

KITAB KUNING AND TRAINING OF 'ULAMÂ': The Experience of Madrasah Al Qismul Ali Jalan Ismailiyah Medan

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Abstract: This article is a result of a history research relying on informants and documents for the larger part of its data. The Madrasah Al Qismul Ali Jalan Ismailiyah Medan was established by Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah in 1953, to cater for the education of young '*ulamâ*' applying a curriculum almost solely based on Islamic classical books (known popularly as *kitab kuning*). This madrasa was very successful in fulfilling its mission and was celebrated as an '*ulamâ*'-producing institution until mid-1980s. Madrasah Al Qismul Ali strives to combine its old winning curriculum with the new state-sponsored one. After some decades, it is clear that this strategy is not working to expectation. The *madrasa* fails to deliver graduates of the same quality as it did. Apparently what is left of classical book in the curriculum is not sufficient to prepare younger generation of '*ulamâ*'.

Abstrak: Artikel ini didasarkan pada sebuah penelitian sejarah yang terutama mengandalkan data informan dan dokumen. Madrasah Al Qismul Ali Jalan Ismailiyah Medan didirikan oleh Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah pada 1953, dengan visi mendidik calon ulama dengan pembelajaran berbasis kitab kuning. Madrasah ini sangat sukses menjalankan misinya dan terkenal sebagai produsen ulama sekurang-kurangnya hingga pertengahan 1980an. Madrasah Al Qismul Ali berjuang untuk memadukan dua kurikulum sekaligus: kurikulum lama berbasis kitab kuning dan kurikulum baru versi pemerintah. Setelah beberapa dekade, terlihat bahwa siasat pemaduan kurikulum tidak dapat menghasilkan alumni sebagaimana sebelumnya. Porsi pembelajaran kitab kuning yang dikurangi ternyata tidak memadai untuk melahirkan bibit ulama.

Keywords: Qismul Ali, *kitab kuning*, '*ulamâ*' training, *madrasah*

Introduction

Kitab Kuning (Islamic classical books) have always been considered very essential in ‘*ulamâ*’ training. As a matter of fact, this has been emphasized by many works. In Indonesian context, the work of Bruinessen might be considered as the most importance and has become classic in the discussion of the topic.¹ *Kitab kuning* is very relevant because it serves as principal source of Islamic religious knowledge. Defined simply, *kitab kuning* is collection of works by classical Muslim scholars on different fields of Islamic knowledge.² In addition, the mastery of *kitab kuning* is considered as an irreplaceable foundation on which one would build his career as ‘*ulamâ*’.³ As such, *kitab kuning* becomes very central in the curriculum of traditional Islamic education that aims at training future ‘*ulamâ*’.

The position of *kitab kuning* in *madrasah* has been weakening significantly during the past few decades, caused primarily by the implementation of the 1975 Joint-Decree of Three Ministers as part of Indonesia’s educational modernization. The phenomenon is especially interesting because it places traditional *madrasah* such as Madrasah Al Qismul Ali Al Washliyah Jalan Ismailiyah Medan (to be shortened as MQA throughout this article) in two contradictory poles: the will to maintain the *kitab kuning* on one hand and the need to modernize on the other. This article analyzes the dynamics of *kitab kuning* as part of MQA since its initial operation to the present. This dynamics is seen especially in the context of its mission to train young generation of ‘*ulamâ*’.

Methodology

In principal this article is based on a historical study and as such follows the steps and procedures of historical research. This research uses the works of Kuntowijoyo as the main methodological reference.⁴ The main part of data for this article had been acquired from informants with first-hand knowledge and experience of the subject. Other data came from educational archives and documents of both Al Jam’iyatul Washliyah and the

¹ Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat: Tradisi-tradisi Islam di Indonesia* (Bandung: Mizan, 1995).

² Different definitions are discussed in Muhammad Riduan Harahap, “Resistensi Tradisi *Kitab kuning* pada Madrasah Al Washliyah di Sumatera Utara” (Ph.D. Dissertation, UIN SU Medan, 2019), p. 19-23.

³ Ja’far Ja’far, “Khazanah *Kitab kuning* di Madrasah Al Jam’iyat Al Washliyah,” in *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam Al-Thariqah*, Vol. 2 No. 2, 2017, pp. 124-134; Ramli Abdul Wahid, “Peran Universitas Al Washliyah dalam Mencerdaskan Umat,” in Ja’far (ed.) *Al Jam’iyatul Washliyah: Potret Histori, Edukasi dan Filosofi* (Medan: Center for Al Washliyah Study & Perdana Publishing, 2011), p. 116, 101; also Ramli Abdul Wahid, *Anak Desa Tak Bertuan Jadi Profesor: Kisah Nyata Kehidupan 60 Tahun Prof. Dr. Drs. H. Ramli Abdul Wahid, Lc., M.A* (Medan: Manhaji, 2014), p. 92.

⁴ Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2003); Kuntowijoyo, *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Benteng, 2005); and Kuntowijoyo, *Penjelasan Sejarah (Historical Explanation)* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana), 2008.

MQA itself. Field data of this study were gathered during 2017. However, some aspects have been updated and expanded making use of newer researches of the same topic. Some secondary sources have also been utilized specially in understanding the data in a broader context as well as in interpreting them.

MQA: A Historical Sketch

When Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah (shortened as Al Washliyah) was established in Medan in 1930, education was one of its main programs.⁵ In its initial days, Al Washliyah developed three types of educational institutions: *Madrasah*, General School, and Teacher School. Later on university was added to the list.⁶ Al Washliyah *madrasah* was organized into four levels: Preparatory (*Tajhiziyah*), Elementary (*Ibtida'iyah*), Junior High School (*Tsanawiyah*), Senior High School (*Al Qismul Ali*), and Specialization (*Takhashshush*).⁷ So MQA is an Al Washliyah high school. MQA was established in 1953 to accommodate and educate children who live in an Al Washliyah Orphanage at Jalan Ismailiyah Medan. Before this year Al Washliyah had opened some *madrasahs* in the city of Medan.⁸ MQA was initialized by some central figures of Al Washliyah, such as Muhammad Nurdin, Hamdan Abbas, Bahri Emde, Usman Hamzah, and Abdul Majid Siraj.⁹

MQA was established in mid-20th century, an era of high significance in the socio-political history of East Sumatra in particular and, indeed, Indonesia in general. Medan was, and is until the present, the largest city in western part of Indonesia, house to a very diverse population both ethnically and religiously. The population of this very vibrant city includes different ethnic groups originated from different parts of Indonesia as well as those coming from other countries. The escalating political climate in anticipation of the 1955 General Election was very relevant to the establishment of MQA. Central figures of Al Washliyah openly supported the Islamic party, Masyumi, in direct opposition against

⁵ Chalijah Hasanuddin, *Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah 1930-1942: Api Dalam Sekam di Sumatera Timur* (Bandung: Pustaka, 1988), is a comprehensive work that introduces Al Washliyah focusing in its establishment and early development. See also Ja'far Ja'far, "Peran Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah dalam Merevitalisasi Madhhab Shafi'i di Era Kontemporer," in *Justicia Islamica*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2016; Ja'far Ja'far, "Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah dan Pelestarian Akidah Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah di Indonesia," in *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2019.

⁶ Hasan Asari, "'Ulamâ' Training and Modernizing Al Washliyah Madrasah," in *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2019, pp. 152-153.

⁷ Nukman Sulaiman, *et al.*, *Peringatan Al Djamijatul Washlijah ¼ Abad* (Medan: Pengurus Besar Al Djamijatul Washlijah, 1956), p. 303.

⁸ Interview with senior teacher of MQA, Muhammad Shaleh Umar, Medan, May 16, 2017.

⁹ Muhammad Rozali, "Pelaksanaan Supervisi Pendidikan dalam Meningkatkan Mutu Lulusan di Madrasah Aliyah Swasta Al-Washliyah Jalan Ismailiyah Medan" (Thesis: IAIN SU Medan, 2013), p. 89.

Indonesian Communist Party.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, political rivalry between the two parties resulted in some riots which often disturbed educational activities of Al Washliyah *madrasahs*.¹¹

The 1950s and the 1960s witnessed a serious economic decline and people in Eastern Sumatra were living in much less than ideal condition. This economic decline was due partly to transitions process following the independence. However, in this far from favorable condition, Medan, just like other major cities of Indonesia, did not delay and take the necessary steps to develop education sector. Education is believed to be a necessary requirement for the nation to move forward. The state-run education system—which is basically nationalization of the colonial education system—had not been running the way expected to be. In addition the volume of education that can be provided by the government cannot accommodate to need of the whole population. Therefore the education organized by social-religious organization such as Al Washliyah is very important in filling the gap.

The early days of MQA were marked with many challenges mainly originated in the unstable social and political milieu of the time. Despite that, MQA grows steadily thanks to the support from the society at large as well as its leadership quality. This *madrasah* has been chaired by individuals with relatively high socio-religious standing. Among the most prominent ones was K. H. Hamdan Abbas. In addition to his position at MQA, he was also a lecturer at State Islamic University of North Sumatra and was well known for his excellent knowledge in religious sciences. His capacity as an *‘alim* was attested best by his position as head of Indonesia Council of *‘Ulamâ’* of North Sumatra for the period of 1990-1995.¹² So far, MQA has undergone nine times of leadership successions. At the time of this research MQA is led by H. Jamaluddin Batubara, Lc., M.Th.¹³

The present management team of MQA appears to understand the hardship and challenges faced by their predecessors to bring this institution to its current condition. Over half-a-century of experience has brought this institution into maturity in handling internal changes and in coping up with ups and downs of supporting factors in general. MQA has been progressing significantly in many aspects, such as facilities, human resources, and the *madrasah’s* physical milieu. This is not to deny that the institution is still in need of improvements at other aspects, such as the application of IT.¹⁴ One is certain, however. Since the 1950s MQA has never stopped performing its basic function of educating and

¹⁰ Sulaiman, *et al.*, *Peringatan Al Djamijatul Washlijah*, p. 224-225; Prabudi Said, *Sejarah Harian Waspada dan 50 Tahun Peristiwa* (Medan: PT Prakarsa Abadi Press, 1995), p. 124; Ja’far Ja’far, “Pemikiran Politik Islamisme Moderat Al Jam’iyatul Washliyah,” in *Al-Araf: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam dan Filsafat*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2019.

¹¹ Said, *Sejarah Harian*, p. 33.

¹² Majelis Ulama Indonesia Propinsi Sumatera Utara, “Tentang Kami,” in <https://www.muisumut.com/about-us/>, accessed May 23, 2020.

¹³ Administration Office of MQA: Graphic Information, May 08, 2017.

¹⁴ Muhammad Shaleh Umar, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May 16 2017.

preparing its students with knowledge and experience before releasing them back to the society as contributing citizens.

In course of time, the management of MQA has also been changing for the better in many respects. The institution started with a very simple organization; now it has become part of a much more developed and well organized managerial structure. At MQA there is a body known as the Perguruan Madrasah Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Jalan Ismailiyah Medan, which presently led by Muhammad Hafiz Ismail. This is the highest body, functioning as overseer. At a more operational level MQA is headed by a Headmaster assisted by three Vice Headmasters with specific job descriptions. General administration is handled by an Administration Office. Learning process is supported by library, laboratory, and other supporting facilities. School Clinics is very important at MQA because big percentage of its students live in the orphanage at the same complex.¹⁵

Original and early documents of Al Washliyah indicate that this organization opted to establish chain of *madrasahs* in order to prepare young generation of 'ulamâ' to fulfill religious leadership of Muslim society. This original mission was based on the 1030s reality and became a success factor of Al Washliyah education for decades. This mission was backed by the use of *kitab kuning* as main learning resource in Al Washliyah *madrasahs*. After independence, Indonesia embarks on modernization of *madrasah* system. The core aspect of this modernization is the inclusion of secular sciences into *madrasah's* curriculum and the standardization of *madrasah* system throughout the country. This state policy brings serious consequences into Al Washliyah *madrasah* mission and the position of *kitab kuning* there in.¹⁶

Despite that, MQA seems to hold on to its original mission of preparing future 'ulamâ'. As a matter of fact, Al Washliyah Congress of 2012 defines its education missions, which includes: "... e) producing graduates with Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah character and solid morality; f) producing cadres of 'ulamâ' to carry on the Prophetic mission or spreading of [Islam] as *rahmatan lil 'âlamîn*."¹⁷ In line with the missions, Al Washliyah defines the objectives of its education, which includes:

- a) Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah education aims at producing practicing believers equipped with comprehensive and in-depth knowledge, solid morality, successful in this world and the hereafter; ... c) producing human resources with cadre qualities to carry on the missions and programs of Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah; d) producing 'ulamâ' to be taken as examples by the general Muslims.¹⁸

¹⁵ Administration Office of MQA: Graphic Information, May 08, 2017.

¹⁶ For general analysis on this, see Asari, " 'Ulamâ' Training and Modernizing Al Washliyah Madrasah."

¹⁷ PB. Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah, *Pedoman Penyelenggaraan Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini, Pendidikan Dasar dan Pendidikan Menengah Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah* (Jakarta: PB. Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah, 2012), pp. 10-11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

It is very clear that Al Washliyah education, especially MQA, is trying its best to uphold the original mission of providing young *'ulamâ'*. One of the requirements of this policy is to keep *kitab kuning* as the main learning sources. Al Washliyah *'ulamâ'* and its masses in general strongly believe that the quality of *'ulamâ'* rests most importantly on their mastery of *kitab kuning*. *'Ulamâ'* and *kitab kuning* are perceived as two sides of a single coin.¹⁹

MQA: Regeneration of *'Ulamâ'* through *Kitab Kuning*

The missions and objectives of MQA as stated above clearly proclaim its intention to educate future *'ulamâ'*. The class of *'ulamâ'* is considered very important because they are entrusted with tough task of continuing the prophetic mission of guiding the *ummah*, i.e. the community of the believers. This role and function is stipulated by a very widely circulated prophetic tradition: "... *al-'ulamâ' waratsat al-anbiyâ' [the 'ulamâ' are the heirs of the prophets]*".²⁰ In addition, it is a well-established fact that the society at large has always been in need of guidance from the *'ulamâ'* for many aspects of their life. In fact, the *'ulamâ'* has always been a central point of any Muslim community. To a large extent, the *'ulamâ'* determines the course of development of the *ummah*.²¹ It is not surprising, therefore, to find out that producing young *'ulamâ'* is in fact the original mission of Al Washliyah *madrasahs*.²²

Al Washliyah in general and MQA in particular strongly believe that *kitab kuning* is absolutely indispensable in educating young generation of *'ulamâ'*. This can be explained through substantive and facilitative connection between *kitab kuning* and the mission of *'ulamâ'*.

Kitab Kuning as Academic Product Par-Excellence of Islamic Civilization

At MQA there is a very strong trust in regard *kitab kuning*. *Kitab kuning* heritage is perceived as the accumulation of past scholars' creativity molded in form of books covering a very wide variety of sciences. A central figure of MQA, Jamaluddin Batubara, stresses that the term "*kitab kuning*" itself is not the best to represent the phenomenon; he suggests that the better term would be "*kutub al-turâts*", that is classical books. However, "*kitab kuning*" has become so popular, because it is easier for general masses to pronounce. *Kitab kuning* collections are generally written in classical Arabic. Some, however, are in Malay

¹⁹ Abdul Wahid, "Peran Universitas Al Washliyah dalam Mencerdaskan Umat," p. 116, 101; Harahap, "Resistensi Tradisi *Kitab kuning*," pp. 109-111.

²⁰ The complete text can be seen in Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsâ al-Tirmidzî, *Sunan al-Tirmidzî* (Mesir: Musthafâ al-Bâb al-Ḥalabî, 1975), vol. V, p. 48; also in Abû Dâwud al-Sijjîstânî, *Sunan Abî Dâwud*, Vol. III (Beirut: al-Maktabah Al-ʿAshriyyah, t.t.), p. 317.

²¹ See excellent study by Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The 'Ulamâ' in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

²² Asari, "*'Ulamâ'* Training and Modernizing Al Washliyah *Madrasah*," pp. 154-159.

language but written in Arabic script. This kind is popularly known as Malay-Arabic Scripts (Aksara Arab-Melayu).²³

This classical creativity and thought is taken as very important basis, methodology, and content in understanding the Qur'an and the Hadith or Prophetic Tradition. As such, *kitab kuning* becomes irreplaceable in the process of developing and reproducing of religious knowledge. As a general rule, modern Islamic religious knowledge must be based on *kitab kuning* heritage. Quite interesting, the exponents of MQA understand the function of *kitab kuning* in the process of reproducing modern religious knowledge. Even more interesting, their reading and attention include the works of rationalist-modernist authors, such as Harun Nasution and Nurcholis Madjid. The point is that even such type of authors cannot escape the use of *kitab kuning*. Of course it is well known that both Nasution and Madjid make extensive use of classical works—such as *Maqâlât al-Islâmiyyîn* (al-Asy'arî), *al-Milal wa al-Nihâl* (al-Syahrastânî)—in their writings. In this line of argument, it is only very natural that Buya Hamka in his *Tafsir al-Azhar* makes a lot of reference to classical exegesis of past scholars.²⁴

At a more practical level, there is also a very strong belief that Islam could not be practiced properly without referring to *kitab kuning*. One of MQA's top managers emphasizes this by a very strong simple sentence: "Without *kitab kuning* we simply could do nothing." He further elaborates saying that one could read the Qur'an properly only with knowledge of 'Ilm al-Tajwid and could read religious classical sources thanks to 'Ilm al-Nahwu wa al-Sharf (Arabic grammar). To perform prayer properly one needs to refer to *kitab kuning*, because the Quran provides no detail and technical guidance for that. The point made is that in order to practice Islam correctly a Muslim needs to refer to *kitab kuning* collection left by the classical 'ulamâ'.²⁵

This might seem to exceed merely appreciation into idealization of *kitab kuning*. However, that idealization comes with certain restriction and does not apply to each and every *kitab kuning*. At MQA, *kitab kuning* is seen as falling into two broad categories:²⁶

- a. *Kitab kuning* that are considered to be perfect and need to be followed the way they are. Their contents simply need to be applied to the best possible way. This includes works on methodology and linguistics, such as works on 'Ulumul Qur'an, Ilmu Tafsir, Mushtalah al-Hadis, Ushul Fiqh, Qawa'id Fiqhiyyah, Nahu-Saraf, and Ilmu Tajwid.

²³ Jamaluddin Batubara, headmaster of MQA, interview in Medan, May 08, 2017.

²⁴ *Ibid.* The specific reference to *Maqâlât al-Islâmiyyîn*, *al-Milal wa al-Nihâl* perfectly suits both Harun Nasution and Nurcholis Madjid, who are experts in Islamic Philosophy and Islamic Theology.

²⁵ Muhammad Hafiz Ismail, head of Perguruan Madrasah Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Jalan Ismailiyah Medan, interview in Medan, May 08, 2017.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Jamaluddin Batubara, headmaster of MQA, interview in Medan, May 08, 2017.

- b. *Kitab kuning* that are in need of continuous development and modernization, albeit with some conditions and restrictions. In principle anything outside of the first group belongs to this second: works on law, politics, economics, and so on. Some of *kitab kuning* on these fields are considered to be outdated, irrelevant, and should be disregarded.

This classification indicates the awareness of continuity and change in regard to *kitab kuning*. It means that *kitab kuning* as a corpus contains basic existential elements of Islam but at the same time it also includes some flexible elements that allow Islam to respond to changes. However, the general attitude MQA and that of Al Washliyah toward *kitab kuning* is *taqlîd*, i.e. following the ideas of classical ‘*ulamâ*’ through their works. Thus, when explaining about legal innovation, an informant speaks only about *qiyâs* and *ilhâq* as ways of establishing the relevance of *kitab kuning* to contemporary legal cases. *Qiyâs* and *ilhâq* are basically applying existing mode of reasoning to new similar legal cases. He also stresses that even *qiyâs* and *ilhâq* should only be applied to non-principles (*masâ’il furû’iyyah*). Putting it very simple he said: “In the end, we are now has to practice *taqlîd*; but a creative and dynamic one ...”²⁷

This is a very concise sentence: *kitab kuning* is indispensable, because it stores the accumulation of creativity of generations of ‘*ulamâ*’ along Islamic history. Much of the content is considered to be final, however some parts of it need to be adjusted and synchronized with recent developments. Still other parts are simply no longer relevant and could be disregarded all together. Based on this classification, the general attitude of MQA is to faithfully follow the teaching of *kitab kuning*, and only use creative approaches in a very limited way.²⁸

Kitab Kuning as Learning Resource of Islamic Subjects

The central position of *kitab kuning* at MQA has been established since the very beginning of its existence. This is in accordance with Al Washliyah’s original education mission since the 1930s. An early Al Washliyah document describes the profiles of graduates expected of MQA:

Those who can be accepted as student of [Al Qismul Ali] level are graduates who are holders of Madrasah Tsanawiyah Al Washliyah or its equivalent. The graduates of [Al Qismul Ali] are supposed to possess a rather advanced religious knowledge and fair knowledge of general subjects. The proportion of subjects is 70% religious subjects and 30% general subjects.²⁹

²⁸ See Lahmuddin Nasution, *Umat Bertanya, Ulama Menjawab: Respon terhadap Berbagai Problematika Hukum Islam* (Medan: Perdana Publishing, 2020), p. v.

²⁹ Sulaiman, et al., *Peringatan Al Djamiyatul Washlijah*, p. 390.

³⁰ Muhammad Shaleh Umar, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May 16, 2017.

The 70% allocated for religious subjects is thought based on *kitab kuning*. It seems that MQA's commitment to *kitab kuning* has always been very high due to the strong conviction as explained above. At MQA there is a strong belief that *kitab kuning* is the primary source of Islamic tenets, next only to the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions. As such, *kitab kuning* is irreplaceable.³⁰ This strong unshakeable commitment also has its historical roots that is a very high respect for MQA's founding fathers, i.e. those who had initialized the institution from the very beginning. An informant put it in a very succinct sentence: "In order to respect the efforts of the 'ulamâ' who founded this *madrasah*, we ought to preserve their purposes by maintaining a *kitab kuning*-based curriculum."³¹

In its early period, MQA used *kitab kuning* as stipulated by Al Washliyah organization. According to Nukman Sulaiman, *kitab kuning* books that must be taught at MQA are as follows:³²

- a. For Qur'anic Exegesis: *Anwâr al-Tanzîl wa-Asrâr al-Ta'wîl* of Nashîr al-Dîn al-Baydhâwî; *Lubab al-Ta'wîl fi Ma'ânî al-Tanzîl* of 'Alâ al-Dîn 'Alî Muhammad al-Khâzin; *Madârik al-Tanzîl wa Haqâ'iq al-Ta'wîl* of Abû al-Barakât al-Nasafi; *Tanwîr al-Miqbâs* of Abdullâh ibn 'Abbâs.
- b. For Hadîts: *Shahîh Muslim* of Imâm Muslim; *Shahîh al-Bukhârî* of Imâm al-Bukhârî.
- c. For Islamic Law: *Al-Mahallî* of Jalâl al-Dîn al-Mahallî; *Minhâj al-Thâlibîn* of Yahyâ ibn Syarîf al-Nawawî.
- d. For Philosophy of Islamic Law: *Syarh Jam' al-Jawâmi' li al-Subkî* of Jalâl al-Dîn al-Mahallî.
- e. For Principles of Islamic Law: *Al-Asybah wal-Nazhâ'ir* of Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûthî.
- f. For Sufism (Tasawuf): *Al-Risâlah al-Qusyayriyyah* of Abû al-Qâsim al-Qusyayrî.
- g. For History: *Muhâdharât Târikh al-Umam al-Islâmiyyah* of Muhammad Khudharî Bîk.

The above list of *kitab kuning* indicates that MQA sets a high standard for its students. That is why this *madrasah* requires input students who had study some *kitab kuning* before. The list also represents the epistemological structure and grouping of the whole branches of Islamic sciences. The *first* group includes Qur'anic Exegesis and Hadîts (Prophetic Tradition) that serve as the very foundation of the whole teaching of Islam. The *second* includes Islamic Law and its supporting sciences. Islamic Law (*Fiqh*) basically is collections of 'ulamâ's opinions on different aspects of life. Philosophy and Principles of Islamic Law (*Ushûl al-Fiqh* and *Qawâ'id al-Fiqh*) provide methodological guidelines in formulating and reformulating the law according to socio-historical changes. The third is Mysticism (*Tashawwuf*) that explains the peaks of Muslim thoughts on how a believing servant gets connected to Allah through the purification of heart and applying the highest moral standard. The *fourth* is history that

³¹ Edi Zuhrawardi Pane, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May 17, 2017.

³² Sulaiman, *et al.*, *Peringatan Al Djamijatul Washlijah*, p. 44.

³³ Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan*, p. 84.

records the real dynamics (change, continuity, ups, downs, and so on) of Muslim society throughout times. The sum total of these four makes a scientific awareness which connects humanity to God.

In course of time this list of books was modified and the names of subjects adjusted here and there. For example, at a later time, the *Tafsîr Jalâlayn* by Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûthî and Jalâl al-Dîn al-Mahallî for Qur'anic Exegesis subject; *Al-Luma'* of Abû Ishâq al-Syîrâzî for Philosophy of Islamic Law; *I'ânah al-Thâlibîn* of Abû Bakr Syathâ al-Dimyâthî, *al-Muhadzdzab fî Fiqh al-Imâm al-Syâfi'* of Abû Ishâq al-Syîrâzî for Islamic Law; and *Nûr al-Yaqîn* of 'Umar 'Abd al-Jabbâr for Islam's History. In addition other works were also introduced, including *Syarh ibn 'Aqîl 'alâ Alfîyyah Ibn Mâlik* of Ibn 'Aqîl and *Al-Kawâkib al-Durriyyah 'alâ Mutammamah al-Ajrumiyyah* of Muḥammad al-Râ'inî for Arabic Grammar; *Syarh al-Kailânî 'alâ al-Tashrîf lil-'Izzî* of Ibn Hisyâm al-Kaylânî for Arabic Syntax; *Maw'izah al-Mu'minîn min Ihyâ' Ulûm al-Dîn* an abridgement book by Jamâl al-Dîn al-Dimasyqî for Ethics; and *Al-Adyân* of Mahmud Yunus for Comparative Religion.³³

The real test of MQA's commitment to *kitab kuning* started in the mid of the 1970s and continues to the present. In 1975 the government issued the so called Joint Decree of Three Ministers (Surat Keputusan Bersama Tiga Menteri) aiming at standardizing *madrasah's* curriculum. The strategies taken by MQA in responding to this fundamental change will be discussed in a special chapter.³⁴

Kitab Kuning: Tradition and Identity

At MQA, *kitab kuning* is not just piles of books studied earnestly. In fact, *kitab kuning* has become a very important aspect of MQA's tradition. It is so, because MQA was established precisely to teach *kitab kuning*. After decades of success story, the values contained in *kitab kuning* gradually become the core identity of MQA and those affiliating with it. Here, identity includes academic, cultural, and historical dimensions.³⁵

At MQA, reading *kitab kuning* means more than simply understanding its contents. It also has to do with mastering the linguistic style in which it is written, i.e. classical Arabic often considered to be much more difficult to handle than the colloquial daily-life Arabic. People at MQA do not appreciate the opinion that the contents of *kitab kuning* could be understood without high mastery of classical Arabic. Here, the high appreciation of *kitab kuning* comes in complete package: the form, the language, its literary style, the learning procedure, as well as the contents. Many of *kitab kuning* books has been made available in

³⁴ This curriculum change, mandated by the Joint Decree of Three Ministers, practically makes it impossible for Al Washliyah *madrasahs* to produce young generation of 'ulamâ' as they did before. See Asari, "Ulumâ' Training and Modernizing Al Washliyah *Madrasah*."

³⁵ Edi Zuhrawardi Pane, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May 17, 2017.

³⁶ Muhammad Shaleh Umar, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May 16, 2017.

Indonesian translation, including some of the ones used at MQA, such as *Shahih al-Bukhârî*, *Shahih Muslim*, *Al-Umm*, *I'ânat al-Thâlibîn*, or *Al-Risâlah al-Qusyayriyyah*. But these translations books are not circulated at MQA, because of the strong belief that translation of *kitab kuning*, in the words of an informant, "... are in no ways comparable to the original *kitab kuning*. Those translations or anything like them contain not just the original ideas of the authors. They are mixed with those of the translators ..."³⁶

It is not certain if this statement was based on sufficient research. But, in general, it can be said that translating classical Arabic into Indonesian language is not to be done by everyone. This low appreciation of translation reinforces the position of *kitab kuning* at MQA to the point that *kitab kuning* becomes important part of MQA's identity. This institution has undergone waves of changes during its history, the most significant being curriculum change imposed by the Joint Degree of 1975. Indeed MQA has to do some adjustments, including in curriculum; but the use of *kitab kuning* is non-negotiable. A senior teaching staff emphasizes that although it needs changes to develop "... MQA has to use *kitab kuning*. As long as we call it Madrasah Ali Qismul Ali Jalan Ismailiyah ... it will never deviate from the course set up by the founding fathers 'ulamâ'."³⁷

The strength of *kitab kuning* tradition at MQA and the unshakeable belief of its future must be seen in the light of continuity and change which has been discussed above. Put simple, some of the *kitab kuning* is believed to function as permanent foundation of Islamic sciences while others develop and change creatively in response to social historical changes.

Kitab Kuning and Legitimacy of 'Ulamâ'

The founding fathers of Al Washliyah *madrasah* stipulated that the core mission of MQA is to educate young generation of 'ulamâ'. They also decided that *kitab kuning* ought to make the core of its curriculum. This choice was based on a strong belief that the legitimacy of 'ulamâ' rests on their academic references. Through books they read they are connected to the intellectual genealogies of the 'ulamâ', heir of the prophets. This connection of intellectual genealogies has two aspects to it. *Firstly*, one connects with past 'ulamâ' through their master pieces. For example, one gets connected with the celebrated Imam al-Syâfi'î through his *Al-Umm*; with al-Suyuthî through his *Al-Asybah wa al-Nazhâ'ir*; with al-Qusyayrî by reading his *Al-Risâlah al-Qusyayriyyah*; and so forth. *Secondly*, one becomes part of methodological transmissions. *Kitab kuning* at MQA is not just about Islamic knowledge or information. *Kitab kuning* represents an important methodological stage in the development of Islamic sciences in history. *Kitab kuning* bridges the revelation from Allah in the forms of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Tradition and the social historical realities of the Muslim

³⁷ Edi Zuhrawardi Pane, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May 16, 2017.

³⁸ Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan*, p. 90.

communities. Many of the verses of the Qur'an come in general statements and therefore in need of explanations to make them applicable. Other verses come with multiple potential meanings and therefore in need of serious deliberation before coming up with the best option. Muslims face constant changes in their lives and in constant need of new religious guidance from those capable of free thinking (*ijtihad*). These roles are played by the 'ulamâ' who wrote their opinion in *kitab kuning*.³⁸

Being the source of legitimacy the teaching of *kitab kuning* becomes indispensable for the training of future 'ulamâ' at MQA. In other words, without *kitab kuning*, the *madrasah's* basic mission as "ulamâ' factory" cannot be achieved.³⁹ This kind of attitude toward *kitab kuning* should not be surprising for it comes from the fold of Al Washliyah. One top-flight *âlim* of this organization, KH Ramli Abdul Wahid, has always been insisting that those without mastery of *kitab kuning* cannot be considered as 'ulamâ' in the real sense of the word.⁴⁰ Because, only through *kitab kuning* one would master the teachings of Islam and at the same time connected to the proper chain of transmissions.

Kitab Kuning and Contemporary Religious Issues

Although *kitab kuning* books were produced in the past, Al Washliyah 'ulamâ' in general considered *kitab kuning* as 'manual' in answering contemporary Islamic problems. There is a strong belief that *kitab kuning* brings in itself the potential to answer to any question posed by social historical developments. Therefore, when new question arises, *kitab kuning* should be consulted first.⁴¹

An excellent example of this can be seen in Lahmuddin Nasution, an Al Washliyah 'ulamâ'. He was entrusted to manage an 'Islamic Consultation' rubric at a local newspaper, *Waspada*, from 1999-2005. One striking feature of his answers was its consistent reference to *kitab kuning* works that are widely circulated among Al Washliyah 'ulamâ', such as *Al-Aḥkâm fî Ushûl al-Aḥkâm* of al-Âmidî; *Fath al-Mu'în* of al-Malîbârî; *Hâsiyah al-Dusûqî* of Dusûqî; *Kitâb al-Umm* of al-Syâfi'î; *Al-Majmû' Syarḥ al-Muhadzdzab* of al-Muthî'î; *I'ânat al-Thâlibîn* of al-Dimyâthî; *Mughnî al-Muhtâj ilâ Ma'rifat Ma'ânî al-Minhâj* of al-Syarbînî; *Minhâj al-Thâlibîn wa-Umdat al-Muftîn* of Al-Nawawî; *Syarḥ al-Maḥallî 'alâ al-Minhâj* of Al-Maḥallî; or *Al-Luma' fî Ushûl al-Fiqh* of al-Syîrâzî. The content of the rubric was published later on in a book entitled *Umat Bertanya, Ulama Menjawab*. In his preface to this book, Lahmuddin Nasution, writes: "In general, the content of these essays is nothing more than excerpts from standard works in fields of Islamic Law, Tradition, Qur'anic Exegesis, and

³⁹ Edi Zuhrawardi Pane, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May 16, 2017.

⁴⁰ Abdul Wahid, "Peran Universitas Al Washliyah," pp. 116, 101; also Abdul Wahid, *Anak Desa Tak Bertuan*, p. 92.

⁴¹ Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan*, p. 90.

⁴² Nasution, *Umat Bertanya, Ulama Menjawab*, p. v.

so on, according to the questions posed.⁴² Lahmuddin Nasution was very charismatic 'ulamâ', partly due to his superb mastery of *kitab kuning* and consistency in referring to them for any religious consultation.⁴³

Kitab Kuning in Islamic Propagation

Al Washliyah involves in Islamic propagation through its 'ulamâ'. As a matter of fact this has been one of its missions since the very beginning—one of its divisions is the Majelis Tabligh.⁴⁴ This division organizes propagation activities in the society at large, making sure that Muslims are provided with religious guidance. Generations of graduates of MQA have been involved greatly in this line of service. The fact that they are well versed in *kitab kuning* gives them special appreciation. During its initial decades there had been program of recruiting students from parts of North Sumatra (sometimes beyond) to study at MQA. More often than not, these students would return to their respective hometown and become agents of Islamic propagation there.⁴⁵

At least up to mid-1980s, MQA certificate was considered as guarantee of mastery of Islamic sciences. Thus the ability of MQA's graduates in providing religious guidance and counseling is generally highly appreciated by the Muslim communities. Again, this high esteem has everything to do with the fact that they have learnt Islam from high authoritative sources, namely *kitab kuning*. Although generally religious guidance is delivered orally (*tablîgh*, *tawshiyah*), there is strong belief that they derive their religious teachings from written classical sources.⁴⁶ But there is another form of the usage of *kitab kuning* in Islamic propagation; that is by having non-formal classes based on a certain book. Among those who prefer this method was Lahmuddin Nasution, a high profile Al Washliyah scholar. He led a weekly *majlis ta'lim* at the Mosque of the University of Al Washliyah in Medan for a long period of time. The sessions were based on book on Islamic Law and Theology, such as *I'ânât al-Thâlibîn* of Al-Dimyâthî. He also taught *Syarh al-Hikam* of Ibn 'Athâ'llâh in a scheduled *majlis ta'lim* held at the house of one his disciples. *Syarh al-Hikam* is a classic book on Sufism many find very hard to discern.

When a session is based on a book, it is normally starts by reading a short passage followed by explanation then he continues with reading some more portion of the book and again followed by explanation. The explanation could take any or combination of:

⁴³ Lahmuddin Nasution studied at MQA for a while sometime during the second half of the 1960s, although did not graduate from it. On the career of Nasution, see Azhari Akmal Tarigan (ed.) *Menjaga Tradisi Mengawal Modernitas: Apresiasi terhadap Pemikiran dan Kiprah Lahmuddin Nasution* (Bandung: Citapustaka Media, 2009).

⁴⁴ Hasanuddin, *Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah*, p. 62.

⁴⁵ Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan*, p. 92.

⁴⁶ Jamaluddin Batubara, headmaster of MQA, interview in Medan, May 08, 2017.

⁴⁷ See Lahmuddin Nasution, "Metodologi Pengkajian *Kitab kuning*," in Azhari Akmal Tarigan

1) translating the reading into Indonesian language; 2) linguistic explanation that involve in the translation process most likely to include grammar, syntax, and lexicography; 3) methodological elaboration which might include legal principles, logic, and exegetical procedures; and 4) contextualization of the reading into contemporary realities, most often through association and syllogism.⁴⁷

In comparison with merely verbal presentation the book-based *majlis ta'lim* has some advantages: 1) the theme of the *majlis ta'lim* is clear. Once a *kitab kuning* is chosen as textbook for a *majlis ta'lim* it means a theme has been determined; 2) with the chosen book comes organization of topics and sequence of materials, referring to the organization of the book in question; 3) relative uniformity in the interest of the audience. The textbook chosen naturally function as audience selection device in the sense that only those interested in the particular book are expected to attend the *majlis ta'lim*; 4) the possibility of learning evaluation. Although learning evaluation sounds very unusual in the case of *majlis ta'lim*, it is actually very feasible when the *majlis ta'lim* is based on a prescribed book. It is so because all audience experiences a relatively uniform learning experience and receives the same body of knowledge.

MQA *vis-à-vis* the Joint Decree of 1975: A Strategy

Soon after its independence in 1945 Indonesia started to develop its national education system. The general policy was to take over and nationalize the education system left by the colonial forces. But part of the program was defining the position of *madrasah* in the newly developed national education system. Before independence, Al Washliyah developed its chain of *madrasahs* independently with no support from the colonial administration.⁴⁸ In fact, Islamic education institutions of the time did not simply perform educational functions per se but also involved in the struggle for independence.⁴⁹ Many from their ranks are recognized as national heroes for their services in this respect.

One of the steps taken by the government to accommodate *madrasah* into national education system was imposing curriculum adjustment. As has been noted above, Al Washliyah started its *madrasahs* in the 1930s with the core mission of educating young '*ulamâ'*' and to ensure that its curriculum was made of 70% Islamic sciences. In 1975, Indonesian

(ed.), *Menjaga Tradisi Mengawal Modernitas: Apresiasi terhadap Pemikiran dan Kiprah Lahmuddin Nasution* (Bandung: Citapustaka Media, 2009), pp. 136-144.

⁴⁸ The general policy of the Dutch colonial administration was to favor education institutions administered by Christians by providing them lavish financial assistance. Mohammad Iskandar dan Achmad Syahid, "Islam dan Kolonialisme," dalam Taufik Abdullah, *et al.* (ed.) *Ensiklopedi Tematis Dunia Islam: Asia Tenggara* (Jakarta: Ichtiar Baru van Hoeve, 2003), Vol. 5, h. 318.

⁴⁹ Haidar Putra Daulay, *Sejarah Pertumbuhan dan Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Prenada Media, 2009), pp. 28-38.

government issued the Joint Degree of Three Ministers that regulates *madrasah*'s curriculum. This Joint Degree is in fact a culmination point of series of discussions (at time more like negotiations) between the government (Ministry of Religious Affairs) and operators of *madrasahs*, in most cases Islamic organizations, such as Al Washliyah.⁵⁰ The Joint Degree aims at modernizing *madrasah* education and to at the same time to establish its status in the national education system. Among many articles of the Joint Degree the most relevant to the present discussion concerns curriculum. It stipulates that *madrasah*'s curriculum must be 70% general subjects and only 30% Islamic sciences. By complying with this regulation, *madrasah* is to be regarded equal to the school system which is basically developed out of the colonial education system. With that, *madrasah* graduates are eligible for tertiary education and formal jobs in government offices.

The Joint Degree challenges MQA greatly and puts in a serious dilemma. On one hand the stipulated proportion of curriculum could cut its tradition, undermine its identity, and makes it impossible to realize its mission. On the other hand, however, it offers modernization, opens new opportunities for its graduates and provides chances for their vertical mobilization. Resisting the Joint Degree would mean that MQA has to play outside of the system. In response to these two opposite choices MQA apply certain strategies to ensure the continuation of its *kitab kuning* tradition and to keep on preparing future 'ulamâ' for the Muslim communities.

These strategies could be summed up as follows:

Learning Time Efficiency

The mandatory state curriculum cannot be but extra work hours for MQA. Al Washliyah had from the beginning developed its own *madrasah* curriculum that includes four levels and each level was further divided into stages. When MQA adopted the state sponsored curriculum the room for *kitab kuning* decrease significantly. A senior teacher puts it: "... the Joint Degree intervenes and weakens MQA significantly in its achievement in teaching *kitab kuning* ..." ⁵¹

From pragmatic point of view, the simplest easy-to-do respond would be replacing the old curriculum all together with the new state sponsored one. However, MQA did not opt this. Having a well-established learning tradition, it opts to maintain its old curriculum and at the same time shows minimum compliance with the Joint Decree. Headmaster of MQA explains: "In order to maintain the curriculum of Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah, we need to be absolutely careful about time management. We also insert the subject-matters prescribed

⁵⁰ Asari, "'Ulamâ' Training and Modernizing Al Washliyah Madrasah," pp. 161-163.

⁵¹ Edi Zuhrawardi Pane, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May, 16 2017.

by the Joint Decree into our own *kitab kuning*-based subjects.”⁵² This policy is explained to all MQA’s stakeholders especially teachers. A teacher further argues that MQA can do nothing except to make time adjustment: “... MQA has to make do with less room for *kitab kuning* by using the available time allocation as efficient as possible. Before [Joint Decree] six-teaching-hour per week was allocated for every *kitab kuning*-based subject. Now we have to struggle to achieve our objectives with only four-teaching –hour per week.”⁵³

It might be added that unlike the normal practice of pesantren, MQA has no dormitory. In general pesantrens could maintain their *kitab kuning* tradition because all students live at campus. Many pesantrens simply consider the curriculum of Joint Decree complementary to their original curriculum.⁵⁴ At MQA, in apart from school time efficiency, things are left to the hands of students to study *kitab kuning* independently.

Modification of Islamic Subject Matters

Another strategy of MQA in responding to Joint Decree is modification or adjustment of Islamic subject matter prescribed therein. As has been stated earlier the Joint Decree that *madrasah*’s curriculum should be made of 70% general subjects and 30% Islamic subjects. Each group is further organized into several subject matters. MQA implements the 70% general subjects according to the new regulation, but makes necessary adjustments in regards the Islamic subjects.

According to the Joint Degree Islamic sciences in *madrasah*’s curriculum consist of five subject matters: 1) The Qur’an and Prophetic Tradition; 2) Theology and Ethics; 3) Islamic Law; 4) History of Islamic Civilization; and 5) Arabic Language. In substance these subject matters have always been taught at MQA, using *kitab kuning* as textbooks. However, at MQA they are known with different nomenclatures. So, MQA’s strategy is “... incorporating these Islamic subject matters of the state sponsored curriculum into *kitab kuning*-based subjects.”⁵⁵ In fact MQA maintains its original nomenclatures and uses its traditional *kitab kuning* to teach them, such as: *Minhâj al-Thâlibîn* (Islamic Law), *Tafsîr Ibn Katsîr* (Qur’anic Exegesis), *Jawâhir al-Bukhârî* (Prophetic Tradition), and *Mau’izhah al-Mu’minîn* (Ethics).

With this strategy, MQA struggles to maintain its *kitab kuning* tradition and at the same time shows some accommodative attitude toward state-sponsored development.

⁵² Jamaluddin Batubara, headmaster of MQA, interview in Medan, May 08, 2017.

⁵³ Muhammad Shaleh Umar, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May 16, 2017

⁵⁴ Al Rasyidin, “Pembelajaran *Kitab kuning* di Pesantren Musthafawiyah, mandailing Natal,” in *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. I, No. 1, 2017; Dihyatun Masqon, “Dynamic of Pondok Pesantren as Indegenous Islamic Education Centre in Indonesia,” in *Tsaqafah: Jurnal Peradaban Islam*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2011.

⁵⁵ Jamaluddin Batubara, headmaster of MQA, interview in Medan, April 3, 2017.

At MQA, the Islamic sciences are organized into more subject matters: Qur'anic Exegesis, Prophetic Tradition, Islamic Law, Philosophy of Islamic Law, Principles of Islamic Law, Theology, Ethics, Logic, History, Arabic Literature, Arabic Grammar, Arabic Syntax, Comparative Religions, and Qur'an Memorization.⁵⁶ So, there are fifteen subject matters as compared to just five according to the Joint Decree. In teaching these subjects *kitab kuning* is used as textbooks. It might be added that the contents of these subjects are much more advances when compared with those required by the Joint Decree. This should be clear by comparing *Minhâj al-Thâlibîn*, *Tafsîr Ibn Katsîr*, *Jawâhir al-Bukhârî* and *Mau'izhah al-Mu'minîn* with the textbooks suggested by the Joint Decree. In the field of Arabic Language this gap is even wider, because MQA still maintains Arabic Literature, Arabic Grammar, and Arabic Syntax as separate subject matters and allocates specific time for each. The Joint Decree curriculum requires nothing but very basic knowledge of Arabic language.

Evaluation of Kitab Kuning Textbooks

The pressure resulted from the implementation of the Joint Decree *madrasah's* curriculum also entails a kind of evaluation on the *kitab kuning* books used as textbooks at MQA. The time allocation for general subjects as required by the Joint Decree has naturally reduced the time for *kitab kuning*. With this reduced time, it is much more difficult to achieve the traditional standard of MQA for *kitab kuning* learning. Therefore some very complicated *kitab kuning* books are replaced with easier ones.⁵⁷

- a. *Al-Luma' fî Ushûl al-Fiqh* of Abû Ishâq al-Syîrâzî has been used as main reference in learning Philosophy of Islamic Law (Usul Fikih) since the beginning of MQA. Later, with less time available, *Al-Luma'* is deemed too difficult to discern and its content is too advanced for high school level such as MQA. Some argue that *Al-Luma'* should be used at university level. This is indeed a big shift: a book that in the past was considered suitable and has always been used is now replaced for being too advanced. Lately, MQA uses *Al-Waraqât fî Ushûl al-Fiqh* of Imâm al-Haramayn al-Juwaynî for the same subject matter.⁵⁸ This book is considered simpler and more likely to be understood in a relatively shorter time.
- b. *Matan Rahbiyyah fî 'Ilm al-Farâ'idh wal-Mîrâts* of Imâm al-Rahbî has always been used at MQA in learning about Islamic Law of Inheritance. Later on, it is considered too sophisticated and therefore replaced with a more accessible one, that is *Al-Mawârits fî al-Syarî'ah al-Islâmiyyah fî Dhaw' al-Kitâb wal-Sunnah* by 'Alî al-Shâbûnî.

⁵⁶ Administration Office of MQA: Graphic Information, May 08, 2017.

⁵⁷ Muhammad Shaleh Umar, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May 17, 2017

⁵⁸ Ihyaur Rahmi, "Dinamika Historis Madrasah Muallimin UNIVA (1958-2018)" (Thesis, UIN SU Medan, 2019), p. 37.

- c. In teaching Islamic History MQA traditionally used *Itmâm al-Wafâ' fi Sîrat al-Khulafâ'* of Muhammad Khudharî Bîk. Later on it was replaced with a work by the same author but considered to be easier, i.e. *Nûr al-Yaqîn fi Sîrat Sayyid al-Mursalîn*. In earlier decades *Nûr al-Yaqîn* was used at Tsanawiyah (junior high school) *madrasahs* of Al Washliyah.

In short some books were put under assessment and then replaced for a simple reason of "... being too difficult for students to understand."⁵⁹ But this difficulty was not there before the enactment of the Joint Decree of 1975. Indeed *kitab kuning* works present special challenges for its readers. They cannot be read like modern Arabic books. They are written in classical Arabic (*fushhâ*) and generally come in special mode of presentation (no diacritical marks, no clear indication of chapters or sub-chapters, and so on). It certainly takes reasonable amount of time to get one familiar with them. As such the replacement of some books with easier ones could be seen as practical solution for MQA.⁶⁰

MQA, 'Ulamâ' Training, and *Kitab Kuning*: the Future in the Reflection of the Present

Education of young 'ulamâ' was the original mission of Al Washliyah *madrasahs*. Consequently, *kitab kuning* became very important in them. For at least half of a century since its establishment in 1930, Al Washliyah had been very successful in this mission. It delivered what it promised and for that it received the appreciation it deserved from Muslim communities. MQA was one of the most successful and popular among Al Washliyah *madrasahs*. As part of modernization of *madrasah* system, in mid 1970s the government introduced a new *madrasah* curriculum and effectively supervised its implementation. This fundamentally different curriculum puts MQA in a heavy test that might be called existential: to be or not to be. MQA opted a middle path of convergence, i.e. stick to its *kitab kuning* tradition and at the same time accommodate the change. Swell aware that it was a hard choice, MQA implements the some strategies that have been outlined above.

It should be noted that the exponents of MQA accept the new state sponsored curriculum very reluctantly and start to implement it when there is no alternative left. To them the price of this change is extremely high, that is sacrificing their *kitab kuning* tradition which has been the institution's success factor for decades. One informant, very regretfully, laments that the Joint Decree "... has to be implemented ... However this *madrasah* is essentially sticking to the dreams of its founding fathers and must use *kitab*

⁵⁹ Muhammad Shaleh Umar, senior teacher of MQA, interview in Medan, May 17, 2017.

⁶⁰ On the cahllenges of learning *kitab kuning* and some suggestions on the problem, see Hasan Asari, *Menguak Sejarah Mencari 'Ibrah: Risalah Sejarah Sosial-Intelektual Muslim Klasik* (Medan: Perdana Publishing, 2017), pp. 98-108.

⁶¹ Edi Zuhrawardi Pane, senior teacher of MQA, interview Medan, May 17, 2017.

kuning. ... MQA ... shall never deviate and betray the original provisions formulated by the founding 'ulamâ'."61 One other informant explains the pragmatic aspect of the change, saying: "Why do we obey the Joint Decree of Three Ministers? Because if we don't, the existence of our *madrasah* will not be recognized by the government and our graduates denied the civil effects of their education."62

Reluctance—indeed rejection for some time in the beginning—to implement the new curriculum should not be seen merely in the context of MQA, especially not by highlighting its pride of its past. This attitude must also be put in a broader context, i.e. the real need of the Muslim communities for 'ulamâ'. Complaint about serious shortage of well qualified 'ulamâ' in the society does not concern just MQA, or Al Washliyah, or just any group of Muslims. As such it must be taken as representing substantial need of the Muslim community as a whole which happen to find its manifestation at MQA. After implementing the new curriculum—even with some strategies mentioned above—what had been feared has indeed taken place. The capacity of MQA to produce young 'ulamâ' has been reduced significantly.

A senior teacher who has been around before the implementation of the Joint Decree curriculum expresses his deep concern about the decreasing quality of *kitab kuning* teaching at MQA during the past three decades or so.⁶³ Another informant says that the implementation of the new curriculum has brought systemic far reaching effects on MQA. In the past there had been a program of sending students from different districts of North Sumatra to study at MQA. Upon graduation, they would generally return to their respective home town and become religious teachers. Some even become 'ulamâ' in due time. This program resulted in a network of alumni that in turn strengthen the existence of MQA and provide lit with an ever enlarging influence. With the new curriculum the objectives shifted and becoming 'ulamâ' is no longer that central. There are no longer envoys of students as before. This does not simply reduce the student intake. More seriously it weakens the networks of Al Washliyah 'ulamâ'. Many elder 'ulamâ' passed away with no heir at sight. In other words the regeneration of 'ulamâ' comes to a halt.⁶⁴ This alarming phenomenon has been expressed repeatedly Ramli Abdul Wahid, a senior Al Washliyah 'ulamâ'.⁶⁵

This internal change also has to do with international reputation of Al Washliyah *madrasahs*. During its heyday, with its own original curriculum, MQA had ties with some universities in the Middle East. MQA's graduates were accepted to continue their education at undergraduate level for certain departments, like Islamic Theology, Islamic Law, Qur'anic

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Jamaluddin Batubara, headmaster of MQA, interview in Medan, May 08, 2017.

⁶⁵ Abdul Wahid, "Peran Universitas Al Washliyah," pp. 116, 101; and Abdul Wahid, *Anak Desa Tak Bertuan*, p. 92.

Exegesis, or Prophetic Tradition. They were welcomed even by the celebrated Al Azhar University in Egypt.⁶⁶

However, this is no longer the case. The latest known of MQA graduate being accepted in the Middle East was in 2001. This appears to be the result of serious decline in both academic quality and administration. With *kitab kuning* being pushed aside it is almost impossible to find a graduate who is ready for higher education in the Middle East. In addition, there used to be special body that administered the program of sending MQA's graduates to the Middle East which is no longer in place.⁶⁷ Continuing education to Middle Eastern countries has always been considered as special prestige by Indonesian '*ulamâ*' and Muslims in general. In fact, Al Washliyah has responded to this in the very beginning of its establishment. One of its divisions was called Majelis Studies Fond, specially devised to raise fund and provide scholarship for Al Washliyah students abroad. Unfortunately, this division did not function effectively for long time and could sponsor only a few students.⁶⁸

So far, one should be crystal clear: MQA is undergoing a very serious setback in its *kitab kuning* tradition. As a result MQA can no longer fill the need of Muslim communities for fresh generation of '*ulamâ*' as it did in the future. Some measures have been taken to cope with the problem but they are apparently not good enough to keep its golden reputation. The strategies of MQA have been so far successful in keeping the tradition but the quality of its output and out come by no means comparable with that of the past. In other words, the reputation and prestige of MQA is in a serious test. New thinking and initiatives are needed to save MQA's mission of educating new generation of '*ulamâ*' which it has been able to deliver for a half of a century.⁶⁹

Conclusion

MQA was born out of the womb of Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah and was designed since the very beginning to prepare young '*ulamâ*' to fill the need of Muslim communities. Using *kitab kuning* books as learning resources MQA successfully accomplished its

⁶⁶ In fact there was a case where a graduate of MQA was accepted to continue to master program in the Middle East. See Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan*, p. 44.

⁶⁷ Interview with headmaster of MQA, Jamaluddin Batubara, Medan, May 08, 2017.

⁶⁸ Hasanuddin, *Al-Jam'iyatul Washliyah*, p. 62. See a study on the influence of this Middle Eastern networks, especially that of Al Azhar, in Indonesia, in Mona Abaza, *Indonesian Students in Cairo* (Paris: Associaton Archipel, 1994).

⁶⁹ It seems in order to bring to light new ideas and initiatives on the matter. Preliminary information could be obtained through Meskipun Hamid Fahmi Zarkasyi, "Modern *Pondok Pesantren*: Maintaining Tradition in Modern System," in *Tsaqafah: Jurnal Peradaban Islam*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2015; Ahmad Saifuddin, "Eksistensi Kurikulum Pesantren dan Kebijakan Pendidikan," in *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, Vol. III, No. 1, 2015. Some new techniques to learn *kitab kuning* have been introduced, for examples 'Metode Hikari' of Agus Purwanto, 'Metode 33' of Habib Syakur, or 'Metode Al-Ankabut,' of Abu Syifa.

missions. It became one of the most important centers of 'ulamâ' training in North Sumatra at least until the middle of the 1980s. It became known as 'factory of 'ulamâ' and gain respect from 'ulamâ' and the masses in general. Standardization of *madrasah* curriculum by the government in the middle of the 1970s challenged MQA and the whole system of its operation and tradition. This policy put MQA in a great dilemma: adopting the new state sponsored curriculum in full or disregard it altogether, each with its consequences. MQA takes a middle-way maintaining its *kitab kuning* tradition and at the same time adopting the new curriculum.

Some strategies are devised to make this combined policy work. MQA appears to have done all that can be done to implement the chosen strategies. But, after three decades, it is getting more and more evident that those strategies are not yielding the expected results. Preparing young 'ulamâ' based on *kitab kuning* tradition requires a full time focused education. It necessitates full commitment and high concentration. It cannot be done other ways.

Realizing that the present strategies are not up to expectation is something. Finding new more effective strategies is something else. However, one thing is certain: as long as MQA—or Al Washliyah for that matter—would like to continue its original mission of preparing young generation of 'ulamâ', new ways and strategies must be found and implemented. In recent years, some new ways of learning *kitab kuning* have been introduced! Their effectiveness and efficiency are yet to be seen.

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