TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC SCHOOLS IN KELANTAN

by

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Islam in Kelantan

Within the context of Malaya and perhaps Southeast Asia generally Kelantan is characterized by a strong popular commitment to Islam. It is true that Islam in the area has its particularities. There is considerable individual variation in piety and religious interest and the traditional syncretist character of many popular attitudes and beliefs is notable, and beyond this various cultural performances and ritual forms still flourish which are questionable from the perspective of Islamic orthodoxy. But overall this the strength of Islam is marked. The Kelantenese themselves believe this to be the case and such beliefs form an important part of the ethnic image they have of themselves. They note the strength of Islam in the area is shown in the number of Koran reading champions from the state, the reputation of its various types of religious schools, and in the modern period by the success of the Pan Malayan Islamic Party. The latter is particularly notable. This party was founded elsewhere and its successes have extended at times beyond the state. However it held control of the state government from 1959 until 1974 and the members of parliament returned by the Kelantan electorate have been the basis of the power the party has wielded in national politics.

The strength of Islam in Kelantan, along with its particularities, has a number of bases, but among these the traditional religious schools characteristic of the region have been of distinct significance. In Indonesia such schools have received considerable attention and the role that they have played in the growth of Islam in the region and in related social and political developments has been stressed.

the course of research conducted in 1966–67 and in 1971 I gathered information on about a dozen such traditional Islamic schools, including the several largest and most important in the state. Most of those I came to know best were located in the Pasir Mas district where my activities were concentrated and several formed important features of the particular communities in which I resided and studied.3

Kelantan is located in the far northeastern sector of the Malay Peninsula between the neighbouring Malaysian state of Trengganu to the south and the southern Malay provinces of Thailand to the north. The heart of the state consists of a broad open rice plain formed along the last fifty or so miles of the Kelantan River and along the open sea coast. The rural Malay population of the plain is large and relatively dense and appears to have been so throughout much of the 19th Century, if not longer. Unlike much of the western and southern regions of the Peninsula where populations derive in large part from migrations from various regions of Sumatra and other areas of Indonesia, Kelantan and the other areas of the northeast have not been populated with Malays from overseas. Kelantenes thus speak a Malay dialect which differs considerably from the national standard; because of this and because of their adherence to certain Malay cultural traditions they are regarded by themselves and by other Malays as somewhat ethnically unique.

The major outside historical influences and population movements into the Kelantan plain seem clearly to have come from or by way of the immediate north, the Patani area of present day South Thailand. Patani is commonly held to have been an early center of the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia. During the early seventeenth century in particular the port of Patani flourished as one of the major centers of long distance trade and while it declined after this trade as the lines of international commerce shifted and as the southward press of the Thai state became more earnest, the region never totally lost its importance in the realm of Southeast Asian Islam.4 During the nineteenth and twentieth century the Thai conquest and increasingly severe subjugation of Patani caused a series of movements of Malays out of what became known as the “Thai Islam” provinces of South Thailand into the northern states of Malaya, particularly Kelantan. Ties between Kelantan and Patani — political and economic as well as religious — continue to be important. Important religious leaders in Kelantan not uncommonly trace their families back to Patani and it is thus not unlikely that traditional religious schools derive at some point from this area as well.

Pondoks and Pondok Study: General Features

Traditional Islamic schools in Kelantan take the pesantran or pondok form typical of Acheh and Java, that is of religious boarding schools at which male students reside and study under the direction of a teacher known in this case as a guru or, more

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appropriately, a *tuan guru*. The schools themselves are also known as *pondok* though not as *pesantren*.

*Pondoks* in Kelantan are concentrated in the plain, though one of the largest and most important is located in the foothills of the interior (*ulu*), and in particular in the sector of the plain nearest the Thai border. *Pondoks* today range in size from those which have only a few regular students and a single teacher and take up only an acre or so of land to the several largest in the state which have upwards of five hundred students, a number of full and part time teachers and occupy from five to eight acres of land. The size of some *pondoks* is swelled by considerable numbers of non-students. The religious council of the state has estimated the number of *pondok* schools in the state to be fifty five but the total number of schools so identified in local usage is probably greater for local people tend to continue to refer to neighbourhoods or quarters as *pondoks* after the schools themselves have ceased to exist or to be active.

The physical complex of a *pondok* consists of the students’ quarters, buildings where teaching, public prayer and other religious activities take place, and the houses of the *guru* and other teachers and of the other families and single individuals living in the *pondok*. Student quarters consist of what are called *pondoks* — from which the name of the type of school is derived — small one room huts which are typically shared by two or three students. Student *pondoks* are built of wood and bamboo with palm thatch roofs and like most other buildings are set several feet off the ground. They are often joined together in long house fashion with a covered porch in front but they are also built singly or in pairs. Teaching, praying and other communal activity takes place in either a mosque or more often in school buildings (*madrasah*). If the *pondok* is small it will have only one such *madrasah*; the largest, on the other hand, have both a mosque and a number of other *madrasahs* as well. These buildings are traditionally constructed of wood with tile roofs built in several tiers, and with walls which extend only a part of the way to the roof. They contain no tables, chairs, or desks for both students and teacher sit on the floor. There is typically a partition or at least a large screen which creates a section where women can pray or listen to Koran reading. Beside or behind these central buildings is the house or houses of the *guru* and his family — or families if he has more than one wife. Located elsewhere are the houses of other teachers and residents of the *pondok*. *Pondoks* appear to begin as roomy areas which then fill up with buildings and houses until in some cases there is space left only in front of the main buildings and not always there; some of the large older *pondoks* have 30 to 40 houses jammed into a fairly small area and accessible only by narrow walkways.

*Pondoks* come into being in several ways and if successful, develop into large and complex communities containing a number of types of people. A man who has studied and perhaps taught elsewhere and who has aspirations may return to his own village and build a *madrasah* with the help of other villagers on his own land or on land provided by his father or someone else in the community; or such a man may marry into a village and be assisted by his father-in-law, who may be a pious wealthy man, and other villagers to establish a school. Similarly, such a man may marry the daughter of the *guru* and teach in his *pondok* and when the *guru* dies, develop his own
school. Once opened on the other hand, the school may grow if a man has or gains a reputation and adolescent boys and young men are attracted to his school as students. Additional property may be acquired as gifts given by the parents of students or by local people or others whom the teacher has assisted, and additional teachers who may be advanced students begin to assist with the teaching. Finally, others who are not students or who are no longer students may come to stay or remain in the pondok.

Pondoks are sometimes referred to as “Koranic schools” but this is not appropriate in the case of those of Kelantan. Here, students enter the pondok after they have already finished the elementary instruction in Koran “reading” that all Malay children commonly begin when they are six or seven years old and complete several years later. Such instruction is not a part of actual pondok study, although it may be provided for local children by an advanced pondok student or someone else living in the area; nor is advanced instruction in Koran reading or chanting generally considered a normal part of pondok study since this is considered a highly developed skill in itself and is taught by a teacher who specializes in it. However, of the various subjects taught, Arabic grammar is considered to be very important because it is said it makes for disciplined study and aids in memorization of lessons.

The method of teaching and also what is taught may vary somewhat according to the teacher and the school. If the teacher can himself read and teach in Arabic then the procedure is for the teacher to read in Arabic and then translate into Malay; if not, teaching is done in Malay, utilizing Malay versions of religious texts. Students attend teaching sessions which are typically held in the morning, the afternoon or the evening. They may also study on their own, in some cases in study groups headed by an older student who is asked questions which are not asked of the guru.

Students today may begin pondok study after attending another type of school and after leaving the pondok may go on to another form of school or if possible go abroad for additional religious study. Formerly pondoks were the only form of school available to many rural youth and it was a general practice of villagers who could afford it to send their sons to study in a pondok for a few years but today, since both Western style Malay schools and modern religious schools (called “Arabic schools”) are accessible to all Malay children in the plain, students who attend pondoks do so for more specific reasons; because of a desire to receive the sort of moral and spiritual training which is believed by some to be available only in pondoks or a desire to become a pondok religious teacher, official, or leader. Students remain for varying lengths of time though it is held that if a student wishes to become a scholar, the period of time of study is long, more than ten years. To some extent the pondok is conceived to be as much as anything a way of life which has a permanent or semi-permanent attraction for many, including those who do not necessarily become teachers. Some students who spend long periods of time in pondoks attend more than one for, moving around and going to a pondok away from one’s home is a part of the tradition, so that many boys in the larger, well-known pondoks come from

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5 As many as fourteen religious subjects are taught in the largest schools. Smaller schools teach half as many or less. The usual standard subjects include taufisr (commentary on the Koran), fikih (law), Tasauf (philosophy), nahu (grammar), and hadith (traditions and sayings of the Prophet).
other states—and formerly other countries as well—but many students also do not
go beyond the local region. In at least some cases, students who master a number
of subjects are given a surat akuan or letter of acknowledgment which is prepared by
the guru and which states what the student has accomplished.

Upon entering a pondok for the first time a boy may be accompanied by his
father who calls upon the guru with a gift and requests that his son be accepted as a
student. No payments in the form of fees or tuition are charged. Instead, a boy’s
parents will make periodic contributions according to their means particularly at
harvest time and at the time of major holidays when payment of charity (zakat and
fitrah) is required, or when it becomes known that the guru wishes to make the pilgrim-
age or requires assistance for some other purpose. Once in the pondok students are
generally maintained by their parents who supply food which the students prepare
themselves. On occasion, students are engaged to pray at funerals and at certain
other rituals and for this they receive a small payment or a meal. Evidently to a
greater extent in earlier times students met some of their needs by learning skills such
as barbering and, particularly, tailoring from someone in the pondok.

7 The traditional style of haircut involves periodically shaving the head—which some pondoks
still require—and traditional dress includes the white religious cap or kupiah, white
shirt and sarong; western style dress was frowned upon in the past and is still not
generally seen in the pondoks though it is worn when students leave the pondok for
non-religious trips or errands). Students who learned to sew and tailor thus made
some of their own clothing and also sewed for hire and made religious caps for
sale. It was also formerly customary to wear crude wooden clogs which the students
again fashioned themselves out of pieces of wood to which they nailed a strip of
bicycle tyre.

The Pondok Community

One of the more notable characteristics of pondoks in contemporary Kelantan
is the extent to which in many instances they are not only schools but quarters or
communities as well. In addition to students, there frequently are other types of
people living in or immediately around a typical long established pondok, occupying
houses which are larger than the huts of students but often also cheaply constructed
and packed in tightly. Some of these people may be relatives of the guru and some
are apt to be former students of the pondok who have married and chosen to remain
in the area. A very large part are divorced or widowed older woman and old men
for whom there may be no other place or for whom the pondok represents a spiritual
haven, or both. Pondoks are regarded as desirable places for the pious elderly
to spend their final years, surrounded by an atmosphere of sanctity and in touch with
a busy routine of social-religious activity. Such elderly people generally live in meagre

6 In some cases money is collected to pay certain expenses such as the land taxes, water bills, or
maintenance but this is not considered tuition. Recently when the Arabic Schools run by the
Religious Council began charging fees for the first time students at one school went on strike
in objection.

7 Students do not work on lands or in business enterprises owned by the guru—which in the case
of business, gurus do not own any way—as it is reported they do in Java.
surroundings and emphasize that their material needs are few. They may receive rice or other income from land they may own or may receive some support from children or other kin. Such people are considered fakir, deserving poor, and may be given charity of various sorts at several times during the year by members of the community. Some of the women, of those who live in the pondok and work, sew and embroider, particularly religious garments, while men, particularly in the town area, work typically as tailors or as carpenters, traders or drivers.

These various members of a pondok together with those surrounding neighbours who are oriented to it form a local religious community. More so than in Malay neighbourhoods or rural hamlets in general, such people assemble together in the madrassah or mosque in the afternoon and in the evening for required prayers. In the evening a common practice is for people to assemble for evening prayer and after that to remain to listen to Koran reading or to meratib (chant a prayer formula over and over so many times — a ritual deriving from sufism and a basic part of much customary Islamic ritual in Kelantan) until it is time for final prayers. This is also true of the celebration of Moslem festivals. One large pondok community, for example, had formerly held a Maulid (Prophet's Birthday) celebration for which it was famous and which included a torch light parade. As the fasting month draws near, there is increasing attention to Koran reading practice and to the Koran reading contests which come at this time. During the fasting month communal religious activity takes place every evening and lasts much of the night. Different families in the community take turns nightly in furnishing the opening meal of the evening (buka puasa) which is eaten together after which there are special prayers and then later an additional small meal. Again, such practices are also followed in neighbourhood or village communities generally though not with such intensity.

Nor are pondoks apt to be separated from the surrounding community in the wider sense, though this varies. Pondok students who generally come from other villages or regions appear to usually stick close to the pondok and not be much involved in the wider community. On the other hand, if the pondok is a long-established one, there are apt to be fairly well-developed kin networks linking the guru and the other inhabitants of the pondok with the wider society. Large pondoks with important gurus tend to be very dominant features in the regions where they are situated, smaller ones not so much. There was a small pondok for example in one village with which I am familiar in which the rest of the village on the whole took little interest and with which it was not much involved, though some of the men of the village had helped build the pondok and all regarded it as a part of the community. There are, on the other hand, large pondoks which exert a strong influence over a wide area, where people will regard the guru as the most important figure in the area and look upon themselves as particularly devoted active.

The influence that is exerted relates to a number of matters. Such communities are less tolerant for example toward the holding of seances or traditional theatrical performances, both of which are quite popular in rural Malay society generally. In one case I was told that such activities were absolutely prohibited near the mosque of a pondok.
Plate 1 Students pondoks set among rubber trees.

Plate 2 A small surau and surrounding empty student pondoks in Pasir Mas.
Photos: R. L. Winzeler
Plate 3. An important pondok guru departing on the Haj.

Plate 4. Departing pilgrims and well-wishers from a Pasir Mas pondok in the train station.

Photos: R. L. Winzeler
Pondok Gurus

Pondok communities are thus centered around and dependent upon the figure of the guru in a way not characteristic of other religious or educational institutions. Pondoks develop about the guru and frequently do not long survive his death. The reputation of the pondok is largely inseparable from that of the guru and many pondoks are referred to only in terms of the guru’s name. Larger pondoks typically have other teachers but they are normally clearly subordinate to the guru. In some cases a son or a son-in-law who becomes a teacher in the pondok keeps it going after the guru’s death but for the most part this is a matter of the new guru having begun over again to acquire a following and develop a reputation rather than one of succeeding to an established position within the wider community.

Gurus are asked to be guest preachers at the Friday mosque service and engaged by political parties or the Religious Council to preach or give what are popularly called “explanations” (keterangan). Those who are influential and able are apt to be very busy, commonly giving regular lectures or addresses in other pondoks or village religious schools. They are also widely sought out to attend and lead prayers at religious feasts, to officiate at ritual events such as an infant’s hair cutting and “first foods” ceremony, a child’s Koran reading “examination” (khatam), the marriage contract ceremony, and funeral ceremonies. Finally, people seek their advice and ritual assistance.

The reputation which an individual guru possesses and the influence which he exerts rests upon his acknowledged mastery of the wisdom and teachings of Islam or over some of its important aspects, upon his personal character, life style and religious piety. In some cases it is also associated with his reputed possession of spiritual powers, and the nature of his political orientation and involvement.

The extent to which the commonly acknowledged mastery of a guru of Koranic scripture, philosophy or law need necessarily be rooted in “genuine” mastery is an issue raised long ago by Islamic reformers and modernists in Kelantan as elsewhere. Such critics held — and hold — that a guru needed to know little in order to know a lot more than those he taught or than ordinary Malay villagers and that a guru’s reputation could then well be based upon factors other than “real” religious knowledge. A crucial point — to the Islamic modernist or reformist critics — was the extent to which gurus could read, understand and utilize Arabic rather than having to rely upon Malay translations of religious works. Today knowledge of Arabic appears to be more the rule than the exception. Of the most important gurus — those with the largest pondoks and widest followings — nearly all are known to be literate in Arabic. Education of the gurus commonly included lengthy residence and study in Mecca and this seems to be an important basis of their reputation. Because of this and because of the comparatively widespread literacy in Arabic which exists among the Malay populace, it seems highly unlikely that a guru could rise to prominence today who was not literate in Arabic and indeed who had not spent a long time studying religion abroad. In the past this was perhaps not the case but by the earlier decades of this century, if not before, the practice of gurus studying for lengthy periods in Mecca (not merely making the pilgrimage) was established. Finally, at least since the latter part of the 19 Century, gurus have not only in some cases been literate