ABDULLAH THE PRIEST AND HIS ADVICE BASED ON THE AL-QURAN AND HADITH

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ABSTRACT

This working paper was aimed at identifying the elements of advice in the earliest Malay autobiographical work of Abdullah Munshi, namely, the Hikayat Abdullah, and to compare it with the Quran and Hadith. This follows the recognition accorded to Abdullah Munshi as the ‘Father of Modern Malay Literature’ in the early 20th century, which drew all sorts of reactions to the extent that he was labelled as ‘Abdullah the Priest’ because of his closeness to the Christian missionaries and British colonialists at that time. However, there were those who were in awe of Abdullah Munshi’s knowledge of Islamic teachings, as reflected in his works. Bearing in mind this conflict, the research methodology applied the text analysis method to the Hikayat Abdullah and compared each piece of advice given by Abdullah Munshi in a text with the evidence based on the Quran and Hadith. The study found that even though Abdullah Munshi appeared to be pro-British, yet the teachings of Islam, which were buried deep within his soul from childhood, shielded him from the influence Christian teachings and instead, drove him to apply the teachings of Islam in all his works. In summary, Abdullah Munshi, being a well-known figure who was responsible for classifying Malay literature into two periods, i.e. the traditional and the modern, should be remembered as an author with an obviously solid Malay-Muslim identity who was able to adapt himself to face challenges together with the British colonialists as his ‘white-rajas’ in this Malay region.

Key word: Abdullah Munshi, advice, Hikayat Abdullah, Quran, Hadith.
1. INTRODUCTION
Abdullah Munshi, in his magnum opus titled *Hikayat Abdullah*, frequently mentioned how he tried to reform the thinking of the Malay community in the 19th century, even though he was regarded as being pro-English. He brought about this early reform by criticising the superstitious practices that were guiding the everyday life of the community. The *Hikayat Abdullah* (2008:115) records an episode where the Malay community succumbed to supernatural powers in an effort to fulfil their personal desires. This obeisance, according to Abdullah Munshi, reflected the ignorance and shallowness of the society of his day with regard to an understanding of Islam to the extent that they were willing to consider themselves as being equal to Allah S.W.T. His criticism sparked a polemic within the community until he was regarded as being anti-Malay and pro-English, especially in matters pertaining to the beliefs and customs of his community (Kassim Ahmad, 2008: xxi). This phenomenon was also backed by Siti Aisah Murad (1990:78), who stated that Abdullah Munshi was negative towards some of the beliefs of the Malay community, which had mostly been inherited and handed down from generation to generation. On the other hand, Abdullah Munshi praised the attitude of the British administrators and Christian missionaries who, in his opinion, should be exemplified, especially when it came to administrative and government matters, which were far different from the system of government of the Malay rulers (Zahari A. Rashid, 2012:213). In this regard, Abdullah Munshi introduced a new way of writing that was rooted firmly in the real world by criticising what he saw (A. Bakar Hamid, 1982:7). Through his first autobiographical work (*Hikayat Abdullah*), he discussed what was happening around him and no longer talked about myths and fables. As stated by Siti Hawa Hj. Salleh (2009:78) Abdullah Munshi no longer wrote sagas to entertain but composed in order to raise the awareness of his audience.

Abdullah Munshi’s writing efforts were made easier by the fact that he was multi-lingual and could communicate well with the British administrators and Christian missionaries (Shaharuddin Maaruf, 1988:24). What’s more, he was appointed as the translator and scribe to Stamford Raffles and as a Malay language instructor to Christian missionaries such as Father Milner and Father Thomson (Kassim Ahmad, 2008: xx; Siti Hawa Hj. Salleh, 1997:160). These were the tasks, especially that of translating the Bible into the Malay language, that earned him the label of ‘Abdullah the Priest’ by his community (Noriah Mohamed, 2006:7). According to Marina Munira Abdul Mutalib (2012:100), even though the local community at that time disapproved of the cooperation extended by Abdullah Munshi, yet he continued to carry out his responsibilities to the colonialists, despite the various accusations and insults that were hurled at him. The statement by Siti Hawa Hj. Salleh (2009:77) below explains the situation of Abdullah Munshi, who was not influenced in any way by the teachings of Christianity and, at the same time, never doubted the purity of Islam:

“Although Munshi Abdullah was not a scholar, yet there is an Islamic feel to his writings. He often views things, not only from the angle of what will be beneficial or detrimental to the Malays but presents several considerations from the angle of Islam”.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT
The *Hikayat Abdullah* was used by its author as a vehicle to criticise the superstitious practices of the community while introducing a new way of writing based on the real world. As a result, Abdullah Munshi became the first individual to bring reforms into Malay literature, thereby
elevating him as ‘The Father of Modern Malay Literature’ (Wilkinson, 1907). The study by Skinner (1978) critically described Abdullah Munshi’s writings as something that divided the thinking between traditional and modern literature. In fact, this idea was proposed earlier by Winstedt (1940) and Zainal Abidin Ahmad (1940), and was followed by Johns (1979), Bakar Hamid (1979), Kassim Ahmad (1981), Thomson (1984), Yahya Ismail (1987), Mohd. Taib Osman (1988) Muhammad Hj. Salleh (1988), Noriah Mohamed (2006), Marina Munira Abdul Mutalib (2012) and Rahimah Hamdan et al. (2016). These scholars were of the opinion that Abdullah Munshi did not follow the path laid by other traditional literary writers, who chose to fantasize in their writings, but instead, he preferred the modern concept of writing. Nevertheless, some scholars, like Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1971), failed to recognize Abdullah Munshi as such. He believed that Hamzah Fansuri was more deserving of that title compared to Abdullah Munshi. He was supported in his opinion by Sweeney and Phillip (1975) and Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir (1997). The literature review above proves that most studies focused more on Abdullah’s contribution to Malay literature and arguments on which individual was more qualified to hold the title ‘Father of Modern Malay Literature’. There has been no comprehensive study to erase the label of ‘Abdullah the Priest’ that has been attached to his name by the community or to examine the impact of Islamic beliefs on the works produced by him. From this point on, the study only focuses on the elements of advice with regard to children in the Hikayat Abdullah, which were identified as having been emphasized by Abdullah Munshi in his autobiographical work. It is hoped that the achievement of these two main objectives, namely, to identify the elements of advice in the earliest autobiographical work known as the Hikayat Abdullah and to compare each advice with the Quran and Hadith, some scholarly contribution can be made to dispel the misunderstanding of the community with regard to this distinguished figure.

3. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the first objective, the study began by identifying the definition of ‘advice’ with regard to the terminology as well as according to the Quran and Hadith. The Fourth Edition of the Kamus Dewan (2007:1071) defines ‘advice’ as ‘a lesson, good instruction, and reminder’. Meanwhile, in the opinion of Ali Abdul Halim (2004:64), ‘advice’, in Islam, means instructions on how to be faithful to Allah, the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W, Islamic leaders, and all Muslims. The Quran (Surah An-Nisa’: 63) stresses the importance of offering advice in order to improve the moral behaviour of individuals, as described below:

“[…] therefore, turn away from them and advise them, and speak to them words that will leave an impression on their souls.”

Advice is like a guide to Muslims in building a knowledgeable and civilized society, and it is mandatory. In the above verse, it is clear that Islam is concerned with the exchange of advice in the lives of human beings and the abandonment of prohibitions, as reinforced in surah Al-Ma’idah (verses 78-79). Next, to achieve the second objective, the core of the study was derived from the Quran and Hadith. Selections were made from the Quran and Hadith to determine whether it was relevant to apply the label, ‘Abdullah the Priest’, to Abdullah Munshi. In the Quran, there are at least five (5) verses that discuss the way to educate children. Among the verses are the Luqman, an-Nur, an-Nisa, an-Anfaal and an-An’aam verses. Meanwhile, from the perspective of the Hadith, this study reverted to the Hadith from the Muslim narrators, Abu Daud and Al-Tabrani. Based on the meaning of advice and its importance in shaping the character of children, this study discussed and compared the elements of advice that can be found in the Hikayat Abdullah with those in the Quran and Hadith. In the opinion of Khalid A. Mu’thi Khalif (2005:273), the best way to analyse and describe the condition of the Islamic
world is to use the Islamic way of looking at things. Therefore, the advice will be seen through the perspective of the Quran and the Hadith.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Selling of children is a false belief

‘Khurafat’, according to the Fourth Edition of the Kamus Dewan (2007:784), means ‘false beliefs, fables and superstitions’. ‘Khurafat’ is something that goes against the logic of a healthy mind and is not based on reality because it is something that is wrong and contains no element of truth whatsoever (Rogayah, 2016:949). The practice of ‘khurafat’ is closely related to the practice observed in the traditional Malay community of selling one’s child if that child was frequently falling ill, as this was an indication that the child was not meant to be raised by its birth family, as mentioned in the excerpt below:

Furthermore, from the time of my birth until I was four months old, my body was healthy and my vigour was restored. Then, later, I began to feel discomfort, and experienced nothing but illness day after day. My parents spent all the money they had to pay for medicine from the Indians and Malays and Chinese. I would be well for two or three days, and then, would be sick for four to five days. My mother was worried and exhausted. She would take me to any place and to anyone who knew about a cure. Faced with such a situation, the people all said that if such is the case and the child keeps falling ill all the time, perhaps the parents are not meant to raise the child, and it would be better to sell him to those who have many children, because this is what the old people used to do.”

(Hikayat Abdullah, 2008:14-15)

Fadzil Adam et al. (2014:2) stated that the lack of religious education gave rise to the practice of ‘khurafat’. Abdullah Munshi harshly criticised this practice and advised the community during his time as follows:

“This is another foolish custom of our ancestors who had no knowledge of Allah. Will the sale lead to a long life for the child, and if the child is reared by its parents, will it have a short life or die? We should never believe that.”

(Hikayat Abdullah, 2008:15)

It is clear that the community during his time was not focused on Allah S.W.T but believed that their customs could bring them happiness even though those customs deviated from the teachings of Islam. Muhammad Jamaluddin (2012:78) stated that the more one gains knowledge of Allah S.W.T, the more one will fear and give homage to Him. It is clear that the practice of ‘khurafat’ is one that contradicts the teachings of Islam because of its deliberate association to Allah S.W.T. The Quran (Surah al-Talaq: 3) explains that obedience to Allah S.W.T in various matters will produce the following results:

“[…] and (remember), whoever surrenders himself wholeheartedly to Allah, then Allah will be enough for him (to help and to save). Surely, Allah will do as He pleases. Allah has already determined the extent and the time for everything”.

4.2. The importance of knowledge in life

True knowledge can guide mankind to differentiate between good and evil (Nur Farhana Baharuddin et al., 2018). It is important to possess knowledge in life so as to be able to avoid what is useless and can cause harm. On examining the Hikayat Abdullah, it was found that during his childhood, Abdullah Munshi was always faced with situations that required the use of knowledge. This caused him to be always exposed to other sciences such as languages and
calculations, other than religious knowledge (Siti Aisah Murad, 1990:78). The importance of knowledge in a person’s life is mentioned in the *Hikayat Abdullah* (2008:34-35) as follows:

“My child, why are you so foolish? Hasn’t it entered your brains yet? You are still children; now, you do not know of what use is knowledge and of the love of parents for their children. For aren’t you my only child? So, if you do not know how to study and write, as the children of good people do, then, great will be the regret of your parents later for not teaching you the things that are good. For now, you may feel that it is more bitter than bile, but later you will know that it is sweeter than honey water. Then, at that moment, you will praise the goodness of your parents. If we both were to leave you with a great deal of wealth, it will not profit you, and, in fact, it will vanish before your eyes in a flash. But knowledge and good instructions are not like that. They will only leave you when your life is separated from your body.”

The beauty of a person with knowledge is likened to ‘honey water’ and will remain until life is withdrawn from the body. There is no other wealth that can match the greatness of knowledge. Knowledge should be nurtured from an early age in the hope that the knowledge that is possessed will not fade and can be utilized from time to time. Every science that is studied is not solely for the sake of the knowledge itself but is for the benefit of human life (Abuddin Nata, 2009:171). Individuals who are highly knowledgeable can position themselves in the midst of a community to attract elements that are good, beneficial and acceptable to the society at large. Knowledge is placed as a human characteristic that understands and appreciates good manners, culture and religion in a society, as mentioned in the words of Allah S.W.T in the Quran as follows:

“And those who have been given knowledge believe that what has been passed down to you from your God is the truth and points the way to Allah, the Almighty and deserving of all Praise."

(*Surah Saba’: 6*)

The words of Allah S.W.T clearly indicate that every good deed will receive its just reward. In the words of Prophet S.A.W. regarding the importance of knowledge in life:

“Whoever pursues a path to seek knowledge, Allah will then make a way for him to head towards heaven.”

(*Hadith Riwayat Muslim*)

This hadith proves the high value that is placed on knowledge to the extent that Allah S.W.T will make a way for those who seek knowledge, placing them at the same level as those who are heading for heaven (Ahmad Sanusi Azmi et al., 2018). This is because it is only with knowledge that an individual will be able to warn and guide others. The *Hikayat Abdullah* also mentions how Abdullah Munshi was determined to study Malay, Tamil, Hindustani and English. Because of his fluency in these languages, he was chosen by the British colonialists to be their Malay language instructor.

4.3. Prayers and the punishment for neglecting them

The second pillar of Islam is prayer or praying five times a day. Therefore, it is the responsibility of Muslims to perform the fardhu prayers. A person is always in a state of sin as long as he does not perform his prayers (Udah Mohsin, 2008:15). This demonstrates that prayer is more important than any other form of worship in daily life. Hence, parents shoulder a heavy responsibility in shaping the behaviour of their children, beginning with faithfulness to prayer. The *Hikayat Abdullah* (2008:28) states the importance of every believer being faithful to prayer from an early age as follows:
“[…] so, my father commanded me to be present, no matter what, at all the prayers that were held five times a day at the mosque. If he failed to see me at any one time, I was sure to receive a caning”.

Abdullah Munshi’s statement above was evidently based on the Quran (Surah Luqman: 17) and also on the words of the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W (Abdullah Nasih, 2015:236), that is, “Command your children to pray when they reach the age of seven years and beat them if they neglect their prayers when they are 10 years old and keep them away from their beds” (Hadith Riwayat Abu Daud). Thus, this clearly shows the importance of practising prayer from an early age so that when they are adults, it will be easy for these children to avoid those things that are of no benefit them. Nik Ismah (1991:25) explained that Islam emphasizes that advice and guidance, no matter how hard or harsh, must be given according to its teachings, which are pure and noble. Herein lies the fairness of punishing children if they fail to give serious attention to prayer.

4.4. Formation of punishment-based discipline

Abdullah Munshi, in his autobiography, Hikayat Abdullah, often described how his father, Abdul Kadir, provided him with a strict education until he was able to master a lot of knowledge and succeeded in becoming a teacher in his adult life. In the beginning, Abdullah Munshi often complained that his childhood was not like that of the other children, who were free to play without having to be serious about learning. In the end, his complaints proved that the disciplinary approach used by Abdul Kadir was very relevant. The punishment that was meted out to Abdullah Munshi was meant to be a lesson, which finally bore fruit:

“So, it became my job every night to memorise the names of those persons. During that time, I was slapped and shamed. Then, the names that were wrongly spelt were hung around my neck to humiliate me. It was only after about a month that I was finally able to write all their names correctly”.

(Hikayat Abdullah, 2008:28)

Like a Malay proverb that says ‘to bend a bamboo, start when it’s still a shoot’, childhood is the best time to apply all sorts of knowledge. This is because at this stage, children are still inexperienced and can be easily formed, and this habit will persist into adulthood. Saat Sulaiman (2008:70) explained that a disciplined person will not waste time, will not trouble his parents, and will not expect his parents to help, but will become a self-reliant person from young. Abdullah Munshi often related how during his childhood he was frequently punished physically for mistakes made when writing. The physical punishment caused pain to the student, who was left to feel discomfort for a certain period of time (Ahmad Kilani Mohamed, 2003:162). This was meant to be a lesson for the mistake that had been committed by the child in the hope that it would not be repeated anymore.

The Hikayat Abdullah (2008:23-24) mentions several forms of punishment that were imposed by the Malay community in the 19th century against naughty students in school for the purpose of educating them. For example, the punishment for stealing and fighting in the school compound was caning with an ‘apit cina’. The ‘apit cina’ was a tool of punishment made from saga rattan and it consisted of four pieces, each being roughly an inch long. The tip of each piece was fixed, while the other end would be attached to a long string. The fingers of the student would be placed in the gap between the rattan pieces and pressed down. Meanwhile, for students who escaped from Quran recitation classes, climbed trees or kicked their classmates, the punishment was meted out through the use of the ‘kayu palat’. This ‘kayu palat’ comprised a piece of wood with a length spanning one side of the chest. It had three (3) holes drilled into it (left, centre, right). A rope was inserted through the centre hole and it was fixed at the left and right holes. The feet of the student would be inserted between the rope straps and turned
upwards. The student would then be beaten on the soles of his feet. Students who ran away, fought and were ‘slow’ in understanding their lessons were subjected to the ‘iron chain’ punishment. The ‘iron chain’, with a length that is estimated to be the span of both arms stretched out, was nailed to a log, with the end of the chain being locked. The buttocks of the student would be locked to the iron chain and he would be forced to walk around the area of the school. Meanwhile, a heavier punishment, known as ‘singgang’, was given to students who refused to listen to the instructions of the teacher. This punishment required the student to hold his left ear with his right hand and the right ear with his left hand, and to sit and stand repeatedly. Laziness in reciting the Quran was punishable by being ‘hung over smoke’ or being ‘tied to a pillar’. The former was carried out by burning dried coir and hanging the student over the smoke, while in the latter punishment, the student would be tied to a pillar and made to read from his writing slate until his reading was fluent. The punishment was different for students who fought, ran away from their place of study and stole. These students would be hung by both hands or would be struck on their buttocks. For students who had a habit of telling lies and cursing others, their mouths would be rubbed with Chinese pepper. These were the punishments mentioned in the Hikayat Abdullah (2008:23-24) that were meant to teach erring students a lesson. The punishments were meant to ensure that the students listened to instructions and were diligent in school. It is important that students be punished for the purpose of educating them, as stated by the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W:

“Hang the whip (cane) in the house so that it can be seen by all the members of your household (your children) because this act will actually educate them.”

(Hadith Riwayat Al-Tabrani)

In the above hadith, it is recommended that the instrument (cane) be displayed in every household as a means of punishment in order to educate. This is to warn children not to go astray. According to Noor Hajidah Hassan (2014:25), ‘caning’, as recommended in Islam, can be used to discipline children because it is regarded as a lesson and a reminder to them should they commit a wrongdoing. Hence, in Islam, punishment from a young age, especially in relation to religious matters, is strongly emphasized in accordance with the Malay proverb ‘to bend a bamboo, start when it’s still a shoot’.

5. CONCLUSION

On the whole, this study has successfully achieved its two main objectives and finally proves that the accusation that Abdullah Munshi was ‘Abdullah the Priest’ is totally false. Although he was responsible for translating the Bible into Malay, in no way was Abdullah Munshi influenced by Christianity. Instead, his familiarity with the British administrators and Christian missionaries was used to his advantage. Disturbing situations in his community, what more those that conflicted with the religious requirements, were clearly stated, even when they concerned the ruling sultan. Abdullah Munshi also criticised the pessimistic attitude of the community in rejecting reforms because such actions would be detrimental to the race. Thus, an examination of the elements of Abdullah Munshi’s advice concerning children, which he considered to be a serious matter in his work, proved that his writings were based on the Quran and Hadith. Indirectly, this should gain him the recognition as an intellectual with a strong Malay-Muslim identity, who succeeded in facing the challenges of the tide of Western colonialization that prevailed in the late 19th century.
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