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## Viewpoints

# Islamic Educational Institutions in the Past: *Kuttāb* and Madrasa

**Alwi Alatas**

In Islam, education has a very important position for it equips man with knowledge or *'ilm* which is necessary for human beings to lead their lives in the righteous path. Dissemination or transmission of knowledge is hence, indispensable and for that purpose, educational institutions are needed. Ever since the inception of Islam in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia, Muslims have optimised the use of these institutions, exemplified for instance, in mosques, *kuttāb* and madrasa so that the disseminated education or knowledge would benefit all. This article will highlight the emergence and development of *kuttāb* and madrasa in Islamic history, especially during the Abbasid era, so as to help us understand how Islamic educational institutions played their role in history.

### **Primary Educational Institution: *Kuttāb***

The first revelation to the Prophet (pbuh), started with the word *iqra'* (QS 96: 1), reflecting on the importance of knowledge and things related to it. The place of knowledge, from Islamic point of view, is in the chest of an *'alim* (scholar), and those who want to pursue knowledge are encouraged to come to and study with those who possess knowledge. Therefore, the core of an educational institution is the teacher, or someone who has knowledge and is capable of teaching. Thus, when an educational institution or school emerges and develops with all its facilities, it is essentially the extension of the teacher.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (2018, p. 17) defines knowledge as “the arrival of the soul at the meaning of a thing or an object of knowledge”. The soul that can understand this meaning is obviously belong to the human beings, not to the schools or colleges. Therefore, without the authority of good teachers that possess knowledge and *adab*, the schools, colleges, or universities are just meaningless entities. Being proud of great facilities, but at the same time undermining the roles of the teachers who are knowledgeable and have *adab*, is a false understanding of education. Mistakes like this will only give birth to confusion and errors, as Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud (2020, p. 32) expresses in his book of poetry, *Jalan Pulang* [Way Home]:

Budaya Dunga leburkan Nizamiyyah dengan kuasa dan fitnah  
 Menggantikan Hujjatul Islam dengan Hassan bin Sabbah  
 Penjarakan sarjana dengan peraturan dan halangan  
 Menutup kebenaran dengan amaran dan sanjungan

[Culture of stupidity extinguishes Nizamiyya with clout and calumny  
 Replacing Hujjatul Islam with Hassan ibn Sabbah  
 Incarcerated the scholars with regulations and hindrances  
 Concealing the truth with admonition and adoration]

In another part (2020, p. 9), he writes:

Bolehkah khinzir dikalungi permata  
 Kera dihadiahkan mawar berharga? ...  
 Pabila ilmu ketandusan makna:  
 Keras suara penentu wibawa

[Is a pig worth of wearing a jewel necklace  
 A monkey is awarded a precious rose? ...  
 If knowledge is deprived of meaning:  
 The loudness of the voice determines the authority]

In the early period, when the Prophet (pbuh) was in Mecca, the companions used to gather and study at the house of al-Arqam ibn Abī al-Arqam or in other places with very simple facilities. When the Prophet and his companions moved to Medina and built the Prophet’s

Mosque in that city, the mosque played a major role in the process of education and transmission of knowledge.

Since then, even to the present day, mosques still play an important role in the field of education. With the passing of time, different types of educational institutions emerged, some with their own buildings, though mosques remain an important part of educational process. Among the new institutions were *kuttāb* and madrasa.

It is important to highlight that madrasa in the past was not a primary or secondary educational institution like what we find today in some Muslim countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia. Madrasa in the past was an institution of higher education, more or less comparable to a college.

Unlike madrasa, the *kuttāb* (or *maktab*) that existed since early Islamic history and derived from the word *kātib* (means ‘writer’), was to provide basic education (Landau, 1985). The use of the word *kuttāb* for elementary school has appeared since the lifetime of Abdullah ibn Umar, the junior Companion of the Prophet, as narrated from Anbasa that he saw Ibn Umar greeting children (*ṣibyān*) at the school (*al-kuttāb*) (al-Bukhari, 1971, p. 654, hadith No.1044). However, its existence in this early period was of course still very limited.

Teachers in this institution, like for example in Baghdad in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century of Hijri, were called *mu’addib*. In *kuttāb* or *maktab*, at least in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries, Muslim children studied the Qur’an, writing and calligraphy, foundational belief (*i’tiqād*), and poetry (Makdisi, 1981). Some elements in this curriculum may be difficult to understand in the context of modern society. However, it was only natural to understand that the curriculum directly or indirectly had transmitted the Islamic worldview to the students agreeing to their age.

The terms *kuttāb* and *maktab* were generally interchangeable, but in certain areas such as Nishapur in northeastern Iran they both represented different phases of education. ‘Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī (d. 529/1134), a Shāfi‘ī scholar of hadith, entered the maktab in the city when he was five years old and studied al-Qur’an and basic *aqīda* (creed) at the institution. At the age of ten, he entered *kuttāb* and studied literature and copied and memorised books related to this field. Apart from that,

*kuttāb* or *maktab* was also a basic education for those who want to continue to a higher level (Makdisi, 1981).

### **The Emergence And Development of Madrasa**

As previously mentioned, after taking basic education, students could continue their education to a higher level. In the beginning, this was not pursued through institutions, but through individual scholars. The most popular field in the higher education was Jurisprudence or Islamic Law (*Fiqh*), yet some studied other fields such as Arabic, *Kalam* (Theology), or Philosophy, as well as other fields of science such as Medicine.

After the formation of *fiqh* schools (*madhhab*) in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries of Hijri (8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), the field of Jurisprudence which was taken up by many higher-level students would be confined to the line of the four *fiqh* schools (Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfi‘ī, and Ḥanbalī).

Initially, the classes of Jurisprudence took place at the mosque (*masjid*), usually for four years. The need for housing for the teachers and the students made this institution developed from *masjid* to *masjid-khan* (a mosque with residential buildings around it) and then to madrasa. The *masjid-khan* flourished on a large scale in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, while madrasa flourished in the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century (Makdisi, 1981).

Madrasa comes from the Arabic root *darasa* which means “to learn”. However, prior to and during the development of this institution, this word had become a special term for Jurisprudence. The word *darrasa*, which actually means “to teach” or “to instruct” in this context had a meaning of teaching Jurisprudence. The word *dars* is used for Jurisprudence lessons and Jurisprudence teachers are referred to as *mudarris*. Thus, at least at the beginning of its development, a madrasa could be referred to as a college of Islamic law (Makdisi, 1961).

Abū Ishāq al-Shīrāzī (d. 476/1083), an expert of the Shāfi‘ī school of jurisprudence who became the first professor of the Nizamiya Madrasa in Baghdad, for example, is mentioned by al-Fārisī (1989) as an Iraqi *faqih* and *mudarris* in Baghdad. He taught (*darrasa*) Jurisprudence in Baghdad for over thirty years. Another scholar, Ismā‘īl ibn Zāhir (d.



479/1086), studied *Fiqh (darasa al-fiqh)* during his youth with Abū Bakr al-Ṭūsī and the activity took place in the mosque (al-Fārisī, 1989).

The emergence of madrasa as colleges of law, again, showed the popularity of the field of Jurisprudence among the existing branches of scholarship. However, this does not mean that Jurisprudence was the only field taught in madrasa. The aforementioned Ismā'īl ibn Zāhir, for example, taught Ḥadīth (Majlis al-Imlā') for many years at the Nizamiya Madrasa (al-Fārisī, 1989). Likewise, the level and composition of the lessons given in madrasa may not be exactly the same from one madrasa to another, though there might be existed a number of textbooks that were studied in these institutions. In addition, the emergence of madrasa did not stop the teaching of Jurisprudence at the mosques.

Due to its gradual development from one phase to the next, it is not easy to determine when exactly the madrasa appeared for the first time in history. Some sources mention about al-Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fez, Morocco, which was built by Fatima al-Fihriya in 859 and a madrasa with the same name and location that is still functioning today.

Referring to this narrative, Madrasa al-Qarawiyyin can be considered as the earliest madrasa in history. However, it is not clear whether the term madrasa was used in the first place for this educational institution. In addition, at least in recent times, this educational institution has a different curriculum from the madrasa in the center of the Abbasid caliphate, so that it is also categorically different from the madrasa described earlier. It is said that Madrasa al-Qarawiyyin teaches Mathematics, Medicine, Logic, Astronomy, History, Geography, and Music, as well as the Qur'an and Jurisprudence (FSTC, 2004), in contrast to the madrasa in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Egypt that emphasised Jurisprudence and religious sciences.

There are some who think that the first madrasa in history was Nizamiya that was founded by Nizam al-Muluk (d. 485/1092) in Baghdad in 459/1067. However, this view is inaccurate, because before the establishment of Nizamiya several other madrasas were already existed in the Islamic world.

Although it is not easy to trace the first madrasa, at least we know that madrasa had already emerged in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. Besides

Baghdad, Nishapur was also a prominent city for education during this period. The names of the madrasa were usually not clearly stated, but the madrasa was known for its main scholar who led the institution.

Prior to 418/1027, there was a madrasa led by Abū Ishāq al-Isfaraynī (d. 418/1027), an important theologian and scholar of the Shāfi'ī school whose classes were attended, among others, by Shaykh Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and al-Ḥāfiẓ Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī. Unfortunately, it is not specified when exactly this educational institution was founded, though it is clearly mentioned as a 'famous madrasa in Nishapur' (Ibn Khallikān, n.d.).

'Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī (1989) mentions the existence of an educational institution in Nishapur led by al-Isfaraynī since 410/1019-1020, replacing Abū Ṭāhir al-Ziyādī, but the class was in the mosque and he calls it by the name *majlis al-implā'* which was usually associated with the science of Hadīth. However, this may be a different institution from the one mentioned by Ibn Khallikān.

Several decades earlier, in 391/1001, Abū 'Alī al-Daqqāq, a Sufi shaykh, founded a madrasa in the city of Nishapur. This madrasa has *tadhkira* sessions (*majālis al-tadhkīr*), which were typical among the Sufis, and possibly a Ḥadīth session (*majlis al-implā'*), but there is no mention of the Jurisprudence subject in it. Apart from that, this madrasa was then continued by al-Daqqāq's son-in-law, namely Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, and after that was known as al-Madrasa al-Qushayriyya (Halm, 1986). Al-Qushayrī was buried with his teacher at the madrasa (Ibn Khallikan, 1843).

Ibn Khallikan (1843) also mentions briefly the Madrasa al-Bayhaqī in Nishapur that was founded by Imam Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066) who was an expert on ḥadīth and also a leader of the Shāfi'ī school of Jurisprudence. Imām al-Ḥaramayn Abū al-Ma'ālī al-Juwaynī studied at this madrasa after his father, who was also a great scholar, passed away. Abū Muḥammad al-Juwaynī, the father of Abū al-Ma'ālī, died in 438/1047 (al-Fārisī, 1989; Ibn Khallikan, 1843). Imam al-Bayhaqī only started his teaching activities in Nishapur after he returned to the city in 441/1050 and a class was held, led by him and attended by scholars and jurists. It is also stated that he came and taught at the Suyurī Madrasa in that city (al-Fārisī, 1989: 104). Unfortunately, it is not clear whether this madrasa (Madrasa al-Bayhaqī) was an upgraded form of the class he led

before or a continuation of the Suyurī Madrasa or a different institution. In spite of that, Madrasa al-Bayhaqī was for sure established before Imam al-Bayhaqī passed away in 458/1066.

Madrasa, of course, did not only arise and develop in Nishapur. In 1012 in Baghdad, a madrasa was already existed and founded by Shaykh al-Sarakhsī. Al-Sarakhsī died while trying to stop the conflict between the adherents of different schools of law that occurred at the madrasa that year (Makdisi, 1961).

In 459/1067, Nizamiya Madrasa in Baghdad was founded by the Saljuk Vizier, Nizam al-Muluk. After that, Nizamiya was also built in Nishapur and several other important cities. Nizamiya would later play an important role in strengthening and expanding the academic tradition in the Sunni world.

In the following periods, apart from the madrasa, there were also many other educational institutions that represent different branches of religious knowledge, such as the Dār al-Qur'an and Dār al-Ḥadīth, *ribāṭ* and *zāwiya* for the Sufis, as well as medical schools. No doubt that with the establishment of these various educational institutions, there emerged numerous Muslim scholars and scientists, particularly during the Abbasid era, who in turn contributed to the advancement of Islamic civilisation.

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