

Challenges of Islamic Education of Pondok Bantan in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand

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Abstract

The study analyses the educational issues and challenges of Pondok Bantan as an Islamic institution in Thailand. Fieldwork research has been carried out in 2018 and 2019. Data is collected using observation instruments and semi-structured interviews. Then it was analyzed descriptively. The study finds that Pondok Bantan needs to overcome several cultural and organizational issues and challenges to achieve its goal as a model of Islamic education institutions in Thailand. The study makes several recommendations such as modification of Islamic studies curriculum and initiation of a comprehensive training program as the way forward for Pondok Bantan to become a respected Islamic institution in future.

Keywords: Islamic Education, the Muslim Minority, Southeast Asia, Thailand, Pondok Bantan

Introduction

One of the main contributions of the Muslim community in Thailand to its national development is in the aspect of human resources development. Muslims' contributions in this field are realized through the establishment of educational institutions catering to the different levels of learning activities in their respective communities. In this regard, the contributions of Islamic education especially in Thailand include developing a learned and knowledge-based society, elevating the problem of illiteracy in the community, promoting national integration, and enhancing universal values of good citizenship among members of the society (Aree & Altafur, 2016; El-Mesawi, 2015; Bustaman- Ahmad, 2015; Bajunid, 2011). This study focuses on the roles, issues, and challenges of *Maahad Misbahuddin* or in Thai as *Prateepsasana Islamic School*, an Islamic school in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand, which is also known as Pondok Bantan, in contributing to nation-building in Thailand since its establishment in 1939.

The word 'pondok' is a Malay term referring to a small house sufficient for two or three persons. In the context of Malay-Muslim educational culture, the 'pondok' means the living quarters of students studying at traditional Islamic educational centers or institutions. It functions like 'hostels' in the modern context of education. In this regard, Anthony (2017) defines the 'pondok' as 'the huts that the boys stay in while pursuing their studies. The term *pondok* is generalized to refer to traditional Islamic learning institutions usually established by learned individuals or groups in Muslim communities to provide Islamic education and welfare services to the community especially its youth (Madmarn, 2001). In his studies on Islamic traditional schools, Madmarn reported that the government took steps to encourage the owners of traditional Islamic schools in Thailand to register their *pondoks* officially with the Education Ministry of Thailand and convert them to *rakyat* or people's private religious schools. According to a survey, 426 *pondoks* out of 487 have registered and converted their status into school or madrasah. Although their status has been changed and the learning practices modernized, the schools still retain the name "*pondok*" (Madmarn, 2001). The participation of Islamic education institutions in Thailand in this program is positive as it will ensure the institutions are not isolated from developments in national education and the students will not be marginalized in the process of nation-building in Thailand.

This paper is a result of a research project conducted by a group of researchers from the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia in 2019. The project was funded by UKM as part of its educational engagement program with Pondok Bantan. The program was initiated by the late Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, who was the former Secretary of ASEAN and happened to be the grandson of the founder of Pondok Bantan, who was Haji Yaakob bin Abdul Rauf. On 20 Jun 2017, Pitsuwan had written an official letter on behalf of the school to UKM's Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dr. Imran Ho Abdullah, inviting the university to support the educational mission of Pondok Bantan. He states:

"My family school (Pondok Bantan) in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, Southern Thailand, needs assistance in the form of Malay Language instructors quite urgently. We hope that UKM can encourage your student interns and researchers in the Malay language and culture outside the heartland of the Malay Cultural World. We are a full boarding school of 1,765 high school students and 637 kindergarten and primary school students. We have pockets of Malay communities where the Malay language and cultural norms are still alive and prevalent. A lot of opportunities and potential for the field of research and documentation" (Pitsuwan, 2017).

In response to the invitation, the university agreed to organize the UKM-Pondok Bantan Educational and Community Engagement Project and both institutions signed the memorandum of understanding for its implementation on 13 August 2017 (Rokiah et al., 2019). UKM assigned a group of researchers from the Faculty of Islamic Studies to examine the educational practices of Pondok Bantan and the challenges it faces as an Islamic educational institution in Thailand. This study applied the qualitative method with a descriptive approach. Interviews were conducted with several leading members and teachers of Pondok Bantan. Observations were conducted on the educational practices at the institution during fieldwork in 2018-19. Finally, the study recommends several ways for it to be a model Islamic education institution for Thailand in the future.

History, Roles and Development of Pondok Bantan as Islamic Education Institution in Thailand

Pondok Bantan is located at Ban Tan village in the Buddhist-majority community of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand. It was founded and managed by a group of Muslim scholars in the province in 1939. It offers basic and intermediate Islamic education, especially to the youth community in Thailand. Nakhon Si Thammarat is the second largest province in southern Thailand and lies about 780 kilometers from Bangkok the capital city of Thailand, along the Gulf of Thailand. The province is situated in the northern area of South Thailand. Its neighboring cities include Songkla, Pattalung, Trang, Krabi, and Surat Thani (Tourism Thailand, 2021). Farid et al (2019); Bayu (2020) argue that natively, Nakhon Si Thammarat or Nagara Sri Dharmaraja (in Pali-Sanskrit) was the capital city of the Kingdom of Ligor in the 13th century. Therefore, Nakhon Si Thammarat is also known as Kota Ligor by the Muslim-minority community in Thailand due to its historical linkage to the ancient city of the Malay Kingdom of Langkasuka. Until today, *Muslim Ligor* is a popular term used to refer to the community of Muslims living in Nakhon Si Thammarat.

As of 2018 statistics, the number of Muslims is 8.5 percent of the 1.560 million population of Nakhon Si Thammarat. Besides locals, Muslims in the province originate from Pattani, in Southern Thailand, and Kedah, the northern part of Malaysia. Migration and other economic and cultural interactions between Thai and Malay kingdoms in past centuries had contributed to the expansion of the Muslim population in Nakhon Si Thammarat. They mostly live in the areas now called Mueang, Talad Kheak, and Tha Sala (Farid et al., 2019).

Although Muslims are a minority in Nakhon Si Thammarat, and the majority are Buddhists, they are allowed by the Thai constitution to practice their religious beliefs freely. The Muslim community has used their religious rights to develop several religious and community institutions in the province to strengthen their religious understanding, preserve their cultural identity and at the same time contribute to the process of nation-building in Thailand. Among the main institutions that have been established are The Council of Islamic Affairs, mosques, Islamic schools, and business enterprises, which play important roles in organizing the religious and social well-being of the community in the province (Bayu Mitra, 2020; Farid et.al., 2019).

Pondok Bantan is one major institution established by the Muslim community of Nakhon Si Thammarat to support the need for Islamic education. It was founded by a religious scholar named Haji Yaakob bin Abdul Rauf who studied Islamic sciences in Makkah. After graduation, he founded Pondok Bantan with some of his family members and friends. It is amongst the earliest Islamic schools established in Nakhon Si Thammarat (Benjasamit, 2001). After Haji Yaacob's death, his son-in-law, Haji Ismail Pitsuwan, and his wife Hajjah Sofiah took over the school's leadership with help from several other learned friends. Currently, the school is run by a group of professional committees in Islamic education under the supervision of Haji Ismail Pitsuwan's family (Abdul Rahman, 2018).

According to Benjasamit (2001), Pondok Bantan plays an important role in providing the young generation of Nakhon Si Thammarat Islamic education, especially in the field of religious sciences. It has also become an alternative institution for Muslim students who previously had to travel to Patani, also a province of Southern Thailand, or Kelantan, Malaysia

to pursue an Islamic studies program. The establishment of Pondok Bantan created a new educational space for the Muslim community in Thailand and subsequently reduced student expenditure for living and traveling to learning institutions in Pattani and Kelantan. It has also contributed significantly, as stated by Rajoo (2007) in uplifting community awareness and quality of understanding of Islam amongst the Muslim community in Nakhon Si Thammarat. In the context of its contribution to nation-building, Pondok Bantan has participated extensively in offering learning opportunities, especially to Muslim citizens of Thailand, and at the same time overcoming the problem of illiteracy among the population through its educational programs, which include pre-school, primary, and secondary schools.

The total number of students enrolled for all levels of studies has reached more than 1,800 persons. They are mostly from Nakhon Si Thammarat locality and some others are from other provinces in Thailand (Asyikin, 2018; Salamiah et. al., 2019).

Pondok Bantan offers open enrolment to all students for its academic courses regardless of academic ability and background. This open enrolment approach is following the learning philosophy of the *pondok*, which aims at providing vast learning opportunities to all community members. Some illiterate students i.e. do not read the Quran nor write the basic Jawi script, have been admitted into Pondok Bantan (Huwaidiyah, 2018). Open enrolment has made Pondok Bantan a popular institution for Islamic education and services to all Muslims in Thailand without exception. It is in a sense democratization of education to extend and hasten its reach for the development of a knowledge-based society in Thailand especially among Muslims thereby substantially contributing to Thailand's nation-building as a whole.

After 80 years of establishment, Pondok Bantan has become a well-known Islamic education institution in Thailand. It is registered as a private people-based Islamic school under the Education Ministry of Thailand. Its extensive development today is due to the influence of modern ideas of Islamic education in the Muslim world and was motivated by the social obligation to fulfill the needs and demands for modern knowledge and skills. Pondok Bantan offers a combined education system incorporating the national curriculum that offers academic subjects and the Islamic studies curriculum that offers religious subjects. Haziyah et.al (2019) emphasized that Pondok Bantan is expanding its Islamic educational services to the community through the implementation of an integrative education system incorporating traditional and modern practices. Presently, it offers programs in traditional religious sciences, national curriculums academic courses, foreign languages such as Arabic, English, and Malay, and skills and training development programs. To further democratize education opportunities for all, Pondok Bantan also offers informal education services or lifelong education classes to the public on basic Islamic sciences conducted after school hours, usually during weekends or nights. Formally the students are also encouraged to participate in the free classes organized by Pondok Bantan to extend their understanding of Islamic knowledge and cultures of the world (Zain et al., 2019).

The recognition of Pondok Bantan's contributions to the national development of Thailand today is credited to the role and influence of Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, a respected national and international political figure of Thailand and Southeast Asia, who was also a graduate from Pondok Bantan during his early years of education. As a member of the school's

leadership committees, he campaigned for the modernization of Pondok Bantan, physically and culturally (Idris et al., 2019). Surin Pitsuwan's association and link to Pondok Bantan boosted support from government agencies and public institutions, nationally and internationally (Merican, 2017). Many parties have supported Pondok Bantan in the past decades, academically and financially such as the Islamic Development Bank and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation of Japan as well as individuals (New Mandala, 2013).

Educational Practises at Pondok Bantan and Its Several Issues and Challenges

Pondok Bantan provides multiple educational practices to serve the community and fulfill its objectives as an Islamic educational institution in Thailand. They can be divided into several aspects, as follows:

a) The Curriculum of the Islamic Studies Program

Pondok Bantan offers studies on subjects such as (a) the study of the Quran and its interpretation (*tafsir*); (b) the study of *Hadith* or the recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad; (c) Islamic Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*); and (d) Islamic Belief Principles (*Aqidah*) (Abdul Rahman, 2018; Ibrahim, 2018).

In terms of content, the studies at Pondok Bantan are based on classical religious texts known in the Malay term as *Kitab Kuning* or Arabic as *turath* such as *Sabil al-Muhtadin*, *Matla' al-Badrain*, *Jawhar al-Mauhub*, *Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan*, and *Riyadh al-Solihin*. Trained religious teachers are appointed to conduct the above-mentioned courses. Besides Arabic texts used as references, most of the books in Islamic studies are written in the traditional Malay script called *Jawi* such as *Penawar Bagi Hati*, *Anak Kunci Syurga*, and *Kitab Bahjah* (Ibrahim, 2018; Salamiah et al., 2019).

b) The National Academic Curriculum

Pondok Bantan also offers subjects that are required by the national academic curriculum such as Science, English, and Mathematics to students. According to Aree and Altafur (2016), these courses are important as they will ensure that the national and religious curriculums are integrated dynamically in the students' knowledge thus achieving balanced development. This integrative approach aims at forging the development of knowledgeable and skilled citizens and at the same time inculcating responsibility and a good personality based on Islamic values and ethics.

b) The Teaching and Learning Development Skills in Islamic Studies

In terms of teaching and learning practices, Abdul Rahman (2018) explained that Pondok Bantan has appointed 100 teachers, where 70 of them conduct academic courses and the rest are religious teachers. Most of the teachers are Muslims who have graduated from local or international Islamic universities such as Al-Azhar, the University of Egypt, and other institutions in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Since Pondok Bantan is a registered Islamic institution in Thailand, teachers have to fulfill teaching and learning training programs that are organized and recognized by the Ministry of Education. This program is to ensure that teachers are well-trained in their teaching specialty and at the same time the quality of teaching and learning practices in Pondok Bantan can be properly maintained. Besides that, Pondok Bantan also organizes its training program for teachers in the Islamic studies program. Teachers are trained to use

modern techniques in teaching and learning activities in class. It also includes skills in determining the efficiency of their teaching performance (Haziyah et. al., 2019).

c) The Arabic Language Program

Pondok Bantan offers international language programs for their students. For the teaching and learning Arabic language program, it uses textbooks such as *Nahw al-Wadih* and *Matan al-Jurumiyah*. The Arabic textbook *al-Arabiyyah li al-Nasyiin* which is published by the Education Ministry of Malaysia is also used as an exercise book for students (Salamiah et al., 2019).

Teachers of the Arabic language at Pondok Bantan apply several methods in the teaching and learning of Arabic. One of the methods is the translation technique. They read selected excerpts from textbooks and then translate them from Arabic into the Thai language. Students write down the Thai translation to understand the meaning of the Arabic texts. Another learning method is the writing technique. Students are given certain Arabic words and they are asked to write and use the words in sentences. Students are also encouraged to speak Arabic with friends and teachers to familiarize its use in daily life (Salamiah et. al., 2019).

These are among the findings of the practices of Islamic education at Pondok Bantan. To summarise, the educational practices of Pondok Bantan comprise three main features: firstly, it applies integrative approaches in terms of courses of studies. Secondly, it combines traditional and modern methods in teaching and learning activities, and thirdly, it emphasizes Arabic as the most important foreign language for students.

In implementing its educational practices, Pondok Bantan faces several issues and challenges, which can be categorized as follows:

a) Conservative Approach to Islamic studies.

This can be observed in the selection of textbook sources for the religious courses stated above. It is based on classical references that are popularly used in traditional pondoks in Pattani and Kelantan. In other words, Pondok Bantan prefers to conserve the traditional model in the teaching and learning of Islamic studies. The conservative approach that it adopted is seen to be in contradiction to its openness to the modern curriculums of other academic subjects offered in its school. This is one of the fundamental issues and challenges in the practice of Islamic education at Pondok Bantan today, and the study finds it essential that it be explored further in the future.

b) Lack of the Contemporary Educational Skills

The teachers at Pondok Bantan lack the capability of adapting to new skills in teaching and learning. The study shows that the motivational level of the teachers in teaching and learning activities at Pondok Bantan is high. However, their exposure to 21st-century educational skills is minimal. As a result, teachers are unable to relate and implement the skills learned for practice in class (Haziyah et al., 2019). The study finds that teachers of Islamic studies still conduct their courses in traditional ways, as follows: Firstly, the teachers will read selected excerpts from the Arabic or Malay textbooks recommended. Secondly, the teachers will translate the meaning of the excerpts into the Thai language, and thirdly, they will explain it in the Thai language. The language used for class discussion is Thai since it is the spoken language of all students at Pondok Bantan. As a result, student proficiency in Arabic or Malay is weak. This has hindered them from directly understanding the meaning of the foreign texts (Haziyah et.al., 2019).

The issues and challenges of Islamic education at Pondok Bantan as characterized above show up the limitations that the institution needs to overcome shortly. First, is the issue of the cultural dilemma between the need for conservation of traditional approaches and the application of modern ways of learning especially in the field of Islamic studies. Second, the lack of urgency in implementing the capacity-building programs of teaching and learning among the teachers of Islamic studies hinders their mastery of new ways of educational practice nowadays. These limitations are the challenges that need to be overcome urgently as they affect the quality and balance of student development in Pondok Bantan.

The Ways Forward for Pondok Bantan as a Model of Islamic Education in Thailand: Recommendations

Pondok Bantan has played an essential role in providing Islamic education services to the Muslim society in Thailand and Nakhon Si Thammarat in particular. Support from all sectors of the Muslim community will ensure Pondok Bantan can fulfill its mission as a model of Islamic education in Thailand and significantly contribute to the process of nation-building of the country. To realize its mission, this study has compiled several recommendations to the leadership of Pondok Bantan as the way forward to the future. The recommendations are as follows:

- a) The Establishment of Advisory Committees for the Development of an Integrative Curriculum of Islamic Studies at Pondok Bantan.

Aree and Altafur (2016) revealed that curriculums and skills remain a challenge for integrated Islamic education in Thailand. They recommended cooperation among various stakeholders within national borders which can be extended to cross-border cooperation. It seems that Pondok Bantan urgently needs advisory committees on Islamic education that can assist them to develop an integrative curriculum of Islamic studies. The committees can also offer help to Pondok Bantan to overcome the cultural dilemma between conservative and modern approaches in Islamic studies. The appointment of experts in Islamic studies nationally and internationally will enhance the image and identity of Pondok Bantan as a model of a modern Islamic institution in the pluralistic society of modern Thailand.

- b) Intensive Upskilling Programs of Teaching and Learning Development Skills for the Teachers of Islamic Studies.

This recommendation is based on findings that show teachers of Pondok Bantan lack mastery of contemporary teaching and learning skills. Hence, intensive upskilling programs in this area are urgently needed. Pondok Bantan needs to initiate an international support program for this purpose through academic and training collaboration with educational institutions in Thailand or other countries. The Pondok Bantan-UKM Community Engagement Program that was initiated in 2018 is a viable model in this respect (Rokiah et al., 2019). This initiative will ensure that the quality of Islamic education at Pondok Bantan will be continuously maintained and progressively improved through the process of capacity building in the skills of the teachers of Islamic studies.

- c) Institutional Support to Realise Pondok Bantan as a Model of Islamic Education Institution

The educational vision of Pondok Bantan to become a center for the development of global talents among Muslim-minority students in Thailand needs continuous support from all parties especially institutions of human development at the national and international levels. Hence it is suggested that Pondok Bantan actively expand its academic collaboration with various sectors and partners globally. Extensive international linkages will provide partnership and collaborative activities that can assist Pondok Bantan to realize its global educational vision and goals in the future.

d) Vision of Developing the Global Talents of Muslim Students

Pondok Bantan is encouraged to adopt the educational vision of becoming a learning center that will contribute to the development of the global talents of their students. This global vision for Pondok Bantan is not new as it has already been stated in its institutional motto, which is to be a "Convergence of the Two Streams of Knowledge" (Abdul Rahman, 2018). This vision is a progressive attribute in the Islamic education approach of Pondok Bantan. Hence, academic programs to upgrade foreign language skills such as Arabic, Malay and English languages need to be properly enhanced as academic preparation for students of Pondok Bantan to engage with global communities.

e) Pondok Bantan as a Centre for Promoting Moderation in Islam

Pondok Bantan is now known nationally and globally as an Islamic institution that promotes the concept and practice of moderation in Islam in the pluralistic society of Thailand. The personality and contributions of Surin Pitsuwan in promoting moderate values of Islam during his life need to be formally adopted in the curricula of education at Pondok Bantan. Surin's ideas on Islamic moderation are recognized in Thailand and the Muslim world and his association with Pondok Bantan have contributed to the positive image and prospects of Pondok Bantan as a model of moderate and modern Islamic education in Thailand (Idris et al., 2019, Merican, 2017).

These recommendations are crucial for Pondok Bantan as they are the bases that will ensure its progressive development in the future. The prospects for Pondok Bantan to become a model of Islamic education in Thailand depend mainly on its readiness culturally and physically to adapt to new ways and approaches in its Islamic education practices. In summary, curriculum renewal, capacity building in human resources, and institutional and community support nationally and internationally are found to be the ways forward for Pondok Bantan as a respected institution of Islamic education in the coming years.

Conclusion

Issues and challenges of Islamic education are various in Muslim society, especially among Muslim-minority communities in Southeast Asia. The role of Pondok Bantan as an Islamic education institution contributing to the process of nation-building in Thailand as discussed has been significant and effective. However, for the institution to move forward and become a model of Islamic education in the future some limitations need to be overcome. They derive mainly from the cultural dilemma of harmonizing the traditional and modern outlook on Islamic education and the essentiality of capacity building in human resources. Reforms will need to be overcome dynamically and institutional support from all sectors of Muslim society will be vital for Pondok Bantan to move forward in confronting contemporary challenges.

In this regard, the university-community engagement program initiated by UKM-Pondok Bantan is a practical model of international collaboration and an effective mechanism for enhancing the educational capabilities of Islamic education institutions, especially for Muslim-minority communities in the Muslim world. This study points to various research opportunities that can be further explored academically on the theme of Islamic education in Muslim-minority communities in Southeast Asia today. The study shows the effectiveness of Islamic education institutions in contributing to nation-building in their respective countries as manifested by Pondok Bantan in the context of Thailand. It has contributed significantly to nation-building in Thailand by developing a knowledge-based society and good and responsible Thai citizens as inspired by the teachings of Islam and its philosophy of education.

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