Survival of Islamic education in a secular state: the madrasah in Singapore

Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor
Department of Islamic History and Civilization, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Nurhanisah Senin and Khadijah Mohd Khambali Hambali
Department of Akidah and Islamic Thought, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and

Asyiqin Ab Halim
Department of Islamic History and Civilization, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract

Purpose – This paper attempts to explore the transformations taken by madrasah, especially in preparing students both in religious and academic field. Besides, this paper aims to demonstrate measures taken by madrasah in instilling the religious and racial cohesion far from conservatism and extremism that has always been labeled to their students.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is qualitative in nature. It is a library research and uses historical method in collecting the data. Some relevant literatures and data have been analyzed and presented in this paper.

Findings – Madrasah in Singapore has always been perceived in a negative nuance because of its ineffectiveness and irrelevant roles in economic building. The conservative and traditional madrasah education system is also seen to impede Singapore’s religious and racial cohesion. The struggle increases prior to the implementation of compulsory education (CE) policy in 2001, where madrasah was almost forced to closure.

Originality/value – Islamic education in Singapore can be observed evolving through three phases: colonial period where it adopted the secular system, post-colonial with the traditional system and, currently, the transformation period with its integrated syllabus.

Keywords Singapore, Islamic education, Islamic history, Madrasah, Secular state

Introduction

Islamic education has always been misinterpreted as conservative, orthodox and incomprehensive. Islamic institutions around the world, be it pesantren, ma’had, daarul uloom, kuttab and madrasah in Indonesia, Egypt, Pakistan, Nigeria, Malaysia (Hashim et al., 2011; Nor and Malim, 2014), Britain and others, are constantly being seen as against secularism and those that failed to respond to modernism. Muslim schools in secular...
societies or Muslim minority face more challenges on this matter (Shah, 2012). In some Muslim countries, government bureaucrats and officials were usually modern educated elites who had grown comfortable and affluent with modern material culture. Most educational policies were based on perpetuating the secularized systems of which they themselves were a product so as to maintain their economic and socio-political advantage (Cook, 1999).

According to Talbani (1996), traditionalism stands in opposition to modernization, which carries the value of secularism and consumerism. As Muslim encounters modernization through colonization, traditionalism tends to oppose the secularism, especially in the educational system. Through the secularization, traditional way of learning seems to be of irrelevance, and the secular education supersedes the religious education in jobs qualification. Therefore, the sustainability of madrasah in facing modernization is certainly in the intense position (Lubis, 2012).

Reformation and transformation in educational systems happen occasionally when the relevance of the Islamic institution is decreasing and fails to meet the demands of national development. According to Ibrahim (2006), madrasah in Asian countries differs in their curriculum structure and opinion on reformation. The case of madrasah in India illustrates that the medieval curriculum used in the madrasah is no longer relevant to the modern needs and requires serious revision. The Indonesian case speaks of the need to streamline the madrasah curriculum with national and modern aspirations. In Pakistan, the madrasah reform is far more complex, being embroiled with politics, alongside the challenge of the conservative bloc amongst the ulama’, whereas in Thailand, transformation of Islamic education focuses on the complexity of the resurgence conflict between the traditionalists and reformists. However, madrasah in Thailand install ample number of academic subjects into its curriculum to prepare the students for the modern demands (Liow, 2009). In Malaysia, as an Islamic country, religious schools are supported financially by the government. The national schools are even supplemented with religious subjects for Muslim students, as being quoted by former Prime Minister of Malaysia:

[…] to develop the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious based on firm belief in God (Ahmad, 1998).

In the case of Singapore, Madrasah education has always been the focal point of national development. Common prejudice toward madrasah usually pertains to the ineffectiveness of its educational system in contributing to the nation building of Singapore. It is exaggerated by the phenomena of Islamophobia after the tragedy of 9/11. Madrasah in Singapore was not exempted from being dichotomized as a center which advocates terrorism similar to madrasah in Pakistan. The heated debates continued further when the government initiated on the compulsory education (CE) which is looked upon as a way of closing the madrasah.

Aljunied and Hussin (2006) argued that the current madrasah has estranged from the ideal past where Madrasah Iqbal was considered the ideal madrasah that incorporated both academic and religious knowledge. However, that school was operated only for a year. Two issues are questioned here: how is it possible to measure the ideality of Madrasah Iqbal when it has not yet produced its graduates and how could it be estranged from the ideal past when the current madrasah has incorporated non-religious subjects in their curriculum? In responding toward the integrated curriculum, Tan (2009) discussed the new syllabus produced by Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) that instills in the primary.

Students the value of multiculturalism. Tan also quoted its syllabus as “inclusive and practices pluralism” which expressed the transformation being made to adapt to the aims of
national education. However, Mokhtar (2010) still argued that it is the lack of support to
madrasah that decreases the effectiveness and relevance of madrasah.

From the literature above, there are mainly two identified issues that madrasah is forced
to address: knowledge-based economy (KBE) and multiculturalism. Madrasah’s syllabus
has been targeted to be the main factor of its unsustainability toward Singapore economic
and social development. Hence, this paper attempts to explore measures taken by madrasah
in Singapore. It can be observed through their actions in revamping the curriculum and
syllabus structure, training teachers and creating a conducive and sufficient environment as
well as providing ample resources for its students. All this is directed to shift the paradigm
of the conservative one-dimensional role of producing ulama’ to an Islamic institute of
education which integrates both religious and academic curricula.

Islamic education in Singapore: issues and challenges
In Singapore, formal education consists of preschool and primary, secondary and tertiary
levels that include pre-university, diploma and university. These schools are fully aided by
the Government under the Singapore Ministry of Education. There is also government-
assisted private education with special assistance plan (SAP) which mainly provides
funding to Chinese-medium language schools. Apart from that, other private institutions
stand on its own without state funding but only under Government’s supervisory including
madrasah. Every year, there are approximately 40,000 students enrolling in Primary 1
government schools, whereas only 400 students are allowed to enter the madrasah annually
(Education Statistic Digest: Ministry of Education, 2013).

Meanwhile, Islamic education in Singapore can be divided into two types: formal and
informal. Informal Islamic education is normally attended through daily lessons
and speeches from Muslim scholars at mosques or individual abodes. This includes forums
and talks which do not require compulsory attendance and registration (Tan, 2014). On the
other hand, formal Islamic education such as Islamic learning centers and madrasah provide
certificates and formal courses for Singaporean Muslim which can be categorized into two:
full-time and part-time Islamic education. Part-time Islamic education is held mainly at
mosques or private institutions and are conducted on weekends for Muslim children who are
enrolled in government school on weekdays. Although Muslims in Singapore only stand
among the minority of 14 per cent from the total population, the awareness on the
importance of religious education should never be undermined. This can be observed
through their own part-time syllabus that was developed by Singapore Muslim Religious
Council (MUIS) named al.I.V.E administered in English medium to cater to the needs of
Muslim students in the government schools. This program consists of four levels involving
toddlers to adults. Besides, there are also formal learning centers, such as Andalus, Cordova,
Zuhri, Jamiyah with Malay, as the medium offers part-time diploma certificate in Islamic
studies.

On the other hand, full-time Islamic education is the madrasah system, which as of now
consists of four main institutions, namely, Alsagoff, Al-Maarif, Wak Tanjong and JMS (Joint
Madrasah System), which is a collaboration of three original madrasahs (Aljunied, Al-Irsyad
and Al-Arabiah). These madrasahs provide three levels of education, namely, primary,
secondary and pre-university levels, supplemented with both Islamic and academic subjects
equivalently. Madrasah students are required to sit for state examination as well, similar to
their peers in government schools such as Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and
General Certificate Examination (GCE “O”) Level under Cambridge University.

Prior to the CE in 2000, every child aged seven was required to be enrolled in government
primary schools. The CE implementation focuses on two main objectives. First, to develop a
common core of knowledge for each child in providing a strong foundation for further education and preparing them for KBE, and second, to provide a common educational environment in building national identity (Report of the Committee on Compulsory Education in Singapore, 2000).

Exemptions are only given to special-need children, home-schooled and those who attend religious schools, including madrasah. They are however required to achieve the benchmark given in PSLEs, which every Primary 6 students are supposed to take. As a result, the madrasah system came under greater public scrutiny. In the National Day Rally of 1999, the former Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong highlighted the high dropout rates in madrasah, which were 71 per cent in 1996, 60 per cent in 1997 and 65 per cent in 1998 (Berita Harian Aug 24, 1999). This was followed by Mentor Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s remarks that “full-time madrasah education will pose serious problems for these students and for Singapore” (Straits Times, May 11, 1999).

Expectedly, the remarks aroused the Muslim community as the Government imposed requirements for the madrasah to meet the average aggregate score for Malays in the six lowest-performing national schools with the benchmark of 175 if they are to be exempted from CE. Failure to do so would lead to the closing of the school as well as being barred from new intakes, which consequently leads to having only part-time madrasah (Straits Times, October 10, 2010). Despite all that, the number of students applying for madrasah doubled.

Because of the globalization and the rapid growth of information technology, education has now been seen to be driven by the concept of KBE. KBE and globalized market prioritize education that plays the role in steering the economy, and capitalism is tied into the results of students attaining skills to be used for that market. Singapore possesses a strategic location for export and import, but the country certainly lacks of natural resources. This definitely becomes the main concern in understanding issues related to education in Singapore. Thus, greater emphasis is placed on citizens as natural resources, and adopting a practical economic model such as KBE is necessary in the development of national economic (Gopinathan and Tan, 2000).

This has put the sciences of technology and medicines in the frontrunner of other knowledge which includes religious knowledge. The debate on madrasah’s capability of contributing to the economic advancement has extended, as the major components of its curricula are focusing on Islamic religious teachings. In 2011, Mentor Minister Lee Kuan Yew posted quite offensive remarks toward Malays and Muslim that they would be better integrated in secular Singapore if they could “be less strict on Islamic observances”. He reiterated his worry in an interview with Readers’ Digest:

But for the resurgence of Islam, it would have been a success […] Some 10 per cent of population are in specially run religious schools where you learn Arabic and the Quran and Malay, and a little bit of Science and Mathematics and English, but in a fast changing society like Singapore, how are you going to make a living later on? That worries me.

The Government’s biggest concern was for those who fail to perform in madrasah could not continue their education in technical institutions, as they did not have the proper prerequisites for entrance. This is because of the syllabus which only focuses on Islamic subjects instead of academic subjects. As a result, the concern becomes more serious because a madrasah student may not be fully equipped for Singapore economic development that is founded upon the KBE model. The problem lies in the relevance of education to the Government, as Lekan (2010) claims that there are two aspects that must be fulfilled before claiming an institution to be a provider of formal education. Evaluating the success of an institution must be based on the market-driven ideology which will
reconstruct the syllabus of an institution with marketable knowledge such as literary skills, life skills and social skill (Lekan, 2010). The two aspects are gaining employment and the prospect of furthering education in higher institutions of choice. Madrasah as a religious institute denies these two aspects. Consequently, the idea of having only part-time madrasah or weekend madrasah were brought up as alternatives to full-time ones (Tan, 2010).

Madrasah was also given the choice to join the national school system much like the Christian missionary schools did, as they could then receive funding from the Government (Hashim and Eng, 2006). But this idea was rejected by Pergas as “it would lead to the closure of madrasah’s primary classes even if not intended” (Mutalib, 2006). Looking at the financial aspect it is such a relief as one of madrasah biggest turndown is the financial instability even up until now. However, by accepting the offer means that the madrasah would need to negotiate its religious curriculum with the national education system, and some religious issues might have to be compromised such as wearing Islamic attire and carrying out religious services. As a result, all madrasahs rejected the proposal and chose to survive on its own.

The development of madrasah in Singapore

Madrasah (plural madaris) literally connotes the meaning of school and is derived from the Arabic word darasa (to study). The term madrasah was first recognized in 1067 during the Sultanate of Saljuk, Nizam al-Mulk, who established the first madrasah in Baghdad. Madrasah Nizamiyyah, named after the founder, had the essentials of a superior institute of higher learning including libraries, lecture halls and lodging facilities for teachers and students. The main subjects in the curriculum were Tafsir (Quranic exegesis), Tauhid (Islamic theology), Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), Nahu (Arabic grammar) and Hadith (Prophet’s traditions) (Mokhtar, 2010). The word was later widely used in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Thailand to refer to Islamic religious school.

To determine the roles of madrasah in the past, it is important to discuss on the evolution that took place within the Islamic education in Singapore and its role in accommodating the needs of the Muslim society. In the late nineteenth centuries, Islamic education was part of Malay vernacular school where Quranic lessons were conducted in the afternoon session after school hours (Aljunied and Hussin, 2006). This can be seen as a result of secular education emerging in the Straits Settlement and the fear of “Christianization”. Islamic education back then only focused on Quranic recitation without any other subjects. The term “madrasah” only came into use in Singapore in the early twentieth century. Kampung Glam and Rochor areas were where the early centers of Islamic education were located. The first madrasah was Madrasah as-Sibyan, established in 1905 and located close to the Sultan mosque. The history of this school can be traced back to 1901 to an Indonesian religious teacher who taught in his home at Bussorah Street. At this early stage, the main objectives of an Islamic education were to inculcate values that would produce good Muslims and to train future clerics, and the main subject taught was the Quranic recitation and Fardhu ‘Ain (fundamentals of Islam) at mosques or surau (mini-mosque). Then Madrasah al-Iqbal was opened in 1908 by Sheikh Ahmad al-Hadi who was considered as a reformist at that time; this brought in a more integrated system of academic and Islamic religious subjects into the curriculum (Aljunied and Hussin, 2006). It was closed after 18 months of opening because of the expensive fees and so-called “Westernized curriculum”, which was not favorably accepted by the Malay society (Fui, 2006).

Madrasah education again returned to the traditional Islamic education which focused on the religious knowledge solely. Four years later, in 1912, Madrasah Alsagoff al-Arabiah was officially opened by Syed Mohamed bin Ahmad bin Abdul Rahman Alsagoff followed by
Madrasah Aljunied in 1927 by Syed Omar Aljunied. Both madrasahs were built on *wakaf* land (Muslim endowment) by the Arab merchants. Four madrasahs were then opened to fulfill the increasing demand from the Muslim society: Madrasah Al-Maarif in 1939, Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Al-Irsyad in 1947 and Madrasah Wak Tanjong in 1955.

In 1930s, during the British colonial, madrasahs were left on their own. Later in late 1950s, the number of madrasahs increased rapidly and further flourished during the period merger between Singapore and Malaysia (1963-1965), with the highest number reaching 28 religious schools in 1962 (Aljunied and Hussin, 2006). Madrasah was seen then as the priority option for Malay Muslim children’s education for parents who were opposed to sending their children to British schools. The role of madrasah definitely changed from a mere preparation for the hereafter to a defense of faith in the post-colonial period. This is because of colonialism and the clash of traditionalism versus modernism (Talbani, 1996). The stigma of defending the faith against colonization had led the madrasah to resist transformational changes in its educational system.

In 1966, the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) was passed and this made provision for the setting up of the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapure (MUIS) or the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, which plays a role in standardizing madrasah syllabus and curriculum. The curriculum remained focused to religious education until 1966 when Madrasah Aljunied started incorporating academic subjects into its curriculum. However, Madrasah Al-Maarif was the first madrasah to prepare students for the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE O) and General Certificate of Education Advance Level (GCE A) examinations as private candidates in 1971 (Hashim and Eng, 2006).

**The response of madrasah**

Through the historical development of madrasah, there were several changes in its curricular system according to the needs and roles of the period. From the traditional to the modern period, the incorporation of academic subjects was considered as the main thrust of transformation. Therefore, to what extent has the incorporation of knowledge contributed in facing the challenges? The development of madrasah could not be seen going at par with the national school educations only. Nonetheless, it has to go beyond that. Madrasah should not be seen as embracing modernization and secularism but as serving holistic education for Muslims and non-Muslims.

The call to “Islamize” the education system has been hurdled by secular ideology which faces the madrasah in its transformation of curriculum. Even the methodologies that Islamic education apply such as memorization has been undermined by the modern view, which apprehend it as less effective compared to critical and creative learning (Ibrahim, 2006). Moreover, the secular system that precedes Islamic law makes the process of Islamization seem more complicated, especially with the British colonial influence (Mutalib, 2006).

Besides fear of “Christianization”, the development of secular education in the Straits Settlement in the nineteenth century further stimulated the enhancement of religious education among the Malays. As we have seen from the earlier sections, the education of the Malays was centered upon the Quran and basic rites of Islam, prior to the advent of colonialism in Malaya. (Aljunied and Hussin, 2006). Despite the struggles of KBE demands and secular background that do not favor religious education as part of the main syllabus, madrasah is observed to make major adjustments to their curriculum segregations.

In relation to that, madrasah has incorporated both religious and academic subjects; however, the weightage given to these subjects vary, depending on the administrator of each madrasah. Since the CE was implemented, most madrasahs have increased the percentage...
of academic subjects to meet the benchmark given by the Government (Hashim and Eng, 2006; Ling and Fui, 2007).

Below are the examples of the subjects offered in madrasah (Tables I and II).

In terms of its subjects’ segregation, to delineate dualism in its role as a madrasah, they had decided to change the components of its subjects to three categories: languages, acquired knowledge and revealed knowledge. Dualism, according to the principal of Madrasah Alsagoff, will lead to the separation of knowledge to academic and religious knowledge, whereas knowledge cannot be separated as it comes from God. It had also segregated its subjects into modular system as to increase the focus on the academic subjects, especially for students who are going to sit for national exams, and reduce the chances of overlapping subjects (Table III).

Madrasahs were also being stereotyped with the inability to produce non-religious professionals. According to Abdul Halim, principal of Madrasah Wak Tanjong, only 10 per cent of its alumni further studied in Islamic universities for each cohort and the remaining chose to further their studies in academic fields (Berita Harian, December 12, 2010). It demonstrates that madrasah’s curriculum has been successful in preparing its students in entering the modern world without limiting its prospect into Islamic field per se. To embrace a balanced segregation of exposure to academic and religious subjects, madrasah had also reconstructed its sessions and changed its former two sessions into a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>O-Level subjects</th>
<th>Ukhrawi/Syahadah subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>English language</td>
<td>Tauhid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Malay language</td>
<td>Fiqh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Arabic language</td>
<td>Tafsir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Hadith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Add mathematics</td>
<td>Islamic history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Humanities (geography/history)</td>
<td>Al-Quran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Pure science</td>
<td>Arabic language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Combined science</td>
<td>Malay language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Islamic religious knowledge</td>
<td>English language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.
List of subjects in Madrasah al-Maarif

Note: This is based on secondary level subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>General education</th>
<th>Islamic studies</th>
<th>Arabic studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Quranic Studies</td>
<td>Insya’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Tafsir</td>
<td>Nahu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Ulum al-Quran</td>
<td>Saraf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>Tauhid</td>
<td>Al-Adab al-Arabi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>Mantiq</td>
<td>Al-Balaghaň</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Fiqh</td>
<td>Al-Tarikh al-Islami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Usul al-Fiqh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Islamic religious knowledge</td>
<td>Qawaid Fiqhiyyah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hadith/Mustolah Hadith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Faraid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Globalization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fiqh al-Siyar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II.
List of subjects in Madrasah Aljunied
single session, compressing religious subjects into a modular system. This measure in one aspect can be seen as diluting religious subjects. However, it is actually to reduce the overlapping areas of subjects that had been taught repeatedly in the former system. By changing it into a modular system and following it with interactive learning, it is hoped to be more efficient and effective.

In providing sufficient education resources, each madrasah has taken its own measures in upgrading their facilities and enhancing the learning tools to ensure that madrasah students experience the same education environment as their peers in national schools. As a good example, responding to a rapid technology usage in education, Madrasah Alsagoff has started using iPad as part of the learning tools accommodated for each student. Each class is also installed with a complete projector to maximize the interactive methods of learning. The pedagogical approach had also undergone reformation; previously the madrasah used to practice a one-way teaching style such as lectures. With the use of technology or iPad for instance, Madrasah Alsagoff has started to instill a problem-based learning even in their revealed knowledge subjects, where the students are given current Islamic issues during lessons and will be asked to present the solution. From there, the usage of iPad is for them to do research on the spot and they will be guided by the teachers on distinguishing on the right data available on the internet. Currently, Madrasah Alsagoff has also started using the virtual books in some of the revealed knowledge subjects. Besides, the madrasah’s registration for the new intakes has also been changed to an e-registration, and recently they have changed their manual attendance to an electronic attendance reader, where the students need to tap their student card for attendance taking (Interview with principal of Madrasah Alsagoff; February 24, 2012).

In another examples, Madrasah Al-Irsyad had started using the interactive software application for mathematics named “Anaritius: Maths Mercenery” for Primary 1 to Primary 3 students which served up to 20 kiosks and each costs about $3000 (Berita Harian, 2011a). As for Madrasah Aljunied, it provides a science lab which caters to not only its own student but also other madrasah students such as students from Madrasah al-Maarif, as its science lab is not well-equipped.

Through a holistic approach in transforming the curricula and reinforcing the academic subjects vis-à-vis the religious subjects, madrasah has taken big steps in responding to the knowledge-based economy concept of education. By delineating the dualism in Islamic education, which separated the revealed knowledge with the non-revealed knowledge, it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Revealed knowledge</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>Acquired knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Al-Quran</td>
<td>Arabic language</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Fiqh</td>
<td>Nahu</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Tauhid</td>
<td>Saraf</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Tafsir</td>
<td>Adab</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Islamic History</td>
<td>Balagah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Hadith</td>
<td>English language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Mustalah Hadith</td>
<td>Malay language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Ulum al-Quran</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Akhlak</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Mantiq</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Usul al-Fiqh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

pulled madrasah backward in this era of modernization. The effort of combining the modern and traditional education has definitely helped in producing modern Muslim scholars who understand Islam in a contextual situation. Moreover, with the implementations of technological advances in its learning curriculum and administration purpose, madrasah, certainly, can be considered to be on track with the rapid technological development of Singapore.

As a globalized and modern country, Singapore is constituted of multiple races comprising Chinese, Malay, Indian, Caucasian and others, and it has also adhered to various religious beliefs such as Buddhism, Taoism, Christian, Islam, Hindu and Judaism. Besides, the parallelization of learning Islamic studies to preaching jihad, which is infamously known as terrorism, had dichotomized the label of madrasah students. To discard the paradox, Panjwani (2005) suggested that the religious education should include the shared common values which must be instilled in the syllabus as to produce a harmonious understanding of the others. This common values play as the fostering factors of the social cohesion, which Islamic education system is currently lacking because of the monolithic approach of the system.

In 2003, because of the September 11 attacks, the Singapore Government had developed the Declaration of Religious Harmony in which it fosters the value of respect and tolerance. The declaration was certainly developed to maintain the harmonious co-existence amidst the secular state of Singapore. It entails with a response from the Singapore Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) in promoting the slogan of “A Muslim Community of Excellence”. The project basically outlines ten desired attributes of a Singaporean Muslim who is religiously profound and socially broadminded. It requires an individual to be not only a good adherent of Islam but also a progressive Muslim amidst the modernization. It also mentions on being inclusive and well-adjusted member of a multi-religious society (MUIS).

As for JMS madrasah, their curriculum was based on the Curriculum Development Project (CDP), which was formulated in 1998. Currently, it is adopted by Madrasah al-Isryad at six levels, Primary 1-6. It is built as to contextualize the Islamic education to the local needs, especially in a pluralistic community such as Singapore. The curriculum uses English as the medium of language and thematic style in integrating its religious knowledge. Basically, a typical madrasahs would have six subjects, but a madrasah under the JMS program will have three subjects with an additional subject of Islamic Social Studies, which other madrasah does not offer. The curriculum was developed purposely to prepare the students in the context of multiculturalism in Singapore as an addition to its main role of producing religious leaders in a competitive modern environment. Other madrasahs have also responded to the multicultural demands of madrasah students, when Madrasah Wak Tanjong held an annual exchange program with a Buddhist school in Japan. Madrasah al-Isryad has also moved forward to enhance the value of integration with other societies through building links with a neighboring Methodist school (Ling and Fui, 2007).

In promoting racial harmony and peaceful co-existence, undoubtedly madrasah has put forth several efforts in showing awareness of other religious beliefs and creating ties with them. It, however, can be profoundly instilled through developing a comparative religious subject as part of the curriculum. The science of comparative religious study is definitely not new in the Islamic field of knowledge, as it has been developed in the tenth century by scholars such as al-Biruni, one of the founding fathers of religionswissenschaft (Kamaruzaman, 2003). Through a comprehensive curriculum and constant interfaith dialogue between religions, the issues of multiculturalism and religious plurality can be solved.
The practice of multiculturalism was definitely questionable as madrasah is only limited to Muslim students and majority of Muslims are Malays. Therefore, madrasah students obviously are not exposed to different culture and races within their space of learning. Occasional learning and visiting holy places of other religions do not seem to be adequate. Although it can be argued that their accommodations are surrounded with different races and cultures could foster the value of understanding and tolerance, nonetheless through mingling with their peers of different races in school is found to be much more effective. The national schools’ concept of a mixed race and religion certainly leaves madrasah behind in addressing the multiculturalism. Furthermore, limited interactions with other races from the primary level to the secondary level will cause culture shock to the students once they enter the tertiary level, where they will have to mix with their peers from different races and religions.

Hence, to expose the students to different culture and races, madrasahs need to step up in organizing or participating in cross-culture programs. This could be in the form of exchange-study visit at local or international level, such as frequent visit to other religious institutions to appreciate religious pluralism and some practical project with non-Muslim students from other schools that can help them to understand others better.

Conclusion
The historical development of madrasah demonstrates the resurgence of a modern approach of Islamic education in the twenty-first century. As compared to the traditional way during the post-colonial era, madrasah has indeed embarked upon the reformed platform because of the increasing percentage of student dropouts. Despite the CE implementation, which was perceived negatively, it in fact shed some lights for madrasah in gearing up its educational standard. Madrasah education has taken steps ahead in refurbishing its curriculum; mainly to fulfill its role as an Islamic institution in a modern secular state. The previous imbalanced curriculum, which has been developed into an integrated syllabus, aims to address the government’s call for KBE and multiculturalism in Singapore. However, current madrasah should not be too complacent with what they have achieved. Along with a constant re-evaluation, contextualization and assessment of its system, it is vital to stay relevant and concurrent with the rapid changes in Singapore. It may be suggested that madrasah looks into planning of becoming an institution which provides education to non-Muslims and non-Malays students too. The ideal madrasah would definitely take years of planning, putting into major consideration especially the funds, locations, supports from the governments and upgrading of schools’ infrastructure. On a final note, madrasah used to be a glorious institution as it fulfilled the need of the Muslim society during the post-colonial period. Perhaps it could regain much more glory when it can serve both, the need of the Muslim society and nation building in a holistic education through embracing the fundamental Islam and modernization hand in hand.

References


Website Madrasah al-Maarif (2016), available at: www.madrasahalmaarifsg.net/curriculum
Further reading

Al-Attas, S.M.N. (1979), *Aims and Objectives of Islamic Education*, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah.


Strait Times (2010), 26 November 2010.


Corresponding author

Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor can be contacted at: m_roslan@um.edu.my