفي. كان التركيز الأساسي من هذا البحث لاكتشاف كيف يتعامل المعلمون مع الموضوعات الدراسية التي تدور حول وجود الخلافات في الآراء بين العلماء المتقدمين والمتأخرين جميعا، كما ازدهرت في أساليب التدريس و كما يفهمها الطلاب من خلال تعلمهم في المدرسة. قد وضعت إحدى الأدوات الرئيسية لجمع البيانات، وهي الاستبيانات التي اعتمدت من مختلف البحوث، والكتابات، و الدراسات المتعلقة بمسائل البحث وأهدافه. وقد أشارت نتائج البحث إلى وجود درجة معينة من التنوع بين المعلمين الذين يدرسون في هذه المدارس الدينية السنغافورية. وقد أعطى المشاركون في هذا البحث حسابات مختلفة من التجارب التي اكتسبت من التعليم المدارس الدينية، وخاصة أولئك الذين قد درسوا في المدرستين المختلفتين طولسعيهم في طلب العلم. وبناء على الإجابات التي قدمها هؤلاء المشاركون، مع أن هناكعدد الأساليب في الفكر والمناهج في التعليم بين المعلمين في هذه المدارس، كانالمعلمونكلهم يتفقوناتفقا تاما في أهمية اكتساب الآداب الإسلامي وحسن الأخلاق في التربية الإسلامية. علاوة على ذلك، قد وافق هؤلاء الطلاب بالإجماع على أن ليس كل ما ينقل هؤلاء المعلمون تعتبر في الدرجة الحقيقة دون وجود الآراء المختلفة التي يمكن أن تساوي في الضبط والصحة. قد اتفقوا على ذلك خاصة من قبل هؤلاء الذين أدركوا وفهموا عن انتشار وجود الخلافات في الآراء و مناهج المعاملة الدينية. رغم أن معظم نتائج البيانات قد وفرت المعلومات اللازمة، أن هناك عدد قليل من المشاركين مترددون في تقديم الإجابات لبعض الأسئلة المثيرة للجدل، مع أن هناك الآخرين الذين ليس لديهم أي فكرة في كيفية الإجابة عليها. وأخيرا، كان الباحث وجدت أن الأجوبة التي قدمها المشاركون من الطلاب تختلف من حيث مستوى فهم هؤلاء الأفراد على بعض القضايا و الأسئلة المطروحة عليهم.

## APPROVAL PAGE

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 thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Islamic Thought and Civilization.

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Fatimah Abdullah  
Supervisor

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## 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.

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Bismillahirrahmanirrahim,  
In the name of Allah the most Merciful the most Kind.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Muslims in Singapore make up less than 15% of the total population (Singapore Census, 2010) and being a minority in this secular state has its own challenges. It is thus important that we Muslims stay united and prevent ourselves from getting involved in unnecessary internal conflicts as much as possible. The national anthem and pledge has persistently emphasized the importance of having the spirit of staying united as one nation regardless of our race, language and religion. The importance of this emphasis is so that we are able to live in peace and harmony, despite our racial, cultural and theological differences. However, Singaporean Muslims are facing problems and difficulties in staying united under the umbrella of Islamic Monotheism due to opposing views and contrasting perceptions on certain issues that are mostly trivial.

One of the alarming challenges the Singaporean Muslim community is facing at present day is the escalating division among its members, ironically but especially the ‘learned’ ones. “What is more worrisome is that the division is intensifying, deepening and widening the already yawning chasm between *asātizah* of different ideologies. It might come a time, even if it is not already here, that the gap will be too wide to build a bridge across both sides,” (Firdaus Yahya, 2015). It is thus important to raise awareness on the danger of this division due to diversity in Islamic thoughts and traditions before our greatest fear becomes a reality. According to the Islamic history it is natural to differ in opinions on one issue to another, but unlike the great

scholars of Islam namely the founders of the four schools of thought, most Muslims nowadays lack the proper ethics of disagreement.

Our local religious teachers, more commonly known as *asātizah*, being responsible for conveying the message of Islam and its noble teachings, play a very important role in the contribution or prevention of this worrying phenomenon. Indeed by practicing correct conduct in discussing differences of opinions among scholars, having an open but rational mind, and abiding by the prophetic morals and values, students will be able to learn and exercise the proper and ethical way to disagree. Nowadays, with the increasing social networking sites made available and very accessible, platforms for voicing out and expressing one's opinions and views on various issues ranging from political to theological could not be any more conducive. In doing that, some if not most tend to forget the importance of practicing proper ethics and manners in the very act of disagreeing with others. Thus, we see Muslims magnifying the smallest issues of a fellow brother or sister in Islam into unnecessarily big reason to quarrel and squabble amongst one another. Due to their inability to develop the much needed sense of tolerance, we hear Muslims calling others names just because they have difference in opinion in terms of their preference in practicing the dīn.

This worrying phenomenon has been affecting members of Muslim community in Singapore as well, and unfortunately the *asātizah* class, most of who are graduates from prestigious Islamic universities have also fallen into this trap, with or without realizing it. Some are involved in it directly, while others fail to play their part to educate or more importantly set good examples for the local Muslims. This is very unfortunate as these *asātizah* are the ones partly if not highly responsible in

instilling Islamic values and igniting the true religious spirit in the group of audience or students they preach to, traditionally in a class setting or virtually in the cyberspace.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The issue of division within our local *asātizah* has been discussed time and again, and while it is important to find solutions to reduce its negative effects and impacts on Muslim community in Singapore, the researcher finds the incumbent need to delve into whether there is actually any sign or proof of division reflected through the learning experiences provided by religious teachers in the most important platform of Islamic education, i.e. local full-time madrasahs. While there are many social issues our current and future *asātizah* should and ought to work on together in order to collectively diminish or solve, it seems like some are more concerned about proving to the community who is right and who is wrong, who should be followed and who should be ostracized. Religious leaders and teachers are not only less attractive but they scare people away from learning the *dīn* due to their rigidity, extremism and fanaticism in preaching Islam (Mohd Asri, 2012).

It is thus important to bring this worrying phenomenon to a stop and take action on the need to prepare our future generations of *asātizah* with brilliant qualities for the betterment of the Ummah. We must find ways to avoid our religious students – future *asātizah*– from becoming more divided resulting in increasing polarisation among members of the Muslim community in Singapore. In order to do that, we must first investigate how far these ideological differences and gaps, if proven prevalent, are passed on to students of religious knowledge in their daily classroom settings. The

level of awareness and opinions of these students are thus important in reflecting their current and existing mind set pertaining to Islamic thought and religious ideology.

One may argue that the existing diversity does not impose any threat or issue to the Muslim community at large, due to it being apparent only among the *asātizah* class. However, the researcher sees this as an alarming state considering how some of our very own *asātizah* tend to propagate their understanding of Islam, Islamic thought and tradition to their followers while making it seem like that is the only true version of Islam, neglecting and ignoring the fact that there are inevitable differences of opinions that may be just as valid, if not more. While some may have intended to do that in the name of spreading truth, others may not be aware of the consequences and implications of the statements made by them in public talks or even classroom settings that may have caused their students to develop a certain set of unwanted misunderstandings and misconceptions.

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This study aims to analyse the level of diversity among *asātizah* in Singapore, as claimed in the PERGAS working paper written by both Khairudin Aljunied and Firdaus Yahya (2015). Despite having a wide spectrum of *asātizah* teaching Islamic revealed knowledge nationwide, this study intends to investigate the prevalence of such diversity among the teaching faculty of full-time madrasahs in Singapore. This is due to the fact that they not only teach their present students, but they also shape and develop important individuals who will be responsible in conveying the message of Islam and teaching Islamic revealed knowledge to the rest of the local Muslim community. It is thus important for us to delve into the quality and value of their

teaching that have impacted the recipients of the sacred knowledge, thought and tradition of Islam.

Firstly, the researcher is of the opinion that the level of influence and impact that these full-time Islamic institutions have on the Muslim community at large is somewhat vast due to its being the central platform in shaping and producing future local religious officers, leaders and scholars. Secondly, there may be a variety of ways to investigate the hypothesis mentioned earlier, but this study targets to enlighten the research arena with data collected from the students' perspectives due to their being exposed to the ideas put forth, presented and shared by their respective *asātizah*. Finally, it is incumbent for us to realise whether this issue of intensifying schism between local *asātizah* is really worth worrying about or otherwise. That being said, this particular research hopes to determine the direction of further researches related to our local *asātizah* class in particular, and madrasah education in general.

This study will highlight the role of *asātizah* in teaching and discussing ideological differences or diversity in Islamic thought and tradition to students of full-time Islamic schools in Singapore or what is commonly known as madrasahs, and the kind of influence, if any, they have on students. While there may be a dire need for us to address the incumbent issue of intensifying division among *asātizah* due to their diversity in Islamic thought and tradition, it is equally if not more important for us to confirm such existence and the level of urgency for us to study further on its impacts, implications and consequences. Due to the extensive nature of the issue, the researcher has narrowed down three main aspects of the topic to be investigated so as to provide a new set of information that may assist future researchers to delve further into the topic of discussion.

Thus, the main objectives and aims of the study are as follows:

1. To confirm the existence of ideological division and diversity among *asātizah* of full-time madrasahs in Singapore.
2. To identify any contrasting teaching styles and methods adopted by these *asātizah* in their respective classes or schools.
3. To determine whether there are students who regard the knowledge taught by their *asātizah* as the definite truth.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Based on the objectives mentioned earlier, this research aims to uncover answers to the following questions:

1. Is there any indication of existing diversity in Islamic thought and traditions among *asātizah* of full-time madrasahs in Singapore?
2. If proven existent, how is such diversity reflected in their teaching styles and methods?
3. Do any of these students embrace their teachers' ideological stances as they regard what they learn in school as the ultimate truth?

## 1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Madrasahs are like the heartbeat of Islamic education in Singapore. Many of the graduates end up becoming religious leaders in local mosques, hold important positions in local Islamic organizations, and also continue the legacy of running local Islamic schools. *Asātizah* teaching in these madrasahs therefore carry an extremely important responsibility in making sure that their existing students not only graduate with the necessary knowledge, but also possess the required wisdom and most importantly *adab* (Al-Attas, 1980).

Despite the secularity of Singapore, it has always encouraged its nations to maintain religious harmony and spirit of co-existence within the multi-religious society. Muslims are given the freedom to have religious schools that provide Islamic education for its followers on both part-time and full-time basis. While the purpose and objectives of education are many, Khurshid Ahmad (1968) suggests that “preservation and promotion of the religion and culture of the people” seem to be compromised in one way or another in order to fulfil the state’s demands, particularly national cohesion. The constant struggle and battle to balance these two opposing sets of requirements especially when seen from a traditional perspective, Islamic schools are regularly working towards reforming their education system. The results of these efforts are seemingly questionable due to the fact that since decades many people still subscribe to the opinion that even “today madrasahs in Singapore are generally backward in terms of both content taught and methodology employed” (Steiner, 2011).

As far as the local full-time madrasahs are concerned, there are students that excel in both revealed and acquired knowledge, or what is more commonly known as

religious and secular knowledge. Unfortunately this type of students are not many, for majority tend to excel in either one of the knowledge categories due to their perpetual struggle to cope with the many and heavy subjects. On top of all these, the state policy which was first implemented in 2003 requires all students of these madrasahs to reach a particular benchmark for their national exam (PSLE) in order to ensure that they are up to the standard of their peers from national schools (Yang Razali, n.d.). The challenge is thus becoming even bigger and the pressure heavier than the community could ever imagine.

On the other hand, most Muslim parents send their kids to the national schools, either based on their choice or otherwise – as there is a limited quota for madrasah student enrolment –, and when it comes to Islamic education, they may or may not enrol their kids in the part-time madrasahs. It was announced by the Mufti of Singapore in 2014 that according to MUIS statistics, about 60% of young Muslims between the ages of 6 to 17 are not exposed to any formal Islamic education due to various and some unknown reasons.

This is where the real challenge comes in. Those enrolled in full-time madrasah most probably have mastered the Islamic rituals and are very familiar with the common rulings due to the exposure they get in school, whilst many of their counterparts may not even know the meaning of the most basic testimony of faith (*syahadah*) due to very obvious reasons. It is thus acceptable to say that the religious and Islamic experience of Muslim students in Singapore are somewhat divided and some may even find them to be on extreme opposites.

At the same time, one may question what is so Islamic about these Islamic schools or madrasahs besides their introducing to the students the history of Islam, its

regulations and principles. Due to the traditional approach of teaching revealed knowledge in these Islamic education institutions, many students struggle to truly comprehend its relevance in present day. Due to the long existing dichotomy of knowledge, teachers too face problems in making students see the big and real picture. The worrying state of these Islamic schools thus encompass both in disseminating the true teachings of Islam effectively so that they could improve the welfare of the Muslim community, and also in making sure that these students are capable of achieving the benchmark set by the government. Despite the secular state's continuous permission for Muslims to provide Islamic education, their policies are definitely not making the mission stress-free.

Many studies and papers have been initiated and written on roles and challenges of *asātizah* in general, mostly discuss not only religious teachers teaching in full-time madrasahs, but also part-time madrasahs, mosques and other Islamic education centres. Many express their understanding that this diversity in Islamic thought and tradition could actually lead to increasing polarisation among the local Muslims. Albeit being aware of its serious danger, little effort have been done by policy makers and religious leaders to avoid that from becoming a reality.

Thus, this study is very vital and crucial due to the following factors; First, it seeks to prove the prevalence of diversity in Islamic thought among *asātizah* teaching in full-time madrasahs in Singapore; Second, it delves into whether the diversity, if proven prevalent, is explicitly reflected in their teaching contributions; Third, it determines whether these *asātizah* are actually contributing to or preventing against further division and separation of the local Muslims, specifically full-time madrasah students.

## **1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This sub-topic discusses the research procedures and approaches of conducting the study to answer the research questions posed in the earlier chapters. It comprises of discussions on research design, research population and respondents, research instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and last but not of least importance, ethical issues related to conducting this very study. Due to the extensive and lengthy definitions, characteristics of concepts related to research methodology, the researcher attempts to simplify and present them in concise and comprehensive manner. Unless the concepts are closely related and involved in this particular research embarked upon, the detailed explanation of these theories and models will not be included.

Out of the three research methods: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, this study made use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches as it lies somewhere on a continuum between the two (Creswell, 2003). This is due to the fact that to a certain extent, this study quantified the number of students involved in the study that seem to have been influenced by their teachers and also how extensive is the latter's influence on the former. At the same time, the research involved analysis of the answers given by the respondents, to further investigate the seriousness and dive into the depth of the subject matter involved. In doing so, the researcher had to use a qualitative approach to really understand each interviewee's response.

Besides quantifying the number of students that agree or disagree on a certain question or particular issue based on their learning experiences in the full-time madrasahs, this particular study had to involve some basic qualitative approach as it comprised of analysis of data collected from interviews, which will be discussed

further in the upcoming sub-topics of this chapter. Ultimately, it is important to note that this study delves deeply into the responses gathered by the researcher followed by thorough and careful understanding of the messages and implications of the answers and data collected.

## I. POPULATION AND RESPONDENTS

Full-time madrasah students refer to those between the ages of 7 to 18 who are enrolled in the school for their primary (7 to 12 years of age), secondary (13 to 16 years of age) and even their pre-university (17 to 18 years of age) education in Singapore. Unlike the mainstream national secular education that is widely available in Singapore, these students may represent a small percentage of Muslims students in general, but they generally end up having to uphold the responsibility of providing religious guidance, direction and leadership needed in the local Muslim community in one way or another. This is why it is important to investigate this particular group of students as they are the ones who will be teaching, preaching and leading the future generations of Muslims in secular Singapore.

Two students, male and female were chosen at random to represent their respective schools. However, only one student from Madrasah Al-Ma'arif Al-Islamiah had participated in the interview as she is representing an all-girls school, thus not requiring a male representative. Therefore, a total of seven students between the ages of 17 to 18 were involved in this study. All of these respondents are currently pursuing their pre-university education (Pre-U) in one of the full-time madrasahs in Singapore. One may argue that the sample size is rather small, but it is important to keep in mind that the researcher has chosen this particular age group due to their vast experience or rather exposure in attaining madrasah education.

In other words, these students represent those who have been in the madrasah education system for at least 10 years, and are still in this very system, prior to pursuing their studies in a higher institution upon their graduation. That being said, despite currently being in the same madrasah for their Pre-U education, these students have just graduated from a variety of madrasahs which may assist the researcher to have fresh and invaluable insights to their experiences gained throughout their decade-long education in their respective schools. Due to time-constraint and limited accessibility to students from all the six madrasahs, the researcher had to settle with students who have been in either one of four various full-time madrasahs for their primary and secondary education. These students had gained vast learning experiences in at least one of the following full-time madrasahs: (1) Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, (2) Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah, (3) Madrasah Al-Ma'arif Al-Islamiah and (4) Madrasah Wak Tanjong Al-Islamiah.

## II. INSTRUMENTATION

As the nature of this research requires studying human experience and diverse situations, the instrument was selected based on its ability to capture the conditions in an organized way (Donald Ary, 2014). Research instrument basically refers to the tool that is used for the measurement goals and it can be represented in many forms, depending on the research questions and what needs to be measured (Geraldine Van Gyn, 2004). Out of the three major sources for doing a qualitative research study, the researcher had chosen interview as her main instrument. This is due to the fact that data collected from the responses gained from these interviews would give an in-depth, honest and enriching insights to the issues involved in this entire study. Unlike

depending on mere numbers and quantitative values, interviews were able to provide a more meaningful understanding of a set of issues.

The interview questions were developed based on the research questions by the researcher prior to seeking suggestions and eventually approval from the supervisor. A set of critical stages of an interview inquiry were employed for the entire interview process, namely (1) thematising; (2) designing; (3) interviewing; (4) transcribing; (5) analysing; (6) verifying; and (7) reporting (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

As mentioned above, the interview questions for this research study were developed according to the three main research questions mentioned:

1. How prevalent is the diversity in Islamic thought and traditions among *asātizah* of full-time madrasahs in Singapore?
2. How much is this diversity reflected in their teaching styles and methods?
3. How far do these *asātizah* encourage students to adopt and emulate the teachings conveyed in class?

It is worth noting that the interview questions were divided into four main sections: (1) educational background, referring to the number of years the students have been in a full-time madrasah education on top of the academic pathway they have taken thus far, (2) learning experiences, which include their most and least preferred teaching styles adopted by their teachers in their respective schools, (3) general idea on diversity, which refers to their surface knowledge regarding diversity in Islamic thought based on their general knowledge acquired mostly from their

respective schools and (4) detailed idea on diversity, referring to specific and a particular set of practices that may point to a certain Islamic sect or group of Muslims.

### III. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data were collected through conducting interviews where respondents comprise of students coming from four different full-time madrasahs. This population study was done so that the phenomenon could be evaluated across the mainstream instructors of formal Islamic education in the country.

#### **a. Interview**

A detailed and effective planning to execute this interview was done so that the data collection procedure was conducted within a short amount of time, without compromising the desired objectives. Each student was interviewed separately, and each interview session was accompanied with audio recording on top of some manual note taking by the researcher herself. This was done to ensure that every word and information was literally recorded down for precise and accurate analysis, investigation and conclusion. The researcher had constantly referred to the list of interview questions prepared in order to ensure that each interview session was moving towards the same direction.

However, there were a couple of instances where the researcher felt somewhat obliged to interrogate further and ask slightly different and additional questions to different interviewees for various reasons. In terms of the language used, generally all interview sessions were conducted in English, but some of the students had trouble