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Colonialism, Society and Reforms in Malaya: A Comparative Evaluation of Shaykh Tahir Jalaluddin and Syed Shaykh Ahmad Al-Hady

Hafiz Zakariya*

Abstract: Early twentieth-century Malaya witnessed the emergence of Islamic reformist movement. Inspired by ‘Abduh, Malay reformists, epitomized by Tahir Jalaluddin and Ahmad al-Hady, discontented with the socio-economic and political conditions of the Malays, criticised the Malay ruling elites and called for reform of their society. While the former worked within the framework of formal Islamic scholarship as an ‘ālim, the latter primarily operated as a public intellectual who spoke to a broad audience, at least in the urban centres of the Straits Settlements. This study compares their careers and ideas regarding colonialism and their remedies to address the socio-economic conditions of Malay society and the intellectual crisis of the Muslims.

Keywords: Malaya, Colonialism, Reforms, Society, Shaykh Tahir Jalaluddin, Syed Saykh Ahmad Al-Hady.

Abstrak: Pada awal Abad ke Dua-puluhan, Malaysia menyaksikan kemunculan pergerakan reformis Islam. Dengan galakan ‘Abduh, reformis Melayu, serta tanda-tanda yang mana Tahir Jalaluddin dan Ahmad al-Hady tidak berpuashati dengan keadaan sosio-ekonomi dan politik orang Melayu ketika itu, mereka turut serta mengkritik golongan elit pemerintah Melayu disamping menyeru terhadap pembaharuan masyarakat mereka ketika itu. Walaupun ‘Abduh bekerja dalam kerangka keserjanaan Islam secara formal sebagai ‘ulama’, namun Tahir Jalaluddin dan Ahmad al-merupakan intelek yang lantang berbicara kepada khalayak luas, sekurang-kurangnya di pusat-pusat bandar di Negeri-negeri Selat. Kajian ini membandingkan kerjaya-kerjaya mereka serta

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idea-idea terhadap penjajahan disamping mengutarakan remedi-remedi untuk menangani keadaan sosio-ekonomi masyarakat Melayu dan krisis intelektual umat Islam ketika itu.

Kata Kunci: Malaya, Penjajahan, Pembaharuan, Masyarakat, Shaykh Tahir Jalaluddin, Syed Saykh Ahmad Al-Hady.

Introduction

The height of European colonialism stretching from the second half of the nineteenth to the first half of twentieth centuries engulfed almost every Muslim country. Anguished by European domination, many Muslims became confused about the supremacy of the Islamic civilisation, as they were mesmerized by the advancement of the West. As a result, they faced the dilemma of whether or not to emulate the West without compromising their religious principles. Muslims' responses to colonialism varied from total rejection to blind imitation of the West. While some Muslims totally refused to cooperate with the colonizers, others were willing to accept colonial domination as well as Western values such as secularism. There was a third group of Muslims who attempted to bridge the gap between total rejection and blind imitation of the West. Epitomized by the ideas of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), this school of thought espoused a simultaneous admiration and rejection of the West. It emerged as a widespread movement in the second half of the nineteenth century to revitalize Muslim conditions by way of focusing on its compatibility with modernity and the primacy of returning to the primary sources of Islam – Qur'ān and *hadīth* – as opposed to the uncritical emulation of established religious opinions.

'Abduh's ideas found resonance in the writings of two Malay reformists who played a pivotal role in promoting them in Malaya: Shaykh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin (1869-1956) and Syed Shaykh Ahmad al-Hady (1867-1934). While Tahir was the most learned and notable scholar of his time (Roff, 1967), al-Hady was the most influential reformist writer and a polemicist. Moreover, the latter had the reputation of being the father of the Malay novel, a progressive thinker and a social critic. This study examines some of the major contributions of these two scholars to the Islamic reformist movement in colonial Malaya. After a brief introduction to their careers and writings, it will compare their

ideas regarding colonialism and their remedies to address the socio-economic conditions of Malay society and the intellectual crisis of the Muslims.

Introducing Tahir and Al-Hady

Tahir was born into an established Minangkabau family with a strong tradition of Islamic learning and leadership (Djamily, 1994). His great grandfather was Tuanku nan Tua, the most prominent ‘*alim*’ of Minangkabau and regarded as the most respected teacher to the Padri warriors. Orphaned as a child, he was brought up by a maternal aunt until he was sent to study in Makkah in 1881 where he stayed for twelve years with an older cousin Shaykh Ahmad al-Khatib, a prominent teacher among the Malay community. In 1894, he went to al-Azhar University from where he graduated in 1897. From 1897 to 1899, he stayed in Makkah to help Shaykh Ahmad teach Malay-Indonesian students. After spending long years in the heartland of Islam, Tahir returned to the Malay world in 1899. In 1901, he married Aishah Mustafa in Perak and five years later opted to reside in Malaya permanently.

One of the most productive religious writers of his time, Tahir wrote prolifically to address various aspects of Islam ranging from the method of Qur’anic recitation to Islamic beliefs. He is also regarded as the father of Islamic astronomy (*‘ilm al-falaq*) in Malaysia, as he authored many works in this field, which guided ordinary Muslims to the direction and times of the prayers as well as the calculation of the Islamic calendar. Such works contributed a lot to the field of Islamic astronomy. In fact, as a graduate from Makkah and Cairo, he was the first scholar in Malaya to use logarithm in calculating the Islamic calendar. Tahir died in Kuala Kangsar, Perak in 1956 (Anonymous, 1947).

Al-Hady was of Arab-Malay descent. He received early informal learning in basic Malay, Arabic, Islam and writing from his father in Malacca. He grew up in Riau from the age of seven and benefitted tremendously from Riau’s rich literary, cultural, and religious activities. Moreover, the Malay spoken in Riau was considered one of the finest in the Malay world as a whole. As an adoptive son of Riau royalty, he had received the best education available there (Gordon, 1999).

The young al-Hady was an avid reader and active participant in literary activities at the Sultanate’s court. (Abu Bakar, 1994). He was

inquisitive in learning and would not just blindly follow any given religious rule if his teachers could not convince him with a logical explanation (Syed Alwi, 1999). These critical and inquisitive attitudes toward knowledge would form one of the fundamental aspects of his intellectual works. Al-Hady was also familiar with intellectual currents in the Arab world first hand, which was facilitated through his visits to Makkah and Cairo and through his connections with Riau's royal family (Roff, 1967). These sojourns were crucial in opening up his eyes to new ideas and developments, as they enabled him to meet the political leaders, intellectuals and scholars of the places he visited (Syed Alwi, 1999). Perhaps, Tahir first introduced him to 'Abduh's thought, as they were familiar to each other even before their trips to the Arab world (Roff, 1967).

Al-Hady had stayed in Singapore, Johor and Malacca before permanently settling down in Penang in 1916. In Penang, he was appointed the Principal of Madrasah al-Masyhur (Daud, 1979). After resigning from the Madrasah in 1919, al-Hady devoted his time to literary activities, producing numerous works – articles, books and novels – on various subjects. He established his own periodical and a weekly newspaper (Abu Bakar, 1994). Al-Hady died of brain disease at his home in Penang on 20 February 1934.

A comparative evaluation of Tahir and al-Hady

As noted earlier, education of these two reformers was quite different. Tahir went to Makkah at the age of twelve for study and then to the famous al-Azhar University in 1893. Al-Hady's academic credentials, on the other hand, were not as impressive as Tahir's. Unlike Tahir, he did not receive any formal Islamic education at any prominent centres in the Arab world. Therefore, al-Hady's command of Arabic was only sufficient for his own use, but his educational training in Riau was more beneficial than Tahir's, especially in Malay language and literature, which proved to be helpful in his later career as a gifted writer and journalist.

While Tahir's long affiliation with the Islamic seminaries in the Arab world enhanced his credentials as a learned scholar, his long years there also inhibited him from learning the fine art of Malay language and literature. This prevented him from expressing himself in Malay as eloquently as al-Hady, and this became obvious when he became

the editor of *Saudara* after al-Hady's death. Tahir's editorship marked the beginning of the decline in the circulation of the newspaper. According to Nik Ahmad Nik Hassan, Tahir's writing style, which was heavily influenced by Arabic, made the newspaper reader-unfriendly and consequently less interesting to the Malay audience. As a result, in September 1934 Tahir relinquished his position as the editor of this newspaper (Nik Haji Hasan, 1963).

It is widely accepted that both Tahir and al-Hady were ardent followers of 'Abduh's reformist thought. However, this argument is problematic, as 'Abduh's ideas were not uni-dimensional – conservative or liberal. Moreover, his thinking led to two major orientations: the liberals as exemplified by Qasim Amin (1863-1908); and the conservatives, spearheaded by Rashid Rida (1865-1935). In the light of this, it is pertinent to examine to which aspect of 'Abduh's intellectual orientation Tahir and al-Hady were inclined. At the general level, both Tahir and al-Hady shared his worldview that the existing condition of the *ummah* needed to be reformed in order to restore Muslims' rightful place in the world and to revitalize their religious belief. For that purpose, both scholars concur that Muslims should abandon the blind following (*taqlīd*) of the Shafi'i school of Islamic laws. Instead, they urged Muslims to go back to the primary sources of Islamic law: Qur'an and *Sunna*.

Despite their common agreement with 'Abduh's religious worldview, a closer analysis of their ideas and activities demonstrates that the more religiously learned Tahir was more inclined to a conservative reformism while the versatile al-Hady was the admirer and promoter of the liberal aspect of the reformist ideas. In his writings, Tahir focused most of his attention on the religious aspects of 'Abduh's thought by emphasizing what is authentically Islamic and by rejecting what is a deviation from Islam (*bid'a*). In so doing, Tahir had written numerous works attacking those religious practices which he considered to be innovations (Zakariya, 2005).

Beyond those religious issues, however, Tahir did not really show much interest in the liberal aspects of 'Abduh's thinking such as the relation between Islam and reason. Al-Hady, on the other hand, not only became a strong proponent of the religious reformism but also fully endorsed and actively promoted the liberal strand of reformist thought.

It is intriguing that al-Hady did not actively promote the writings of Rashid Rida, whom he knew personally, to the Malay audience. Al-Hady laid emphasis on ‘Abduh’s ideas rather than Rida’s. According to al-Hady’s friend Za’ba, ‘Abduh had greater influence on al-Hady than Rida. Za’ba informs us that although Rida was a strong supporter of ‘Abduh, al-Hady had little intellectual admiration for Rida except for his numerous writings and profound learning in Qur’anic exegesis and *hadīth*. According to Za’ba, al-Hady hung life-size portraits of ‘Abduh and Afghani in his residence in Penang, but not of Rida (Gordon, 1999).

Fascinated by ‘Abduh’s progressive ideas, Al-Hady played a leading role in promoting those to the Malay audience. He translated two of Abduh’s Qur’anic exegeses into Malay. The first one *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma* [Exegesis of the last section of the Qur’an] (Al-Hady, 1927) and the second was *Tafsīr al-Fātihah* [Exegesis of the opening chapter of the Qur’an] (Al-Hady, 1928). He also promoted ‘Abduh’s idea of the compatibility of Islam and reason, which is one of the central issues in ‘Abduh’s theological and apologetic writings (Kerr, 1966). His two major works that promote this theme are *Risalat al-tawhīd* [Theology of unity] (Ábduh, 1932) and *al-Islām wa al-Nasrāniyya ma’a al-‘ilm wa-al-madaniyya* [Islam’s and Christianity’s views on knowledge and progress] (Ábduh, n.d.). What is more, inspired by ‘Abduh, al-Hady published his own work, *Kitab agama Islam dan akal* [Islam and reason]. In his preface to this book, al-Hady states that he intends to inform Muslims that every aspect of Islam is compatible with reason. He states that if Muslims examine the obligatory rituals carefully, they will notice their utilities, benefits and relevance to contemporary needs (Al-Hady, 1931).

Al-Hady, unlike most of his reformist colleagues who stayed away from the ideas of women’s emancipation, accepted Qasim Amin’s ideas enthusiastically. Moreover, he became one of the first exponents of the emancipation of women in Malay society. Discontent with the treatment and position of women in traditional Malay society, al-Hady appreciated the importance of providing greater liberty for women in society. Between 1926 and 1928, al-Hady wrote a series of articles entitled *Alam Perempuan* [Women’s world] in his periodical, *al-Ikhwān*. The articles were then edited and published as *Kitab Alam Perempuan* [Book on women’s world]. Tahir, on the other hand, had reservations about these aspects of Qasim Amin’s thoughts, as he remained silent

about these and adopted a more cautious view about some aspects of 'Abduh's ideas as well. Tahir's restraint and cautious attitude was reflected in his opinion on canned meat. In an unpublished manuscript written around 1946, Tahir rejected the opinion of Haji Hassan, a traditionalist scholar and Haji Abbas Taha, a reformist whose opinion considered canned meat as permissible (National Archives, MS SP 10/E3-489).

Another important divergence between Tahir and al-Hady was their genres of writings. Tahir's writings are generally categorized as religious in nature, while Al-Hady was more versatile and used various genres to express his ideas: religious writings, journalistic writings and novels. Al-Hady's versatility resembles that of Hamka (1908-1981), the Indonesian Islamic scholar who wrote more than one hundred books through various genres: religious works, journalistic writings and novels. Due to al-Hady's versatility, he is widely regarded in Malaysia as the Father of Malay Novel, the Father of Malay Journalism, the Progressive *'Alīm* and the Prominent Social Critic. However, most of al-Hady's works were either translations or adaptations of works from foreign languages. Therefore, al-Hady, despite his prolificacy, fame and reputation, was not a truly original thinker. The less celebrated reformist, Tahir, on the other hand, produced several original works, the most famous one, published in both Malay and Arabic, being *Kitāb ta'yīd muttabi' al-Sunna fī al-radd 'alā al-qā'il bil-sunniyyat al-rak'atain qabla al-jum'at* (Book supporting the followers of the *Sunnah* in refuting those claiming that the Friday supererogatory prayer is recommended). This book earned recognition from various prominent 'ulama such as Rashid Rida. Similarly, his *Perisai Qadiani* [The shield against the Qadianis] and *Risalah penebasan bid'ah di Kepala Batas* [Treatise on clearing innovation in Kepala Batas] were also original writings. Moreover, through his works on the Islamic astronomy, such as, *Natijat al-ummī li ma'rifat al-awqāt al-khamsa* [Work of an illiterate man in determining the times of the five daily prayer] *Pati kiraan pada menentukan waktu yang lima dan hal qiblat dengan logaritma* [The essence of calculation for the five prayers and the *qiblah* through logarithm] and *Natija al-Jalaliyya* [The outcome of Jalaliyya] Tahir made a pioneering contribution to its development in Malaysia and is rightly regarded as the father of Malaysian Islamic astronomy (Ilyas, 2003).

Tahir's and al-Hady's Attitudes towards British Colonialism

The reformists in Malaya generally had a positive notion of the British and regarded the Muslims as much better off under the British administration than they were under feudalistic Malay rulers. It should be mentioned that an attempt to analyze Tahir's attitude towards the British is seriously inhibited by the lack of source materials on the subject. This is so because Tahir was basically non-political and he neither joined any political party nor wrote any work on contemporary politics. However, in Tahir's writings, there are no indications that he was strongly against British colonial rule. There is one passage where Tahir makes reference to British colonialism, and it demonstrates his admiration of the British: "The great government [British], which protected this eastern country, does not like to interfere in, far less to change, the religious law and custom of the native people." (Tahir, 1930: 24). However, he also critiques colonial rule through poetry:

Masuklah kaumnya ke jalan kemajuan
 Masyhurlah bangsanya hingga ke awan
 Kita pun gentar memandangnya tuan
 Seumpama budak tujuan sawan
 Masuk mereka ke negeri kita
 Dimiliki segala bumi dan harta
 Diperhambanya kita seperti unta
 Dihisapnya darah seluruh anggota
 Di sini kalam terasa malu
 Hendak menghuraikan terang terlalu
 Ahli pelajaran tuan penghulu
 Mengertilah sekalian keadaan yang lalu
 [His race joined the path of progress
 His race's fame reached sky-high
 We shuddered as we observed them, sir
 Much like an epileptic child
 They entered our motherland
 They took possession of our riches and soil

They enslave us like camels
 They suck the blood out of the whole body
 Hitherto, this pen felt ashamed
 In unravelling the overly obvious
 Educators and leaders
 Do understand those past events]

While Tahir's attitude towards the British is ambivalent, he did not hide his distaste for Dutch colonialism in his homeland, West Sumatra. This can be partly attributed to the variant nature of colonial strategy of the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya. Comparatively, the Dutch administrators adopted a more restrictive policy on Islam than the British in Malaya. Moreover, in West Sumatra, the Dutch authority was involved in the bloody battles against the locals and eventually crushed the last bastion of the Padri movement in 1838 and effectively imposed its control throughout Minangkabau. Tahir's anti-Dutch attitude became particularly apparent during his visit to Minangkabau in 1923 and 1927, where he delivered fiery speeches against the Dutch, which eventually led to his arrest and imprisonment. (Zakariya, 2005).

Al-Hady's writings demonstrated his complex attitude towards the British. He believed that under British control Malaya would be able to develop much better politically, economically and socially. He reminded the Muslims that they should not blame the British if they could not benefit from the new changes and development introduced by colonial rule. Instead, according to him, the blame should go to themselves and their leaders who were not prepared for those changes. Moreover, al-Hady considered that the British had brought about positive changes to the Malayan economy. As he puts it: "The signs of prosperity and wealth have manifested themselves because of the fair rule of the British Government, which has attracted money from European nations; Banks have opened here [in Malaya] to serve the public" (Al-Hady, 1926:1).

Al-Hady considered the arrival of the British in Malaya as part of God's grand plan to save the Muslims from injustice, ignorance and oppression. He even went to the extent of likening the British to God's army whose arrival in Malaya brought about blessings to its people: "Indeed, the English are an army of God, the Lord of the worlds, who has ordered them to come here to free us from darkness, the prison of

ignorance, injustice, wickedness, and cruelty of our own rulers” (Al-Hady, 1926: 4).

Al-Hady’s stance on the British needs proper contextualization; otherwise it runs the risk of oversimplification. As Alatas argues, based on the aforementioned discussion, it would be easy to conclude that al-Hady blames the Malay problems solely on the feudal elite instead of colonial power and thus he emerged as a strong supporter of the British. (Alatas, 1985) However, the following quotes point to al-Hady’s critical attitude towards colonialism:

Then came to our eastern countries the Europeans from the north winds replete with the weapons to win the battle of life and equipped with knowledge of the ways and means to make profit [...]. And what happened to all of us here? We were all silent. Then we surrendered to them our dignity, our laws, our properties and our national pride! We became their slaves or servants, not unlike a watchdog or a beast of burden! We contented ourselves with the remnants thrown from their dishes and with the grass that grew round their compounds! We believed mostfaithfully that we, the peoples of the East, were created imperfectly, with less than perfect minds and vision.

If we are awake and conscious then we should, indeed we must, scream as if we had been thrashed with more violence than we can bear. Indeed, we should be screaming and yelling instead of laughing and applauding [...]. For if we are conscious and still possess the faculty of thought, then how can we allow another people to rule over us, to be our guardian in our own beloved Motherland? How can we allow ourselves to be so looked after that we would be naked and die if our food, clothing, furnishings, and the necessary tools, were not provided by others? In fact, if they did not intend to fatten us that they might make use of us as they would of machines and factories, they would never have so provided for us.

(Cited in alAtas, p. 16)

The above quotations demonstrate al-Hady’s obvious anguish with the colonization of Malaya and thus not his strong support for the British. He wrote another piece titled “Angan-Angan berbetulan dengan hakikat” [Dream in accord with Reality] which tells us in a subtle way

his unhappiness with colonialism in the region. As Linda Tan (1999, p. 138) describes:

Syed Shaykh described how in a reverie he was born high up in the sky. Looking down, his eyes filled with tears for he saw below him Sumatra, Java, the Philippines and Malaya all in the grips of foreign powers. More saddening still was the sight of the inhabitants: how idle and ignorant, how quarrelsome they were among themselves.

Accordingly, the absence of Al-Hady's call for independence from the British should be contextualized against the political conditions of Malaya and thus should not be equated with his loyalty to them. Malaya then was controlled by the feudal elite whom al-Hady characterizes as backward-looking and primarily responsible for the sorry state of the Malays. Thus, even if the Malays sought independence and forced the British to leave Malaya, al-Hady believed that the Malay leaders were not ready for self-rule and "would still not be in control of the country"

(Alatas, 1985:15). In al-Hady's own words: "The moment English let go, other nations will come in. This is firstly because we are not ready to govern our own country. Secondly, we don't have the power to stop an enemy from coming in". (al-Hady, 1926: 50).

Similarly, Tahir did not discuss the struggle for independence openly. However, his support for independence can be gleaned from his advice to Datuk Haji Batuah, a local Minangkabau political activist, on the question of the struggle for independence:

Independence requires several conditions. From my point of view, the time to rule ourselves has not come yet. If we want independence it is obligatory upon us [...] to acquire perfect knowledge in all aspects, including religious knowledge and skills, which the Europeans possess [...]. We also must have enough material wealth. With all these conditions we may achieve security and independence, otherwise these ideas cannot be achieved and if we insist (on acquiring it) [...] it will endanger us. This is prohibited by Islamic law (Tahir, n.d.).

The above quotation indicates that Tahir did not reject the struggle for independence for it is an obligation. However, echoing al-Hadi's sentiments, Tahir urged Batuah to fully prepare the nation for

independence first, as he felt that currently the people were not ready for self rule.

The above discussion suggests that Tahir, like al-Hady and other Malay reformers, apparently appreciated British rule. They argued that, as opposed to the Malay rulers, the British provided Malay reformers a platform to carry out their reformist activities freely in the Straits Settlements (Abu Bakar, 1994). For example, the reformist periodical, *al-Ikhwān*, was printed and published with the permission of the colonial administration in the Straits Settlements. Moreover, when the traditional ulama attempted to influence the Sultan of Kelantan to ban *al-Ikhwān* from being circulated there, al-Hady trusted the British High Commissioner to solve this problem fairly. At the same time, as Anthony Milner argues, the reformers in the Straits Settlements would not enjoy the freedom to undermine the colonial regime (Milner, 1995). Thus, it may be argued that Tahir's and al-Hadi's apparent satisfaction with the British probably indicated their preference for the "enlightened" British over the "despotism" of the Malay rulers, and the rule of the former might have represented the lesser of the two evils (Ibrahim, 1987).

Against these contexts, the reformists became cautious in their public views about the British and as a result only made implicit rather than explicit criticism of colonial rule. However, this should not be interpreted as their unreserved endorsement of British colonialism in Malaya. Rather, as reformists who enjoyed freedom of expression in the British enclaves, both al-Hadi and Tahir had to walk a tight rope between frank expression of their views towards colonialism (which would invite the British wrath) and the positive appraisal of the British.

Tahir's and al-Hady's Analyses of the Malay Socio-Economic Conditions

Tahir was not as astute in social and political criticism as he was with Islamic studies. As such, he did not write any major work analysing the socio-economic problems of the Malays. However, his lack of literary productivity in social and political criticism did not mean that he was not concerned with the problems confronting the Malays. His views on these issues are found in several articles in the reformist periodicals where he made occasional and passing references to the Malay problems.

In the preface to his writing on religious innovations, Tahir expresses his despair at the sorry state of the Muslims whom he characterizes

as living at the edge of destruction (Jalaluddin, 1953). His statement shows that he was indeed concerned about the problems of the Malays and the socio-economic slump in which they were stuck. This alarming situation of the Malays prompted him to analyse and find out the reasons behind this crisis. As a religious scholar who was more at home in Islamic doctrines than in the social sciences, Tahir approached the problem of Malay inertia from a theological standpoint. He contended that the Malays' inertia and stagnation did not stem from Islam; rather it was due to their own ignorance and negligence of the religion. Although Tahir did not openly champion the Muslim adoption of the positive aspects of Western ideas and technology, at heart, his attitude towards Western ideas and institutions was positive.

Unlike Tahir, who was not an astute social and political critic, al-Hady was adept at analysing the socio-economic problems confronting the Malays. It is due to his contributions to social criticism of Malay society that he is also regarded as a prominent social reformer (Ismail, 1972). One issue that received al-Hady's attention was the backwardness of the Malays and the foreigners' domination of the Malayan economy. Therefore, he was passionate about improving the economy of the Muslims in general and the Malays in particular. Through his writings, he often reminded the Malays that their non-participation in the economic sphere might eventually threaten their survival altogether (Al-Hady, 1930). He suggested various remedies. First, by invoking from Islamic teachings, al-Hady urged the Muslims to change their attitude towards life. He stressed that human beings endowed with enormous potentials should use them fully throughout their life. Al-Hady added that a Muslim will be judged in the hereafter on the basis of his efforts he makes to implement the commandments of God for individual and collective welfare (Tan, 1999).

Al-Hady's contribution to uplifting the Malays from economic backwardness was not confined to theoretical discussion. Moreover, as an ardent supporter of the government-sponsored cooperative movement, he urged the Malays to participate in cooperative societies. He believed that participation in a co-operative would alleviate economic exploitation. While the conservative scholars discouraged Muslims from depositing and borrowing money in the credit society on the ground that it involved *ribā* (usury), al-Hady explained to them that profits from cooperative societies were permissible, and wrote a booklet on this issue in 1933 (Roff, 1967; Husain, 2000).

In addition to economic problems, al-Hady also examined other relevant social issues such as women's involvement in society and the Malay educational system. In short, al-Hady responded conscientiously to the problems of his times and he was very committed to redress the social and economic ills besetting the Malays. In doing so, al-Hady made significant contributions to the review of the Malay's social and economic problems.

Tahir's and al-Hady's Reforms

Religious Reform

Given Malay backwardness, both reformists believed that the *ummah* needed to undergo reform in order to get out of material slump and intellectual stagnation. In this regard, as mentioned before, Tahir shared with other Muslim reformers like 'Abduh and Rida the conviction that Muslim weakness and inertia stemmed from their deviation from "true" Islam (Jalaluddin, 1926). In order to ameliorate their conditions in Malaya, Muslims had to recommit themselves to the understanding of their religion and living according to the Qur'an and *Sunna* as exemplified by the early generations of Muslims.

Tahir's conception of "true" Islam entailed the precepts of the Qur'an and *Sunna* without the admixture of un-Islamic cultural beliefs and practices. Thus, in order for Muslims in Malaya to practice and live according to the "true" Islamic precepts, it was necessary for them to purify their beliefs and practices from elements that corrupted the form of Islam. The sole basis of distinguishing the "pure" from the "tainted" Islam was the Qur'an and *Sunna* (Jalaluddin, 1926: 42). Tahir urged the Muslims to go back to the Qur'an and *Sunna*, and not to rely entirely on the opinions of scholars of Islam. In general, they must reject any innovations in religious practices, the views with which, al-Hadi agreed (Tan, 1999).

Both Tahir and al-Hady agreed that the forms of religious practice and understanding in colonial Malaya had deviated from the "true" Islam and needed to be reformed. In doing so, both were engaged in debates and polemics against the defenders of the traditional Islam of Malaya. Tahir refuted the traditional ulama' in his major work entitled *Risalah penebasan bid'ah di Kepala Batas* [Treatise on clearing innovation in Kepala Batas]. *Risalah* published as a response to the traditionalist

conference in Kepala Batas provided the arguments for the reformist contention that religious rituals such as Supererogatory Prayer before the Friday Prayer (*Sunnah Qabliyyah Jumát*) and the utterance of the intention to pray loudly, as practiced by a great majority of Muslims in Malaya, were innovations. Tahir provided a detailed analysis of the religious practices that were prevalent in Malay, which he considered innovations (Jalaluddin, 1953).

Al-Hady concurred with Tahir that the forms of religious practice and understanding in Malaya had deviated from the “true” Islam and needed to be reformed, and on a wide range of the Islamic rituals (*‘ibādāt*) such as the Friday prayer, uttering the intention to pray and instructing the deceased after burial (*talqin*) (Abu Bakar, 1992). Furthermore, as the leading reformist polemicist, al-Hady was involved in bitter religious polemics against the defenders of the traditional Islam. Through his writings, al-Hadi strongly criticized many aspects of religious practices such as the recitation of *talqin* for the deceased, feast given for the dead and the observance of the *mawlid* (the birth of the Prophet s.a.w.) (Tan, 1999). While the traditionalist ulama believed that there are two types of *bid’ah*: beneficial and deviated, Tahir and Hadi were opposed to all forms of *bid’ah*. Tahir believed that innovations in belief and religious observance are against the *sunna*, and hence deviating and misleading (Jalaluddin, 1953).

Tahir argued that in order to solve this problem and revitalize the Malays’ socio-economic condition, Muslims should carry out a religious reform, which would greatly benefit Muslims the same way Martin Luther’s reformation did the European Christians. In order to convince Muslims to embrace a religious reform, Tahir stressed that a religious reform would not be threatening to the Islamic faith. This is because religious reforms would neither introduce anything new to Islam, nor would it reduce the Islamic rules which had been clearly and firmly established with evidence (Jalaluddin, 1953).

Tahir’s writings on the significance of reform in Malaya provided only a general, mostly theological, explanation for the backwardness of the Malays and the religious prescription to cure this ill. They neither provided a systematic analysis of their problems nor offered a specific plan of action for the Malays to revitalize them. Thus, there was no reference to the question of Muslim interaction with and adoption of

positive aspects of Western knowledge and technology. However, it is understood that he was not totally opposed to borrowing from the West. This is gleaned from Tahir's conversation with Datu Batuah where Tahir advised Datu Batuah to learn various branches of knowledge and technology so that Muslims would be as progressive as the West.

Al-Hady's ideas of reform, on the other hand, are more elaborate. Unlike Tahir, al-Hady's analysis of Malay backwardness was not confined to theological explanation only. He examined various factors contributing to the Malay inertia and laziness including the irresponsibility of the Malay rulers and aristocrats. However, he dismissed the argument that the people of the East are inferior to those of the West. Furthermore, referring to the industrious immigrant Chinese community, he urged the Malays to emulate their work ethics. He also criticized the Malays' lack of participation in economy (Tan, 1999). As noted earlier, to redress Malay economic backwardness, first, he referred to the Qur'an in order to stress the need for Malays' change of attitude towards life. Second, he fully supported the Government-sponsored co-operative movement and urged the Malays to participate in that. He also wrote a booklet to emphasize that interest from co-operatives was not *riba* (usury). Third, he founded and drafted a constitution for a society for the poor named Persatuan Ikhwan al-Masakin (Society for the Poor). Thus, al-Hadi's analysis of the Malay economic problems is more detailed and specific than Tahir's.

Tahir attempted to promote Islamic reform from within and without the system. During the early phase of his life in Malaya, he participated in Islamic bureaucracy and served as *qiblat* inspector in Perak, an advisor to the Magistrate in Taiping and accompanying the Sultan to London as a religious advisor. Apart from serving in the Islamic civil bureaucracy in Perak, he also served in Johore, taught Islamic law to judges and magistrates in the state and worked as a supervisor of the Islamic schools in the region. However, these positions did not enable him to promote his reformist ideas effectively. Despite Tahir's solid credentials as an Islamic scholar with an *'ilmiyya* degree from al-Azhar, the high public offices in the Islamic bureaucracy such as *Qādī* (Judge) and *Muftī* (the highest religious official at the state level who could issue a religious ruling) remained inaccessible to him. It is obvious that Tahir was well qualified for these high posts, but, he was denied these due to his adherence to reformist ideas that were thought to be a threat

to the religious establishment. Consequently, it constricted Tahir's role in bringing about a wider and far-reaching change in Malay society (Ibrahim, 1987).

Al-Hady's efforts to promote Islamic reformist discourse took place from outside the system. This is so because, unlike the learned Tahir who had managed to get employment in traditionalist-dominated Islamic bureaucracy albeit temporarily, al-Hady could not avail such a career. Therefore, by and large, al-Hady sought to uplift the Malays from their problems from outside the system. At different phases of his career, al-Hady earned his livelihood as businessman, *shari'ah* lawyer, teacher, principal, journalist, novelist, writer and publisher. Although denied of positions in the Islamic bureaucracy, al-Hady became an effective critic of Malay society.

Tahir's and al-Hady's Educational Reform

Besides religious reform, both Tahir and al-Hady emphasized the significance of reforming religious education in order to fashion the future generation of Muslims. The Malay reformists believed that the way Islamic learning was taught in Malaya was inadequate to prepare the new Muslim generation for the demands of the modern world. Islamic education in colonial Malaya was traditionally taught at the *pondok* whose curriculum offered only Islamic and Arabic subjects. At *pondok*, the students study together in a common class regardless of age or level and there are no examinations. This type of learning system generally encourages memorization and *taqlid*. Both Tahir and al-Hady were discontent with the inadequacy of the traditional Islamic learning to prepare students to meet the contemporary challenges.

Tahir did not provide a complete analysis of Islamic education. His views may be gleaned from his writings on Islamic reform where he made passing remarks on education. A case in point is Tahir's article in *Saudara*. After establishing the importance of knowledge and education, Tahir points out that Islam commands Muslims to learn not only Islamic subjects as taught in *pondoks*, but also different branches of worldly knowledge such as craftsmanship, business management, social etiquettes, and pharmacology (Mustajab, 2003). Tahir's brief remark on this issue demonstrates his support for the reform of Islamic education by introducing a balanced curriculum encompassing both mundane as well as other-worldly matters. In addition to curriculum reform, Tahir

also emphasized the need to change the teaching and delivery methods at the Islamic educational institutions as well as informal learning at the village level. Moreover, in a letter to the Sultan of Perak, Tahir proposed the establishment of a university in the region though he did not provide any detailed curriculum for that (Djamily, 1994).

Conversely, al-Hady offered a more detailed assessment and criticism of the educational system in Malaya. His ideas of education were reflected in his concept of knowledge and criticism of the existing Islamic education in Malaya. Having been exposed to *pondok* education, al-Hady became its strong critic. Echoing Tahir's views, he strongly advocated that Islamic schools in Malaya needed substantial reform, and that they should offer not only Islamic subjects but also modern courses such as English, arithmetic and geography. In other words, Al-Hady espoused the establishment of modern Islamic schools, whose curriculum would emphasize both religious as well as worldly subjects (Abu Bakar, 1994). For Al-Hady (as cited in Tan, 1999: 151-152), students should be exposed to "every kind of knowledge which will enable Muslims to equal or compete with other people in the field of life"

Besides reforming Islamic education, al-Hadi differed from Tahir in his admiration of the English education system. He claimed that if Muslims do not follow the European education system, "they will forever remain backward" (Abu Bakar, 1992: 193-194). Thus, al-Hady believed that in order to get quality education Muslim students should study at the Government English Schools. However, fierce competition and limited opportunities prevented the majority of Malays from entering the mainstream school system. To solve this problem he proposed the establishment of the Anglo-Malay School. Al-Hadi suggested this school to adopt the syllabus offered at the Government English Schools and the standard subjects would be taught in English. At the same time Malay would be the medium of instruction for religious subjects and students would be exposed to the relevant Arabic texts (Abu Bakar, 1994).

Tahir's and al-Hady's contributions to Islamic education were not confined to theoretical discussion only. Both were personally involved in the reform of Islamic education. For instance, from 1920 to 1923 Tahir taught at a reformist Islamic school in Penang where al-Hady was the headmaster. Furthermore, in 1925, Tahir taught at a private

Islamic school named Madrasah Haji Taib in Muar, Johore. According to Bachtiar, during his tenure at the school, Tahir served as its Principal and was responsible for the introduction of the teaching of English. (Sharif, 1979). Al-Hady's role in reforming Islamic education was more profound than Tahir's because the former was responsible for the foundation of two Islamic schools. For example, around 1915, al-Hady founded a reformist school, Madrasah al-Hady, with the help of his local associate, Haji Bachik. However, this school did not receive favourable reception from the public and was forced to close around 1918. After al-Hady left Malacca for Penang in 1919, Haji Bachik reopened it and made concerted efforts to consolidate the Islamic school by recruiting teachers from overseas including Egypt and West Sumatra (Mat Ton, 1974). He also played a crucial role in enhancing the administration of an Islamic school in Penang named Madrasah al-Masyhur al-Islamiyya. In 1919, he served as the Principal of the school for some time. In his capacity as the Principal, he invited his reformist colleagues – Tahir, and Shaykh Abdullah Maghribi – to teach at the school (Abu Bakar, 1994). Owing to their concerted efforts during the post-war period, Madrasah al-Masyhur in Penang offered not only various Islamic disciplines but also numerous modern subjects, such as, general knowledge, geography, logic, psychology, philosophy and biology (Hussin, 1993). Finally, the school had to be shifted to a bigger compound, as students' enrolment increased drastically (Abu Bakar, 1994).

In brief, the reformists, who were discontent with the existing Islamic education in Malaya, introduced the new kind of Islamic education system. Unlike the traditional Islamic seminaries, *madrasah* was better organized and had a comprehensive curriculum that covered both Islamic and secular subjects. Indeed, the innovative and organized structure of the reformist Islamic schools influenced the development of the Islamic educational system in twentieth-century Malaya. The *madrasah* system, which flourished in Malaya from the late 1920s to the 1940s, was modelled after the reformist schools (Hussin, 1993). This in itself is an indication of the reformers' remarkable achievement and immense contribution to Malay society.

Tahir's and al-Hady's Views on the Roles of Women in Society

In terms of the status and roles of women in society, al-Hady and Tahir seem to have a major dissimilarity. While al-Hady, inspired by Qasim

Amin's ideas of women's liberation, suggested women's reform, Tahir left us with no clue concerning his attitudes towards this issue. As noted earlier, al-Hady became one of the first exponents of the emancipation of women in Malay society, as he criticized the traditional views of women's status and roles in society and suggested reforms (Abu Bakar, 1994).

Discontent with the treatment and position of women in traditional Malay society, al-Hady realized the importance of providing greater liberty for women in society. Between 1926 and 1928, he wrote a series of articles under the general title *Alam perempuan* in his periodical *al-Ikhwān*. These articles were then edited and published as *Kitab alam perempuan*. In this work, al-Hady discusses the position of women in Islam and the urgent need to provide educational opportunities for women and their liberation from customary and religious restrictions. He also demonstrated scripturally and rationally the significance of women's contributions to public life (Abu Bakar, 1994).

Al-Hady rejected the popular Muslim misperception of women's inferiority to men in terms of rational abilities and temperament. He insisted that men and women have the same capabilities and have the same purpose in life, that is, to know God and to obey His commandments. He also urged a greater involvement of women in society and stated that the deterioration of women's role in society did not emanate from Islam but from its misinterpretation. He drew evidence from early Islamic history to substantiate his argument and argued that early Muslim men allowed their women to be involved actively in building the Muslim community. In early Islam women were not banned from taking part in various aspects of public life. They were their husbands' helpers at home and participated in the battles at the same time (Abu Bakar, 1994).

These two reformers adopted different attitudes towards Qasim Amin's ideas of women's emancipation. While Tahir maintained conspicuous silence, al-Hady vigorously championed and promoted these ideas in Malay society. It is probable that Tahir disagreed with these "radical" ideas which contradicted his own opinion. This is not surprising because Tahir, unlike al-Hady, adopted a restraint and more cautious attitude towards some aspects of 'Abduh's ideas. Indeed, Al-Hady made important contributions in creating awareness about the improvement of women's status and their emancipation in society. In

that regard, he may be considered as “Malaya’s first feminist” (Alatas: 1985: 9).

Despite the lack of a popular following, Tahir and al-Hady played a significant role in bringing about a Malay consciousness of the contemporary socio-economic and political realities. However, their reform did not lead to a mass movement, as they were loosely organized and lacked coherent and specific programs for socio-economic and political transformations. As a result, they could not bring about wider and lasting changes in the Malay society of that time (Ibrahim, 1987).

Conclusion

Tahir and al-Hady contributed immensely to the development of Islamic reformist discourse in Malaya. They differed from each other in educational background, genre of their writing, originality of ideas and more importantly their take on different aspects of ‘Abduh’s ideas. In spite of such significant differences in their backgrounds, education, and intellectual approach, they collaborated very effectively through several ventures in promoting the cause of Islamic reform.

Though these two Malay reformers were generally in agreement with each other in their acceptance of the religious and educational aspects of ‘Abduh’s ideas, they differed in their attitude towards the liberal strand of his thought. Through his writings, Tahir focused most of his attention on the religious aspects of reformism by emphasizing what is authentically Islamic and what is a deviation from Islam (*bid‘a*). Beyond those religious issues, however, Tahir did not really show his attitude toward the liberal aspects of ‘Abduh’s thinking regarding the relation between Islam and reason. Al-Hady, on the other hand, not only became a strong proponent of religious reformism, but also fully endorsed and actively promoted liberal reformist thought. Al-Hady emphasised ‘Abduh’s thought rather than Rida’s, as he was more impressed with ‘Abduh’s ideas (Gordon, 1999). Therefore, al-Hady may well be considered as the ‘Abduh-like reformer in Malaya, while the learned Tahir represented the conservative reformism of Rida.

Tahir and al-Hady also differed in the genre of their writings. While Tahir primarily wrote on technical Islamic matters, al-Hady was more versatile, using various media, such as writings on religion, critical essays on society and economy, and novels. In fact, al-Hady was

so successful as a novelist that he is regarded as the father of the Malay novel. His famous romance novel, *Faridah Hanum* was a bestseller at that time.

Although he is considered a more accomplished and celebrated writer than Tahir, al-Hady was not really an original thinker. This is because almost all of his major works were either translations or adaptations of works from foreign languages. Tahir, who is generally regarded as the less accomplished writer, on the other hand, produced several major, original works, most notably *Kitāb ta'yīd muttabi' al-Sunna fi al-radd 'alā al-qāil bil-sunniyyat al-rak'atān qabla al-Jum'at* [The book supporting the followers of the *Sunnah* in refuting those claiming that the Friday supererogatory prayer is recommended] and other important works on Islamic astronomy. Regarding the fields of social and political criticism, Tahir was not as astute as he was in Islamic studies. Therefore, Tahir did not provide any elaborate discussion on these topics (Zakariya, 2005). Conversely, al-Hady produced numerous writings dealing with social, economic and political problems confronting the contemporary Malays.

Tahir had a limited influence because he always tried to work within the framework of formal Islamic scholarship as an *'ālim*, and not as an activist. This of course brought him into head-to-head conflict with the traditional ulama and rulers of Malaya whose antagonism marginalized him. Al-Hady, primarily made himself a public intellectual who spoke to a broad audience, especially at the urban centres of the Straits Settlements. Though the traditional ulama opposed his ideas and writings, they could not effectively block his reformist views from being disseminated.

Among the Malaysians today, al-Hady is more acclaimed than Tahir. This, however, does not in any way mean that Tahir contributed less to Malay society. His lack of popularity among contemporary Malaysians is primarily due to the fact that he wrote on technical Islamic subjects, which are not popular among the masses. Al-Hady, unlike Tahir, not only wrote on Islamic issues but also produced romance novels, which appealed to a wider audience. One of the key reasons that makes al-Hady renowned today is that some contemporary students of Malay literature continue to read his bestseller novel, *Faridah Hanum*. On the other hand, Tahir's major writings are almost unheard of by today's

audience. It is probably due to this reason that Tahir has not received the appropriate scholarly attention that he deserves.

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