Malay Society of the Late 19th and Early 20th Century: Blind Imitation vs Independent Reasoning

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Abstract: Malays of the late 19th and early 20th century are divided into two major factions. They are either the advocators of blind imitation or the supporters of independent reasoning. This article discusses the aspects of blind imitation and independent reasoning in the Malay society at that time. The objective is to examine the place of the faculty of reason in the Malay society. It is also to evaluate the true attitude of the Malays towards blind imitation and independent reasoning. Library and archive research methods were used to examine the social atmosphere and religious practice of the time. The study revealed that independent reasoning was not only advocated by the Young Faction but it was also held by a small segment of the Old Faction. This writing may provide a different perspective about the Malays of the late 19th and early 20th century.

Key words: Malay · Blind imitation · Independent reasoning · Young Faction · Old Faction · 19th century · 20th century

INTRODUCTION

Traditionalist Malays of the late 19th and early 20th century were usually labelled as advocates of blind imitation while refusing to accept any practice of exercising independent reasoning. They comprised the largest number of Malays and they had outnumbered their opponents, i.e. the modernists. The traditionalists were seen behind in terms of progress and the needs of the time when compared to the modernists. The declining state of the Malays deeply disturbed the modernists and this spurred them into action. The educational reform in Egypt was regarded as the most important thrust to the Malay reformists-cum-modernists' thoughts on the restoration of the Malays.

According to their personal outlook on the traditionalist Malays, the latter's mindset was formed and influenced by the Malay culture and civilization. This made them prone to blind adherence to some pertinent concepts held by their forefathers - otherwise known as blind imitation (*taqlid buta*). Hence, the Malays rejected any new ideas pertaining to several matters. In this respect, one needs to sift through relevant materials to seek out the status of the faculty of reason in the Malay society and to acquire a cohesive understanding of the Malays' views on blind imitation and independent reasoning.

The Malays in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century: In the mid-19th century, a large number of Malays earned their living at paddy fields, farms and rivers. Others were doing other jobs such as being schoolteachers, policemen, office workers, labourers and small traders. Towards the end of the 19th century, they also participated in small-scale coffee and rubber growing and ore mining. The profitable ore-mining industry attracted keen interest from many Chinese in the mainland who migrated to Malaya to have a share in the profits. Ore mining turned out to be a promising business for the Chinese as they brought a new technique of mining to

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Malaya. The Malays did not partake much in this industry and therefore the immigrants and the foreign merchants controlled it [1].

The Chinese, who used to be coolies, began running big businesses and became economically prosperous. It seemed to the Malay that the new Malaya was not like his own country. It was indicated that in 1880's, the Chinese already managed big businesses such as the steamer, an essential mode of transport for passengers and goods from one port to another [2]. As far as the Indians of Malaya were concerned, they were not only rubber tappers as some of them became general public workers. Chinese, Indians and Eurasians mostly held clerical posts in the government offices [3]. They were competing among themselves to secure positions in the government's administration whilst it was to be beyond the reach of ordinary Malays.

The above social condition of the Malays ignited the modernists to provide them with the appropriate platform for a change. New ideas and thoughts were expressed in works such as *al-Imam* (The Leader), *al-Ikhwan* (The Comrade) and *Saudara* (The Brotherhood). In fact, the publication of *al-Imam* marked a transformation of journalism in Malaya, from ordinary mundane subject matters to important issues and the problems faced by the Malays. Prior to 1906, the mundane subject matters as covered by the Malay newspapers dealt with issues such as the sentence construction of Malay language, its grammar and aspects of essay writing. The papers also covered local and foreign news but issues related to the Malays were rarely debated. *al-Imam*, however, streamed ideas on religious reforms, on the problems of the Malays and its possible solutions. Advocates of *Al-Imam* called for an independent reasoning (*ijtihad*), whilst it insisted upon the eradication of blind imitation (*taqlid*). These advocators also encouraged the Malays to make use of their reason to spearhead them towards progress [4].

Besides, the modernists utilized the platform of magazines, books, novels and narratives to disseminate their ideas on how to make progress in politics, economy and society. Such dissemination of thoughts on reform was to spark a revival movement in Malaya. They believed that transformation of the Malay community into a progressive nation required an intensive involvement by the press and journalism. Through the medium of writings, the Malays were urged to embrace reforms with an open mind [5,6]. The main thrust of the modernists' thoughts on transformation and reform brought about a mixed reaction among the people in Malaya. Their ideas on transformation did not sit well with the traditionalists or

Old Faction (*Kaum Tua*). The ideas, however, gained support from those who were called Young Faction (*Kaum Muda*) or reformists-cum-modernists.

The terms *Kaum Muda* and *Kaum Tua* to a certain extent illustrated a religious conflict between two groups. The conflict between the reformists or modernists (*Kaum Muda*) and the traditionalists (*Kaum Tua*) arose due to their diverse understanding of religion and the status of reason [7]. The traditionalists firmly believed in the closing of the door of *ijtihad* in Islamic jurisprudence. They were opposed to making use of reason as promoted by the modernists, who held onto reasoning in almost all issues including those related to religion [8]. The traditionalists, as Fedrspiel says [9]:

> Believed that the truth expressed in the teachings of the great Islamic scholars of classical and medieval Islam--such as Ghazali, Maturidi and al-Ash'ari in theology and the *imams* of the great *madhhabs* in jurisprudence--did not change. That truth, *kaum tua* argued, did not ever need to be brought to trial since it was not ever altered by the change of time and conditions and was as valid in twentieth century as when it was formulated. A re-examination of Qur'an and *hadith* was not only unnecessary but also dangerous since it could lead to misinterpretation and error.

On the other hand, the modernists were inclined to independent reasoning (*ijtihad*), wherein faculty of reason is used to re-examine the Qur'an and the Sunnah. It was done to make religious teachings compatible with the changing time [8]. The Malay modernists denounced derivative belief (*taqlid*) or "unquestioning obedience to the interpretation and teachings of religious law expounded by the four classical schools of Muslim jurisprudence and their systems" [8,10]. *Taqlid* was against their principle that advocated absolute independent reasoning in all issues pertaining to religious aspects. Their most important objective was to purify religion from any corrupted elements which include innovation (*bida'ah*) and superstitions (*khurafat*). They firmly believed in the need for religious reform so as to make Muslim thoughts and practice viable with the times. They, as maintained by Ferdspiel, "marshalled considerable evidence from religious courses, primarily Qur'an and *hadith*, supported it with the arguments of the modernist Muslims of the Middle East and argued it with force and reason to prove the validity of their own viewpoint and to dispute the stand of their adversaries" [9].

Independent Reasoning (*Ijtihad*) vs Blind Imitation (*Taqlid*): As mentioned earlier, the conflict between *Kaum Muda* and *Kaum Tua* centred round the validity of reason to verify religious matters. As far as the status of reason is concerned, Islam, as quoted by Syed Shaykh from Abduh's statement, commended those who use reason in criticising those religious scholars, who blindly followed the teachings of early scholars [11] as the Qur'an says, "when it is said to them: Follow what Allah has revealed. They say, No! We shall follow the ways of our fathers. What! Even though their fathers were void of wisdom and guidance?" [12]. It follows from this Qur'anic verse that it illustrates one major reason for the Muslim modernists' opposition towards blind imitation (*taqlid*) and their emphasis on the dire need to use reason. To them, instead of simply accepting the words and opinions of the religious scholars, man is required to make use of reason to distinguish between the valid and invalid opinions [11], or to reinterpret them.

Syed Shaykh, supported by Abdul Rahim Kajai and Muhammad Basiyuni 'Imran who wrote in *al-Ikhwan*, was convinced that advocators of *taqlid* rejected the use of reason in religion as they claimed that the practice conflicted with the Qur'an. He maintained that the traditionalists claimed that the opinions of early and medieval Muslim scholars hold equal authority with that of the Qur'an and Sunnah. They branded those Malays, who relied on evidences from the divine sources, as men of independent reasoning (*mujtahid*) [13]. In the opinion of Muhammad Basiyuni, the use of the term *mujtahid* to refer to the modernists was to show hatred and anger of the traditionalists towards those who declared themselves as those who did not practice *taqlid* (non-*muqallid*). The term *mujtahid* was in fact a derogatory term amongst the traditionalists [14].

To the traditionalists, it was highly impossible for one to make independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) as the knowledge needed to be a *mujtahid* had since discontinued several centuries ago [15]. They, according to M. Basyuni, did not accept idea that the door of *ijtihad* is still open for the creation of new Islamic laws as they thought that past Muslim scholars had closed the door of *ijtihad*. As such, in their view, *ijtihad* was definitely forbidden and they pronounced *taqlid* as compulsory. This doctrine, as M. Basiyuni asserted, was a stark contrast to the modernists' view that anyone, who met the requirements to be a *mujtahid*, was obliged to make *ijtihad* and therefore, was not allowed to simply adhere to *taqlid*. During that time, some of the religious scholars, who fulfilled the conditions of a *mujtahid*, themselves practised *taqlid* (*muqallid*) [14].

The door of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) is regarded as closed since all major Islamic legal decisions had been made by the tenth century by founders of the major schools of law (*madhahib*) of Islam. Jurists are thus, from then on, to adhere to the principles of the respective founders in exercising *ijtihad* while Muslims need to follow the rulings of one of the schools of law [16]. Al-Ghazali, who lived in that period, however, did not agree with the view that Muslims were to adopt blind imitation (*taqlid*). In *Al-Munqidh min Al-Dalal* (Deliverance from Error), he disagreed to accept knowledge based upon the authority of parents and teachers as true. al-Ghazali did not acknowledge the reliability of this authority and as such he sought to distinguish between true and false knowledge [17]. In *Al-Mankhul Min Al-Ta'liqat Al-Usul*, he classified knowledge that results from narrations (*sam'iyyat*), which is similar to *taqlid*, as the last kind of knowledge. This is due to its least clear of authority [18].

To the modernists, blind imitation was simply unacceptable as the traditional religious scholars of Malaya, who claimed to be Arabic experts, could miss the crucial point of the Qur'an's condemnation towards blind imitation (*taqlid*). These religious scholars simply relied on the opinions and interpretations of early Muslims to codify Islamic laws while neglecting the authority of divine sources [19]. Convinced in the principle that blind imitation (*taqlid*) was unacceptable, the modernists claimed that the view that the door to independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) was closed many years back thus made the traditionalist Malays, whether they were religious scholars or not, strictly adhere to the opinions of the early Muslim generations. The traditionalists rejected the use of reason to re-evaluate the opinions of early religious scholars as they firmly believed that these opinions are relevant at all times and circumstances. At the same time, they too prohibited a direct reference to the Qur'an and Sunnah in deducing laws using reason [20,21].

Based on Syed Shaykh's observation, he was convinced that the traditional religious scholars of Malaya had adequate ability to make *ijtihad*. However, they were very inclined to adhere to the previous opinion with no valid evidence. Thus, the traditional advocators simply held to the opinion of early Muslim scholars, who implemented Islamic legal laws that correspond to the needs of their time. The modernists, on the other hand, advocated the need for the use of reason to reinterpret those Islamic legal laws to correspond to their time, i.e. the early 20th century. Muslims should deduce Islamic laws

directly from the divine sources instead of merely relying on the works and opinion of early Muslim scholars. Thus, they are requested to study early Islamic history to learn the causes behind every legal opinion of that time [22].

The unquestionable dependence of the traditionalists on early Muslim scholars was detrimental in promoting the youngsters to use reason. This is due to their understanding of the Qur'an was influenced by the opinions of early scholars. This was encouraged by the traditionalists, whose opinions were highly regarded and considered as true teachings of Islam. Such unquestionable dependence of the traditionalists on early Muslim scholars had inadvertently nullified the value of reason and knowledge of these youngsters [23]. As some of the religious scholars blatantly used their religious knowledge as 'baits' to garner support and to receive privileges from the Malay leaders, the modernists condemned the Malays' blind acceptance of such religious scholars. To the modernists, human intellect can distinguish between truth and falsehood and reason would be relevant in ensuring that the opinions of the early scholars suit the needs and demands of his time.

In Syed Shaykh's view, any religious interpretations of the early Muslim scholars that conflict with the faculty of reason and are incongruent with the circumstances of his time needed to be re-evaluated and re-interpreted according to the Qur'an and Sunnah [22]. As such, a Muslim with sound intellect and knowledge did not simply accept the opinions of other Muslims. They would use their reason to evaluate these opinions and would take what is true and reject what is irreconcilable to the intellect [24]. Reason is thus a prerequisite for one to truly understand and appreciate the teachings of Islam. Sound reason opposes any religious practices that are derived from blind imitation. This kind of practice is to be regarded as futile except for those that are based on strong faith, sound reason and true knowledge [25].

It is indicated by the Malay modernists themselves that among other reasons for their rejection of reliance on opinions of early Muslim scholars was that the latter were not regarded as sacrosanct (*ma'sum*) and they were susceptible to make mistakes. The Malays thus were required to acquire knowledge and make use of reason to evaluate and examine the truth and validity of interpretations of these religious scholars. The modernists themselves maintained that they held fast to the authority of the Qur'an and Sunnah and placed divine sources higher than the opinions of early Muslim scholars.

Muslims, as they asserted, were allowed to refer to these scholars in understanding the Qur'an and Sunnah. However, divine sources are to be given priority when a conflict arises between these sources and the opinions of those religious scholars [23,26-28].

In order to support the importance of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*), the modernists listed several disadvantages of blind imitation (*taqlid*). Firstly, the faculty of reason, if not utilised, becomes useless; secondly, *taqlid* blocked one's inclination to acquire knowledge; thirdly, *taqlid* resulted in Muslim's backwardness and degradation intellectually, politically and economically; and fourthly, God denounced one who practices blind imitation (*muqallid*) [27] as mentioned in the Qur'an, when Allah says, "When it is said to them, follow what Allah has revealed, they say, nay, We shall follow the ways of our fathers" [29]. It follows from here that *ijtihad* was important to the modernists as man would refer to the Qur'an and Sunnah rather than blindly imitating or accepting the opinions of previous scholars. The support for *ijtihad* was aimed to correct the misunderstood concepts of *ijtihad* and *taqlid* by the Malays as they had strong inclinations towards blind imitation alone. Their mind was entangled with the views of early Muslim generation. Such phenomenon would deter the transformation and advancement of the Malays [25].

Beside these shortcomings, it is indicated that *taqlid* was previously the practice of Christians, who blindly followed the words of the priests in relation to religious law. The Christians simply believed in the teachings of the priests, although they lacked authoritative and valid evidence from the Bible. This was evident from the Qur'an as it says, "They take their priests and their monks to be their lords beside Allah" [30]. The verse criticises the practice and tradition of Christian *muqallid*, who merely resorted to blind imitation and rejected the use of reason. The Malays were thus encouraged not to follow the footsteps of the Christian *muqallid* because, if they were to do so, they tend to simply rely on the opinion of early Muslim scholars and this would lead them to stagnation [24].

From the discussion, we can say that Syed Shaykh and other Malay modernists probably thought that it is within the capacity of all the Malays to exercise *ijtihad* with the aid of their religious knowledge and the use of reason. They probably were not fully aware of the real capability of ordinary Malays to be able to do *ijtihad* or they possibly understood that everyone has a

qualification for *ijtihad*. This could be deciphered from Al-Shatibi, who maintained that qualifications for *ijtihad* Al-Shatibi, fall into two categories. They are simple *ijtihad* and specialised *ijtihad*. The former could be exercised by anyone while specialised *ijtihad* would be valid only if a qualified expert exercises it [31]. In this respect, it is important to mention that the Malay traditionalists, who were not scholars, in fact engaged in exercising such a simple *ijtihad*. It is apparent that the modernists did not diagnose the reality of the Malay community as they rather over generalised.

A study devised on the system of education at traditional religious schools (*pondoks*) in Kota Bharu, Kelantan shows that students did not solely rely on memorisation in their acquisition of religious knowledge. At these *pondoks*, a student is taught methods of the Qur'anic and Prophetic exegesis, coupled with the teaching of several disciplines of religious knowledge. They are useful tools to find a solution to any legal problems. The student is then given a question on the Islamic legal law and he needed to answer and explain it in depth. This explanation must be in his own words and they are based on the Qur'an, *hadith* and works of previous Muslim scholars. The student should use his faculty of reason to deduce an Islamic legal law and this must be aided by the above tools. As such, "independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) was possibly exercised in giving an opinion based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah" [32]. *Qiyas* (analogical reasoning) was also possibly used in this respect. Although it is almost clear that several *pondoks* did exercise *ijtihad* in discerning legal law, there is no mentioning about it in any of the modernists' works. This could be associated with their negative perception on the method of instruction in traditional religious schools.

One also finds that *taqlid* was not absolutely rejected by our previous great scholars. In his work known as *Al-Murshid al-Amin* (The Honest Guide), Al-Ghazali for instance, maintained that the Prophet said, "Seeking knowledge is compulsory upon Muslim men and women," means that "it is obliged upon a Muslim, after the age of puberty, to know the declaration of belief in the Oneness of God and in Muhammad as His final prophet (*kalimah syahadah*) and to understand its meaning. He is not, however, obliged to seek evidences [to have a deep understanding]. He only needs to have full conviction in the faith, even if he blindly adheres (*taqlid*) [to it]" [33].

In addition to this opinion, Al-Baghdadi (d.463H), a great Muslim scholar who specialised in tradition and history, had asserted that blind imitation (*taqlid*) is permissible to those who do not know the proper methods and workings of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). They are to adhere only to the opinion of sound religious scholars. On the other hand, scholars are not allowed to hold to blind imitation especially if they have sufficient time to reach a legal decision within the framework of Islamic law (*shar'iah*) [34]. These views of al-Ghazali and al-Baghdadi on the permissibility of blind imitation (*taqlid*) could be the evidence for the Malays to adhere to the opinions of previous scholars. *Taqlid* was then probably exercised in other aspects of their religious doctrine and practices.

It is probably right to say that the modernists' view that independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) must be exercised by Malays, who were Muslims, was not in line with that of the Middle Eastern modernists'. In their magazine namely *al-Manar*, these modernists maintained that *ijtihad* could be exercised only by those who are qualified. They called man to stress on *ijtihad* while opposing *taqlid* in order to place the Qur'an and the Sunnah above the works of earlier scholars. Their works, as maintained by these modernists, could be used only for the purpose of understanding the two primary sources [35]. Although the Malay modernists were seen to be somewhat not in line with their mentors, those modernists were said to be greatly influenced by the thought of Ibn Taymiyyah, who stood against *taqlid*, fought against superstitious practices (*khurafat*) and supported independent verdicts (*fatwas*) [39-39]. This statement may be linked to the fact that they all stressed on the use of one's faculty of reason, which involves reasoning and evidence.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the review that the use of the faculty of reason was the reason that causes conflict between the Old and Young Factions. Almost all the traditionalists Malays agreed that they were to hold to the opinions of the early Muslim scholars because the earlier did not fulfil the requirements to be a *mujtahid*. Blind imitation is thus always associated with the practice of the traditionalists, except a few. For this reason, the modernists attacked their opponents and contended that independent reasoning is within the capacity of every individual Malay-Muslim. From the discussion, it found that the modernists were not fully aware of the incapability of almost all ordinary Malays to exercise independent reasoning. The modernists likewise failed to acknowledge that early scholars did not absolutely reject blind imitation and a few practices of the traditionalists involved the use of the faculty of reason.

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