

'ULAMĀ' TRAINING AND MODERNIZING AL WASHLIYAH *MADRASAH*

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Abstract: One of the marked steps in education modernization in independence Indonesia is the integration of *madrastas* into national schooling system. This paper attempts to study how Al Washliyah *Madrrasah* responds to this development and to what extent the policy has affected their vision in achieving the goal as an '*ulamā*' training institution. Founded in 1930, Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah established significant number of *madrastas* with a core mission of training future '*ulamā*' to fill the need of Muslim society. In order to achieve this mission Al Washliyah developed a curriculum that is made of 70% Islamic subjects and 30% general subjects, which made them delivering very well. The 1975 Joint Decree of Three Ministers (*SKB 3 Menteri*) gave Al Washliyah *madrassa* no choice but to adjust its curriculum. The author finds that with the new state-sponsored curriculum, Al Washliyah *madrassa* loses the ability to produce young generations of '*ulamā*'. The 1990s witnessed the scarcity of '*ulamā*' and becoming more alarming ever since, nonetheless, viable strategy yet to be found to meet the challenge.

Keywords: Al Washliyah, *madrrasah*, '*ulamā*', Islamic education

Introduction

Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah, very often shortened as just Al Washliyah, is a North Sumatra based Islamic organization. Al Washliyah was founded in Medan in November 30, 1930. Combining Islamic religious spirit and national zeal, this organization very quickly became highly influential, especially in northern parts of Sumatra. In 1986 Al Washliyah moved its headquarter to Jakarta, starting its adventures at national level. As with many Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Al Washliyah puts education as one of its core programs. Although Al Washliyah founded a series of education institutions of different types and levels, the majority of these institutions are *madrasas* (*Islamic Schools*).¹ It is through chains of *madrasas* Al Washliyah crafted its educational contribution. Al Washliyah *madrasas* are to be found everywhere in North Sumatra, with some others in Aceh, Java, and Kalimantan.

One of Al Washliyah *madrasas*' core objectives is providing students with fundamental knowledge and training them in basic skills required to become future '*ulamâ*'. '*Ulamâ*' functions as preachers to propagate Islam and to serve the Muslim society at large in any religious matters. It must be noted that Al Washliyah *madrasas* were delivering very well, and became well known as main producer of young North Sumatran '*ulamâ*', at least until the 1980s. During this period of time, a great many of North Sumatran top-flight '*ulamâ*' are members of Al Washliyah or affiliated with it in one way or another. Some of these '*ulamâ*' are not just locally recognized but also of national and even international reputation.²

However, from the 1990s on this very important role of providing '*ulamâ*' has been declining very seriously. That very often glorified heyday is nothing but a chapter—indeed a very important one—in Al Washliyah history. Today, just like any Islamic organization in Indonesia, Al Washliyah is having great

problem in producing fresh generation of *'ulamâ'*. The *madrasas* under Al Washliyah are not delivering the same type of graduates any longer.³

Modernization of Islamic education seems to be at the very center of this phenomenon. The seed of Islamic modernism in Indonesia came from the Middle East in the 17th and 18th centuries, as has been solidly established by Azyumardi Azra.⁴ This modernizing idea found its breeding ground in Indonesian Islamic education institutions which by then under foreign occupation. The first important change in Islamic education was the introduction of secular orientation into what had been purely religious in the previous times. This new orientation necessitated that the curriculum be adjusted accordingly. However, until 1975 any organization had the freedom of determining its schools' curriculum. The Joint Decree of Three Ministers of 1975 (*SKB 3 Menteri*), however, ended this freedom and required that all schools of the same type and level apply the same government-regulated curriculum. Apparently, this Joint Decree and the choice made by Al Washliyah in responding to it greatly change its position and contribution to *'ulamâ'* training.

Modernization and Al Washliyah Education Design

Many major scholarly studies put the many Islamic organizations in Indonesia in a traditionalist-modernist perspective. One of the most popular of such studies would be Deliar Noer's *Gerakan Moderen Islam di Indonesia 1900-1942*, which has become classic in this line of study.⁵ This approach of course is not without shortages. One of these shortages would be its tendencies to be simply black-and-white and, as a result, its failure to take into consideration the sometimes very wide variations within any given organization.⁶

Some researchers have noted that it is rather difficult to put Al Washliyah into this black-and-white category. Underlining the significance of Al Washliyah and putting it in third position after Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah,⁷ Steenbrink emphasizes that “it is rather difficult to position Al Washliyah in a simple classification of modernist or traditionalist.”⁸ Bruinessen describes Al Washliyah as a modernist socio educational organization with a moderate approach.⁹ Steenbrink argues that one of the reasons for this was the fact that Al Washliyah rooted in North Sumatra, a region with substantial population of Christian Bataks and Chinese.¹⁰

Many considered that Al Washliyah was born out of Maktab al-Islamiyah Tapanuli (MIT) because its foundation was initiated by a group of teachers of this *maktab*.¹¹ The earliest days of Al Washliyah were marked with increasing waves of modernization in the region. Muhammadiyah as representation of modernism *par excellence* established a North Sumatran branch in 1927.¹² The introduction of modern ideas resulted in widespread and often heated debates over many topics among ‘*ulamâ*’ as well as among the general masses. The founding fathers of Al Washliyah believed that this should be handled by better education. This belief explained why Al Washliyah placed education as a primary line of activities. In its initial years, Al Washliyah developed 8 divisions to implement its programs and activities, and education came second in the list, as *Majlis Tarbiyah* (Department of Education).¹³ In fact Al Washliyah waste no time at all, and started to established series of education institutions since the time of its foundation.¹⁴

Al Washliyah divided its institutions of learning into three types: *Madrasas* (Islamic School), *Sekolah Umum* (General School), and *Sekolah Guru* (Teachers School). Later on, university education was added to this list. With these education institutions Al

Washliyah intended to achieve at least two things. *Firstly*, it tries to contribute through formal education. It must be noted that in the first quarter of the 20th century Medan had not known any well-organized *madrasas*. In fact MIT was the first of such institution.¹⁵ Until then, religious learning was taught in non-formal circles (*majlis ta'lim*) in mosques or houses of 'ulamâ'. *Secondly*, by establishing general school (*sekolah umum*) along with *madrasas*, Al Washliyah shows its strong awareness of the waves of modernization in every aspects of life. The founding fathers of Al Washliyah were with no doubt traditionalists. This is most clearly indicated by the Statute of the organization, which says: "This organization was based on Islam, following Syâfi'i School in matters of law and *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamâ'ah* in theological matters."¹⁶ In spite of that they were well aware of the importance of modern education in secular sciences and established chains of general schools with Al Washliyah flag. Al Washliyah also shows its openness to modernity by sending in 1934 a delegation to Minangkabau West Sumatra. There, Arsjad Thalib Lubis, Udin Sjamsuddin, and Nukman Sulaiman visited Sekolah Adabiyah, Noormal School, and Diniyah School, among others.¹⁷ Minangkabau is indeed known as the starting point of modernization of Islamic education in Sumatra.¹⁸ This delegation visited modernizing schools of Minangkabau and brought home novel ideas and best practices to be introduced in Al Washliyah *madrasas* and general schools.¹⁹

A mid 1950s record shows that Al Washliyah of that time was organizing 670 educational institutions, *madrasas* and general schools, as follows:²⁰

| NO | INSTITUTION | NUMBER OF UNITS |
|----|--|-----------------|
| | <i>Madrasas</i> | |
| 1. | <i>Tajhîziyyah</i> (Preparatory) level | 301 |
| 2. | <i>Ibtida'iyah</i> (Elementary)level | 296 |
| 3. | <i>Tsanawiyah</i> (Junior High) level | 14 |
| 4. | <i>Al-Qismul Ali</i> (Senior High) level | 3 |
| 5. | <i>Takhassus</i> (Specialization) level | 1 |
| | <i>General Schools</i> | |
| 6. | Elementary School (SR) | 39 |
| 7. | Junior High School (SMP) | 7 |
| 8. | Junior High School for Economics (SMEP) | 2 |

Clearly Al Washliyah original educational design attempts to provide both religious education through *madrasas* and general education through *sekolah umum*. The curriculum of *madrasas* comprises of 70% Islamic subjects and 30% of general subjects. In Al Washliyah schools the portion is reversed: 70% general subjects and 30% Islamic subjects.²¹ The table indicates that while catering for general education, the main contribution of Al Washliyah education is to be found in its chains of *madrasas*.

***'Ulamâ'* Training as Original Mission of Al Washliyah Madrasa**

It is absolutely clear that Al Washliyah puts a great emphasis on the importance of religious education. This can be seen in the levels of Al Washliyah *madrasas* as well as in their respective curriculum. Al Washliyah *madrasa* education was designed to last for 14 years, comprising 5 levels, as follows:

1. Preparatory (*Tajhîziyyah*) level (2 years).
2. Elementary (*Ibtida'iyah*) level (4 years).
3. Junior High (*Tsanawiyah*) level (3 years).

4. Senior High (*Al-Qism al-'Alî*) level (3 years).
5. Specialization (*Takhashshush*) level (2 years).

It should be noted that apart from *madrasas*, Al Washliyah also opened a special institute for Qur'anic Studies, called Instituut Met de Qoran, although survived only for a short period of time.²²

Al Washliyah's commitment to education of '*ulamâ*' was supported by the curriculum of its *madrasas*. In 1953, Al Washliyah held The 9th Congress of Al Washliyah Teachers (*Kongres Guru-guru Al Washliyah ke IX*) in Medan, discussing varieties of topics regarding Al Washliyah education institutions. Most relevant to our present discussion is the agreed curriculum of Al Washliyah *madrasas* and their alumni profiles thereby described. The Congress stipulated that curriculum of Al Washliyah *Ibtida'iyah*, *Tsanawiyah*, and *Al-Qismul Alî madrasas* should comprise no less than 70% of Islamic religious subjects and only up to 30% of general subjects.²³

With this kind of curriculum, Al Washliyah *madrasas* was expected to prepare student to become religious teachers, preachers, and eventually assume religious leadership in society.²⁴ The 1953 Congress came up with the following description of Al Washliyah *madrasas*' alumni. The *Tajhîziyyah* level of *madrasa* is designed for "children who have not developed the ability to write or to read Arabic scripts, until they could read the Qur'an (i.e. Arabic writing with diacritical marks) and could read Arabic writings with no diacritical marks (in Indonesian language). They should also be able to perform the ritual of *salat* and other Islamic rituals."²⁵ For the *Ibtida'iyah* level, it was said that "...students of this level should have sufficient knowledge of Islam and limited general subjects."²⁶

The alumni of *Tsanawiyah* level, "... are expected to become religious functionaries for their own communities and be able to teach at *Tajhîziyyah* and *Ibtida'iyah* levels of *madrasa*."²⁷ A much higher standard was demanded from alumni of *Al-Qismul Alî* level of Al Washliyah *madrasas*. "The alumni of this level should have a relatively complete knowledge of religious subjects and also some crucial general subjects."²⁸ Finally, the *Takhassus* level is "the highest level of Al Washliyah religious training ... designed for advanced studies in Islam and some specific subjects."²⁹

These descriptions of alumni profiles make it absolutely clear that Al Washliyah *madrasa* system was designed primarily to train 'ulamâ'.³⁰ Each stage of the five-level system represents an important step one needs to become a highly qualified 'ulamâ'. While the first two levels of Al Washliyah *madrasa* education should suffice to establish a high standard of personal piety, the third level provides a bridge to become a community religious leader, albeit in the most rudimentary meaning of the term. The next level of *madrasa* prepares its students for proper 'ulamâ' qualifications. Still, the final level gives one a chance to pursue a specialized study from the wide range of Islamic studies, such as *Fiqh*, *Tafsîr*, *Hadîts*, or *Kalâm*. In short, there is no doubt that those who follow the ladders from the beginning to the end will eventually become an 'ulamâ' worthy of religious leadership of the society. The only future roles to be expected were religion-related.

Arabic language is very important in Al Washliyah *madrasa* system. It is clear from the description above that Arabic language was introduced at the very beginning of *madrasa* education, i.e. since the *Tajhîziyyah* level. Arabic is a must because all primary sources of Islamic subjects are in that language: the Holy Qur'an, the Prophetic Tradition, as well as classical works in different branches of knowledge, popularly known in Indonesia as *kitab*

kuning (literally, yellow books). It is generally held that ‘*ulamâ*’ must possess high ability in understanding *kitab kuning*. One of contemporary senior Al Washliyah ‘*ulamâ*’ makes it clear that ‘*ulamâ*’ should have excellent mastery of *kitab kuning* in Islamic disciplines. Anyone unequipped with this fundamental ability cannot be considered as qualified ‘*ulamâ*’.³¹

This fundamental belief in the indispensability of Arabic language materializes in the lists of compulsory references of Al Washliyah *madrasa* education. With an initial very rapid development of its *madrasas*, Al Washliyah soon realized the necessity of standardized curriculum. This problem was discussed in the First Conference of Al Washliyah Teachers (*Kongres Guru-guru Al Washliyah Pertama*) held in Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli in December 24, 1933.³²

A short list sampel of the *kitab kuning* that are used in Al Washliyah *madrasa* should be in order here. The *Tajhîziyyah* started to introduce students to some basic disciplines of Islamic Studies using books in Malay language, but written in Arabic scripts, known as Malay Arabic Scripts (*Aksara Arab Melayu*).³³ In *Ibtidaiyah* level, however, the introduction of Arabic books (*kitab kuning*) starts. Among compulsory references in Al Washliyah *madrasa* are *Matn al-Ajrûmiyyah* of Muḥammad bin Daud al-Sanhâjî, *Matn al-Maqsûd* of Imam Aḥmad Ḥanafiah Kailâni (Arabic Grammar); *Matn Taqrîb* of Abu Sujâ‘ al-Ashfahânî dan *Fath al-Qarîb* of ‘Ali Ibnu Qâsim, *Tuhfah al-Saniyah* of Ḥasan Masysyâth (Islamic Law); *Kifâyah al-‘Awwâm* of Ibrâhîm al-Baijûrî, *Syarḥ al-Dusûqî ‘ala Umm al-Barâhîm* of Muḥammad al-Dusûqî (Islamic Theology); *Matn al-Arba‘în al-Nawâwîyah* of Imam Yahya al-Nawâwî (Hadis).

For *Tsanawiyah* level, some of the most commonly used *kitab kuning* are *Tafsîr al-Jalâlayn* of Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûthî and Jalâl al-Dîn al-Mahallî (Qur’anic Exegesis); *al-Asybah wa an-*

Nazhâ'ir of Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûthî, *Al-Warâqat* of Ahmad al-Dimyathi, *Tuhfah al-Thullâb* of Ahmad bin Zakariyâ' al-Anshârî (Islamic Law); *Riyâdh al-Shâlihîn* of Imam Yahya al-Nawâwî, *Mau'izhah al-Mu'minîn* of Muhammad Jalâl al-Dîn al-Dimasyqi (Ethics).

At the very top level of *Al-Qismul 'Alî*, among the most important *kitab kuning* reference are: *Tafsîr al-Baidhâwî* of Qâdhî Nâshir al-Dîn al-Baidhâwî, *Tafsîr al-Khâzin* of 'Ala' al-Dîn 'Ali bin Muhammad al-Baghdadî al-Khâzin, *Tafsîr al-Nasafî* of 'Abdullâh bin Ahmad al-Nasafî, *Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibnu 'Abbâs* of Muhammad bin Ya'qûb bin Fadhillâh al-Fairûzâbâdî (Qur'anic Exegesis); *Shahîh Muslim* of Muslim bin al-Hajjâj al-Naisâbûrî (Hadis); *al-Mahallî* of Jalâl al-Dîn al-Mahallî, *al-Asybah wa al-Nazhâ'ir* of Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûthî, *Syarh Jalâl al-Dîn al-Mahallî 'alâ Jam' al-Jawâmi'* of Tâj al-Dîn 'Abdul Wahâb bin 'Ali al-Subkî (Islamic Law); *al-Risâlah al-Qusyairiyyah* of Abû al-Qâsim al-Qusyairi (Tasawwuf); *Muhâdharât Târîkh al-Umam al-Islâmiyah* of Muhammad al-Khudhari Bîk (Islamic History); *al-Adyân* of Mahmud Yunus (Comparative Religion); *al-Waladiyah* of Muhammad al-Marasyi (Debate).³⁴

It is very unfortunate that the present author have not been able to acquire any information about the books used for the *Takhassus* level. The list of Al Washliyah schools does include one such *madrasa*, but does not provide any other information about it.³⁵ Nevertheless, it should be saved to assume that the books used in the *Takhassus* level are those highly specialized most advanced ones in particular field, such as Islamic Law, Islamic Theology, or Islamic Ethics.

This list of books indicate that Al Washliyah *madrasa* was designed to provide '*ulamâ'*' training of considerable standard. As a matter of fact, some claim the quality of '*ulamâ'*' training in Al Washliyah *madrasas* is comparable to that of Middle East

centers of Islamic learning, including the celebrated Al-Azhar in Cairo.³⁶ It is outside of our concern to prove these claims. Nevertheless, we do have records of some Al Washliyah *madrasas*' alumni who continued their religious studies to certain learning centers in the Middle East, including to Al-Azhar.³⁷ With this kind of *madrasa* system, it is no surprising that Al Washliyah become a major provider of quality '*ulamâ*' and religious leaders for North Sumatra and the surrounding regions for at least down to the 1980s.

Modernization and the Changing Curriculum of *Madrasa*

The roots of Islamic modernism in Indonesia should be traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries.³⁸ In the outset this modernization focused on religious thought, especially in the fields of theology and law. Later on these thoughts covered the theme of Dutch colonialism and most importantly the ways Indonesia Muslims should respond to it. Only in the beginning of the 19th century this modernization project started to touch Islamic education per se. Modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia was perceived not just in the context of education or intellectual enterprises but also as part of strategies to cope with colonialism. In the long term, quality education in an independence Indonesia is believed to be the best way to social development and prosperity. Elsewhere I have argued that the most devastating effects of colonialism are the decline of Indonesian Islamic education and its poor ability to compete with modern education once Indonesia attained independence.³⁹ For centuries Dutch Colonial discriminated Islamic education and considered the whole system as potential threats. On the other hand, it favored and amply supported schools managed by Christian Missionaries.⁴⁰

In addition to this, influence from outside Indonesia also contributed to modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia. Muslims in Indonesia learnt a great deal from educational movements in Egypt, Turkey, as well as India and adopted some of their experience into Indonesian contexts.⁴¹ This educational reform involves many aspects: objectives, access to education, management, curriculum, methods and strategies, and so on. Islamic organizations took very important parts in this modernization of education, regardless of their different orientations and main focuses. Nothing is more relevant to our present discussion than the shifting objectives of Islamic education and the inevitable curriculum reform following it.

As has been explained above, Al Washliyah responded to the early 20th century developments by having two separate systems of education: *Sekolah Umum* for general education and *Madrasas* for religious education. We have also seen that Al Washliyah's greater contribution lies in its *madrasas*. Our following discussion however shall focus only on the way Al Washliyah has adjusted the objectives and curriculum of its *madrasas* and how this course of action has been undermining—if not betraying all together—the original mission of Al Washliyah *madrasas*, namely reproducing '*ulamâ*'.

To ensure its ability to produce '*ulamâ*', Al Washliyah *madrasas* applied a curriculum which consisted of 70% Islamic subjects and 30% general subjects. Designed in the early 1930s this curriculum proved to be working up to the expectations of its designers and the society at large. Before independence, any socio-religious organization exercised complete liberty in determining the contents of its educational system.⁴²

As a matter of fact, a truly effective policy on standardizing education contents did not come until a couple of decades after independence. With its choice of curriculum, Al Washliyah

madrasas were delivering what it meant to deliver, i.e. generations of young '*ulamâ*' ready to fill the need of the community. This was the case at least down to the middle of 1980s.

Indonesian independence in 1945 naturally brought about basic questions on how to set up a viable National Education System. Broadly speaking the new administration had at its disposal two systems of education: the one operated by Colonial administration on one hand and the one operated by communities on the other. The new administration had to capitalize and build the new National Education System on them. While the former had applied certain standards and operated in organized manner, it was very difficult to say that regarding some of the latter. However, it must be remembered that the community-based education was by far larger than the government-run one. In addition, as the home of the biggest Muslim population, the greater portion of this belonged to Islamic organization. As such, one of the most pressing educational agenda of Indonesia in its early days of independence was starting a standardized education system with some level of uniformity throughout the country.

Of the many aspects of education, curriculum was one of the most problematic in this context. During the colonial times, different organizations in the community took the initiatives to set up educational institutions exercising full freedom in determining the contents. *Al Washliyah madrasa's* curriculum as delineated above was a perfect example of this phenomenon. The 1930s formula apparently worked very well in the colonial context and early independence Indonesia. But, it soon appeared that it could not fit perfectly with the new Indonesian national education policies. With independence, the priority of the nation shifted to developing and modernizing the country according to modern standards; and this surely cannot be achieved without

education. So Al Washliyah *madrasas* soon entered a time when it had only two choices: to play along with state-controlled modernization or be left alone by the speedy currents of development.

One of central topics in Indonesian education modernization was standardizing the curriculum of *madrasas*. Since *madrasas* were generally established by non-government organizations they had different curriculums in place; and this proved to be a great challenge. The government (Ministry of Religious Affairs) and Islamic organizations had to undergo series of discussions, meetings, and ‘negotiations’ to produce an ‘agreed’ curriculum for *madrasas*. In February 1958, for example, the Ministry of Religious Affairs initiated a National Conference on Madrasa, attended by representatives of Islamic organizations that run *madrasas*, including Al Washliyah. Among other discussed topics was the importance of expanding the portion of general subjects in *madrasa*’s curriculum.⁴³ The Ministry of Religious Affairs had no difficulties to convince all parties about the importance of general subjects in *madrasa*’s curriculum. But, determining the ideal proportion was a completely different story. The original proposal of the Ministry was that 70% of the curriculum would be given for general subjects and the rest 30% for Islamic subjects. After a series of discussion, in 1962 the Ministry of Religious Affairs settled at 68% for secular subjects and 32% for Islamic ones.⁴⁴ Yet, this formal decree did not end the problem. As always, it is easier to say than to do. Putting the decision into operation and ensuring that all *madrasas* implement it was no easy matter at all. Subhan notes that in some areas *madrasas* gave only 40% rooms for general subjects. Still others allowed nothing more than 11%.⁴⁵ This was the general picture during the course of the 1960s down to early 1970s, despite all efforts from the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

In 1975 the government issued Joint Decree of Three Ministries, i.e. Ministry of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Education and Culture, and Ministry of Internal Affairs.⁴⁶ Of the many government decrees concerning *madrasa*, this one is perhaps the most popular and at the same time influential. This Decree has a far reaching consequences and very determinant in the history of Indonesian *madrasa*. In short, this Decree was truly a game changer. Apart from its contents, the Decree was proved to be much more effective than any of its predecessor. This was the case because by mid 1970s Indonesian government has become relatively well coordinated. In addition, the Suharto administration was well known for being very centralistic and at times used harsh measures to secure the implementation of its policies.

The Decree was designed to further the integration of *madrasas* into the national schooling system. Among other things, this Decree stipulated that *madrasa's* curriculum should be made of 70% general secular subjects and 30% Islamic subjects. Statistically, the proportion did not represent any substantial change. In fact, it was precisely the proportion proposed by the government in 1958 and, at best, a minor change from the agreed proportion in 1962. Other stipulations were that—upon implementation of the intended curriculum—*madrasas* were considered ‘the same’ as schools in general. As such *madrasas'* students could transfer to schools and vice versa. Moreover, its alumni are eligible for enrolment at state universities. This Decree was followed by other regulations of different level and type that further strengthen the position of secular subjects in *madrasa's* curriculum. By 1989, the government introduced a brand new law on National Education System⁴⁷ in which *madrasa* was no longer categorized as Islamic religious education but rather as general education institution, that is a “general school with Islamic characteristics.”⁴⁸

With more elaborate regulations in the hand of a more effective ministry, from 1975 on, pioneered by those state-run ones, private *madrasas* started to adjust to the new curriculum. Different organizations responded differently and in variety of speed; some even showed resistance to the changes. But, in the end, *madrasas* did not have much room to negotiate. By the beginning of the 1980s, any *madrasa* that did not apply such curriculum was not recognized by the government and risk losing its alumni's eligibility for continuing education as well as other potential benefits.

Al Washliyah *Madrasas*: Modernization vis-à-vis 'Ulamâ' Training

Naturally, Al Washliyah *madrasas* also need to adjust. Nevertheless, with its original mission of training '*ulamâ*', it was understandable that Al Washliyah *madrasas* faced great difficulties in compromising its curriculum. After all, the original curriculum has been proven very effective for quite some times. Indeed, the new state-sponsored *madrasa* curriculum was precisely the same as Al Washliyah curriculum for *Sekolah Umum* (general schools) which was not designed to produce '*ulamâ*'. So, for Al Washliyah, implementing the new *madrasa* curriculum means no less than giving up the mission of training young '*ulamâ*'.⁴⁹ It came to no surprise that Al Washliyah's 15th Congress in 1978 still came to conclusion that "Al Washliyah *madrasas* should continue with the old curriculum which gives high priority on Islamic subject matters over general subject matters,"⁵⁰ i.e. Islamic subjects makes 70% of the curriculum.

Despite this Congress decision, in reality, Al Washliyah *madrasas* face the hard choice of insisting with the old curriculum or practical benefits to be gained by implementing the new

curriculum. In the end, it was clear that eligibility to enter tertiary education and job markets proved to be too hard to resist. So, albeit with some concealed reservations, Al Washliyah *madrasas* start to implement the state-designed curriculum based on the Joint Decree of 1975. It must be noted that this course of actions has not been an easy one. Some Al Washliyah *madrasas* need longer time than that of others. The extent of their compliance to the Joint Decree also vary.

In this respect Al Washliyah *madrasas* are of three types. The *first* type fully applies government curriculum. This type of *madrasa* faithfully follows any regulation from the Ministry of Religious Affairs: curriculum, teaching methods and techniques, learning resources, evaluation, textbooks, and so on. The majority of Al Washliyah *madrasas* fall into this type. The *second* type combines the old Al Washliyah curriculum with the new state-sponsored one. There are several models of this combination. The most common one is by applying the state curriculum, but limited for general subjects matters only. For Islamic subject matters, this type of *madrasa* adopts only the nomenclatures provided by the government. The contents of Islamic subjects in this *madrasa* are slightly higher than the government standards. This type of *madrasa* also uses *kitab kuning* as textbooks for Islamic subjects. These are the classical works on Islamic subjects believed to be indispensable in forming the foundation of ‘*ulamâ*’ training that have been in use since the early 1930s. In order to cover this extra load, some additional school-time is usually added. The *third* type of *madrasa* resists the change and goes on with old Al Washliyah curriculum. The students of this type usually would attend another school to allow them to continue their education. This type is becoming less and less popular through time. As of now only one Al Washliyah *madrasa*

is known to continue applying the old curriculum designed to train young generation of *'ulamâ'*.⁵¹

Despite varieties in the extent of its application, formal education policy of Al Washliyah is to follow state regulation at full. In one of Al Washliyah Education Guidelines, it's stated that, "Curriculum of Al Washliyah education is designed to help student in achieving those competencies defined in National Education Objectives ..." ⁵² Accordingly, Al Washliyah *madrasas* gradually become more and more compliant to state regulation in all aspects. By so doing, graduates of these *madrasas* receive the benefits of being eligible for continuing education and also for corresponding job opportunities. However, this change proved to be determinant in the context of *'ulamâ'* training as original mission of Al Washliyah *madrasas*. It significantly alters the very identity of Al Washliyah *madrasas*. By applying the state-sponsored curriculum, the teaching of *kitab kuning* decreased seriously. Indeed some Al Washliyah *madrasas* continue to accommodate *kitab kuning* until today in one way or another. But, in general, this classical works are no longer at the top of the list; they are given merely side stages with very limited influence.⁵³

As part of Madrasa Curriculum Reform, the Ministry of Religious Affairs introduces series of textbooks to be used in *madrasas*. In no time, this new body of literature pushes aside *kitab kuning* even further. For decades, Al Washliyah *madrasas* were well known for their excellent studies based on *kitab kuning*. So much so, *kitab kuning* studies have become an identity that set Al Washliyah *madrasas* from the rest. In this respect, it can be said that modernization of Al Washliyah *madrasas* came with an extremely high price. Because, according to Rozali, disrupting the long tradition of teaching *kitab kuning* is no less than throwing away important parts of intellectual history of Al Washliyah *'ulamâ'*.⁵⁴

Slowly, this change has been taking very serious consequences. With its new curriculum, Al Washliyah *madrasas* naturally loses its ability to prepare young generations of ‘*ulamâ*’. Ramli Abdul Wahid, a contemporary top-flight AW ‘*ulamâ*’, has been consistently complaining about the alarming scarcity of individuals who can understand *kitab kuning* and, by that very competency, can be counted as future ‘*ulamâ*’.⁵⁵ He goes on to stress that nowadays the number of individuals who are up to the task of delivering *fatwa* is shrinking very rapidly.⁵⁶ Indeed, the need for sufficient number of ‘*ulamâ*’ and the difficulty of providing them is now a serious concern shared by more and more of people in Al Washliyah.⁵⁷ And, again, in the very center of this alarming phenomenon is the degrading ability to access the classical works of past ‘*ulamâ*’ which naturally followed by degrading quality of religious sciences in Al Washliyah *madrasas*.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Modernization of education in independence Indonesia involves, among others, the integration of *madrasas* into national schooling system. Since the early days of independence, different policies have been installed and steps taken to modernize *madrasas*. Al Washliyah has to deal with this modernization project very seriously because of two reasons. *Firstly*, since the very beginning Al Washliyah organized a series of *madrasas*, scattered throughout North Sumatra and the surrounding regions. *Secondly*, and more importantly, the original mission of Al Washliyah *madrasas* was producing young generation of ‘*ulamâ*’ to fill the need of the community. It was absolutely clear that the new state-sponsored *madrasa* curriculum was not designed to support the mission and learning tradition such that of Al Washliyah. So, despite some reservations, by the beginning of 1980s, if not earlier, Al Washliyah *madrasas* started to adjust their curriculum at the

expense of their traditional mission of producing new generation of ‘*ulamâ*’.

The consequences of this choice started to be felt by the 1990s and becoming more pronounced ever since. While the need of the Muslim society for quality ‘*ulamâ*’ has never been higher, Al Washliyah *madrastas* have abandoned its original mission of training young ‘*ulamâ*’. Indeed, a few *madrastas* are trying to offer some additional traditional Islamic subjects based on classical Arabic works. But their efforts are by no means sufficient: ‘*ulamâ*’ training can never be successful as a side activity. Now, more and more complaints about the scarcity of quality ‘*ulamâ*’ are brought to surface. Islamic religious organizations should take the responsibility to ensure that this complain is answered and the need for ‘*ulamâ*’ be met. With a shining record of producing young ‘*ulamâ*’ in its early decades, Al Washliyah should have no difficulty in doing it once again. Based on renewed commitment new initiatives must be taken and real feasible strategies prepared. Al Washliyah *madrastas*—or any other alternative—ought to once again be empowered to do this noble task. For Muslim societies cannot be without ‘*ulamâ*’.

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Endnotes:

¹ Throughout Islamic history numerous types of educational institutions were introduced, but *madsara* seems to be the most successful and widely adopted one. *Madrasa* was introduced during the heyday of the Abbasid era, back in the 10th century, and believed to be the predecessor of Western colleges and universities. Despite the ups and downs of education quality the term *madrasa* is still very widely used nowadays throughout Muslim countries. A most thorough historical analysis of medieval *madrasa* would be George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981); but see also Hasan Asari, *Menyingkap Zaman Keemasan Islam: Studi Atas Lembaga-Lembaga Pendidikan* (Bandung: Citapustaka Media, 2007).

² Ja'far, *Tradisi Intelektual Al Washliyah: Biografi Ulama Kharismatik dan Tradisi Keulamaan* (Medan: Perdana Publishing, 2015).

³ Some most recent studies have brought up this phenomenon, underlining the importance of understanding it comprehensively and finding a viable solution for the problem. Notable about this is the study by Muhammad Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Sumatera Utara* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2017), based on his Ph.D. thesis submitted to UIN SU Medan in 2016, and Zainal Abidin, "Eksistensi Kitab Kuning dalam Kurikulum Madrasah Al Qismul Ali Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Jalan Ismailiyah Medan Tahun 1955-2015" (Unpublished Thesis: UIN SU Medan, 2017).

⁴ Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII dan XVIII: Melacak Akar-Akar Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam di Indonesia* (Bandung: Mizan, 1994).

⁵ Deliar Noer, *Gerakan Moderen Islam di Indonesia 1900-1942* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1988).

⁶ Greg Fealy, "Introduction," in Muhammad Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Sumatera Utara* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2017), p. vi.

⁷ Karel A. Steenbrink, "Kata Pengantar," in Chalidjah Hasanuddin, *Al-Jam'iyatul Washliyah: Api Dalam Sekam* (Bandung: Pustaka, 1988), p. vii. See also, Faisal Ismail, "The Nahdlatul Ulama: Its Early History and Contribution to the Establishment of Indonesian State," in *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2011; Abbas Pulungan, "Nahdlatul Ulama di Luar Jawa: Perkembangan di Tanah Mandailing," in *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2018; Hyung-Jun Kim, "Praxis and Religious Authority in Islam: The Case of Ahmad Dahlan, Founder of Muhammadiyah," in *Studia Islamika*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2010.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

⁹ Martin van Bruinessen, *Tarekat Naqsyabandiyah di Indonesia: Survey Historis, Geografis, dan Sosiologis* (Bandung: Mizan, 1996), p. 113, footnote 7.

¹⁰ Steenbrink, "Kata Pengantar," p. viii.

¹¹ Maktab al-Islamiyah Tapanuli (MIT) was established in Mei 18, 1918 to provide Islamic religious education based on classical Arabic works. Abubakar Ya'qub, *Sejarah Maktab al-Islamiyah Tapanuli* (Medan: Unpublished Book, 1395 AH); also Nukman Sulaiman, *et al.*, *Peringatan Al Djamijatul Washlijah 1/4 Abad* (Medan: Pengurus Besar Al Djamijatul Washlijah, 1956), p. 34-35. For a fuller study on this pioneering institution, see Muaz Tanjung, *Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli, 1918-1942: Menelusuri Sejarah Pendidikan Islam Awal Abad ke-20 di Medan* (Medan: IAIN Press, 2012).

¹² On Muhammadiyah and its development in North Sumatra, see Al Rasyidin, "Islamic Organizations in North Sumatra: The Politics of Initial Establishment and Later Development," in *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, 10: 1 (2016), pp. 67-70.

¹³ Sulaiman, *et al.*, *Peringatan Al Djamijatul Washlijah 1/4 Abad*, p. 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-45.

¹⁵ Tanjung, *Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli*, p. 9.

¹⁶ *Anggaran Dasar Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah*, Pasal 2, in Sulaiman, *et al.*, *Peringatan Al Djamijatul Washlijah 1/4 Abad*, p. 342. This was revised in 1978 by adding Pancasila and UUD 1945 as the basis of Al Washliyah. Bahrum Jamil, *Al Washliyah Buah Hati Umat Islam dan Keputusan Muktamar Al Washliyah ke XV Pekan Baru-Riau* (Medan: Wajah Islam, 1985), p. 6, 19. See also, Ja'far Ja'far, "Respon Dewan Fatwa Al-Jam'iyatul Washliyah Terhadap Isu Akidah dan Syariah di Era Global," in *Al-Manahij: Jurnal Kajian Hukum Islam*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2017, pp. 97-118, or Ja'far Ja'far, "Peran Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah dalam Merevitalisasi Madhhab Shafi'i di Era Kontemporer," in *Justicia Islamica*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2016.

¹⁷ Chalidjah Hasanuddin, *Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah: Api dalam Sekam* (Bandung: Pustaka, 1988), pp. 77-78.

¹⁸ Noer, *Gerakan Moderen Islam*, pp. 38-39; also Azyumardi Azra, "The Rise and Decline of the Minangkabau Surau: A Traditional Islamic Educational Institution in West Sumatra During the Dutch Colonial Government" (Thesis: Columbia University, 1988).

¹⁹ Hasanuddin, *Al-Jam'iyatul Washliyah*, pp. 77-78.

²⁰ Sulaiman, *et al.*, *Peringatan Al Djamijatul Washlijah 1/4 Abad*, p. 303.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 390-391.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 297.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³¹ Ramli Abdul Wahid, “Peran Universitas Al Washliyah dalam Mencerdaskan Umat,” in Ja’far (ed.) *Al Jam’iyatul Washliyah: Potret Histori, Edukasi dan Filosofi* (Medan: Perdana Publishing & Center for Al Washliyah Studies, 2011), pp. 116, 101; also Ramli Abdul Wahid, *Anak Desa Tak Bertuan Jadi Profesor: Kisah Nyata Kehidupan 60 Tahun Prof. Dr. Drs. H. Ramli Abdul Wahid, Lc., MA* (Medan: Manhaji, 2014), p. 92. See also, Ja’far Ja’far, “Khazanah Kitab Kuning di Madrasah Al Jam’iyat Al Washliyah,” in *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam Al-Thariqah*, Vol. 2 No. 2, 2017, pp. 124-134.

³² Sulaiman, *et al.*, *Peringatan Al Djamijatul Washlijah Abad*, p. 44.

³³ This Malay Arabic Scripts (*Aksara Arab Melayu*) shows the depth of Islamic influence upon Malay World. Nowadays this scripts is considered mainly as cultural heritage taught as a complementary subject in many elementary schools in North Sumatra.

³⁴ A much fuller lists are to be found in Muhammad Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan Al Jam’iyatul Washliyah*, pp. 36-43; also Ramli Abdul Wahid, “Kualitas Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia dan Kontribusi Al Washliyah,” in Ja’far (ed.), *Al Jam’iyatul Washliyah: Potret Histori, Edukasi dan Filosofi* (Medan: Perdana Publishing & Center for Al Washliyah Studies, 2011), pp. 96-97.

³⁵ Sulaiman, *et al.*, *Peringatan Al Djamijatul Washlijah 1/4 Abad*, p. 303. I have managed to consult some senior intellectuals of Al Washliyah in Medan on this, but so far no one seems to be able to shed some light on this.

³⁶ Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan Al Jam’iyatul Washliyah*, pp. 44-45.

³⁷ For some examples, see Ja’far, *Tradisi Intelektual Al Washliyah*, pp. 21, 29, 33, 56, 73, 93, 96, 114, 125, 146, 151, 159, 169.

³⁸ Azra, *Jaringan Ulama*.

³⁹ Hasan Asari, “Lembaga Pendidikan Tinggi Islam: Refleksi Menyambut UIN SU,” in Hasan Asari (ed.), *Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara: Memperkokoh Eksistensi Memperluas Kontribusui* (Medan: IAIN Press, 2015), p. 240.

⁴⁰ Mohammad Iskandar and Achmad Syahid, “Islam dan Kolonialisme,” in Taufik Abdullah, *et al.* (ed.) *Ensiklopedi Tematis Dunia Islam: Asia Tenggara* (Jakarta: Ichtiar Baru van Hoeve, 2003), vol. 5, p. 318; see also Th. van den End and Jan S. Aritonang, “1800-2005: A National Overview,” in Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel Steenbrink (eds.), *A History of Christianity in Indonesia* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2008), pp. 159, 161.

⁴¹ For some basic information about Islamic education reforms in these countries, see Ghulam Nabi Saqib, *Modernization of Muslim Education in Egypt, Pakistan and Turkey: A Comparative Study* (Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1977).

⁴² Solihah Titin Sumanti, “Modernisasi Isi Pendidikan Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama dan Al Jam’iyatul Washliyah Tahun 1900-1942” (Unpublished Dissertation, UIN SU Medan, 2017).

⁴³ Arief Subhan, *Lembaga Pendidikan Islam Indonesia Abad ke-20: Pergumulan antara Modernisasi dan Identitas* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2012), pp. 249-250.

⁴⁴ *Surat Keputusan Menteri Agama Nomor 104 Tahun 1962.*

⁴⁵ Subhan, *Lembaga Pendidikan Islam*, p. 253.

⁴⁶ *Surat Keputusan Bersama Tiga Menteri* (also popular as *SKB 3 Menteri*) was a coordinated decree, dated March 24, 1975, involving Ministry of Religious Affairs No. 6/1975, Ministry of Education and Culture No. 037/U/1975, and Ministry of Internal Affairs No. 36/1975.

⁴⁷ *Undang-Undang Nomor 2 Tahun 1989 tentang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional.*

⁴⁸ *Keputusan Menteri Agama Republik Indonesia Nomor 370 Tahun 1993 tentang Madrasah Aliyah, Bab III Pasal 3, ayat (1).*

⁴⁹ In addition, this new *madrasa* curriculum also undermines the reasons of having general schools. Perhaps this explains the fact that Al Washliyah has never developed high quality schools (*sekolah umum*).

⁵⁰ Jamil, *Al Washliyah Buah Hati Umat Islam*, p. 28.

⁵¹ Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah*, pp. 46-47.

⁵² Pengurus Besar Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah, *Pedoman Penyelenggaraan Pendidikan Tinggi* (Jakarta: Pengurus Besar Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah, n.y.), p. 19.

⁵³ Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah*, p. 91.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁵⁵ Abdul Wahid, *Anak Desa Tak Bertuan*, p. 92.

⁵⁶ Ramli Abdul Wahid, *Peranan Islam dalam Menghadapi Era Globalisasi Sekuler* (Bandung: Citapustaka Media, 2014), h. 59. *Fatwa* is opinion given by an *'alim* to a particular question presented by community members. *Kitab kuning* is considered very important because it contains records of *fatwas* from time to time.

⁵⁷ M. Nasir, "Al Washliyah dan Tradisi Keulamaan," in *Waspada*, Friday, December 19, 2014, p. C6.

⁵⁸ Rozali, *Tradisi Keulamaan Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah*, pp. 54-56.