

Arabic Language Development and Its Teaching in Terengganu, Malaysia: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper discusses the development of Arabic language and its teachings in Terengganu, Malaysia. Using secondary data analysis and descriptive technique, the study found that there were several stages taken by the Terengganu authority prior to the formation of religious schools and college for the sake of Muslims in Terengganu. These incuse the teaching of Arabic language and religious teaching in the mosque and pondok (traditional school). Several scholars involved such as Sheikh Abdul Malik, TokkuPaloh and those ulama' from Southern Thailand.

Keywords: Arabic studies, Islam, Terengganu

1. Introduction

This paper looks into the development of Arabic language and its teachings in Terengganu, Malaysia, including traditional Islamic teachings amongst Muslims of Terengganu. Religious education within the Malay community during that time refers to Islamic education that put great emphasis on the oneness of Allah (*Tauhid*) and the Prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh) as the messenger of Allah. The Prophet's teachings therefore must be followed as they become revealed knowledge and guidance coming from Allah. Describing religious education among the Malay Muslim community in the 19th century, Abdullah Munsyi notes that there are three important elements emphasized that always linked with Islam and centered around the Quran, *Hadith* (tradition) and religious law. These elements could be described as follows: 1) Studying the classical books emphasized the Oneness of Allah (*tauhid*), His actions (*af'al*) and His attributes (*sifat*). 2) Studying the books of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) that stress on Muslim relations (*mu'amalat*) and their obligations such as prayer, fasting, zakat and pilgrimage and 3) Studying various disciplines and branches of knowledge that would benefit them in their daily life such as the biography of the Prophet, good conducts or moral (*akhlaq*) and the classical Islamic tales (Haron Din and Sobri Salamun, 1980, AsyrafHjAb Rahman, 2017). In order to understand religious teachings, Arabic language became the main tools and means which requires Muslim to study and understand its words, syntax and philology.

Using secondary data analysis and descriptive technique, the study traces the development of Arabic and Islamic education in Terengganu from the early stages and how they came into existence up the the present day. The role and contributions of traditional ulama (Muslim scholars) are taken into account towards the success. Names like Sheikh Abdul Malik, TokkoPaloh and some others from Southern Thailand are so importance to be analysed to see their efforts towards realizing the importance of Arabic language as means to study religious teachings

2. Historical Background of The Arabic Language Development

2.1 Pre Islamic Period (Jahiliyyah Period)

The Jahaliliyyah period was a period which showed an insulated life style of the Arab people. Before the emergence of Islam, they did not make much contact with outside nations nor vice versa.

Al-Jahiliyyah was a new word which was coined by the Muslims. It was derived from the word *al-Jahl* (الجهل) which means ignorance, i.e. the opposite of *al 'Ilm*, which is knowledge, especially of religion. There are several explanations of the word *al-Jahiliyyah*, a term capable of being rendered as the 'period of ignorance or the period of 'Rudeness', a derogatory designation applied to the Pre-Islamic period. Some also say that the people of that period were ignorant of Allah and his messengers and worshipped idols (Jawad Ali, 1978). This generation brought destruction upon themselves because of rivalry and social conflict (SyauqiDayf, 1977). Despite of ignorance in terms of values and conduct of life based on revelation, the Jahiliyyah society were advanced, especially in literature. Before the coming of Islam, there were numerous language varieties and dialects used by the Arabs. There were differences between one tribe and another in terms of words, language structure and pronunciation. For instance, the language of some tribes such as Tamin, Rabi^cahMudar, Hudail and others are markedly different one from the other. These languages are free from any outside influences. The situation is different for tribes which had a lot of interaction with foreigners such as those of the Hijaz from Mecca who were mostly traders (JurjiZaidan, 1968). In general, historians have classified the Arabic language into two broad-types:

- a. Southern Arabic or Arab Qahtaniyyah (قحطانية)
- b. Northern Arabic or Arab Adnaniyyah (عدنانية)

The southern Arabic people was more civilized than its northern counterpart. It had its own script and law and was associated with Himyar (Ahmad Shalabi, 1970). Likewise, the northern language had its own rules. It is also known as a 'higher standard language' which is Quranic language. When the Southern state was destroyed following the downfall of the Ma'rib Empire, commerce in the Arabian peninsular shifted North. Furthermore, when the city of Mecca became the religious center for the region, the northern language became more well-known and developed whereas the importance of the southern language diminished. The emergence of Islam and the revelation of the Qur'an made the Northern more established. As time went on, the language spread to the whole of the Arabian Peninsula (Hamka, 1980).

2.2. The Qur'an and the Arabic Language

The Holy Qur'an was revealed by Allah to his messenger in Arabic, as stated in the Qur'an: وهذا لسان عربي مبين Surah al-Nahl, page 103 Which means, the Qur'an is in clear Arabic language. A question arose about the true nature of the Arabic language used in the Qur'an. The messenger of God explained the issue in a tradition. The Qur'an was revealed in seven *Ahruf*.

انزل القرآن على سبعة أحرف

Sunah Abu Dawud, page 159

The *Ahruf* refer to dialects which existed among the tribes at that time. The Holy Prophet allowed the faithful to recite the Qur'an in their own dialects. The Holy Prophet said:

اقرأوا كما علمتم

Which means, recite the Qur'an as you have been taught?

As a result of the emergence of Islam, many people became interested in studying Arabic to understand the Islamic religion itself, especially the Qur'an, as the utterance of God. For a long time, the Arabs had mixed with non-Arabs and moreover, after many wars, especially during the reign of Caliph Omar b. al-Khattab, the language was infiltrated by the usage of those more familiar with the foreign languages a phenomenon which is known as *al-Lahn* (اللحن) (Muhammad KhudriBaik, n.d)

At the beginning, these mistakes in the Arabic language could be controlled but as time passed, they became more widespread and difficult to control. It became worse when the mistakes occurred in the recitation of the Qur'an. Therefore the Muslim scholars initiated an effort to outline a method for reading Arabic and the Qur'an to maintain the Arabic language in its original form. This method is known as *ilm al-nahu*. The knowledge of this method is essential because it can rectify recitation to avoid giving different meanings. Thus, the scholars have studied the Qur'an for guidelines to outline the Arabic grammar. This then made the Qur'an one of the most important sources of *ilm al-Nahu* (Arabic syntax). Besides, the revelation of the Qur'an in Arabic has enriched the vocabulary of Arabic language with new words, for example, *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (charity) and *kafir* (infidel).

Need to mention that the style of the language used in the Qur'an is very beautiful and this has influenced the Arabic literature to the extent that some writers tried to imitate the style of the Qur'an in their work. In the word of Hassan IbnThabit said;

عزيز عليه أن يحيدوا عن الهدى

حريص على ان يستقيموا أو يهتدوا

Here, we can recall that the Qur'an is regarded as the first *Mu'jiza* (miracle) of the prophet and therefore it will last forever, even though the time has changed. The Qur'an remains as a witness of the truthfulness of the prophethood of Muhammad. Those who can understand the Arabic language well, whether they are Muslims or not, will undoubtedly admit that the Qur'an is not a work of any human, because no matter how clever a man is, he is not able to write such a book whose literary value and smooth-flowing language is beyond human capacity.

3. *Islam in Terengganu : A Brief History of Islam in Terengganu*

3.1 Islam in Terengganu

The teaching of Arabic language is closely related to the Islamic religion. This is due to the fact that to understand Islamic teaching requires understanding the Quran that was in Arabic language. The arrival of Islam in Terengganu led to the teaching of Arabic and therefore it cannot be denied that the teaching of Arabic and Islamic education took place in Terengganu owing to the establishment of Islam in the state. The early date of the arrival of Islam in the Malay peninsula is shown by the discovery of the Terengganu Inscription at Kuala Berang, Ulu Terengganu. The date of the Inscription remains questionable. According to D.G.E. Hall it bears a date between 1303 and 1387 AD. Al-'Attas (1970) claims it bears a date of 4th Rejab in the year 702 H, equivalent to February 22nd, 1303 AD. In spite of that, there was no further sign of the influence of Islam from Terengganu, unlike Malacca which received Islam late but enjoyed great influence and played an important role in the activities of propagating Islam in the Malay Peninsula specifically and in the Malay Archipelago generally. S.Q. Fatimi (1963), in discussing the arrival of Islam in the Malay Archipelago, described the Terengganu inscription as; "..... the earliest Malay text in the Arabic script which has been discovered and one of the first contemporary records of the introduction of Islam into any state of the peninsula".

According to Muhammad Salleh (1983), a historian from Terengganu, in his book "Studying The History of Terengganu", the State of Terengganu received Islam a quarter of a century before Malacca did. Meanwhile, H.S. Peterson (1924) in his article, "An Early Inscription from Terengganu", notes that the inscription, which was found in the river Teresat in Kuala Berang, Ulu Terengganu was the oldest discovered written in the Malay Version (*Jawi*) of Arabic. Hence, it can be concluded that the inscription is a record of the arrival of Islam in the Malay peninsular.

According to Al-Ma'udi's report, in 262 H (876 AD), there were about 1200,00 merchants and traders who were Muslims in Khanfu (Canton). During the Huang ch'uo rebellion in southern China during the reign of Emperor Hi-Tsung, of the Tang Dynasty many of these Muslim traders were killed. Consequently some of them managed to escape to Kedah and Palembang. Syed Muhammad al-'Attas believes that this is the earliest presence of Islam in Malaysia (1969).

The Terengganu inscription does not bear on it an obvious date of when exactly it was cut. However, on the inscription, the year 702 H / 1303 AD is indicated (Muhammad SallehAwang, 1983). Muhammad Naguib al-Attas (1970) in his study has proven that the date of the inscription was Friday, 4th of Rejab 702 H which coincided with 2nd of February 1303 AD.

Based on that date, it is most likely that the inscription is the oldest of its type discovered in Malaysia. Therefore, it can be concluded that Islam has existed in Terengganu since the 8th century or 14th century AD which means 100 years before the arrival of Islam in Malacca and hence Terengganu can be considered as the first state in the Malay peninsula which received Islam. D. Jong (1965), one of the researchers of the Terengganu inscription said; "..... so, to discover the first proof of Islam in a very remote place such as Terengganu remained a puzzle, I think the best explanation is that what happened to the Muslim community in Terengganu, for whom the law was made, was equivalent to what happened in Cambodia. They were not the local Muslims but a group of foreign Traders from the Middle East and their Families together with some local friends and relatives who embraced Islam".

Although Terengganu is the first area which received Islam in the Malay Peninsular up to the middle of the 8th century, there were still some people for whom the influence of Hinduism remained. It is recorded by Wang Ta Yuen in 750 H that there were still some people in Terengganu who made sacrifices to statues made from wood (Fatimi, 1963).

4. Arabic language and Islamic Educational System in Terengganu

The arrival of Islam played an important role in initiating and intensifying the development of Arabic language in Terengganu. As far as we know and can trace, the development of Islam at the beginning was through marriage and trade with scholars who were educated in the Middle East. Later, the Arabic language expanded through informal institutions such as the mosque and the teacher's house. After that teaching was done at more formal places such as 'pondok' (literally hut). This term is derived from the Arabic word *funduq*. It is an institution in which the physical aspect has the characteristic of a teacher's house, a space to study either in the house or in the small mosque near the teacher's house and the small houses around them in which the students stayed during the nineteenth century, an unsystematic method of teaching. Since the beginning of the 20th century it was done in a systematic and formal institution (Awang Had, 1977). According to Rauf, M.A., the word 'pondok' brings the meaning of a temporary place for students who come to study religious knowledge and bring all the necessities which are needed for the period of their studies (M Abdul Rauf, 1977). The Arabic and Islamic subjects are taught at the *pondok*. The teachers in these pondok are called *ustadh*. Sometimes, teachers of religious subjects at a higher level are also called *ustadh*. The Malay female teachers of Arabic courses are called *ustadhah*. These are Arabic words for teachers (M Jabbar Beg, 1983). Generally, the development of Arabic education in Terengganu before 1338 H can be visualized in three stages; i. Early stage, ii. Middle stage and iii. Advanced stage.

i. The early stage.

This stage is from the arrival of Islam in Terengganu up to the year 1200 H (18th A.D). Foreign traders played an important role. They came here for the purpose of business but did missionary work on a voluntary basis. The teaching was centred at the palaces, mosques and houses of the teachers. Among other things being taught was *farduAin* which includes the principles of Islam, principles of Iman and the recitation of Qur'an. A well known scholar in the middle of the 17th century was Sheikh Abdul Malik bin Abdullah who was better known as 'TokPulauManis' (Shafie Abu Bakar, n.d). He was an outstanding scholar, the founder of a religious intellectual movement and the founder of the 'pondok' system in Terengganu which was situated in PulauManis.

A.H. Edrus in his book on Malay literature, considered TokPulauManis as equivalent to another well known scholar and author such as Abdul Samad Palembang, while Muhammad Uthman El Muhammadiyah considered TokPulauManis to be on the same level as Sheikh DaudPatani, Sheikh Abdul SamadIbn Muhammad Salih al-Kelantani. They are responsible for the 'pondok' institution use during the 19th century in which the methods of teaching were unsystematic. This 'pondok' institution acted as the forerunner to the present system of higher education which is conducted in a more systematic way. The teachers who taught in these pondoks, called *ustadh* or *Tok guru* (in Malay language), had many students who are now well-known in Malaysia.

ii. The Middle stage

This stage is between 1200-1300 H and gradually developed with contributions from several scholars. The centres of Islamic teaching established by followers of Sheikh Abdul Malik were increasing in number. Meanwhile the response from the local community towards the religious teaching was very encouraging. Among the students of sheikh Abdul Malik were:

1. Abdul Jamal bin Imam Yusof from Kampong Belada, Kuala Terengganu district.
2. Haji Malik bin Isa from Kampong Serengah, Kuala Terengganu district.
3. Haji Muhammad bin Abd. Malik from Kampong Serengah, Kuala Terengganu district.

Abdullah Abdul KadirMunshi, who visited Terengganu between the month of March and April 1254 H (1838 AD), reported that the teaching of recitation of al Qur'an was a tradition in most houses in Terengganu, even though the people did not understand what was being recited. The students in Terengganu at that time use more Arabic texts than Malay versions. Their handwriting was nice because they were taught since the arrival of Islam and their recitation of the Qur'an was well known to be good even to outsiders. At the same time, the scholars and the intellectuals from Patani, Southern Thailand also contributed to the development and dissemination of Islamic da'wah in Terengganu. They included Sheikh Daud bin Abdullah Patani who lived in Pulau Duyong, in the district of Kuala Terengganu. Later, he moved to Mecca and resided there. The local scholars who were his students included Sheikh Muhammad bin Ismail and Daud bin Abdullah who carried out their activities in Kuala Terengganu district. Haji Wan Abdullah bin Muhammad Amin was ewll-known as 'Tok Sheikh Buyong' and his colleague Sheikh Abdul Kadir opened a learning centre at bukitBayas in Kuala Terengganu. The development became more encouraging when the Sultan of Terengganu gave his support (Shafie Abu Bakar, n.d).

The result of the teaching by the scholars and the encouragement from the rulers at that time was that many leaders from among the local people had been produced, among them;

- a. Syed Muhammad bin ZainalAbidin, who was known as ‘Tok Ku Tuan Besar’. Besides being a teacher, he was also a writer.
- b. Syed Abd. Rahman bin Muhammad, who was the son of syed Muhammad bin syedZainalAbidin. He was more well-known by the local people as ‘Tok Ku Paloh’. Besides being a teacher he was also well-known as a sufi. He also became the teacher to the sultan of Terengganu between 1298 – 1338 H (881 – 1919 Ad).

However, the development of Islamic education at this stage was not very different from that of the early stage, and it can be considered as the continuation of the previous stage.

iii. The Advanced stage

At the end of the 14th century, the Arabic education in Terengganu reached a new era with the establishment of *pondok* schools around Kuala Terengganu specifically and in Terengganu state generally, alongside the continuation of the teaching of Arabic in informal centers. The *pondok* education, using texts in Arabic, gained a good momentum and response from the community in the early 20th century. Owing to the awareness of the local scholars, the *pondok* learning centres had been established in the whole state. Among them;

1. PondokHj. Abbas bin Muhammad TokJiring, Kuala Terengganu district.
2. Pondok Durian Guling, Kuala Terengganu district.
3. Pondok Haji Muhammad Ali, Kuala Terengganu district.
4. PondokCekEmbong Padang Midin, Kuala Terengganu district.
5. Pondok Haji Muhammad Endut, Kuala Terengganu district.
6. Pondok Haji ShafieLosong, Kuala Terengganu district.
7. Pondok Haji Abdul Latiff, Jerteh, Kuala Terengganu district.
8. PondokLampau Kampong Raja, Besut district.
9. PondokAlurKeladi, Besut district.
10. Pondok Haji Muhammad Hassan, Besut district.
11. Pondok Haji Bidin, Dungun district
12. PondokTokPakir Abdullah, Kuala Berang, Ulu Terengganu district.

The teachers worked on a voluntary basis without any payment from anybody. The students were not charged. The teaching of Arabic language had become more widespread and the reference works for Islamic knowledge as well as *sarf* (syntax and philology) were mostly emphasized. Al-Qur’an and tajwid were also given due attention because the community at that time gave priority to the ability to recite the contents of the Qur’an. At this stage, besides books in Arabic, texts in Malay were also being used. Most ‘graduands’ from the *pondok* mastered a good standard of Arabic language. Among the books used were;

- a. *Kifayah al awamm*
- b. *Hadith MatanArba^cin*.
- c. *FiqhManiah al-Musdali*.
- d. *Matla^culBadrin*.
- e. *Minhaj^cAbidin*.
- f. *Bidayat al Hidayah*.
- g. *Sairu al Salikin*.
- h. *Miftah al Jinan*.

After the Second World War, the position of *pondok* education was declining owing to competition from the English schools which were founded in 1923 AD and were encouraged by the British advisors and their officers such as Datuk Amar Seri Diraja, Datuk Bentara Luar, Ketua Pegawai Pelajaran and Datuk Andika Raja who felt the need to change Islamic education from the *pondok* system to schools with modern methods of teaching such as Sultan ZainalAbidin Religious School. Since then, new modern schools were established using modern curriculums. However, the coming of the British did not affect the development of this type of modern and traditional religious schools. Support for this kind of educational institution continued because the Malay parents had placed Arabic language and religious education as a high priority. Regardless of whether their children would get a job or continue their study to a higher level, religious knowledge was regarded as of utmost importance in their life (Shafie Abu Bakar, 1983, Azmah, 2008).

5. Conclusion

This paper looks into the development of Arabic language and its teachings in Terengganu, Malaysia, including traditional Islamic teachings amongst Muslims of Terengganu. Religious education within the Malay community during this period refers to Islamic education that put great emphasis on the oneness of Allah (*Tauhid*) and the Prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh) as the messenger of Allah. Religious education was inspired by Islamic scholars and it had a long history as it was first established in Pulau Manis. From thereon, numbers of pondok were built throughout the state and they received warm response from the inhabitants. More importantly, Arabic language considered so important as means to understand and learning religious teachings. Generally, the development of Arabic education in Terengganu before 1338 H can be visualized in three stages namely early stage, middle stage and advanced stage. These stages are significant towards putting Arabic language as important subject to be studied by Muslims in order to understand the Quran and religious teachings as a whole. The coming of the British did not affect the development of this type of schools.¹⁴⁴ Support for this kind of educational institution continued because the Malay parents had placed religious education as a high priority. Regardless of whether their children would get a job or continue their study to a higher level, religious knowledge was regarded as of utmost importance in their life.

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