

## Islamic Educational Networks Between Singapore and the Middle East<sup>1</sup>

MONA ABAZA

### Introduction

Since early times, Islamic civilization created a distinctive pattern of a cosmopolitan religious scholarship which extended from Morocco to China. However, with the advent of national independence movements and the creation of modern nation-states in the Muslim countries and the institutionalization of Islam, religious networks have been intensified. In many parts of the Muslim World one witnesses today extensive financing from various Muslim regimes to build mosques, religious schools, and encourage Qur'an reading competitions. Travel among 'Ulama and students to the Middle East is another facet of this exchange. With the improvement of the communication system and the phenomenon of globalization, the world has equally narrowed for Muslims. Thus, exchange of religious scholars and the training of preachers (*du'ah*), the flow of travelling 'Ulama have significantly increased. Perhaps one interesting aspect to be looked at such networks is the level of imagination of the supposed "ideal", "far away" society which Muslims aspire for. Here of course the long journey for *talab al- 'ilm* (the search for knowledge, science) in Mekka and Egypt is a dream for many Southeast Asian Muslims which they aspire for. But also the transplanting of imagined Muslim Arab manners and religious behavior which symbolize the

---

1 The idea of this paper is an extension of a previous study on "*Muslim Education and Cultural Exchange: Indonesian Students in Cairo*", 1990. I am thankful to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for the award of a research grant for two years (1988-1990) and to Professor Hans-Dieter Evers for having supervised the research and for his valuable suggestions and comments. My gratitude goes to Dr. Charon Sidique from the Institute of South East Asian Studies in Singapore for her moral support and the many valuable comments and extensive reading of an earlier draft on Indonesian students in Cairo. I am also grateful to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies for having allowed me to grasp the Islamic networks in Singapore.

"Golden age" period are recurrently occurring in the Muslim world of Southeast Asia<sup>2</sup>. One can mention here that Aceh in Sumatra since the 17th century was called the "Verandah of Mekka" due to its famous role as a station for pilgrims and for having produced distinguished 'Ulama. These scholars have studied theology, Sufism law and for long years in the centres of learning in the Middle East and played a great role in the flourishing of Islam. The 'Ulama contributed genuinely in writing commentaries of the Qur'an and Sufi texts such as the works of Hamza al-Fansuri and Ar-Raniri.<sup>3</sup>

This paper attempts to shed some light at the networks, and the religious institutions in Singapore which prepare students to study in the Middle East, in particular at al-Azhar.<sup>4</sup> The al-Azhar university hosts every year thousands of Muslim students from all over the Muslim World. These students come from various Islamic schools and institutions which have established since a long time, networks through the returning Azharites and the Egyptian missionaries and preachers (*da'i*, pl. *du'ah*) who are sent to teach Arabic, the language of the Qur'an and religious subjects in different parts of Southeast Asia. Mekka is another pole of attraction, where Southeast Asians not only went for pilgrimage but, spent years to study religious subjects. The *Jawa* community in Saudi

- 
- 2 In recent years with the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism that swept the Muslim world, and the flourishing of the *Dakwah (da' wah)* movement in Malaysia, a new trend of returning to tradition in adopting the so-called Islamic values was to be observed. Thus, for the world of Southeast Asia, dying rice green, wearing the white or green *jubah*, the turban, the leather sandals is to be perceived as a sign of moving closer to the Arab pattern. See Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam. Modern Religious Radicals and Their Roots*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), p. 83.
  - 3 Bernhard Dahm, "Islam in Sumatra", in: *Der Einfluß des Islam auf Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft in Südostasien*, ed: Werner Draguhn, (Institut für Asienkunde, Hamburg, 1983), p. 59-60.
  - 4 The Islamic intercultural exchange has been previously analyzed by the prominent orientalist C. Snouck Hurgronje in his *Mekka in the latter part of the 19th Century. Daily Life, Customs and Learning. The Moslems of the East-Indian Archipelago* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), and Van den Berg's *Le Hadramaut et les colonies Arabes dans l' Archipel Indien* (Batavia: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1886) which became classical works on the impact of the Middle Eastern cultures and religion in Southeast Asia. What is attempted in this paper is to follow up W. Roff's study on "Indonesian and Malay Students in Cairo in the 1920's", in: *Indonesia*, (Cornell University 1970), No. 9, pp. 73-87. In taking into account Singapore as a case, see also Werner Ende, "Schitische Tendenzen bei sunnitischen Sayyids aus Hadramaut: Muhammad b. 'Aqil al-'Alawi (1863-1931)", in: *Der Islam*, vol. 50, (1973), no. 1, pp. 82-97.



Arabia testifies such an on going link between the two worlds of South-east Asia and the Middle East. My intention here is to point to the Islamic institutions which do send students to the Middle East.

### The al-Azhar University-Mosque

Al-Azhar, the brilliant Mosque in reference to Fatima al-Zahra<sup>5</sup> is until today, considered as one of the most important centres of orthodox Sunni Islam teachings. The mosque was constructed during the Fatimid period when the fourth Caliph of the Fatimid dynasty al-Mu'izz sent Jawhar the Sicilian to invade Egypt. The construction of the Mosque began in 970 A.C. and was completed in 972 A.C. In early times al-Azhar seemed have perpetuated Isma'ili teaching. Al-Mu'izz's desire was to train jurists, to persuade people to substitute Fatimid law for their older Sunni codes.<sup>6</sup> Very little information has nevertheless remained concerning this period. It was during the Ayubids that Fatimid teachings were replaced by a Shafi'i code.<sup>7</sup> This University-Mosque, being a centre of learning, was also a space where students and pilgrims were in earlier times lodged, it was a place where ideas, books and goods were exchanged. Trading and pursuing religious knowledge represented no contradiction as this has been a frequent phenomenon in the Muslim World. Indeed the pattern of scholar-traveller could be found in both the Sunni and Shi'a tradition in Islam. There existed in Islam a distinctive pattern of a scholar-traveller, who travelled long distances to hear a particular teacher. Moreover, al-Azhar as an institution of learning is considered as one of the oldest institutions in the Muslim and Christian world.

The 1961 law, article no. 103, issued by the Nasser regime led to the secularization of al-Azhar in that secular faculties were introduced. The idea was to produce graduates who would have multiple exposure i.e. a scientific and a religious one, so that religion would cease to be a profession.<sup>8</sup> The Azhar was, thus, normalized vis a vis the national system and its certificates were standardized. This law recomposed and created new

---

5 *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition. See: al-Azhar, pp. 813-814.

6 Bayard Dodge, *Al-Azhar. A Millennium of Muslim learning*, (The Middle East Institute, Washington D.C., 1961), p. 10.

7 *Ibid.*

8 See D. Crecelious, "al-Azhar in the Revolution", *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. XX, (1966), p. 42.

colleges, such as the college of business and administration, Arabic studies, engineering and industries, agriculture and medicine, in addition to the Islamic colleges. In 1974 there were fourteen faculties and around 60,000 students.<sup>9</sup> Another significant achievement was the Azhar girls college which offers degrees in Islamic, Arabic and social studies, as well as technical subjects and European languages. There are also primary, preparatory and secondary levels of al-Azhar for the students to prepare themselves for university life. The secondary level requires four years studies, and the Azhar University has extended institutes in various provinces of Egypt.<sup>10</sup> The degrees offered today are equivalent to Bachelors degree, a Masters program, and a *'alamiyya* degree which is equivalent to a Ph.D.

In 1983, there were 3697 foreign students studying at al-Azhar<sup>11</sup>. The Egyptian press has in 1988 revealed that there are around five thousand foreign Azharites<sup>12</sup>. There are 4176 students who are coming from the Middle East, 1648 from Africa, 1243 from Asia. These numbers appear to be less than reality. For instance, informants reported that the Malaysian community only in Cairo consists of around 1200-1500 students<sup>13</sup>, the Indonesian students numbered 750. There are also around 300 Philippines, 54 students from Singapore, and also students from Brunei (around 120), Thailand, and a few Chinese. More important though, is the huge number of Egyptian Azharites who are sent as missionaries teachers and preachers. In 1989, there were 29 Egyptian Azharites working all over Indonesia as preachers and teachers of religion and Arabic language.

---

9 See Georgie D.M. Hyde, *Education in Modern Egypt: Ideals and Realities*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978) p. 155.

10 C.A. Eccel, *Egypt Islam and Social Change. Al-Azhar in Conflict and Accomodation*, (Klaus Schwarz Verlag, Berlin. 1984), p. 315, and G. Hyde, p. 155.

11 Al-Azhar al-Sharif, *Maima' al-Buhuth al-Islamiyya. Tarikhuhi wa tattawuruhi* (The Council of Islamic Research, its History and Evolution), (Cairo al-Amanah al 'Ammah, 1983).

12 For more details about the curriculum, studies subjects and hours taught in the faculty of theology *Kulliyat usul ud-din*, see Jacques Jomier, "Programme et orientation des Etudes à la faculté de Theologie d'al-Azhar", *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 1976, No. 44, pp. 253-272. In 1968 the Faculty included 278 foreigners (*wafidin*).

13 Indeed these numbers are not accurate because an extensive number of students either come to study at their own expenses or have scholarships from Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries or from their home country.



## Al-Azhar and Singapore

During the late nineteenth century Singapore acquired the image of being the centre of religious life in the Archipelago as a cross road point to sending pilgrims to Mekka. The management of the pilgrimage industry we are told was under the control of the Arab community. It also played a significant role in publication and distribution of religious writings. The Arab community in Southeast Asia has been prominent for spreading orthodox Islam and reformist ideas from the Middle East. The first reformist journal was *al-Imam*, it was launched in 1906 and it survived until 1908. The connection and resemblance between the Egyptian magazine *al-Manar*, which was published by Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida and the Singaporean Imam has been previously analyzed by Roff.<sup>14</sup> Roff mentions the following:

"AL-Imam itself assisted in the establishment in Singapore in 1908 of the Madrasah al-Ikbal al-Islamiyyah, run by an Egyptian, othman Effendi Rafat, who returned to Egypt to engage some of his teaching staff"<sup>15</sup>

What is nevertheless interesting is the fact that the Arab community during the 1930's controlled the press in Malay language:

"The Alsagoff family launched the *Warta Melayu*, which was published daily from 1930 to 1941. Onn bin Jaafar, who edited the *Warta Melayu* for the first three years, then founded and edited the *Lambaga Malaya* which was Arab financed and was published in Singapore from 1934 to 1937, after which it moved to Johor Bahru".<sup>16</sup>

The Arab community in Singapore<sup>17</sup> maintains up to the present close links to the Middle East. According to the Singaporean *Straits Times* the

- 
- 14 William R. Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 59.
- 15 *Ibid.* p. 66.
- 16 C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1975*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.147.
- 17 In 1988, the population of Singapore numbered 2,647,100. The Chinese constituted 76% of the population, the Malays 15.1%, the Indians 6.5% and persons of other ethnic groups figure 2.4%. *Singapore, Facts and Pictures 1989*. Published by The Information Division Ministry of Communication and Information. Islam is the religion of the majority of the Malays; there are also Indian Muslims.

Arab community consists of around 9,000.<sup>18</sup> Roff has nevertheless pointed to the fact that the Arab population in Singapore has been ethnically mixed due to the embargo on female emigration from Hadramaut.<sup>19</sup> Thus many Arabs intermarried with the Malay population. One can meet today in the houses of Arab families and the shops of Arab street in Singapore relatives of the al-Juneid family who established themselves in Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, while maintaining contacts to Hadramaut (in Southern Yemen) have perpetuated the tradition of religious scholarship. The trade networks today with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries are of no less significance in maintaining the link with the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> There exists today a Singapore Arab Association (*Rabitat al-Wehda al-Arabiyya*) which celebrated in 1986 its fortieth anniversary. It was officially registered a voluntary association in November 1946. Today this association promotes various activities such as offering courses in Arabic language, and religious classes and organizing lectures.<sup>21</sup> The association is today located in Arab street.

### The Significance of the Madrasahs

Although there is a list of 36 Islamic religious schools, madrasah in Singapore, only four schools offer both primary and secondary education, which are the following: madrasah Al-Juneid Al-Islamiah in Victoria street. It was founded in 1927 by an Arab religious scholar, Syed Abdul Rahman bin Juneid omar al-Juneid. Madrasah Wak Tanjong which was founded in 1958 by the religious teacher Mohammed Noor Taib. Madrasah Alsagoff in Jalan Sultan which was founded in 1912 by Arab philanthropist Syed Mohammed bin Ahad Alsagoff and madrasah al-Maarif Al-Islamiah in Ipoh Lane Katongin which was founded in 1936 by theologian Shaykh Muhammad Fudlullah Suhaimi<sup>22</sup>. Since 1971 these schools have introduced Mathematics, science and English, and the students can sit for the O- and A-level. Nevertheless, one has to bear in mind that until the early eighties the Malays were considered as the least

---

18 *Straits Times* (Singapore daily), 2 November, 1988.

19 Roff, 1967, p. 41.

20 One can meet in Arab Street in Singapore Saudi Arabian Traders who constantly travel between the Middle East and Singapore.

21 Activities of Arab Association in Singapore (pamphlet), no date.

22 *Straits Times* (Singapore daily), 8 April, 1989.



privileged ethnic group in terms of educational opportunities.<sup>23</sup> While in the late eighties there seems to have been an improvement and further Malay participation in economic development through the establishment of the MENDAKI (Council of Education for Muslim Children) and the government support of this institution.<sup>24</sup>

These madrasahs are the link to the Middle East and the notion of success is measured by the ability to make it to study at al-Azhar university or any other Middle Eastern institution. The basic training for al-Azhar in Cairo is best in al-Juneid school. Al-Azhar recognizes solely the certificate of madrasah al-Juneid al-Islamiah and any student wanting to travel to the Middle East should accomplish one year in this madrasah. There are two Egyptian Azharites who are teaching Arabic and Islamic studies there. The chairman of the school Sayyed Muhammed bin Issa al-Haddad (died in 1990) maintained close links to the Middle East and deployed efforts to obtain scholarships from Egypt and Kuwait (before the Iraq's invasion to Kuwait in 1990). The school is basically run by young Singaporean returning Azharites. It should be pointed that this madrasah graduated many prominent figures such as the current Mufti of Singapore Issa bin Mohammed bin Sumait who studied at al-Azhar university<sup>25</sup>. When he first arrived in Cairo to study at al-Azhar University after having finished his secondary education at al-Juneid madrasah in the early sixties the Mufti reported that there were only three students who came from Singapore. After the establishment of the Singaporean Embassy in Cairo in 1967 and the institutionalization of Islam through MUIS (*Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura*)<sup>26</sup> the number of students increased.<sup>27</sup>

---

23 For instance the Malay community entailed the highest percentage of persons aged over ten years who had less than a secondary education. They also had a low enrolment in institutions of higher learning and the lowest percentage of enrolment in secondary education. See Wan Hussin Zoohri, "Socio-Economic Problems of the Malays in Singapore", in: *SOJOURN*, Social Issues in Southeast Asia, (ISEAS, Singapore) vol. 2 (1987), no. 2, p. 179.

24 *Ibid.* p. 204.

25 The Mufti of Singapore studied in Cairo from 1961/2 until 1969. He studied *Shari'a* (Islamic Law) at al-Azhar University.

26 The *Majlis Ugama Singapura* (MUIS) was established as a statutory body under the provisions of the administration of Muslim Law Act in July 1968. For more details about the administration of Islam in Singapore see: Sharon Siddique, "The Administration of Islam in Singapore", in: *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*, ed. Taufik Abdullah and Sharon Siddique, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), pp. 315-332.

27 Interview with the Mufti of Singapore 12 October 1991. MUIS, Singapore.

Nevertheless, these madrassahs seem to suffer from financial problems. So for instance the graduate madrasah teacher might earn a salary of 300 to 400 Singapore Dollars and a non graduate is paid 200 Singapore Dollars and thus the teachers have to find secondary jobs.<sup>28</sup> As a result MUIS in recent years took over the initiative and the madrasahs were put under its auspices to overcome the financial problems.

It is stated that fewer than ten Singaporean will make to study abroad. In 1990 there were in Cairo 45 female Singaporeans studying at the Females' Faculty of al-Azhar (*Kuliyat al-Banat*) and ten males studying at al-Azhar. It is also interesting to note that the number of female students attending the madrasah has in recent years significantly increased. So for instance 60% of the pupils of al-Juneid madrasah are females, while al-Sagoff and al-Maarif which were previously restricted to males has reached 100% females and the percentage of male pupils of Madrasah of Wak Tanjong is only reaching 10%.<sup>29</sup> These females are thus the future students who will be sent to study in Cairo. Can one thus conclude that the future of orthodox Islamic education in Singapore will increasingly depend on women while males might seem to shift to secular, professional functions?<sup>30</sup>

It was reported that beside the al-Azhar scholarship which is around 60 Egyptian pounds, MUIS has offered a scholarship through the body of the "Prophet Muhammed Scholarship Board Fund" which was established in 1967. For successful students who manage not to fail in their academic year the scholarship was raised to 1200 Singapore Dollars (1991) which is a very generous scholarship in comparison to the African Azharite students in Cairo who are considered as the poorest students for instance. Moreover in 1991 MUIS, through the Singaporean Embassy in Cairo managed to buy two flats in the district of Madinat Nasr where the largest al-Azhar Southeast Asian community lives to establish the Singaporean association in Cairo.<sup>31</sup> The aim of creating such a space in

---

28 Abu bakar Hashim "The Madrasahs in Singapore. Past, Present and Future", in: *Faiar Islam*. Issued in Singapore, vol.2, 1989. p.33.

29 Interview with the Mufti of Singapore 12 October 1991. (MUIS)

30 In fact, further research is needed to analyze to what extent this is either depriving the female students from the mainstream secular educational system or offering alternatives for drop outs.

31 The al-Azhar students originating from different nationalities have created various associations in Cairo. Concerning the history and of the *Djami 'ah al-Chairiah*, and the intellectual role of Al-Azhar Indonesian and Malay Students during the twenties and thirties see Roff, 1970. One of the oldest associations is the Indonesian Students



Cairo is to allow the students for social and religious gatherings. A project of establishing a library (if not already) is envisaged.

It was reported that al-Azhar certificate is not recognized in the secular national system in Singapore. The job market is therefore restricted to either teaching religious subjects in madrasah or to work in the Islamic centre [*Ja'miyya ad-da'wa al-islamiyya Singhafura* - (Arabic), *Persekutuan Seruan Islam Singapura* - (Malay)]. For many Singaporean Muslim we are told that Malaysia offers better changes since the religious sector has witnessed a boom with the Islamization policies launched by the Mahathir government. Nevertheless, there are today in Singapore ninety two mosques among which a large part belongs to the new generation mosques which are very active in community development and social activities. Thus the demand for imams, to lead the prayer and khatibs, teachers for religious evening classes, is extremely high among the Muslims. The organization of the distribution of *zakat*, religious donation, the maintenance of the mosques, are all jobs which are filled by the Middle East graduates.

Some parents reported that they prefer to place their children in a religious school to protect their children from alien values.<sup>32</sup> Other informants according to the Straits Times in Singapore stated that many children who are sent to Madrasah are drop-outs. The religious education like many Middle Eastern countries seems to become the alternative of the under privileged.

This raises the question of the role of such madrasahs and their integration into the overall secular system of Singapore. In the past their role was restricted to producing religious scholars who would be knowledgeable in Islamic matters. However, today with the changes in the society the madrasahs are required to compete in what they offer with other schools. We are told that some madrasahs have introduced the teaching of English, Malay and mathematics parallel with Religious studies and Arabic. The administrators today encourage the students to obtain two types of certificates-one from the madrasah, and the General

---

association in the quarter of Bab al-Louq in Cairo. The Malaysian students have an own association which is called *Bait Malaysia* (the House of Malaysia). For more details about such associations and their social functions see my *Muslim Education and Cultural Exchange: Indonesian Students in Cairo*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Development Sociology, University of Bielefeld, 1990.

32 *Straits Times*, 8 April, 1989.

certificate of Education (GCE), issued from the Ministry of Education in Singapore to be secure that they widen their choice in university career.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

Scholars and intellectuals from different parts of the Muslim world have pointed to the crisis which Muslim education has encountered and which has been exacerbated by the introduction of secular and Western methods and subjects in most of the Muslim countries. In the contemporary Muslim world, be it in Egypt, Indonesia or Singapore, the graduates of religious learning are undergoing a strong pressure and competition from the secular trained and Western educated academicians and professionals. Among Indonesian intellectuals and state official, there is much discussion about reorienting the students towards Islamic Studies in the West rather than spending long years in Cairo or Mekka. In spite of strong criticisms which religious education has been undergoing, the contention of this paper is to highlight the vitality of Muslim networks between the Middle East and the World of Southeast Asia.

---

33 *Ibid* p.28-29.