

A Discussion Pertaining To A Classical Teaching Material and Its Methodology: *Masail al Muhtadi li Ikhwanil Mubtadi*¹

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Abstract

Studying in a pesantren entails that junior students have to possess fundamental knowledge at the very outset of their education career. This level of knowledge is salient for the students' scholarly career even though it is very basic and related to very relatively simply written books. *Masail al Muhtadi li Ikhwanil Mubtadi* written by Shaikh Daud bin Ismail bin Mustafa Rumî has been taught as the standard text book in pesantren in the last 250 years, in some geographies of the Malay Archipelago. The method of the above-mentioned book ought to be considered in relation to the extent of how this classical course material is vital for the development of critical thinking process of students. And due to this reason, this research focussed on the method of the book during teaching-learning process. What makes this book unique is its encouragement of methods such as Question&Answer. Owing to this reasons, the author concentrates on the discovery how effective of this method is and how it encourages critical thinking. The argument is that this fundamental text stimulates the mind through Q&A method and contributes development of critical thinking which is needed in further levels of education. This study is an attempt to discover: (1) whether pesantren education is really and simply based on the indoctrination of reliance on students' memorization skills or these are the steps in a bottom up education process that encompasses critical thinking; (2) whether pesantren education provides some form of a methodological approach in relation to knowledge acquisition at varying levels and if it is specifically tailored for students from different age groups.

Key Words: *Masail al Muhtadi*, pesantren education, critical thinking, Islamic education.

INTRODUCTION

The principal purpose of this study was to reassess the pondok-pesantren² educational system in light of the methods set out in "*Masail al Muhtadi li Ikhwanil Mubtadi*"³ and its relation to the development of critical thinking. MM is a *risalah* which is considered a catechism. It functions as fundamental source for the transmission of Islamic beliefs to the younger generation. This risalah is used as course material, formally in some pesantrens, or informally in family environments or in village meunasahs to teach pupils before they enter an established pesantren or a modern education institution. The content of this risalah covers some fundamental "technicalities", which might be found in similar work as mentioned by Bruinessen. These technicalities include ritual purification (*wudu*), prayer (*salat*), and fasting (*sawm*) etc. All these technicalities are subject to a learning process which "appears very straightforwardly"

¹This paper was presented at *8th World Conference on Muslim Education (World-COME 2012)*, 12-13th November, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.

²Hereinafter referred to as "pesantren".

³Hereinafter referred to as "MM". It is a classic text written by Shaikh Daud bin Ismail bin Mustafa Rumî For a detailed information See: Mehmet Ozay, (2011). "Baba Daud: A Turkish Scholar in Aceh" In *Ottoman Connections to the Malay World: Islam, Law and Society*, Assc. Prof. Saim Kayadibi, Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press.

(Bruinessen 2011: 2) due to the nature of fundamental Islamic knowledge based on an epistemological background.

The departure point of the study was the method of using MM as an initial text book in both formal and informal teaching environments. Though it is more popular in some areas than it is in others, in regions such as Aceh, (Indonesia), MM is an integral part of early Islamic education for the younger generation and is frequently used in pesantren education. Data for this study was also collected from Aceh (Indonesia), Kelantan (Malaysia) and Patani (Southern Thailand). These two regions were chosen for the following reasons; the connection of the writer to the *risalah*, the geographical closeness of the author to Aceh, and the similarities between the two regions in terms of their pesantren education systems as emphasized by Interviewee 2 in Kelantan.⁴

In terms of outcomes, the research into the methods of MM and its relation to the development of critical thinking ought to be regarded as a new attempt to understand and reinterpret the implementation of multiple methods in pesantren education. The analysis of the data collected throughout interview sessions were in line with the methods discussed in the MM and the data provided a window into how MM methods contribute to the development of critical thinking in pupils. It must also be mentioned that the contributions made by MM methods cannot be realized at the initial educational levels, due to various reasons as seen in data analysis.

One may argue that to study a classical text (*kitab lama*) in relation to critical thinking, a modern teaching method, may be regarded as an anachronism, owing to the fact that the concept of critical thinking was recently introduced as a modern concept. Without overlooking this point, a strong argument can be made that the writer of MM chose the Question and Answer⁵ method to teach issues, such as *iman* and *akidah*. However, it cannot be denied that traditional teaching and learning⁶ environments stimulate academic skills using various vehicles pertaining to the methods described in MM and traditional T&L environment positively impacts the development of thinking abilities. In fact, critical thinking is a substantial feature of traditional education. Members of traditional education institutions may claim to be unaware of this “fashionable concept” but the Malay language (Bahasa Indonesia/Malayu) has an almost similar concept, ‘*berfikir kritis kritis*’, which is an established phrase used to refer to ‘critical thinking.’

Since this *risalah* is used as course material for the youngest pupils, it is salient in molding and sustaining a strong rational attitude in individual pupils. As a result, its importance attracts much attention because current beliefs hold that pupils will adopt the attitudes in this *risalah* in their future studies. In light of these beliefs, the author wishes to state that this study was a construction of knowledge based on rational thinking via Q&A methods.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The content of the interview session focused on the methods used in T&L process in pesantren education, particularly the ones seen as contributing to the development of critical thinking

⁴Interview with Interviewee 2, from Kelantan, 16 August 2011, Fakultas Pengajian Islam, Universiti Malaya.

⁵Hereinafter referred to as “Q&A”.

⁶Hereinafter referred to as “T&L”.

skills. This category used carefully framed questions to avoid the bias left by Western observers regarding traditional Islamic education. The methods in MM were considered, especially the Q&A method, to determine whether there was a relation between this method and development of critical thinking skills.

Question Formulation

The formulation of the interview questions occurred in various phases. The decision regarding which method would be chosen was determined on the basis of initial preparations combining processes such as a literature review, observations and informal talks with teungkus and students. Literature, which touched on the nature of the pesantren education system was reviewed and briefly discussed with lecturers and other researchers in Jawa, Aceh, and Johor either face-to-face or by e-mails. The terminology used in this paper was carefully chosen to reach individuals in pesantren circles. The questions in the list were shortened, and more explanations were given as part of the interview process to make the subject more understandable. The main data collection and its appropriateness to the interview questions were significantly influenced by these scholars.

Research Questions

The research focused on the following questions:

- 1-Is a MM fundamental book?
- 2-Are there any issues pertaining to Rote Learning or memorization?
- 3-Do the methods in f MM increase understanding?
- 4-Does the Q&A method in MM lead students to acquire ‘critical thinking’ skills, such as asking questions? Do they improve in terms of their critical approach?
- 5-Do Western scholars argue that the Qur’an classes or schools are based on rote-learning and memorization while excluding critical thinking?

Research Instrument

A multiple process approach was used during this study and it included the documentation method, determining the regions, identifying school leaders, conducting interviews, creating transcriptions, data processing and analysis. A qualitative method was used to collect data since it allowed the researchers to understand how T&L activities operated by examining the approaches used by instructors in traditional education institutions. The first task was initiated using a documentation method to collect data about both the writer of MM and his works as described by various sources in the literature. Then, interviews were conducted with distinguished figures from pesantren circles in the three regions. There are some reasons to choose interviews as a research vehicle. During an interview, the interviewer has the capacity to control the direction of the conversation using various strategies, such as asking certain questions and contributing by confirming arguments made by the interviewee. Interview sessions allow for an exchange of information between the interviewer and interviewee (Feagin 2004: 33). In addition to the interview sessions, the researcher found opportunities to observe lessons under real conditions. The opportunity to observe classroom behaviour provided information that was as significant because it increased understanding of the T&L environment and approaches. Bernard Phillips mentions that observations made under real life conditions (1976: 235) “yield an emphasis on the nonverbal aspects of behaviour”. Next, the collected interview data was

transliterated, translated and processed. Lastly, any text concerned with teaching methods based on Q&A techniques, was analyzed.

Data Collection

After the interviews were completed, each record was transcribed word by word by a professional service. The interviews flexible atmosphere allowed the researcher to direct each session. As a result, additional significant information was collected because other, optional questions could be asked. The interviewer had to shift the focus of the interview from the impact of teaching MM to how the respective religious scholars highlight critical thinking and related issues in T&L process because MM was not used in Kelantan and Patani. This shift resulted in collecting data that was valuable, supported the hypothesis and was itself was an example of the critical approach used by the interviewees.

FINDINGS

Out of thirty interviewees, four were excluded during the analysis process for various reasons. The data was taken from twenty-six participants as seen above in Table 1. The final evaluation was conducted using data from sixteen participants from Aceh, five participants from Patanese and five Kelantanese religious scholars. During this study, the author found opportunities to experience T&L environments based on the structures set out by various well known religious scholars. In addition to responding to the prepared interview questions, the respondents also discussed the relationship between the students at pesantren and the relationships between students and the teachers/scholars. The results of the interviews revealed that the teaching epistemology in pesantrens allowed for the maintenance of the methods in T&L activities.

-MM is very fundamental book.

The pesantren system exposes children first to non-formal educational practices in their families using indirect learning processes such as witnessing, imitation, and repetition. Then, when they reach a certain age, children are immersed into formal education facilities depending on local conditions. Before starting their education in traditional education centres, children study MM under the guidance of a knowledgeable person in their families or community to acquire basic information about Islamic knowledge. They may also study MM under the guidance of a religious scholar in some sort of traditional space such as *meunasah*. In Aceh, as remarked by Interviewee 2, who is not only the head of a well-known pesantren but also a ranking official in a distinguished institution, MM takes a historic place in the curriculum and is used as a standard text book classified as “*buku kecil*” like *Matan migrat*.⁷ Interviewee 2’s opinion reflects the widespread usage of MM by religious scholars, particularly in Aceh. In addition, MM is a well-known classical text and almost all children at the village level study it before continuing their studies. Very young children, such as those from the ages of six to seven, attend a *meunasah*, a well-established institution in a village and study MM with the help of *teungku meunasah*, who is the head of the *meunasah* (Alfian 1987: 42). As seen in Table 3 above, the majority, of respondents agreed on the use of MM in the early stages of Islamic education. The minority of the respondent, who did not agree were from Kelantan and Patani.

⁷From interview with Interviewee 2, Blang Bintang, Banda Aceh, 22 May, 2011.

-Rote Learning and Memorization Issues in Learning Processes

Memorization is a crucial teaching method applied during the early years of Islamic study. In terms of studying MM, memorization seems to be used everywhere. There are various factors that should be considered when evaluating the use of this method, such as the age of the pupil and the level of the book. MM functions well, since its content gives the fundamentals of Islam in a basic way. That is why some respondents remarked during the interviews that students memorized the book early in their schooling. However, at later stages, students discover the meanings behind what they memorized and, at the same time, they start asking questions, particularly at the higher third and fourth levels (*tingkat*). This process reflects the learning process from memorization to understanding and analysis. More than one respondent indicated that MM includes a multi-level approach. For example, Interviewee 1 discussed the method based on T&L levels as shown below:

“...*Pertama bila kita belajar di sekolah dia bagi kita hafaz kemudian peringkat mungkin darjah dua atau tiga dia akan suruh kita tafsir sejauh mana kefahaman kita.*”⁸

Interviewee 5 from Patani described the education system in terms of his experience as being separated into two levels: the “*sistem nizami*” which included four levels and the “*kelas umum*,” which included three levels. The three levels of *kelas umum* are the introduction (*mukhtadi, permulaan, and mutawasiq*), the middle and the higher level. Levels were also an issue in Aceh. In this paper, the different levels were described by Interviewee 9, a very senior Teungku in Aceh. He stated that Islamic studies in traditional education centres include four types: Type A, B, C and Type ‘*pengajian*’. Type A is the highest level of study and is the last one conducted at the village level.⁹ Unlike Interviewee 9, the majority of the respondents highlighted only two levels, low (elementary) and high (advanced) level. For example, Interviewee 7 said that he himself studied and observed as a researcher that students “*must obey what to do the books say. In advanced level there are discussions.*”¹⁰ As seen below, only one respondent, Interviewee 4 from Patani, argued that there was no ‘rote learning’, instead the teacher introduced interaction teacher during class. The question, is whether pesantren education is based on indoctrination by forcing students to memorize all related texts or is it a system that incorporates various steps in the educational process, including critical thinking and problem solving approaches. This question is the subject of dissension by outside observers. To be able to understand this question, it is best to analyse the respondents’ answers.

Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents stated that the studies entailed some rote learning. Interviewee 11 remarked that in Aceh, rote learning is used when studying the fundamentals of Islamic such as the Pillars of Islam (*Rukun Iman*).¹¹ In early childhood, very basic level learning, such as, language acquisition, starts with imitation before understanding takes place. Later in the language acquisition process, children construct their own sentences. This same process explains how the basic texts of Islamic creed are taught in pesantrens. All necessary T&L steps must be properly considered without ignoring Islamic phenomenology.

⁸From interview with Interviewee 1, on 20 July 2011, Patani.

⁹From the interview with Interviewee 9, on 27 August 2011, Panto Labu, Aceh.

¹⁰From the interview with Interviewee 7, on 4 June 2011, Darussalam, Banda Aceh.

¹¹From the interview with Interviewee 11, on 28 August 2011, Pantan Labu.

However, rote learning is not the sole method used in the T&L process. It is a phase of memorization, related to the nature of Islamic studies and epistemology. As an initial step, memorization is inevitable and transitory method. Later on, students are exposed of develop critical approaches and internalize Islamic knowledge through interactions with their guru and with other students. Interviewee 9 highlighted this issue arguing that students memorize MM during the initial phase and they “*understand the content when they attend studies in pesantren where students focus more on using rational skills to perceive the topics*”.¹² There are various approaches employed during T&L process in pesantrens. When the importance of rote learning is considered, even the title of the book MM indicates what kind of knowledge is imparted to the pupils. As the Interviewee 4 explained, ‘*masail*’ means question, ‘*muhtadi*’ is directed (*petunjuk*) to *hidayah*. Literally translated, this means that it is almost equal to ‘divine guidance’.¹³ The data from this study confirms the argument of Karel Steenbrink (1974: 10-11). According to her, pesantren education used memorization starting from a very early age (between six and ten years) under the guidance of a guru. At the earlier stage of T&L, students are immersed in learning the Qur’an. The requirement to pray five times a day makes rote learning a necessity.

-The Q&A method of MM increases understanding

None of the respondents was opposed to the learning methods in MM. Rote learning and the Q&A method described in MM were seen as contributing to the development of critical thinking. The content and scope of the book includes fundamental knowledge of faith (*iman*), practical rules of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) which are suitable topics for rote learning. Abstract topics such as *tauhid*, *iman*, *ikhlas*, *makrifat* and *syahadat*, which every individual learns in the initial phase of Islamic education (Fathurrahman 2010: 177; Sulaiman 1997: 31), may not lead directly to the development of critical thinking but the Q&A familiarized students with asking and answering questions. Students develop the inclination to answer than ask questions as a result of studying this book.

More than half of the respondents agreed that the methods of MM increase understanding. A look at individual answers reveals the teachers’ thoughts and what approaches they used to relate to this course material. For instance, Interviewee 6¹⁴ from Aceh argued strongly that the students would not be able to understand the *kitab kuning* in their further studies without first learning MM. In addition, Interviewee 3, who was the leader of a pesantren, suggested that MM methods were significant by comparing with other teaching materials such as *Ilmu Mantiq* (logic), *Balaqah*, and *Ilmu Maani*, taught at higher levels. Tgk. Ataskreung also gave an example of a similar book written in the same Q&A method, and quoted from the writer who explains that the reason he used this specific method as follows: “*I wrote this book in Q&A in order to make it easier for students to memorize and understand accordingly.*”¹⁵

-The Q&A method of MM leads students to acquire ‘critical thinking’ skills such as asking questions. They improve in terms of their critical approach

It is not easy to determine if the pupils who were immersed in the Q&A method develop critical thinking skills to the same degree as modern individuals. Despite this, there is no doubt that they

¹²From the interview with Interviewee 9, on 27 August 2011, Pantan Labu.

¹³From the interview with Interviewee 4, on 30 May 2011, Banda Aceh.

¹⁴From the interview with the Interviewee 6, on 2 June 2011, Banda Aceh.

¹⁵From the interview with the Interviewee 3, on 22 May 2011, Banda Aceh.

are equipped with a skill that allows them to handle the problematic areas in their daily lives in their respective societies. As a conventional way of T&L in an organizational setting, pesantrens include parameters that guide the most direct involvement of teachers and learners. This is called a “contract between teachers and students which will set the expectations and norms” (Mayes 2006: 17). The importance of group communication between students and teacher allows the students to internalize the process by restructuring their own concepts (Mayes 2006: 18). At each level, starting from pengajian in meunasah (Aceh) by *imam meunasah* or *surau* or at home of religious teacher (*Lebai*, in Malaysia), students learn new skills in terms of their studies and are moulded and prepared by their teachers. Each step of a T&L activity uses Q&A sessions to stimulate thinking skills. When asked what level MM contributed to the development of critical thinking, the respondents had difficulties in answering appropriately. The majority agreed that MM contributed to the development of critical thinking skills. A few respondents hesitated, had a sort of hesitation and needed to address that this book was only a beginner’s book and could not have any significant contribution. For instance, Interviewee 2 remarked as follows:

*“Children who study this book as a beginner course book cannot use their rationality. Nonetheless, this study helps them for their further study”.*¹⁶

Without forgetting that the study group was the very junior group and MM is a basic text, Interviewee 7 argued that:

*“It’s a type of stimulation, but mainly initial process makes how the students understand knowledge of Islam. But this method in the process has some impact on the development of critical thinking.”*¹⁷

In addition, it can be argued that through this book, and particularly through its method, the development of the critical skills of the young learner transpires over the course of time. Another respondent commented on the curiosity of younger learners arguing that this method capitalized on this curiosity, which exists in all children.¹⁸ Over the course of the interviews, it became clear that critical thinking was intertwined throughout the multiple-methods applied in the pesantren. The T&L process included self-study, group study, memorization and discussion. These approaches were fashioned to be in line with the age and level of the students. Pesantren education exercised all these methods and all the respondents suggested that they start at an early age and continue to age fifteen and align with factors such as the aims and capabilities of the students.¹⁹ Some Patani teachers contributed to this study by analysing the title and methods of MM, even though the MM was not generally taught in Patani pesantrens. One respondent remarked that, *“It is not acceptable that MM does not have any sort of impact on critical skills. It is incorrect... Even the title of the book clarifies that teaching method is salient enough conducted seriously word by word of the content by asking questions...”*²⁰ The same respondent urged that the nature of education in pesantren was related to asking questions. In situations where books were not written in the same way as MM, the teachers introduced questions to highlights issues and lead students²¹

¹⁶From interview with the Interviewee 2, on 22 May, 2011, Banda Aceh.

¹⁷From the interview with the Interviewee 7, on 4 June 2011, Banda Aceh.

¹⁸From the interview with the Interviewee 5, on 2 June 2011, Banda Aceh.

¹⁹From interview with the Interviewee 5, from Kelantan, on 19th July 2011.

²⁰From interview with the Interviewee 2, on 20 July 2011, Patani.

²¹From interview with the Interviewee 2, on 20 July 2011, Patani.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The book MM which, chosen by the present writer as research material, is symbolically significant enough to be analysed in regard of its method and impact on the students' development for their further studies. Though MM, as a course book, once upon a time was thought overall in pesantren, in current conditions mostly is used as a fundamental teaching material in Aceh and almost all students participating in basic level of Islamic learning process are exposed this book and its method. Provided that *pengajian* (study) in meunasah and pesantren education is organically attached to each other, studying MM in the pre-pesantren education makes it inevitable consistent with the further study (Dhofier 1999:12).

This course material is very fundamental in terms of its content to structure the basis of belief system of young Muslim children. This issue was also highlighted by the majority of the interviewees conducted by the present writer. And the method, Q&A, is encouraging to study this text which is not only subject to be memorized but also understood in a rational way to some extent. As the questions asked in a very carefully structured way "*Jika ditanya orang kita*"... Then, the way of answering the questions as followed "*bahwa*" is also in line with making it understandable in affordable way realized by the younger learners (Fathurrahman 2010: 177)²².

It is right to ask a question what makes this fundamental book unique and significant. Its characteristics is the method, say, Q&A method. And it is the core aspect of this research and also as witnessed, its relation with critical thinking is salient enough. It is supposedly claimed that this teaching method worked well in a few ways; first it functionalizes the questioning habit of the younger children since they are prone to ask often questions to grasp the meaning of their social and natural environment; second it constitutes a significant attempt to make students to acquire some certain capacity of critical thinking; third, it lets children acquire fundamental Islamic knowledge in a clear and short form of information. As mentioned in various places in this research, Q&A method has a stimulative effect on the development of critical thinking skills throughout the long period of study in pesantren institution. The method of MM, say Q&A including variety types of versions, such as "when, why, why not and how else" is thought to lead students to inculcate thinking and "acquire the ability to know and understand" the content of what they are studying. While teachers at modern schools currently create T&L environment "to sense of their world" by using various leverages, one cannot argue that the opposite in traditional ones (Hashim; Hussien 2003: 5).

And it might raise a type of suspicion about the usage of critical thinking in terms of a traditional teaching material. Nonetheless, it is worth arguing here that rationality is exercised in the context of Islamic epistemology. Regarding Islamic education, it should not be missed that the epistemology is different from the Western epistemological approach. In particular, pesantren education is based on the understanding of the Islamic religious belief which makes the study of certain types of knowledge, as known compulsory (*fard 'ayn*) for each believer. Due to this reason, in Islamic societies the fact is precisely that "seeking knowledge is a form of religious duty" (Al-Roubaie 2010: 338). Islam accepts the revelation as an initial point for knowledge and Islamic education commence its inculcation by Qur'anic training. However, it does not mean that Islamic education falsifies rational thinking and problem solving approach.

²²This aspect was also highlighted by some interviewees, such as Interviewee 2 from Patani, on 20th July, 2011.

For instance, James Siegel (1979: 234) touches indirectly the issue of rationality in somewhere else in his renowned book while talking about Hikayat Perang Sabil which happened in Aceh:

“Without the guidance of religion, akal is not a reliable guide to the world. Rather, people are ruled by desire, which allows them to accept things for what they seem, unaware of the dangers hidden within. The world is thus a source of deception. Rationality must be used not to reflect the world but, through the guidance of religion, to use and shape it. The guidance of religion can come only from those who are learned in it, the oelama.”

It is striking that both in practice and method critical thinking takes a significant place in pesantren education. For example, among some other features, critical thinking (*berfikir kritis*) is given a significant place in pesantren education in a publication of National Education Department (Shabri 2000: 47). In regard to this, it is salient to remind the point of view Naqib al-Attas, a contemporary scholar. He (1972: 96) argues that Islamic thought is the cause Muslim people to gain “the spirit of rationalism” which is inevitably the result of education system.

In the context of pesantren education in various regions of Malay world, the education of students rests upon the open-critical approach throughout the upper levels. If we need to define by the Western educational terminology, the first step might be named as external structuring of education, and the second one is the internal or learner-centered education which allows students to satisfy their learning curiosity and expansion for knowledge. As it is allegedly claimed that learner-centered approach allows intellectually interactions both among the students and teacher–students and allows students to improve comprehensively in T&L process (Nelson et. al. 2010: 166). In the context of above-mentioned dual, say, external and internal education, it can be strongly admitted that pesantren education allows multiple approaches to be implemented throughout the system²³. Pesantren students remarked themselves during talks with the present writer in various opportunities and the latter observed, that they look for acquiring not only scholarly knowledge but also wisdom throughout their education. How they do develop critical thinking and approach can be witnessed in their attitude during the discussion (*mushyawah*) classes in which the teacher and students interact freely based on their subject matter of discussion.

²³From the interview with Interviewee 13 from Aceh. In particular Interviewee 9 from Aceh urged the variety of method while he was classifying pesantren education (on 27 August 2011).

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