

History and Formation of Arabic and Islamic Institutions in Terengganu: A Special Reference to Sultan Zainalabid in Religious College (KUSZA)

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Abstract

This paper discusses the history and formation of Islamic institutions in Terengganu Malaysia in particular, Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College or KUSZA. The study was so important since the contribution of early religious schools led to the establishment of a well-known Islamic institution, KUSZA and Unisza in 2007. Using content analysis and review of secondary data, the study found that those early institutions have had a great contribution for the rapid development of Arabic and Islamic education in the State of Terengganu, Malaysia. KUSZA later, transformed into a new public university under the Ministry of Higher Institution known as Universiti Sultan ZainalAbidin or Unisza. Since then, syllabus and courses related to Islamic and Arabic teachings went through several development and evolution for the sake of students' needs and current requirements for the modern standards.

Keywords: Arabic studies, Islamic Education, Kusza

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the history and formation of Islamic institutions in Terengganu Malaysia. The study was so important since the contribution of these early institutions gradually led to the formation of more structured and modern Islamic college known as Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College or Kusza. The college later, transformed into a new public university under the Ministry of Higher Institution known as Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin or Unisza. Since then, syllabus and courses related to Islamic and Arabic teachings went through several development and evolution for the sake of students' needs and current requirements for the modern standards.

2. Historical Background of Islamic Education in Terengganu

The development of Islamic education in Malaysia began since the coming of Islam into this country in the 13th century. This could be traced back through various sources among which was archaeological evidence; the discovery of Batu Bersurat (stone) Terengganu, known as Prasasti of Terengganu at Tersat River, Kuala Berang in 1902/1320H. The writings on the stone indicated the existence of an Islamic government, which implemented Islamic laws in this area (alAttas, 1970). There was also other evidence showing the coming of Islam into this Malay Archipelago, including the conversion of Malacca Ruler into Islam. The conversion of the past rulers to Islam successfully prompted their subjects to embrace the same religion. Various Islamic traditional educations emerged and were conducted in mosques and *pondok* schools to fill the spiritual needs of the local community (AsyrafHjAb Rahman, 2015).

Terengganu considered as one of the earliest state in Malaysia to receive Islam. At the earlier stage, learning activities were centered at teachers or ulama houses and mosques. Such learning system was known as ‘*halaqah*’ or study circles. From time to time, religious education run in the house and mosques reached a climax in terms of an increase in number of students and the problems of study space (AsyrafHjAb Rahman, 2015). Accommodation became another crucial problem for students coming from very distant areas. Then, small huts were built near the mosque and house of *ulama* for temporary living space known as *pondok*, from which the name of the type of school is later derived. *Ulama* known as Tok Guru were responsible to teach students in both mosques and *pondok*. Student who missed the class at the mosques may again repeat his lesson at the *pondok* with the same instructor. This practice is continued until the present days. The involvement of well-known religious figures as instructors also contributed to the increase number of students. Names like Sheikh Abdul Malik and TokkuPaloh were well known for their commitment and contribution to the development of the Islamic education in Terengganu (Shafie Abu Bakar, 1977). Today, government’s supports for religious education in mosques and pondok are immense. Through Directorate of Islamic progress in Malaysia (JAKIM), State Islamic Religious Departments, and Counsel for Islamic and Malay Cultural Affairs (Maidam), various educational programs under the names of Takmir, KAFA, Muallim and Da’i were introduced. The establishment of modern structure of schools or *madrasah* under the supervision of religious department known as JHEAT (Department of religious affairs Terengganu) also made the religious education more relevant with the current needs of Muslim society. Schools like Sultan ZainalAbdin Religious School (SMUASZA) Kuala Terengganu, Ittifaqiyah Religious school, Besut and several others in selected districts successfully provided opportunity for parents to send their children studying in those schools equipped with modern facilities and trained teachers.

3. Formation and Objectives of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College

The foundation of the Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College in Gong Badak, Kuala Terengganu is closely related to the intention of the state government to improve the education system at secondary level in Arabic schools, especially in Sekolah Menengah Agama Atas Sultan Zainal Abidin (SMUASZA). This school was founded in 1933, and considered the oldest and largest formal educational institution in Terengganu before the establishment of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College in 1981. The school combined two streams of study: the national stream and the religious stream (Kafaah Certificate) amongst the students of Arabic at that time. National Stream means the standardized national curriculum throughout the country where students can sit for Lower Certificate of Education (L.C.E.), Malaysian certificate of Education – M. C. E., equivalent to O-Level and Higher Standard Education – H.S.C., equivalent to A – Level.

Since the *Kafaah* Certificate is not recognized by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, the opportunities for further study among the students are limited and the Certificate itself has no economic value, unlike the Malaysian Certificate of Education (M.C.E) and Higher School of Certificate Education (H.S.C.) in national schools. The weakness in *Kafaah* study became an issue which came to the attention of Terengganu state political leaders. The issue was debated in the Terengganu State Assembly, especially in the nineteen-seventies, for instance when Dato’ Abdul Rashid Ngah(State Assembly Member) once voiced concern about the weaknesses in the education system of existing religious school (SMUASZA)saying;

“ The system of teaching and learning in Sekolah Menengah Agama Atas Sultan ZainalAbidin (SMUASZA) consists of two streams of study, one based on national education policy and the second one on religious study which is Kafaah study. It is found that from this type of system the students of Arabic Schools will not be led any where. Secondly it is found that students in these Schools are notproficient or have a low quality (of ability) in Arabic Language”.

(The State Assembly Report on The First Meeting of the third term on 25 and 26 April, 1976)

Realizing these weaknesses, he suggested to the state government especially Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Terengganu’ (JHEAT), Islamic Religious Affairs Department of Terengganu a review to improve the system of study in SMUASZA. Before that, the Sultan of Terengganu mentioned the subject, so that the system of religious study in Arabic schools needed to be revised and improved.

Besides, the Association of Middle Eastern and the Association of Terengganu secondary Religious Teachers sent a memorandum to the state government urging the review of the system of study in the religious schools in the state and proper actions be taken to overcome the weaknesses in the system.

As a result, coupled with the opinions expressed by the political leaders on the weaknesses in the study system of SMUASZA, the state government set up a committee, which is known as The Committee for reviewing the policies and education systems in Islamic Higher, learning Centers in Terengganu.

Based on the report from this committee, a bill was proposed in the State Assembly by Dato' Haji Abu Bakar bin Daud and seconded by YB Muda bin Abdullah to found a religious learning institution to be known as Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College, Enactment Number 3, Terengganu state, year 1981 in which stated that the aims of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College foundation were as follows:

1. To enhance, improve and further develop the teaching of Islam and Other related fields of study.
2. To monitor study at secondary level using the national education system fully.

In order to achieve the above aims, several objectives of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College were promulgated:

“First to implement a more systematic Islamic education system; second to produce a well educated Muslim generation who are capable of propagating Islam with an approach according to al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah; third to produce semi-professionals based on Islamic Principles and fourth to expose the community to practice Islam as a way of life.” (Prospectus of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College, 1986 / 1987).

It is obvious that one of the objectives of the foundation of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College is to produce expert man-power based on Islamic principles. This objective is somewhat different from the aim of the national education system which emphasizes a more liberal-secular education system. Besides, Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College hopes to make Arabic language the medium of instruction. Meanwhile the use of English language is not neglected. (Abdul Rahman Kurais, 1987). Actually, this effort of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College is in line with the steps and intentions of the state government in implementing the five year Islamic Development Plan in the state (Prospectus of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College, 1986 / 1987). On this matter, Tan Sri Dato' Haji wan Mokhtar Ahmad who is the Chief Minister once said:

“The state government hopes that the progress of the Islamic Religion is to be enhanced in line with the coming economic growth and this is to balance the economic development with Religion.” (Utusan Malaysia (Local press), 1981)

As a learning institute which has the status of a statutory body, the expenditure of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College is fully financed by the state government. The construction of its buildings in the current campus started in 1981 and is expected to be completed in the fifth Malaysia Plan. Considering the fact that the state government is facing some financial problems, the physical development of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College had been carried out according to certain priorities; up to 1985 the institution proper buildings as mentioned in the table below:

Physical facilities of KUSZA

Types of buildings	Number
Students' Hostel	4
Lecture Rooms	3
Dining Hall	1
Science Laboratory	1
Main Hall	1
Administration Building	1
Block	
Library	1
Total	12

Source: 10 Year Development Terengganu State 1974 - 1984

Meanwhile the construction of the buildings includes 1 mosque, 3 lecture theatres, 1 speech hall, 1 gymnasium, 1 stadium and 14 staff houses, class c and d which are expected to be completed in 1991.

4. Administration of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College (KUSZA)

As a state corporate body, KUSZA is administered by a 'council' which acts as a college executive body and resolves all KUSZA policies. The Council plays a role as guardian in all affairs and administration of the College.

The Chair Person of every committee is elected by the council or under the instruction of the council. The members of the council consist of Yang Berhormat Dato' Haji Abu Bakarbin Daud (chairman), Yang Berhormat Dato' Setiawangsa Terengganu State Government Secretary) Yang Berhormat Dato' Lela Jasa (state financial officer), Yang Berhormat Dato' Perwira Negara (Religious Affairs Commissioner member), Dato' HjAbd. Rashid Ngah (Terengganu State Exco member), Tan Sri Dato' Dr. Arshad bin Ayub (member), Prof Dato' Dr. Othman bin Ishak (member), Prof. Dato' Dr. Wan Hussein Azmi bin Abd. Kadir (member), Dato' Dr. Abd. Hamid bin Hj. Othman (member), Tuan Hj. ZainalAbidin bin Abd. Kadir – member), and Mr. Nuru Huda @ Ariffin bin Muda(Registrar KUSZA).To ensure that the administrative management is efficient and effective, the council is assisted by (*An Introduction to Sultan Zainal Abidin*, March 5, 1984):

- i. Academic committee
- ii. Financial and Development Committee
- iii. Personnel and Service

The responsibility of the academic Committee is to make suggestions and advise the council on the matters relating to the structure of the academic courses, academic fields, staff training, suggestions for introducing or canceling any course, conferring diplomas and certificates, awards and scholarships to the students. The financial and development committee is responsible for the financial and development affairs of the college. Meanwhile the posting committee is responsible for the intake and appointment of staff, promotion, service regulation, etiquette and other related matters. The structure of the administrative and academic executive post of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College is known as that of 'Director'. To assist the director, three units of administration have been established;

- i. Research and academic Department
- ii. Administration and Financial Department
- iii. Student Affairs

The research and academic department is headed by a deputy Director, as is also student affairs, while the administrative and financial department is headed by a registrar (*An Introduction of Sultan ZainalAbidin Religious College*, 1983). The Director is responsible for everything that is related to the college. Nevertheless, his duty is subject to the allocated enactment, including the instructions from the chief Minister given through the council.

5. Conclusion

From the discussions above, it is seen that the development of Arabic Language and Islamic education in particular, was in line with the spread of Islam in Malay Archipelago and Terengganu was the first region to receive it. As far as we are concerned, the acceptance of Islam in Malaysia was obviously related to Muslim traders who were famous for their commercial activities, especially the Arabs who used Malaysia as a stopover on their way to China. Thus, the Arabs had successfully brought influence over the language in Malaysia. The Jawi script, for instance, which is used by the Malays actually comprises Arabic letters. The wide acceptance of Arabic influence by the Malays, coupled with their concern on Islamic teachings brought to the establishment of "Pondok" or traditional Islamic school which provided unsystematic methods of teaching Arabic language and religious education.

The establishment of Sekolah Menengah Agama Atas Sultan ZainalAbidin providing more formal education and systematic teaching methods, was a process of continuing the Arabic language and Islamic education in Terengganu. This gradually brought to the establishment of Sultan Zainal Abidin Religious College to provide a more modern system of Islamic education system aimed at producing Muslim professionals and semi-professionals who may help in propagating Islamic doctrines effectively based on al-Qur'an and Al-Sunnah. To achieve this, Sultan ZainalAbidin Religious College has been offering a variety of courses integrating the liberal and religious education such as Diploma in school of Management and Diploma in School of Islamic Studies.

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