

MALAYSIAN JOURNAL OF HUMAN ECOLOGY

Journal Homepage: https://eco1.upm.edu.my/jurnal_mjhe-3740

TOO ISLAMIC OR TOO SUPERFICIAL? A REFLECTION ON RELIGIOUS TREND IN MALAYSIA

Arfah Ab. Majid

Department of Government and Civilization Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Over the recent years, Islamic lifestyles and cultures are apparently flourishing in Malaysia. The wearing of *hijab* (headscarf) among Muslim women, the use of Arabic words in greetings and daily conversation such as the word *solat*, (i.e. *sembahyang* in Malay) and proliferation of Islamic programs in the media and national events are among the examples of this religious phenomenon. Nonetheless, in the midst of the growth of Islamic cultures and lifestyles, there are still issues of crimes, moral, social and humanitarian associated with Muslims in this country. This paper therefore seeks to explore the nature of the religious trend and the reality behind the prevalent of Islamic lifestyles and cultures in present-day Malaysian Muslim society. In order to unpack the nature of this religious phenomenon, phenomenological research design was employed by interviewing six muftis representing different states in Malaysia. They were the Federal Territories mufti, the Penang mufti, the Perlis mufti, the Pahang mufti, the Melaka mufti and the Perak mufti. These muftis were selected purposively based on their current position as mufti, credential and experience as the main religious advisor in a particular state. The finding reveals that even though Islamic lifestyles and cultures today seem prevailing in the society but in reality they are superficial and incomplete. According to the muftis, this religious trend lack of values and spiritual aspect of Islam since the emphasis is only on the labels and visible practices. This study is significant for Malaysian Muslim in general to practice an even more comprehensive Islamic teaching without being selective and superficial.

Keywords: Muslim, Malaysia, superficial, Islam, spiritual

Corresponding Author:

Arfah Ab. Majid
Email: am_arfah@upm.edu.my
Tel: 03.9769 7084

INTRODUCTION

Islam in Malaysia undeniably has a very unique position and plays an essential role in molding the identity of Malaysian Muslim society. Other than Article 3 in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia that declares Islam as the religion of the Federation, the Islamisation projects have also significant impact on Islamic practices in Malaysia.

Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas (2010:147) have identified the trend towards a 'deepening religiosity, moral conservatism and a growing societal constituency' among Malaysian Muslim since the implementation of Islamisation projects in the early 80s. In a forum on 'Arabisation' among Malays, Syed Farid Al-Attas pointed out that the Malay Muslims in particular, are more likely to imitate the Arab cultures which they believe to be the model of the authentic Muslim (Syed Jaymal Zahiid, 2016). Even though the term Arabisation may not be necessarily accurate to reflect current phenomenon but the idea of becoming 'authentic Muslim' is an indicator of the growing religiosity among Malaysian Muslim society.

Islamic Infiltration: Institutional level

Many scholars (e.g., Jomo, K. S., & Ahmad Shabery Cheek, 1992; Chandra Muzaffar, 1987.; Hussin Mutalib, 1993; Muhamad Fuzi Omar, 1999) interpreted the government's attempt to embed Islamic values in Malaysia during the 1980's as an immediate response to the rise of Islamic revival movements led by multiple *da'wah* groups some of which have cropped up since the 1970's. Rendered as the voice of the Muslim majority in Malaysia, the government was expected to support this spirit of revivalism by enforcing few Islamic programs and institutions (Hussin Mutalib, 1990).

The government's commitment to this effort was demonstrated by allocating funds to support institutions devoted to researching and spreading not only Islamic but also Malay arts and cultures (Lee, 2000).

Hussin Mutalib (1993) delineated certain major Islamic projects which the government undertook during the 1980s. Among the projects were; policy declaration to remodel the economic structure of Malaysia into an Islamic one in 1980; establishment of Islamic Banks, Islamic Pawnshops, Islamic Insurance and an Islamic Economic Foundation in 1981; establishment of an International Islamic Training Camp permanent site in 1982; establishment of an International Islamic University Malaysia in 1983; official declaration of Islamisation of Government Machinery in 1984; declaring that the role of Islamic judges and courts must be equivalent to that of their counterparts in the civil judiciary.

The Islamic bureaucrats are also further strengthened with number of strategies. Those strategies as identified by Maznah Mohamad (2010) are, centralisation of Islamic authority under the federal government such as JAKIM, expansion of various religious institutions (e.g the Office of the Islamic Religious Affairs was divided into three separate entities Shari'ah courts, Office of the Mufti and Islamic Religious Council) and multiplication of laws under shari'ah statutes. All these developments marked the infiltration of Islamic values at the institutional level.

Islamic Infiltration: Societal level

At the societal level, the Islamic lifestyles and cultures are becoming more popular trend these days. This phenomenon is visible in Malaysian Muslim society through the transformation in their dressing style which can be considered as 'shari'ah compliance' style (e.g. the wearing of

hijab (headscarf) among Muslim women; *jubah* and *arbaya* (Arabic long dress) and their daily conversation (e.g. the replacement of Malay words with Arabic such as *Assalamualaikum* for greeting, *iftar* for *buka puasa*, *solat* for *sembahyang*, *Eid Mubarak* for *Selamat Hari Raya*).

Apart from that, the tendency to partake in Islamic activities and events such as *Majlis zikir* (ceremonies in praise of Prophet Muhammad SAW)), listening to Muslim scholarly talks on You Tube and sharing religious threads in WhatsApp groups may also be seen as a sign of increased religiosity among Malaysian Muslims (Asma Abdullah 2016: 261). There are also increasing number of Islamic programs in the electronic and social media as well as in the national events such as the *Q'Éri Junior*, *Qur'Én* hour, *DaÑi*, *Pencetus Ummah* and many more.

Degeneracy in highly religious society?

From the aforementioned discussion, the expansion of Islamic cultures, laws and institutions in Malaysia therefore took place at the institutional level that are mobilized by the government and at the societal level that are initiated by the civil society. At first glance, this religious trend is indicator of an increasing Islamic awareness and revival. Yet, if Islam has been revived and practiced adequately, why are there still issues of crimes, moral, social and humanitarian associated with Muslim society?

Based on statistical data reported by *Jabatan kebajikan Masyarakat*, between January 2014 and December 2018 there were 577 cases of baby dumping and the figure grows each year (Mohd Jamilul Anbia, Fairul Asmaini, Mary Victoria Dass, Nur Saliawati & Nurul Hidayah, 2019). *Agensi Anti Dadah Kebangsaan* (AADK) revealed that 7,261 new drug users were detected between January and March 2016, and that number is expected to rise compared to a total of

26,668 in 2015 and 21,777 in 2014 (Azrul Affandi Sobry, 2016).

For cases of corruption, Suruhanjaya Pencegahan Rasuah Malaysia (SPRM) made 894 arrests in 2018 slightly higher than 879 arrests in 2017, and marginally lower than 939 arrests in 2016 (SPRM, 2018). According to Kuala Lumpur Chief of Police Datuk Mazlan Lazim, the snatch and robbery crime index in Kuala Lumpur jumped to 1,010 cases in 2017 compared with 640 in 2016 (Syazwan Masr, 2017).

The spike in the crime rates, social and humanitarian issues, raises the question as to whether Islam has really been revived? This study therefore aims at exploring the nature of the religious trend and the reality behind the prevalent of Islamic lifestyles and cultures in present-day Malaysian Muslim society.

METHODOLOGY

In order to unpack the nature of this religious phenomenon, phenomenological research design was adopted with in depth-interview as the main instrument. There were six muftis that had been interviewed for this study:

- i. Dato' Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (Perlis mufti)
- ii. Datuk Dr. Wan Salim Wan Mohd Nor (Penang mufti)
- iii. Dato' Haji Abdul Halim Tawil (Melaka mufti)
- iv. Tan Sri Harussani Haji Zakaria (Perak mufti)
- v. Datuk Dr. Zulkifli Mohamad Albakri (Federal Territories mufti)
- vi. Datuk Seri Dr. Abdul Rahman Osman (Pahang mufti)

These muftis were purposively chosen based on their current position as mufti, credential and experience as the key religious advisor in a particular state.

The Nature of Religious Trend in Malaysia

All muftis were of the view that the current development of Islamic cultures and lifestyles are superficial, mechanical and cosmetic that lack of values and spiritual dimension of Islam. This phenomenon is the inadvertent result of institutionalisation of Islam in Malaysia.

The rise of institutions and bureaucratic systems with Islamic labels resulted in an increased trend in Islamic labelling. The Islamic label eventually not only limited to Islamic institutions and organizations but it also has been used to label products for commercial purpose including supplements and healthcare products.

All muftis expressed their disenchantment with the Islamisation approach that rely heavily on Islamic labelling. These muftis agreed that the things that we perceive as flourishing are not actually the values but only the labels. They believed that Islam should be the core values and principles in every institution instead of having Islamic and non-Islamic institutions separately. Such tendencies will make Islam rigid and exclusive instead of dynamic and inclusive religion.

Few issues related to the Islamic labelling approaches have been identified by the muftis. The first issue is the issue of dualism. This issue was highlighted by the Federal Territories mufti. Dualism or *sanawiyyah* as coined by the mufti, including dualism in thought (*sanawiyyah al-fikrah*) and dualism in education (*sanawiyyah at-ta'alim*).

In Malaysian higher educational institutions for instance, there are universities with Islamic

names while there are universities without Islamic names even though those universities consist of Muslim majority students. The Federal Territories mufti questioned the level of religiosity of those universities. He gave Universiti Putra Malaysia as an example. Does Universiti Putra Malaysia is less Islamic than International Islamic University? (Federal Territories Mufti, personal communication, October 6, 2016).

According to the Federal Territories mufti, the Islamic labelling approach is no longer relevant in our society today where Islam has become prevalent. This approach might be appropriate in the era and region where Islam is still foreign. Given that the labelling approach is no longer relevant, the Federal Territories mufti demanded it to be revisited (personal communication, October 6, 2016).

Other than the issue of dualism, the Islamic labelling also led to exclusiveness of the particular institutions or systems. This issue had been highlighted by the Penang mufti. He anticipated the Islamic labels given to specific institutions or systems will create the perception among the non-Muslims that those institutions or systems were made exclusively for Muslims.

The Islamic division of Malaysian courts or *shari'ah* courts are perceived by the non-Muslims as a form of discrimination against them. For example, in the case of conversion of a husband or wife to Islam, the *shari'ah* courts will grant the custody of the children to the Muslim father or mother. The Penang mufti considered this kind of ruling does not reflect the concept of justice as endorsed by Islam even in the name of protecting the *'aqidah* of the children.

If the children still need care, love and attention from their mother, the custody should be given to the mother even if the mother is a non-

Muslim. According to the Penang mufti, Islam is not all about *hukum* (injunction) but it is also about wisdom and diplomacy.

The Penang mufti also opined that the Islamic labels attached to particular institutions should be consistent with the Islamic principles and values. The main focus should be on the essence and not only on the surface. He gave an example, during the Abbasid and Ummayyad period, the rulers used the word *khalifah*. However, only few of the *khalifah* were really adopting Islamic values during their reigns and their lives. Others were despotic and corrupt rulers. The renowned Islamic figure, *Salahuddin al-Ayyubi* might not had been a *khalifah*, but his contributions were greater than the so called *khalifah* during the Abbasid period. Islamic labels can be used provided that Islamic values are also being applied, otherwise it will give negative impact on Islam (Penang Mufti, personal communication, October 25, 2016).

Similar concern was also raised by the Pahang mufti. According to him, the entity that needs to be Islamised is the *'ummah* and not the institution. He doubted if the Islamic institutions do not reflect the real Islamic values, it will lead to misperception towards Islam (Pahang Mufti, personal communication, October 20, 2016).

Other religious phenomenon that has been identified by the Melaka mufti is the issue of priority (*aulawiyat*). According to him, Malaysian Muslims today tend to prioritize the recommended (*mandub*) practices instead of obligatory (*wajib*) practices. As an example, Muslims today are more interested to perform *'umrah* few times, instead of settling their debt (Melaka Mufti, personal communication, November 22, 2016).

According to the Penang mufti, the issue of priority also affected the Qur'an-related practices. For example, the priority is given to

memorisation of the Qur'an or *tajwid* instead of the insight and application of its contents. He asserts that the right understanding of the Qur'an and the application of its principles in the right context that will bring significant changes to the people (Penang Mufti, personal communication, October 25, 2016).

The Perlis mufti envisaged Islamisation today as Islamisation of 'form' that is full with commercial elements. Islam in Malaysia today has become a commodity for commercial purposes. The Islamic brands can be found in clothing, beauty products and supplements.

The wearing of *hijab* among Muslim women nowadays has become a popular trend which has profited the traders handsomely. According to the Perlis mufti, what Malaysian Muslims is currently focusing is nothing but religious decoration while forsaking the essence of the religion.

The Perlis mufti called for the reversion to the proper understanding of the essence of Islam and the *maqasid shari'ah*. The Perlis mufti also posed few questions to Malaysian Muslim. Among the questions were: "What is actually required by Islam?" "How to define oneself as being reverted and devoted to God?" "Is it simply by wearing *tudung* and delivering [Islamic] talk?" "Is it simply by putting Arabic names to the products?." One need to answer these kind of questions and understand the essence of Islam in order to become a true Muslim (Perlis Mufti, personal communication, October 14, 2016).

Other than the aforementioned issues, the modern trend of *da'wah* were also frowned upon by the muftis. The mushrooming of *da'wah* programmes and events especially in the media, apparently signifying the growing public interest in religion, but there are few issues raised by the muftis related to the methods applied by the

contemporary Muslim preachers or *da'i*. Among the disquieting modern trends of *da'wah* according to the muftis is the incorporation of entertainment element in the *da'wah* programmes for instance by inserting joke, singing, and acting in the *da'wah*.

According to the Melaka mufti, this form of *da'wah* also reflects the superficial practices of Islam, since the focus is on entertainment instead of the content and knowledge. He questioned the quality of knowledge that could be gained from a *da'wah* programmes that are blended with entertainment. According to Melaka mufti, the recent trends on Islamic lifestyles and cultures may seem like an Islamic development, but it is feared that they may not reach the real truth. He believes that Malaysian Muslims are superficial in nature, therefore they tend to take things on the surface including Islamic practices.

Another issue that was highlighted by the Melaka mufti related to superficial religious practices is the trend of 'concert-like religious events' such as *Malam Cinta Rasul*. Without refuting the contribution of such event in promoting *zikr* and *salawat*, the Melaka mufti remained uncertain about the actual content of such event (Melaka Mufti, personal communication, November 22, 2016).

The Perlis mufti also contended that the modern trend of *da'wah* is 'lack of content but focuses on jokes, singing and other forms of entertainment' (Perlis Mufti, personal communication, October 14, 2016). The Perak mufti also questioned the outcomes of the current *da'wah* methods despite the mushrooming of *da'wah* channels (mass media, radio, newspaper etc.) and Muslim preachers. According to him, *da'wah* that is filled with entertainment and lack of enforcement may lead to the ineffectiveness of the *da'wah* (Perak

Mufti, personal communication, November 16, 2016).

The Melaka mufti described the phenomenon that Malaysian Muslims is currently experiencing as *tadayyun manqus* (incomplete religiosity), not Islamic revivalism or Islamic conservatism as claimed by some people. Even though Muslims are apparently becoming more religious and pious, in reality they are becoming more regressive (Melaka Mufti, personal communication, November 22, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Islamisation in Malaysia has undergone various phases, processes and forms that were influenced by various factors. If the earlier form of Islamisation focusing on Islamising the people of the Malay land, the later Islamisation took different form.

The main focus was no longer the people but the institutions. The institutional Islamisation began to take form during the era of British colonialism in Malaya. The statutory definition that limit Islamic law to family and personal law, variety regulations including bureaucratisation of imam and *qadi* appointments, marriage and divorce regulation were all examples of how Islam started to be institutionalised. To the Malays, these measures were the ways to expand the Islamic law but to the British these were the ways they could monitor and limit the Islamic law.

The instituting of Islamic regulations which are tolerable to the British and the appointment of religious-related officials all began during this era (Roff, 1998). This trend continued during the post-independence Malaya with the position of Islam as the religion of the federation in the constitution.

Mahathir's policy of inculcation of Islamic values (*Dasar Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam*) during the 80s in government administration and the establishment of several Islamic institutions including Islamic banks and Islamic universities has further reinforced the institutional Islamisation in Malaysia.

However, despite the growth of these Islamic institutions and the flourishing of Islamic lifestyles and cultures in the society, the muftis still expressed their concern with the recent religious trend in Malaysia. Even though the Muslim society appears to be more Islamic nowadays, they are actually superficial in nature. It is superficial through various forms as identified by the muftis. The focus on Islamic labels as applied to the Islamic institutions and products, the inappropriate priority in religious practices and lack of content in *da'wah* are all symbolize the superficial Islamic practices.

The phenomenon that are currently experienced by Malaysian Muslim society today is known as *tadayyun manqus* (incomplete religiosity). Even though this concept was highlighted by the Melaka mufti, it was originally introduced by an Egyptian Muslim scholar Fahmi Huwaydi (1994). This phenomenon is a phenomenon of separation between religion and the world, between worship and other deeds, between worldly affairs and hereafter. As an example, a person who puts much emphasis on performing prayers that are only *mustahabb* (recommended) but abandoning his works at the office. Religion is seen as an affair between a person with Allah and not with other person and creature.

The phenomenon of separation between worldly and religious affairs actually reflects the idea of secularism. According to Al-Attas (1993), the spread of secular ideology and secular education does not only emerge from the West, but it is also created by the Muslims themselves. This

happened whenever the Islamisation is focusing on the society and the state instead of the individual Muslim. While the state, society and the institutions are getting more Islamised, the individual Muslim are getting more confused and ignorant about Islam. Therefore, in order to find the best remedy for these problems, the emphasis should be on the individual, not on the society and the state (Al-Attas, 1993).

The wrong approach to Islamisation eventually leads to superficial, secularised, and incomplete religiosity. In order to produce a Muslim community that could be recognised as 'the best community that has been raised up for mankind' as stated in the Qur'an, Chapter 3 (Surah Ali 'Imran) verse 110 the Islamisation framework that focus on Islamic labelling need to be revisited as suggested by the Federal Territories mufti (Personal communication, October 6, 2016).

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