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CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE ACEHNESE DAYAH SALAFI (A CASE STUDY)

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Abstract

This is part of research result from a Ph.D thesis which is submitted to Flinders University South Australia. This is a study about the Acehnese dayah salafi and its recent change and development, both in general and in the light of messages from the government about the need for standardisation and regulation of the studies of these Islamic educational institutions. Through a qualitative case study of a purposively selected dayah salafi in Aceh province, Indonesia, this research tried to find how standardising or regulating might affect dayah salafi and their teaching activity. The result is perhaps a kind of snapshot of the current moving situation. To get a variety of views for this research, data were collected, using semi-structured interviews, from various dayah salafi people, from a government departmental officer and from a senior Islamic educational researcher. The research also used other sources of data such as general observation and documents related to this study.

Keywords: *Dayah Salafi, Change, Development, Religious Education*

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A. Introduction

This research was conducted at a particular dayah salafi in Aceh, and has shown that such a dayah is a complex institution. Although the dayah salafi is one of various Islamic educational institutions that have been based on "a centuries-old tradition" (Dhofier, 1990: 27) the dayah actually is not stagnant but, rather, it is a dynamic institution. The dynamism of the dayah is proved through its development and the changes that have happened within it. This dynamic fashion can be picked up from the interviews, in which the dayah people are well aware that the world is changing and, because of that, they are always thinking about developing with their goal and purpose. However, they have a stability which they can refer to at the same time as they operate in that dynamic fashion. What is thus renewed in each new generation is a consciously lived continuing tradition.

B. Development and the dayah: preservation and responsiveness

The three focal research questions stated in chapter two can be answered by reporting, firstly, that this dayah's curriculum and practice has indeed changed and developed over the years. Its curriculum, though preserved in traditional pattern overall, has been varied in response to changing circumstances. Even some of the Founder's kitab are not now used. Also, for some years past, this dayah has seen the value of putting an ordinary school run by the dayah Foundation on its site, and also of admitting female students. Secondly, it can be reported that the further impact of government policy and direction may be expected to lead to further adaptations, as in the case of the school, to the demands of which the dayah has adapted its routine and practices. And thirdly, aside from any government direction, it is clear that the dayah will tend to develop anyway in accord with its tradition of responsiveness to community and student needs, in a two-way exchange of support and understanding. It will also necessarily continue to be attentive to the guidance of the ulama associations regarding the tradition which links them, as leaders, and the dayah as a key element of preservation and renewal.

The strong element of stability and preservation is in line with what was stated by Yusny Saby (2005: 75) as the researcher found that the key elements of this dayah salafi establishment (the leader, the students, the buildings etc.) can be considered standard, and that the curriculum is also standard and typical. The classical and traditional Arabic kitab are the main source of curriculum and source of the subjects.

In regard to the subjects that teach Arabic itself as a language, namely Nahwu and Saraf, the teaching and learning is also typical - generally limited to the memorization of Arabic grammar patterns and Arabic word derivation. This limitation of Arabic teaching and learning in the dayah salafi is very similar to what has been described for other non-Arab Muslim countries, namely that "the product of this syllabus is a student who knows the rules of morphology and syntax and memorizes a number of vocabulary items...he does not develop a literary taste...and does not develop the skills of writing, public speaking or normal everyday speaking in Arabic" (S. M. Yusuf, 1982: 94-45). This is the case in the dayah salafi, where the students are not able to speak in Arabic although they are very smart in Arabic grammar. In SE Asia, besides Arabic kitab, the kitab Jawi (in the Malay language) are also taught. They are taught in the dayah salafi whenever there is spare time after teaching the Arabic kitab. One study on kitab Jawi observes that the Islamic thought which is included in the discussion in kitab Jawi comes variously from theological, social, economic and political thought (Ngah, 1983: viii).

The general pattern can be compared to what happens in the formal education systems generally, whether traditional or developing recently (since the nineteenth century), whether in Indonesia or in other countries that have formal education systems. Thus Azra (2002: 95-96) points out:

> "Curriculum is the main guide for the implementation of a formal education, which serves as guidelines for all teachers, principals, schools (madrassas), and the superintendent of education in the execution of their daily duties. More than that, the curriculum is the manifestation of the educational goals to be achieved. Therefore, the curriculum includes the number of subjects taught, a basic outline of

teaching, and the number of hours for each subject taught in a week, during the school year and according to level of education".

As the dayah curriculum focuses on teaching the Arabic kitab, this means that the teaching in dayah salafi emphasises and concentrates upon the written word in a special way. From this standpoint the tradition of teaching in the dayah salafi that focusses upon understanding Arabic classic texts is not particularly unusual. It is very similar to that 'classical' curriculum formulated by the European humanists of the late Renaissance, and then practised across Europe and its colonies, including North America, until the twentieth century. The keynote of the scheme, as the renowned scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam pointed out in the early sixteenth century, is that in education it is precisely the knowledge of words that is acquired first (Bantock, 1980: 65).

Just as Renaissance classical education attended deeply to the style and meaning of the texts that guided study, so the teaching of religion influenced by the Reformation in sixteenth century Europe emphasised the written word. Bantock, in his studies, has shown how later across the whole of western education, including eventually religious education, systematic practice then slowly incorporated the scientific emphasis on the experience and observation of 'things' in the world, which eventually resulted in a massive shift away from traditions of classicism and religion with their emphasis upon key texts.

The result is that, in the developed education systems of Europe and the many national systems influenced by those, times have changed dramatically. The guiding thinking is progressive and, most importantly, scientific, being derived mainly from economics and the social sciences. At present according to Australian educationists Brady and Kennedy (2007: 7) "curriculum is essentially about the future; it cannot be based on curriculum models that have been handed down from the previous centuries".

This is very different from what the researcher has found in the dayah, where the curriculum consists of kitab that come from the Islamic classical period and the traditions of use of those kitab which have been passed on from generation to generation among those who have chosen to

study in dayah salafi. That it should be done this way is part of the very purpose of dayah salafi, to preserve the character it has, emphasising studying of classical kitab. This is what makes the dayah different from other institutions and it is what is known and appreciated by the community, particularly the Acehnese community, who would be certain that the dayah salafi should study the classical Arabic kitab. The dayah pattern is thus responsive to community expectation. This is where the solution suggested by the interviewed senior researcher regarding teaching methods for textual analysis could have appeal, because the use of such a method could work to develop the thinking of teachers and students, even though they are still using their classical Arabic kitab.

Stability and preservation are not the whole story. Development is occurring in response to both inner circumstances and outer circumstances. It is probably always to some extent caused by both, but one or other may predominate at different times. From the point of view of the dayah teachers, there have been influences from Badan Dayah, ulama meetings, the governor's decree and instruction from the third leader of the dayah. Significantly, the teachers do not refer much directly to the curriculum scheme of the Department of Religious Affairs, which lay behind both the Badan Dayah handbook and the governor's decree.

From the point of view of the Department of Religious Affairs, influence for development comes from the Head Office of the Department of Religious Affairs in Jakarta, which spreads information to the provincial branch of that Department in regard to the program for development of dayah salafi. As a result, the provincial Department of Religious Affairs has the task to spread that information to its own branches in every Acehnese district where there is some evidence of dayah salafi activity. Whenever the provincial Department of Religious Affairs has a meeting at district level, their team keeps giving information on the program and discussing it.

Importantly, from the information gathered from the teachers, reported in chapter five, besides classical Arabic texts being a focus, there are also students' needs to which the teachers are responsive. This is an element that points a little in the direction of the 'learner centred

ideology', a psychology-derived approach to teaching which normally features strongly among modern 'scientific' curriculum ideologies that various educationists have promoted. In this ideology the focus is on the 'needs and concerns of the individual' (Schiro, 2008: 5). This is not then without some counterpart in the dayah. It can be argued that for the dayah students 'Islamic curricula help the individual to acquire the character of the learned ulama' (Al-Afendi, 1980: 19), and it is something close to that need and concern that has brought them to the dayah salafi to study. This then becomes the teachers' concern.

The evidence further suggests that this dayah mode of developing, merging continuity and change, can also be related to concepts of religious identity and dayah spirit. Religious identity in Aceh relates strongly to the operation of community goals, linking and binding the activities of people (Siegel, 2000). There is a strong sense of continuity in the idea of a common Muslim identity and the way it works within the community. For example, this is seen in the statement from the Secretary-General about key dayah purposes relating to the preservation of waqaf land, to helping the poor and to supporting the leadership of ulama. These three elements really refer to that concept of religious identity and its concrete relation to the community. When the Secretary-General talks about sincerity (*ikhlas*), on the other hand, he emphasises the dayah spirit itself linked to the spirit of education. It is communicated between the teachers and the students. The sincerity that the teachers have, and are developing in themselves, is the spirit they have to pass on to the students.

There is also responsiveness in the dayah to the Founder's intention, working through the continuity of the chain of learning from the Founder as teacher. For the sake of continuity the teachers reject fundamental change, but their fundamental continuity is partly their response to, and respect for, the Founder, and partly also from the general religious identity that they have as part of the community. And with this continuity the teachers retain the dayah spirit that goes with sincerity (*ikhlas*). This *ikhlas* is as the basis for their whole activity within the dayah and it is spread to the community in their relation with the community. It is in recognition of this effort for ikhlas, as the senior researcher says, that the community will value the dayah and tap its influence in various ways.

From the teachers' point of view, because the teachers will change their teaching and develop it in the light of students' need, it means that the development is for the students and the change is driven somewhat by the students. This shows that the teachers accept change but that they have clear conditions regarding just what changes they will accept, though overall there are also clear enough signs that they have adapted, and will adapt, to new circumstances.

An important part of the new circumstances is of course the more systematic curriculum scheme through which the Department of Religious Affairs is pursuing its administrative purposes and goals. While the teachers, as noted, do not generally acknowledge the Department's efforts, they are nevertheless considering the same sort of message coming through other sources. This is happening along with the government-inspired curriculum pressure coming from the ordinary school run by the dayah Foundation on the site. Teachers are increasingly conscious of the issue of their loss of teaching time and possible overload on students. This concern comes significantly from the majority of the teachers, and influences their consideration of any possible additions to the dayah curriculum.

There is a general concern in the dayah about getting more teachers and students. This is part of the idea of development, its key resource inputs, as it were. It represents an influence relating to the attractiveness of the dayah to the potential student or teacher. This is a problem for the dayah system as a whole, and it may be seen as part of the issue of responsiveness to community. People will respond to what they take to be valuable. Although there may be a lot of plans to develop, if there are no more students and if it is difficult to get new teachers, then the institution is limited in what it can do. In this context, there is a definite element of limitation: when the students do not come anymore, and the teachers are not there, development is not possible anymore and the institution cannot self-renew.

Crucial to the ongoing activity of the dayah and its maintenance is of course the governance of the dayah. The suggestion made by Suparto (2000: 246) and Saby (2005: 149), about the wisdom of establishing a Foundation that oversees a pesantren or dayah, has actually been the situation in this dayah

since its establishment in 1968. The Founder was able to judge in that matter as in others, for example the founding of the school, what would allow the dayah to develop in response to circumstances, while preserving its essential mission. This dayah has moved somewhat ahead of its times, and this continues to be its ongoing challenge.

C. Religious education as concrete practice not abstract scheme

Considering more fully the interplay between components in this moving concrete religious education situation that systematic government action and other changing circumstances are influencing, it is necessary to see as the broad context the general scheme of modern educational planning. So it is necessary to include as an element also the research activity that has tended to come with systematic planning, training and delivery efforts. An example of such activity is of course the present study, and a useful final reflection on this research is suggested.

In this study, what the government planning emphasizes above all is standardisation of and equality of education programs. This key conception of the modern educational task is signalled in the departmental officer's interview when he mentions 'equality' which is perhaps the key concept in his account, to the effect that all the dayah institutions will be equal, among themselves and to other institutions, if they all do the same thing, to 'a standard'. This concept, thus formally expressed, has an abstract character, and the same might be said of other important aspects of the government thinking. The officer also emphasizes 'opportunity' which suggests also abstract schematic views related to higher education, career planning and educational careers. It is a fact that educational schemes become linked to supplying government with recruits for their increasing various administrative bodies and operations (S. Idris, 1995a: 12) and these bodies can then intensify and extend their operations. Abstract conceptions in general lead to thinking in terms of controlled standard operations and predictable outcomes, which suits bureaucratic purposes.

The officer does not emphasize there being a religious program at stake and he does not emphasize it as a program having a particular continuity with anything from the past. This shows government planning

revealed as typically open and abstract, modern and scientific. It is shown as a forward-looking open schematization of education in terms of programs offered to match planning of various kinds, giving data that can be measured against predictions. This tends to result in a mechanical and quantifiable operation.

However, in the dayah, the education is personal and it is based on religious identity. As noted in the previous section, the dayah represents continuity of an established religious identity, living and growing through the dynamic spirit of the dayah. As far as the dayah people are concerned what they want is captured in the notion of religious identity of the community and the spirit of sincerity in the individual. Their goals are to do with people as they are, living here and now, but in the light of the whole teaching tradition which includes the Founder, the Founder's teachers and other past ulama in a chain of continually renewed personal influence that has a crucial resonance with the surrounding community.

Very important links between people are in evidence throughout the accounts from the dayah people: links with the Founder, with early students, with the early associate of the Founder, with the first leader, the second leader, the third leader, and so on. This suggests that it is people that are significant, perhaps morose than the institution in some ways. The institution in action is a living network of people and practices. And individual significance is always coming from and amplifying some resonance with community, of which the common religious practice is the core.

This dayah, as is typical, has a role in establishing community consciousness, for example by giving teaching for adults from the surrounding area (though unfortunately this teaching for larger numbers was discontinued because of conflict, as mentioned in chapter four). Currently some of these dayah teachers individually continue to teach people from community, and it is usually because of people requesting this, what is called *Majelis Ta'lim*, as mentioned in chapter five. Thus dayah teachers extend their role in forming and raising community consciousness. This also extends their religious practice because "there is no real practice of religion without personal investment in the community" (Ramadan, 2009: 33). However, such religious practice, as

concrete expression of community, is very different from notions of systematic training for opportunity and career development, coming from a more abstract and scientifically controlled systematic educational pattern.

Thinking in community and social terms, one cannot simply ignore the crucial social and individual aspects of religious activity. The concept of sincerity, in action, binds both individual and community. It is communicated as a message that calls forth a response. This comes through in the teachers' words. The opportunity that they are seeking is reflected in the teachers' opinion when they say that they work in the dayah to improve themselves, or they are doing it to improve society, or they are doing it for religious reasons. All of these can be involved, and all link to sincerity. None of the teachers say that they do what they do to gain their own profit financially, or mention the relatively poor material prospects they endure. This means that people would not go to the dayah in order to advance their career. In line with this Saby (2005: 81) states that:

> "to aim to make a living as a result of study in the dayah would reduce the student's sincerity and devalue the study itself. In the understanding of the dayah community, "knowledge belongs to God", and to seek knowledge is to follow the path of God. If a person were to aim at getting worldly benefit from study, he would achieve 'unblessed' knowledge".

For the dayah people it is in this common heritage that people live and develop properly. In contrast, the Department (government) puts an emphasis on opportunity and career, by insisting on a scheme of educational programs for the dayah students. At this point, it is important to recognise as a problem this different kind of mentality, concerned with abstract schematisation and organization, rather than the living community. Once this is noted, a more balanced relating can be attempted.

For a researcher operating in a modern research context, researching religious education, it is useful to elaborate further on the above contrast, as perhaps offering some general underlying principles for other religious education research. There is perhaps some important link to be examined between the effects of the idea of national systematisation of an education scheme, necessarily abstract and general, and effects of that same idea at work

in formal research on the traditional and continuing religious education practices of concrete and local communities.

This research tries to excavate the meaning from what the dayah people think in regard to the government's regulation in terms of dayah development, and it tries not to impose some theoretical notion, such as 'equality of opportunity', from outside on the dayah people, but wants to understand the view as revealed by the dayah people themselves. It is seen in fact in practice that, from their tradition, they try to offer their teaching to all who wish it on equal terms. This research thus has to consider the dayah institution as having its own dynamic, doing things for its own reasons in its own way. It does not have to conform to typical modern conceptions of desirable educational change. It may be possible to derive from these sorts of moves a general schema for research that helps to understand a religious education institution by referring to the views of the people within the religious education institution itself, and tries to understand them in their own terms, while also posing questions.

A research effort about religious education should at any rate not unthinkingly employ modern conceptions that secularize religious education, imposing labels or research categories before it has appreciated the phenomena. If it does so it is not dealing with what the phenomena mean to participants. The emphasis should not, for example, be on traditional institutions as somehow out of date or deficient, and in need of changes towards the sort of open and abstract educational scheme that sits well with both large national systems and the usual activities of educational researchers. The dayah, for example, is very much about preservation of a certain character and spirit, and a researcher needs properly to appreciate and respect that character, rather than assuming that the dayah needs to be modernized. In order to appreciate what the dayah is doing, one has to take the dayah people seriously; and the concepts they bring forward, such as about a particular kind of sincerity and commitment, are crucial to what they are and do. This is a living heritage and a piece of living tradition that is handed on by those who live in it.

In the dayah, the education is personal and it is based on religious identity; but in the world outside the dayah, the education that follows government schemes and systems is more schematized, abstract and open to experiment and freedom. This usually comes from the western model

and this is what is found in this study in the departmental practice as part of the government that adopts the western model.

The researcher would judge that the department see themselves as the government representatives, without thinking the way the dayah people think. As part of the government, their interest is mostly in control and regulation and trying to ensure that institutions affiliated with the department should follow the department's demand which actually is the government's demand. There is perhaps a lack of realization that the religious education institution has its own demand and purpose based on its own characteristic approach which is personal and supports religious identity. This situation can cause conflict when the government intends to interfere with any religious education institutions.

The government program could also be called abstract because it does not come from the locality and is rather derived from some education practice which can be regarded as modern. Therefore in terms of openness to change and to experiment it contrasts with the situation in the dayah model and systems, which is more about preservation and continuity. The government emphasizes changes, higher education and career planning and educational careers, trying to bring religious education into some strict relation with such a scheme, without considering religious education as the sort of practice it is, needing to be seen as a more concrete personal matter.

The phenomena in Australia in regard to government scheme and system coming to have control of religious education have shown clearly the conflict with religious education. By the nineteen-seventies, according to Professor Neal of the University of Adelaide (Neal, 1972: 37) the effect of acceptance by Catholic schools of the Public Examinations Board's syllabuses had been to separate religion from knowledge, and keep them scrupulously apart, which he regarded as bad for both religion and education . Developing the theme, Neal stated that "religious education does not mean, either, instruction in the faith or scriptural knowledge, or even theology. Religious education means religion in education; not next to it, or near to it, or merely in the same building with it, but actually in it." (Neal, ibid.). Something about the whole exercise must be religious, in other words, for it to merit the name of religious education.

Australian schools founded from religious backgrounds have generally lost the battle to maintain this fully religious character, the more they have been drawn into the schemes of government regulation and funding. It can be seen that there is simply a different perspective between government and religious education institutions in viewing the religious education itself. Very recently Johns also (2014: 51) has argued against separation: "the teaching of a religion must involve the secular world in which the religion is embodied, the cultures that clothe it and the languages that express it; in a phrase, the ways in which the religion is realized." In other words, teaching a religion teaches a way of looking at and living in the world we have. It does not, however, take that world's own perspective but transforms it.

There is concern when educational research coming from the western systems and carrying with it the western model of education may not value or understand education that operates on some different model. This is a reasonable concern, and in relation to this aspect of globalization, Spring (2009: 154) elaborates:

> "Many religious and indigenous education models are in direct conflict with the human capital model of education. Issues of spirituality, the purpose of life, the meaning of wisdom, and traditional knowledge are in conflict with human capital economics that defines the welfare of humans as a function of economic development".

For the secular western model, education has come to be about having opportunity and career - in other words it represents profit. But for religious education, career cannot be the main motivation. Not only the researching, but also teaching about religious traditions needs care. The teaching of Islam in the western university can be taken as an example. According to Johns (2014: 51), the goal of teaching Islam should be "a critical understanding of what Islam is and the various modes of realization of ideas and values that for Muslims are part of life." This needs to be done carefully, because for Muslims it is a matter of faith to believe without questioning the ideas and values as long as the references truly come from al-Qur'an and hadits. The term for this is *'sami'na wa atha'na'* (we listen and we obey it).

It is too easy studying religion in western education to adopt an attitude that sees belief as unscientific rather than trying to understand its real value in people's concrete living. It is worth thinking more wisely, in researching religious education, and the researcher needs to properly appreciate the religious practice involved in the events and schedules of a traditional religious education institution. Before conducting the research, the researcher should have adequate knowledge of religion, both in general and of the particular faith that is involved; and should be well aware of the distinctly different practice that she or he will encounter when research is commenced. The researcher should put her or his empathy at the service of engaging with the group of people affiliated with the institution, as this attitude helps the researcher to become immersed in the research site as concrete living with a particular meaning. In regard to this, a passage from Johns (2014: 53) is relevant:

> "The study of a religion is then not only a study of the propositions of a faith, but of the interactions among themselves and outsiders of the community who believe in them and the textures and levels of belief and even unbelief or doubt inhering within that community".

Furthermore, Johns (ibid.) elaborates that there are a tone and a coloring that accompany any particular religious tradition, and one can learn such tone and coloring only "by living it, by sharing in some way the life of the community for whom it is native, for whom it lies at the very heart of being human". This is what the researcher should bear in mind in researching religious education. There must be the sort of awareness that comes with living within the site and sharing the way the people live in it. The people there need to be appreciated as human individuals as well as the researcher appreciates herself/himself. It is a situation for genuine response and interaction. They are not merely objects for research that can be treated coldly. It is from them the researcher will learn much by the data they give, and from them the researcher will gain new knowledge that probably she/he may never come across in the academic routine at a university level. The researcher should respect the character of religious education properly rather than assuming that the religious education should be modernized or imposing generally some unnecessary abstract and open scheme upon a lived tradition of a concrete religious community.

D. Concluding remarks

On the subject of possible improvements on or extensions to what was done here, it is worth commenting that further research might be done with a researcher living more closely together with the dayah students in the dayah, getting closer to the student daily activity from the dawn until the night, to include some more detailed appreciation of the student life in the dayah, and also students' views on their activities and purposes, rather than a focus upon the adults involved. Equally, a larger study might also sample wider community views, for a more thorough exploration of the context around the institution and its operation. It is unlikely that anything seriously at variance with the picture gained here from talking to the teachers and other figures would appear, but the larger context might be usefully described in more detail. The main point is that this kind of research seeks to understand the institution from what the people who form it say they are doing and from what it is for them in the first place.

There is every reason to think that, across Aceh, and indeed across Indonesia in general, dayah and pesantren will currently be looking for and trying out the various options for development that seem suitable for their circumstances. There is no shortage of suitable examples, such as the dayah studied here, and there can be found, in Aceh certainly, a growing sense, fostered now by the Ministry (formerly Department) of Religious Affairs, of there being a community of interest involving all such institutions, despite their diversity of history and development. All in all, dayah in Aceh have been through a long journey in preserving their tradition. Others, outside dayah, might have seen the dayah as static institutions, but a little inspection reveals that actually, as a component part of an increasingly interrelated pattern of educational activities, they are moving responsively as they continue to engage in the transmission of a living tradition.

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