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EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF QURANIC EXEGESIS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

According to Syed Naquib al-Attas and Mahayudin Yahaya, the teaching of Islam arrived in Malaysia during the end of 9th century, though historical notes on the study and writing of Quranic exegesis or tafsir were not much found except after the 20th century. Besides, reviewing the literature on the topic found that the writings do not describe the tafsir development in-depth as well factors due to it. The study therefore, aims to analyze the early stages of tafsir development in the country, also determine factors affected it. Research methods used to examine the exegesis of Quranic studies are largely qualitative, and consist of approaches such as historical research and content analyses. Therefore in the interests of validity and reliability, the study provides multiple sources of evidence. These include tape-recorded in-depth interviews with specific researchers in particular with an expert educationalist and academician's affairs in Malaysia. As a result, based on the discussion, the present article affirms that the earliest developments of tafsir studies were taught to the Malay region simultaneously with the coming of Islam. This is mainly because there are two main sources for an understanding of Islam; the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith. Regards, it has been developed onwards, thus, influenced by two main streams or tendencies; Madrasah Muhammad Abduh and of Sheikh Waliyullah al-Dihlawi. The influence of Muhammad Abduh and his disciples, Rashid Rida and al-Maraghi for example, was very significant to the local scholars who were educated in the Middle East, thereby contributing to the development of tafsir writing in the country.

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Keywords: Madrasah system, Malaysia, Malay region, Middle East, Quranic exegesis, Pondok system.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of Malaysia (formerly known as Malaya before 1963), study of Quranic exegesis was believed to have started in the 17th century in a traditional learning institution namely 'pondok', while writing of Quranic exegesis or *tafsir* was identified to have its beginning early in the 20th century. Lack of historical data about the *tafsir* field was due to the orientation of Islamic studies among the community up till the mid-19th century which focused on disciplines such as *‘aqidah* (faith), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), Islamic history and *tasawwuf* (Sufism). Indeed, the writing of books at that time was also limited to the fields mentioned above. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the Muslim community in Malaya did not learn the Quran. In fact, they have studied the Quran since the arrival of Islam to this country, and have also memorized small parts of the Quran with the intention of reciting it in the five daily prayers.

It is possible that Muslim preachers at that time have taught *tafsir* indirectly in their religious lectures and classes, fitting with the circumstances of the time. Which explains why *tafsir* was not known except after a few centuries later, particularly after the Malays themselves had gone to study Islamic studies abroad such as in Mecca, Medina, India and Egypt. After returning home, they held religious classes that included Quranic studies and exegesis in houses, *musallas* (small mosque) and mosques, before moving to larger and more systematic learning institutions namely *pondok*¹ and *madrasah*.

2. METHODS AND RESEARCH MATERIAL

The study of Quranic exegesis in this article refers to studies that are related to the Quran, which seeks to understand its content and appreciate its demands in life. This study covers the teaching and learning of the meaning of the Quranic verses as well as topics that serve as an aid to understanding the Quran better, such as reason for revelation, *Makki* verses, *Madani* verses, and the ruling of *nasakh* (abrogation). These lessons were conducted in Malay language (Ismail Yusof, 1995).

Research methods used to examine the exegesis of Quranic studies are largely qualitative, and consist of approaches such as historical research and content analyses. Therefore in the interests of validity and reliability, the study provides multiple sources of evidence. These include tape-recorded in-depth interviews with specific researches in particular with an expert educationalist and academician's affairs in Malaysia.

¹ The word 'pondok' (literally meaning a hut or cottage) comes from Arabic word which means a temporary transit place for travelers. The term was used to refer to the residential place of students who come to a particular place or area for the sake of learning religion by bringing their own needs. From here, *pondok* was specifically used to refer to the earliest established religious educational institutions in Malaya and in the archipelago in general. It consisted of a teaching place called *madrasah* or mosque, surrounded by small houses or residences of students, called the *pondok*. The teachers' houses were also built in the area. This educational institution came into existence in Malaya as a product of scholars' awareness. These scholars emulated the educational system of foreign countries such as Pattani, Aceh, Mecca and Medina. This system was seen developing in the states to the east and north of Malaysia, such as Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Penang and Perak (Nabir, 1976).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Development Between 9th to 16th century

Most scholars believe that the development of Quranic exegesis studies in the country is a continuation of the study of Quran which was conducted via *halaqat* (study circles) in the teacher's house and *musallas* (Ismail Yusof, 1995; Mustaffa, 2009). In this system of *halaqat*, teachers would teach the Quran to a small group of students. Focus was given on training students to read the Quran, starting with the introduction of the Arabic alphabetical letters or *hija'iyah* and phonetics, followed by reading verses from *Juz 'Amma*, i.e. which is the thirtieth constituent in the Quran. Then, students would continue with reading the first constituent, i.e. Surah al-Baqarah or known as *JuzAlif Lam Mim* until they finish the entire Quran. After that, the students would repeat the process in order to ensure a smooth reading of the Quran, according to the *tajwid* or recitation laws until they are proficient.

The ability and skill to recite the Quran are highly regarded by the Muslim community. This is because the Quran is the primary source of Islam, hence studying the Quran is considered a form of basic education in Malay customs as well as a tradition to be passed to one's child before the child starts learning other forms of knowledge including the Malay language itself (Al-Attas, 2011). In other words, a child should finish reciting the Quran before continuing his learning in formal institutions. The significance of this study is explained by Munshi Abdullah, as quoted by Mustaffa Abdullah:

There is no specific place for people to learn the Quran, and in fact one could learn from ten or twelve houses (teachers). One's children studying and learning the Quran, which is not in the Malay language; such is the custom in the Malay states in the world. The child will only learn the Malay language after he has finished studying the Quran at a young age (Mustaffa, 2009).

The existence of *tafsir* studies was also due to the development and expansion of religious education among the Muslim community in this country. Religious studies were first initiated during the 12th century, and gradually evolved in line with the rapid Islamic missionary activity that occurred at the end of the 13th century and reached its peak in the 14th century, and subsequently dominated the entire archipelago by the 15th century. A more rapid development of these studies took place after the 16th century (Al-Attas, 1966). Nevertheless, religious studies at that time mostly focused on the more basic sciences e.g. *aqidah*, *tasawuf*, *fiqh* of daily worship, such as performing prayer, religious rulings, saying *doa* or pray as well as recitation of the Quran. Classes were held at *musalla* and conducted by a religious teacher. In the early stages, teachers consisted of foreign scholars, especially those of Arab, Indian and Persian descent who came to preach Islam to this country, while Arabic-language books were used as textbooks in religious studies (Nabir, 1976; Ismail Yusof, 1995). However, when Malay scholars started writing religious books in Malay language using the *Jawi* scripture, their books then became the new source of learning. Unfortunately, no record was found about the study of *tafsir* among the Muslim communities in Malaya during this time up until the end of the 17th century.

3.2. Development Between 17th to late 19th century

A figure whose role is recognized as the cause of growth of *tafsir* studies in this country is Sheikh Abdul Malik bin Abdullah (1650-1736), who was also known as Tok Pulau Manis. He received his religious education in Aceh before continuing his studies in Mecca in order to deepen his knowledge in *tafsir*, *Fiqh*, *Usuluddin* and *tasawuf*. After finishing his studies in Mecca and returning back to Terengganu in mid-1690, Sheikh Abdul Malik founded a *pondok*-styled school in Pulau Manis, Terengganu which applied a teaching system that was modelled after the one used in the Grand Mosque of Mecca (Mohammad Abu Bakar, 1991). He is said to have transcribed the *tafsir* work of *Tarjuman al-Mustafid*, which was written by his teacher, Abdul Rauf al-Fansuri al-Singkeli (1615-1693), an Aceh scholar of the 17th century. It is believed that Sheikh Abdul Malik also taught this *tafsir* work (Ismail Yusof, 1995; Mustaffa, 2009).

In addition, Zainal Lebai Hassan in his book *Sejarah Islam Pahang 1750-2000*, as quoted by Rashidi (2004) stated that Tok Shihabuddin bin Zainal Abidin (1670-1770) also taught *tafsir* in this state of Pahang. He is said to have studied from Singkeli and Tok Pulau Manis. However, it is quite difficult to prove the accuracy of this statement, as mentioned by Abdul Monir Yaacob (1993) in his study that Tok Shihabuddin's main field of interest was in the Sufism, mysticism, and religious poems. Additionally, his tutelage under Singkeli was also unsubstantiated due to the fact that he did not stay long in Aceh. Instead, he was known to have studied from a man called Pakeh Yusuf bin Abdul Salam in Betawi. Due to the factors mentioned above, his name was never listed by researchers as a figure of *tafsir* in Malaysia.

Consequently, it can be concluded that Quranic exegesis studies specifically were first initiated in Malaya during the late 17th century or early 18th century and were taught in *pondok*. This new system of education grew rapidly in the mid-19th century, especially in states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Perak and Kedah after local clerics who received their religious education from Aceh, Patani, Mecca and Medina opened their own *pondok* in their hometown to teach religion to the community². A study by Abdul Hafiz (2001) concluded that *tafsir* studies were already introduced into the *pondok* system in line with its emergence in the 19th century. However, this statement cannot be verified by clear information, therefore it cannot be used as concrete evidence that *tafsir* studies had taken place in *pondok* at that time. This is because the core custom practiced in the *pondok* as well as in the *halaqat* system in mosques was to recite the Quran, and to read books written in Jawi scriptures by Malay scholars in the field of *aqidah*, jurisprudence, ethics and mysticism, and in addition to other subjects such as Arabic grammar, morphology, *usul fiqh* and Arabic literature (Nabir, 1976; Abdul Hafiz, 2001; Fauzi and Mohd Asmawi, 2012). In Kelantan,

² The state with the fastest growing and developing religious studies and *pondok* education institutions is Kelantan, hence explains the reason why it is known as the Veranda of Mecca. Most of the scholars involved in this effort are those who were educated in Mecca. The earliest *pondok* founded in Kelantan was around the year 1820 in Pulai Condong by Haji Abdul Samad Abdullah. After that, the *pondok* system continued to expand with the establishment of several more *pondoks* like Pondok Tok Konok Atas Banggol by Haji Nik Zainal Abidin Bin Nik Ismail (1830s-1893), and Pondok Haji Mohammad bin Lebai Ahmad (1887-1967). The most famous *pondok* education at the end of the 19th century was that run at al-Muhammadi mosque in Kota Bharu (M. Redzuan 2005; Mustaffa 2009).

for example, sufism studies gained a more favourable position among the society and religious teachers during the late 19th century and early 20th century (Abdul Hayei, 2003).

In the state of Pahang, although the earliest *pondok* was set up in 1911, namely Pondok al-Quran Lubuk Kawah in Temerloh, nevertheless the system focused on reading the Quran which was taught by Haji Abdul Rahman, a religious cleric who derived from Kelantan, in addition to learning the Jawi scriptures. The study of *tafsiral-Quran* was not found to have been taught here at that particular time (Rashidi, 2004). Obviously, researchers were unable to produce a clear written record about the development of *tafsir* studies after the era of Tok Pulau Manis whether in mosques or *pondok*. *Tafsir* only started getting the attention of scholars and the society in the early 20th century, and thrived rapidly in the *pondok* system, in addition to being introduced to the public through *tafsir* studies conducted in mosques.

Religious studies among the community in Malaya started to grow and gain significance after a number of Malay individuals who pursued their Islamic studies abroad - especially in Hijaz (Mecca and Medina) and Egypt -, increased particularly at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century.³ Among this group of Malay students was Tuan Tabal (1811-1891), Wan Ali bin Abdul Rahman Kutan (1837-1913), Abdul Samad Abdullah (1792-1873). However, their distinction was in the field of *Usuluddin* and *tauhid*, as well as in jurisprudence, sufism, and ethics. These scholars only taught these disciplines in *pondok* and only wrote books in these fields. For example, among the works of Wan Ali Kutan are *Jawhar al-Mauhub* in the field of ethics, *Zahrah al-Murid* in the field of *aqidah* and *Luma' al-Awrad* which is a collection of *wirid* and *doa*.

3.3. Development Between late 19th century onwards

The fate of *tafsir* studies began to turn for the better with the return of several prominent figures from the Middle East, among them Syed Sheikh Ahmad al-Hadi (1867-1934)⁴ and Haji

³ Records found indicate that the earliest Malay who had gone to Mecca to seek knowledge is Sheikh Abdul Malik Abdullah (TokPulau Manis), at the end of the 17th century. He stayed there for 12 years. The increase in the number of Malays in Mecca and Medina at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century was influenced by ease in transportation, as well as increase in demand for religious teachers with the opening of many *pondok* and *madrasah* in Malaya, in addition to the fame of both learning institutions as centres of Malay intellectual development, with many Malay scholars such as Sheikh Muhammad Arshad Al-Banjari, Sheikh Nawawi al-Bantani, Sheikh Daud al-Fatani, Sheikh Wan Ahmad Zainal Fatani and Sheikh Ahmad Khatib bin Abdul Latif al-Minangkabawi teaching there (M. Redzuan 2005).

⁴ Syed Sheikh was born in Kampung Hulu, Malacca. His father, Syed Ahmad bin Syed Hasan bin Saggaf al-Hadi was a descendent of Hadramaut; a very influential tribe in politics, economics as well as in social and religious issues in Malaya. He received his education in a Malay school and a *pondok* in Terengganu before furthering his studies in Mecca. He served as an escort for the children of Riau-Linggi King who went to pursue their studies in the Middle East. Al-Hadi took this opportunity to expand his knowledge in Cairo by learning from Muhammad Abduh. Therefore it is not surprising that he was very much influenced by the mindset of Abduh and his idea of religious reform. He later became the founder of Madrasah al-Iqbal and Madrasah al-Masyhur, and the publisher of magazines such as *al-Imam*, *al-*

Mohd Yusof Ahmad (1868-1933)⁵ who was also known as Tok Kenali. They were among the many Malay students who were greatly influenced by reformist ideas put forward by Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), and his disciples like Sayyid Muhammad Rashid Rida (1866-1935), and Mustafa al-Maraghi (d. 1945) as well as Malay scholars residing in Mecca such as the likes of Muhammad Arshad al-Banjari (1710-1812), Nawawi al-Bantani (1815-1879), Daud al-Fatani, Ahmad Khatib bin Abdul Latif al-Minangkabawi (1860-1916) and Wan Ahmad bin Muhammad Zain Mustafa al-Fatani (1856-1908). Upon returning home, these Malay students strived to inculcate religious awareness through their teaching and education (Mohammad Redzuan, 2005; Mustaffa, 2012). They spread these ideas through religious classes at the mosque and by establishing *pondok* education system, and by calling on the local community to practice and apply the teachings of the Quran and to return to the original sources of Islam and to combat *bid'ah* and *taqlid* (accepting a dogma without question). Thus with this, these students had helped introduce and expand the *tafsir* studies in society (Nik Abdul Aziz, 1983).

Clearly, only at the beginning of the 20th century did *tafsir* studies gain a strong foothold in the country and has been growing and expanding ever since. In terms of the form of study, *tafsir* is still being taught in *pondoks* and mosques, although with the addition of being taught in religious schools as well as in the national education system.

4. PONDOK SYSTEM

Quranic exegesis studies started to receive attention through religious studies taught in *pondoks* especially during the time of Tok Kenali. Tok Kenali was known to have taught *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* and several other *tafsir* in his *pondok*. The first *pondok* erected was in Kampung Paya, Kenali in 1910, and the second one built in 1917 was called Pondok Tok Kenali (Abdullah al-Qari, 2009). In fact, Tok Kenali's *pondok* school had succeeded in producing many Malay intellectuals such as Muhammad Idris al-Marbawi (1894-1990), Ali Salah al-Din (1899-1968), Haji Abdullah Tahir Haji Ahmad (1897-1961) and Sheikh Uthman Jalaluddin (1867 -1952) who contributed to the development of Islamic education and writing of *tafsir* books in Malaysia.

Traditionally, *tafsir* studies in *pondok* began with the teacher reading to the students classical *tafsir* texts in Arabic from the beginning to the end of the book, which usually took a long time to finish. In fact, some parts of the book would be repeated. During lesson time, the teacher would explain the textual content of the book, by focusing on the meaning of the words, Arabic grammatical analysis and *qira'at* (variant readings) explanation. Not much attention was given to related current problems whether it was local politics, economics or social issues. This is due to

Ikhwan and Saudara. He was appointed as a syariah lawyer for the state of Johor from the year 1909 until 1915. He then became a scholar, preacher, writer and publisher until his death in 1934 in Penang (Talib Samad 1992).

⁵ Tok Kenali's early education began in Kelantan, before continuing his studies in Mecca in 1886. Among his teachers was Sheikh Ahmad bin Muhammad Zain al-Fattani. Tok Kenali's area of expertise is in the field of Arabic grammar, morphology, rhetoric, *Arud* and jurisprudence. Upon returning from Mecca in 1908, he was recognized as a scholar, community activist, and an educator in Pondok Kenali, and Muhammadi Mosque, Kota Bharu (Abdul Hayei, A.S.2003).

their sense of inferiority and poor self-esteem about their qualifications to accurately interpret the Qur'an, in addition to fear of being accused as a reformist, which at that time was classified as 'Kaum Muda'⁶ or young generation (Ismail Yusof, 1995; Mustaffa, 2006). Among the books used at that time were, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn, Madarik al-Tanzil* - a commentary by al-Nasafi, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-^cAzim* by Ibn Kathir, *Lubabal-Ta'wil fi Ma'ani al-Tanzil* - a work of al-Khazin, and *Anwar al-Tanzil wa Asrar al-Ta'wil* by al-Baydawi and *Tarjuman al-Mustafid*, by al-Singkeli (Abdul Hafiz, 2001). These works did not merely secure a place in the field of *tafsir* studies in Malaysia, but as well as in the archipelago generally (Riddell, 2001).

After World War II, *pondok* education began to decline due to several factors such as competition with Malay schools, English schools and the *madrasah*, as well as the death of its founder teacher. However, there were several *pondok* institutions which managed to last even up till now like Pondok Lubuk Tapah in Kelantan that was first established in 1932. As a matter of fact, *tafsir* studies are still very much ongoing in this *pondok* (Abdul Hafiz, 2001). Apart from maintaining the traditional method of teaching and learning, and the use of classic *tafsir* commentaries, some *pondok* have also resorted to using modern *tafsir* commentaries such as *Safwah al-Tafasir* by Muhammad Ali al-Sabuni, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* by Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), in addition to local *tafsir* books such as *Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan* written by Muhammad Said bin Umar (1854-1932M)⁷ and *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Hakim* by Mustafa Abdul Rahman (1918-1968)⁸ (Mustaffa, 2009). Some other *pondok* integrated its religious education with that of the national education by introducing two systems; which are the general system or the traditional learning system, and the

⁶ Kaum Tua (Old generation) and Kaum Muda (Young generation) refer to two Islamic schools of thought among the Malay community before World War II. Oldfolk group or traditional religious scholars preferred discussing issues pertaining to religious worship (*ibadah*), especially the minor issues. Meanwhile the Young generation group were influenced by the Middle Eastern reformers, thus they were more focused on matters of education, economics, social and politics. They interpreted verses of Quran and Hadith that are not bound, i.e. the struggle to achieve success in this world and hereafter, in addition to using modern arguments. They avoided stagnation and blind imitation. Their ideology was disseminated to the public via magazines (Nabir1976).

⁷ He once worked as a teacher in a *pondok* in Kedah before being appointed as a Kadi (judge) in Jitra. He also taught in mosques. Among the lessons that he taught was *tafsir* of Quran (Zulkifli, H.M.Y. and M. Hamza 2005).

⁸ He was born in Mount Semanggol, Perak. His father, Abdul Rahman was an alumnus of al-Azhar University and Masjidil Haram, Mecca as well as the founder of Pondok Rahmaniyyah. In this *pondok*, Mustafa received his education before going to Madrasah Idrisiyyah, Kuala Langsar to learn from Haji Abdullah Fahim. He was also the student of Abu Bakar al-Baqir, the founder of Hizbul Muslimin. Mustaffa's desire to further his studies to al-Azhar was not fulfilled due to the death of his father and the critical situation of the country at that time, which was close to World War II. He then worked as a teacher in Maahad Ihya al-Syarif, Gunung Semanggol (1946-1948) before working full time as a preacher and writer. Among his works are, *Tafsir al-Quran al-Hakim, Hadith 40 Terjemahan dan Syarahnya (40 Hadith: its Translation and Explanation)* and *Mukhtasar Ibn Abi Jamrah* (Mustaffa 2009;).

new formal system called *nizami* system which is based on standard syllabus, examination and certification also known as 'modern *pondok*'. Meanwhile some *pondok* have totally changed their system and adopted religious schooling or *tahfiz* system (Abdul Hafiz, 2001).

5. MOSQUE LEARNING SYSTEM

Tafsir studies in mosques were first introduced in the state of Kelantan in 1917 by Sayyid Hasan bin Nor Hasan (1875-1944)⁹, who was also known as Tok Khurasan. He taught *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* and several other *tafsir* books (Fauzi and Mohd Asmawi, 2012). These efforts were intensified by other scholars such as Haji Muhammad Noor Ibrahim (1905-1987)¹⁰ who taught *tafsir* in Muhammadi mosque and Penambang mosque in Kota Bharu, Kelantan in the year 1945 and Jami' Merbau al-Isma'ili mosque (Ismail Yusof, 1995; Mohamad Kamil, 2003). In fact Haji Nik Abdullah Wan Musa (d. 1935) was understood to have already started teaching *tafsir* methodology in 1934 by using the book *al-Fawz al-Kabir fi Usul al-Tafsir*, written by Sheikh Waliyullah al-Dihlawi. He also revealed to the public the views on *tafsir* as quoted by theologians and philosophers, as well as encouraged *ijtihad* (individual interpretation), in order to deduce teachings (*istinbat*) from verses of the Quran (Nik Abdul Aziz, 1983).

Initially Arabic *tafsir* commentaries were used as textbooks in teaching *tafsir* such as *Tafsir al-Nasafi*, which was taught in Muhammadi Mosque, as well as *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*. However, as Malay scholars started producing their own works of *tafsir* such as *Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan* by Muhammad Sa'id ibn Umar and *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Hakim* by Mustafa Abdul Rahman, these books were gradually included in the list of primary source of reading for *tafsir* studies in mosques. Apart from reading books, the community was also exposed to thematic exegesis or known as *tafsir mawdu'î*. Teachers would choose verses of the Quran which cover specific topics such as verses that convey rulings, faith and morals, and would provide explanations on these topics based on several books of *tafsir*. Exegesis of these Quranic verses would also be linked with social issues and politics, apart from discussions regarding issues of faith, morals and rulings (Abdul Wahab, 1990; Ismail Yusof, 1995).

Tafsir studies are still being conducted and taught in mosques all over Malaysia to date, alongside with other studies such as *tajwid*, *aqidah*, sufism, *fiqh*, *sirah* and *akhlaq*. In fact, these

⁹ Tok Khurasan originated from Pakistan and received his education in Dar al-Ulum, Deoband, India in various field ssuch as *hadith*, *tafsir*, philosophy, logic, rhetoric and *Fiqh Hanafiyyah*. He then migrated to Kelantan around 1911. His main contributions are introducing the study of *hadith*, *tafsir* and *Fiqh Hanafiyyah* in his *halaqat* (Fauzi, D. and M. Mohd Asmawi 2012).

¹⁰ Early period of his childhood was spent in Mecca, before returning to his hometown after the death of his mother in 1911. He descended from a family of scholars. After completing his English education in Kelantan, he pursued his studies in Mecca to learn in-depth about the sciences of the Qur'an and *qira'at* from Tok Senggora, in addition to learning Fiqh, Hadith, *tafsir* and other fields. Upon his return to Kelantan in either 1936 or 1937, he was appointed as the official qadi (judge) of Kelantan, and then as the palace's Mufti in 1941. He also taught at Jami Merbau 'al-Isma'ili in 1945 and became a teacher in Maahad Muhammadi starting from 1st March 1949 until 1965. In 1968, he was appointed as Mufti of Kelantan and retained this position until his death (Mohamad Kamil, A.M., 2003; .

classes and lectures are supported and monitored by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) and state departments of religious affairs in their program 'Takmir Masjid' which was introduced in the year 1985 (Zalina, 2010). References for *tafsir* books have also been varied to combine both Arabic and Malay *tafsir* books such as *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, *Tafsir al-Munir* by Wahbah al-Zuhayli, *Tafsir Ayat al-Ahkam* by al-Sabuni, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, *Tafsir 'Abr al-Athir* by Ahmad Sonhaji (1922-2010), *Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan* and *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Hakim* (Rashidi, 2004; Mustafa, 2009). In effect, the existence and accessibility of *tafsir* studies in mosques have helped introduce Quranic exegesis to the public and increase their understanding and appreciation of the Qur'an.

6. MADRASAH SYSTEM

The education system of the muslim community in this country switched from the *halaqat* held in *musollas* and mosques to a semi-formal system, i.e. the *pondok*, and then to a fully formal system with the birth of *madrasah* or religious schools. The establishment of *madrasah* by local scholars is due to the influence of the reform movement in the Middle East (Nabir, 1976). For example, Syed Sheikh al-Hadi founded Madrasah Masriyah in Penang in 1906, Madrasah al-Iqbal al-Islamiyyah in Singapore in 1908 and Madrasah al-Hadi in Malacca in 1917. Another religious school, Madrasah Muhammadi was later erected in Kelantan in 1937. The *Madrasah* system integrated religious knowledge with modern science, in line with the reform of academic system taking place in al-Azhar University at that time, while also taking into account the suitability of the curriculum with Meccan-style education. The rapid growth of *madrasahs* can be witnessed at the end of the 1920's and early 1930's, and it was so influential that it also affected the *pondok* system. Some *pondok* institutions began to implement a more systematic way of teaching soon after to emulate the system applied in the *madrasahs*. Among them is Madrasah al-Islah al-Diniah, Matang Kunda which was founded in 1935, Madrasah al-Ulum al-Shari'ah, Bagan Datoh in 1937 (Mohammad Redzuan, 2005) and Madrasah Ihya 'Assyarif, Mount Semanggol, Perak in 1934 which originally was known as Pondok al-Rahmaniah that was founded in 1918 (Nabir, 1976).

Consequently, *tafsir* studies were taught in *madrasah* and common schools (*sekolah rakyat*), such as in Madrasah Ihya' Assyarif, Madrasah al-Masyhur and Madrasah Al-Huda in Penang, Madrasah Muhammadiyah in Kelantan, and Madrasah al-Islah in Temerloh, Pahang. In fact, *tafsir* books that were *islah* (reform)-based were also used as textbooks and reference. For example, *Tafsir al-Maraghi*, penned by Syeikh Mustafa al-Maraghi was made a *tafsir* textbook in religious common schools in Kelantan in 1945 and was later followed by the common schools in the state after 1960. Similarly, in Maahad Ihya' Assyarif, and other religious schools, it was found that *Tafsir al-Maraghi*, *Tafsir al-Fatihah* and *Tafsir Juz Amma* by Muhammad Abduh, were all used as the main manuscripts and sources of reference for *tafsir* studies, in addition to existing texts such as *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* and *Tafsir al-Nasafi* (Nabir, 1976). This shows that the extent of reformed-oriented *tafsir* books particularly *Tafsir al-Maraghi* influenced on *tafsir* studies in Malaysia (Mustafa, 2012). Obviously, the influence of reform has given a new impetus to Quranic exegesis studies in the country, while also laying the foundation stone for its existence in the national education system.

7. NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

Education in Malaya started off by learning to read the Quran. This is asserted by al-Attas based on the phenomenon described by Abdullah Munshi in Hikayat Abdullah in the year 1819 that there was a 'school of the Qur'an' (Al-Attas, 2011). When Malay schools were first established in 1871, classes teaching Quranic recitation were conducted in afternoon religious schools run by the State Islamic Religious Council. *Tafsir* studies had not yet been introduced in this system at that time, and were instead conducted in *pondok* institutions, as it was considered a more advanced level compared to the basic Quran education, which is the study of (learning to read) the Quran (Ab Halim, 1996).

Tafsir subject was first included in the syllabus of religious education when it was compiled in 1959 in government schools and was later implemented in 1962. The style of teaching at that time was quite limited because students were only exposed to brief explanation of the meaning of groups of Quranic verses selected from certain chapters which are related to issues of faith, ethics and jurisprudence, with the translation of words that were difficult to understand, brief reviews and instructional text included. The textbook used in *tafsir* subject at that time was compiled by the Ministry of Education (Ismail Yusof, 1995; Mustaffa, 2009). In 1970, the syllabus for Quran studies was amended and *tafsir* ceased to be taught in primary schools. Instead the focus shifted to writing and the phonetics of the letters of the Quran and reading short *surahs* (chapters of Quran). Several changes were later made to the syllabus of religious education after a revision was made in 1977 which re-introduced *tafsir* studies. These changes were implemented in the New Curriculum for Primary Schools (KBSR) in 1983. This new syllabus focused on students' understanding of the meaning of short *surahs* from *Juz 'Amma* (Ab Halim, 1996).

Meanwhile, at the secondary level, *tafsir* studies as in the Old Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KLSM) which were implemented from 1962 to 1987, focused on meaning of words and understanding the verses from selected *surahs* that covered a variety of faith-related, legal, religious, moral and *da'wah* topics. For example, verses 1 through 5 of *Surah al-Nahl*, verse 23, 183 and 184, as well as verse 275 of *Surah al-Baqarah*, verse 36 to 40 of *Surah al-Shura* and verses 90 to 91 of *Surah al-Ma'idah*. In the year 1988, the New Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM) was introduced. *Tafsir* was taught under the component of *Tilawah al-Quran* (recitation of the Quran) and its syllabus was found to be better than the previous one because the groups of verses interpreted and studied by the students were more. For example, the new syllabus covered *Surah al-Baqarah*, verse 1 to 186, *Surah al-Kahf* verse 1 through 110, *Surah al-An'am* verse 1 to 165 and *Surah Luqman* verse 1 to 34. *Tafsir* studies were carried out in accordance with the book *Tafsir al-Quran* which was compiled by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (Ab Halim, 1996).

In general, the curriculum for *tafsir* studies in the national education system at both the primary and secondary level revolves around the exegesis of clusters or groups of selected verses or *surahs* from the Quran which are related to specific issues, namely moral, jurisprudence and faith. The new curriculum focuses on the meaning of words, general description of the verses, as well as appreciation of the lessons or morals derived from a particular verse. Nevertheless, *tafsir* curriculum at religious common schools were found to be more ahead compared to government mainstream schools, as it used *tafsir* commentaries quoted from Arabic *tafsir* books. Although the essence is the same, which is the exegesis of groups of selected verses and *surahs*, but *Tafsir al-*

Nasafi – the manuscript used in state religious schools in Kelantan and Pahang-, was in line with the curriculum used for *tafsir* studies in al-Azhar, which was deemed to be better (Ismail Yusof, 1995). Clearly the changes in the education system have influenced development of *tafsir* studies in the country, and in fact also led to the writing of *tafsir* manuscripts in Malay language to be made *tafsir* textbooks.

Tafsir studies are also offered in Islamic studies courses at the level of higher education. Among the earliest universities and colleges were Malaya Islamic College, Faculty of Islamic Studies at the National University of Malaysia, Academy of Islamic Studies at the University of Malaya and Darul Quran which is under the governance of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia. Courses and programs offering Quran and *tafsir* studies first emerged in the 1990's in the University of Malaya, International Islamic University and Islamic Science University of Malaysia, as well as at a number of private institutes of higher education, which further intensified and established *tafsir* studies. Focus is not just based on understanding the meaning of a verse, but also encompasses a variety of related disciplines which includes methodology of *tafsir*. Students are exposed to various *tafsir* works and commentaries, both classic and modern, representing all sorts of *tafsir* schools. They are also trained to build their capacity and skill to interpret the Quran and solve contemporary issues based on the perspective of the Qur'an and the *Hadith*.

8. CONCLUSION

Tafsir studies can be traced in Malaysia to as early as the end of the 17th century, although shortly after, it declined due to widespread interest in other disciplines such as *tauhid*, *fiqh* and Sufism. At the turn of the 20th century, *tafsir* began to gain place due to the influence of reform movement in the Middle East and the increase in number of Malay graduates from al-Azhar University and Islamic institutes in Mecca. The only at the beginning of the 20th century did *tafsir* studies gain a strong foothold in the country and has been growing and expanding ever since. In terms of the centre of study, *tafsir* has been taught in traditional Malay learning centre such as *pondok*, mosques and madrasah, and also in the national education system. The development of *tafsir* studies also has been influenced by two main streams or tendencies; the stream of Madrasah Muhammad Abduh, and the stream of Sheikh Waliyullah al-Dihlawi. The influence of Muhammad Abduh and his disciples such as Rashid Rida and al-Maraghi was very significant on local scholars who were educated in the Middle East, thereby contributing to the development of *tafsir* writing in the country.

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