Functionalising Islam: The Schooling Experiences of Malay Muslims in Singapore

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Abstract

This article explores key events in the schooling experiences of the Malay Muslims in Singapore by using Gregory Starrett's concept of the 'functionalisation of religion'. It argues that many Malay Muslims turned to the madrasah as a symbol and function of cultural and religious resistance towards the British colonial government's secular and anglicised state schools. After Singapore's independence, when a majority of Malay Muslims preferred secular state schools to the madāris (pl. of madrasah), the madrasah leaders responded by functionalising the madāris for the institutions' own survival and long-term viability. In recent years, some Malay Muslim parents and their supporters also attempt to functionalise the headscarf as a symbol of their religious identity and rejection of the secular state educational policy.

Keywords: British colonial government, discourses, Gregory Starrett, functionalisation of religion, headscarf, tudung, Islam, Muslim community, madrasah (madāris), Malay Muslims, Singapore, resistance, counter-hegemonic responses, religious identity, multi-ethnic society, multi-religious society, secular schools, schooling experiences.

Introduction

As an identity marker, religion is a potent driving force for counter-hegemonic responses. These responses are often situated within competing discourses – the official discourse produced and legitimised by the state, and the nonofficial discourses constructed and advocated by various contesting forces.[1] The official discourse, which aims at mediating social order and regulating the power relationships between social groups, is constantly being challenged by active agents, who create nonofficial discourses by selecting, regulating and determining pedagogic texts and identities. Key pedagogic agents are officials from state pedagogic agencies, schools, communities, and other fields that are able to exert influence on the state and on special sites, agents and practices within education.[2]

In the midst of the various discourses competing for representation and power, how is religion utilised or 'functionalised' to serve the social, religious and political agendas of various agents? This question is the focus of this article, which aims to examine the functionalisation of Islam in the schooling experiences of the Malay Muslims in Singapore from the colonial period to the present time.

Founded as a British trading post in 1819, Singapore was granted self-government in 1959 and merged with the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia in 1963. However, it was a short-lived union marked by political and social conflicts. Singapore left Malaysia to

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become an independent state in 1965. Today, Singapore is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with 5.1 million residents, comprising Chinese (74.2%), Malays (13.4%), Indians (9.2%) and other races[3] (3.2%). 83% of its population identify themselves as adherents of a particular religion: 33.3% are Buddhists, 18.3% are Christians, 14.7% are Muslims, 10.9% are Taoists, 5.1% are Hindus, and 17% others. Among the ethnic groups, the Malays are the most homogenous, with 99.6% of this group adhering to the Islamic religion.[4] The rest of the Muslim population (about 15%) are people of Chinese, Eurasian, Arab and South Asian descent. As the majority of Muslims are Malays in Singapore, this article will focus on Muslims who are Malays or 'Malay Muslims', and use the two terms, 'Malays' and 'Muslims' synonymously throughout the discussion.

Adapting Gregory Starrett's concept of the 'functionalisation of religion', this article explores the functionalisation of Islam in the schooling experiences of the Malay Muslims in Singapore from the colonial period to the present time.[5] The article begins with a discussion of the concept of the functionalisation of religion, followed by an analysis of the functionalisation of Islam through key events in the schooling experiences of the Malay Muslims in Singapore.[6]

1. Functionalisation of Religion

Starrett introduces the concept of the 'functionalisation of religion' to refer to a process where a religion is made practically useful by being consciously put to work for various types of social and political projects. He elaborates:

"Functionalisation refers to processes of translation in which intellectual objects from one discourse come to serve the strategic and utilitarian ends of another discourse. This translation not only places intellectual objects in new fields of discourse, but radically shifts the meaning of their initial context. […]

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[3] The reference to 'races' rather than 'ethnic groups' follows the Singapore state's practice of classifying all citizens in Singapore based on four racial identities according to one's paternal line: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO). A depoliticised defined notion of 'race' is advocated where specific characteristics such as food, attire, religious and ethnic festivals are ascribed to the 'races'.

[4] The 'Malays' are comprised of various ethnic sub-groups such as Malay, Javanese and Baweanese. Judith Djamour classified the Malays in Singapore into two types: immigrants from the peninsula who had lived in the colony for several generations; and Indonesian immigrants who were mainly Javanese, Baweanese, Bugis and Banjarese. See Judith Djamouor, *Family Structure of the Singapore Malays: Report to the Colonial Social Science Research Council (Scheme R. 281)*, London: Colonial Office 1953, as cited in Aljunied Syed Muhd Khairudin, *"British Discourses and Malay Identity in Colonial Singapore"*, in: *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 37/107 (2009), p. 8.

[5] Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1998.

[6] This article does not aim to provide a detailed history of the schooling experiences of the Malay Muslims in Singapore. Interested readers may refer to a body of existing literature on this topic, such as William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, New Haven / London: Yale University Press 1967; T. R. Doraisamy (ed.), *150 Years of Education in Singapore*, Singapore: Teachers' Training College 1969; Wan Hussin Zoohri, *The Singapore Malays: The Dilemma of Development*, Singapore: Kesatuan Guru-Guru Melayu Singapura [Singapore Malay Teachers' Union] 1990); Hikmatuallah Babu Sahib, *"Islamic Education in Singapore: Past Achievements, Present Dilemmas and Future Directions"*, in: I. Alee et al. (eds.), *Islamic Studies in ASEAN: Presentations of an International Seminar*, Pattani: College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University 2000, pp. 69-85.

> Traditions, customs, beliefs, institutions, and values that originally possessed their own evaluative criteria and their own rules of operation and mobilisation become consciously subsumed by modern-educated elites to the evaluative criteria of social and political utility."[7]

Applying this concept to his case study of Egypt, Starrett maintains that the Egyptian government reified and systematised Islam to fulfil the official ends of the modern and secular discourse of public policy. For example, the government reinterpreted Islamic beliefs and practices to suit social functions such as increased health, cleanliness and order. In the process, Islam was extracted from its original religious domain and authoritative discourse to perform social work and further programmes of socio-political reform.

Starrett points out that the functionalisation of Islam in Egypt appears to stand opposed to the modernisation paradigm and the secularist principle of the separation of church and state. In other words, Islam is socially constructed to be compatible with naturalistic and materialistic explanations; as he puts it, "functionalisation occurs without the desacralisation of the material".[8] Starrett adds that the Egyptian government was not the only agent involved in functionalising Islam. The opposition parties also adopted the same strategy with the aim of utilising the Islamic discourse for their political purposes. These led to incompatible and strident Islamic voices being heard in the public space. It is instructive to note that the functionalisation of Islam is not a new phenomenon. Robert W. Hefner observes that in the 19th century, Muslim rulers and civilian elites patronised madāris for the purposes of nation-building and safeguarding their political interests.[9]

This article explores how two intellectual objects of Islam – madrasah and Islamic headscarf – were "put to work", to use Starrett's terms, for social, economic and political projects by various pedagogic agents within the Muslim community. The interest is on how these two objects were viewed not purely as religious institutions and obligations, but as justification for and symbols of the Muslims' (counter)responses to state educational policies.

At the outset, it is helpful to clarify that this article uses the concept of the functionalisation of Islam differently from Starrett's in two ways. First, while Starrett's study centres on the key role played by the government in functionalising Islam, this article identifies and underscores the active roles played by non-state agents, namely members of the Muslim community and the madrasah leaders. In other words, the analysis highlights non-official discourses constructed and promoted by the Muslim community, rather than the official discourse conceptualised and privileged by the state.

Secondly, Starrett argues that the functionalisation of Islam in Egypt has placed intellectual objects in new fields of discourse, thereby radically shifting the meaning of their initial context. He adds that Islamic traditions, customs, beliefs, institutions and values, along with their original evaluative criteria and rules of operation and mobilisation, have

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[7]   Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt*, pp. 9-10.
[8]   Ibid., p. 153.
[9]   Robert W. Hefner, *"Introduction: The Culture, Politics, and Future of Muslim Education"*, in: Robert W. Hefner / Muhammad Q. Zaman (eds.), *Schooling Islam*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007, pp. 1-39. I wish to acknowledge that it was Hefner's article that firstly drew my attention to Starrett's concept of the functionalisation of Islam.

been *subsumed* by modern-educated elites under the evaluative criteria of social and political utility. This case study on Singapore, however, examines how these traditions, institutions, evaluative criteria and rules of operation and mobilisation have been strategically *modified* by the people who practise the traditions and are responsible for upholding the institutions and defining the evaluative criteria. While intellectual objects have been placed in new fields of discourse in Singapore, in a similar way as in Egypt, these objects in Singapore do not lose their original meaning but are ascribed *additional* meanings in the local context. In short, these objects are regarded as religious symbols as well as representations of the Muslims population's identity, values, beliefs and rights. The next section begins the discussion by focusing on the role that the madrasah played during Singapore's colonial period.

2. Functionalising the Madāris

2.1 During the British Colonial Period

In the early 19th century, the British colonial powers produced and legitimised the official discourse for Singapore that sought to mediate the social order and regulate the power relationships between the rulers and the ruled. The official discourse served to provide minimal secular schooling to the masses in their indigenous languages.[10] In tandem with the provision of limited elementary schooling to the masses was the policy to offer an English education to a select group chosen from the Malay aristocratic class. To help the Malay Muslims learn their indigenous language which was (and still is) Malay, the British rulers started the Malay-medium schools in the early 19th century. The first Malay class was introduced in 1834 at the Singapore Free School for twelve boys, followed by other institutions such as the Malay Day Schools in 1856 and a College for training teachers for Malay schools between 1878 and 1895.[11] However, while the Malay lessons were formally recognised as a part of the state curriculum, Qur'anic lessons were left entirely to the Muslim community, who were responsible for paying the Islamic teachers. This approach led to the rise of a dual system of education in which secular state education came under the British government's control, while Islamic education was left to the autonomy of the Muslim community.

The British official discourse was challenged by many Malay Muslims, who turned to the madāris as a symbol and function of cultural and religious resistance towards the British colonial government's secular Malay-medium schools. The Malay Muslims rejected the British educational agenda as many feared that their children would be anglicised, Christianised, de-Islamised and deculturalised through schooling in Malay as well as English schools. The usage of the Bible as a schoolbook in the Malay schools in which Qur'anic lessons were held inadvertently entrenched this prejudice, leading to protests from the Muslim parents and strengthening them in their decision not to send their children

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[10]   In the words of W. H Treacher, the Resident of Perak: "[T]he vernacular education brought to their doors by a liberal government has not for its main object the manufacture of clerks, but that a lad who has gone through the school training is likely to be a better padi planter, trader, minor or sailor than one whose early years have been passed in idleness in the village lanes", as cited in: Wan Hussin Zoohri, *The Singapore Malays: The Dilemma of Development*, p. 7.

[11]   T. R. Doraisamy (ed.), *150 Years of Education in Singapore*, Singapore: Teachers' Training College 1969.

to the Malay schools.[12] All these factors resulted in the Malay institutions being met with apathy, suspicion and resistance by the Malay Muslim community, and led to their inevitable demise.

The preferred alternative for the Malay Muslims was schooling in the madāris. Islamic education, which started as private classes conducted by Islamic teachers at their homes and in mosques, predated the arrival of the British colonial powers in Singapore in 1819. Madāris which came into existence at the turn of the 20th century had been founded and were sponsored and run by individuals and private organisations.[13] Madāris, which already enjoyed considerable societal prestige and the cooperation with the Muslim community, received greater community support with the arrival of the British. Rather than being marginalised or fading into oblivion with the establishment of the Malay schools, the madāris were functionalised by the Muslim community as a bastion against Western-type formal education and the religious and political encroachment of the colonials.[14] The ostensible activities of Christian missionaries, coupled with the admission of some Muslim students into Christian mission schools, further amplified the perception among the Muslim community that their religion was under siege and affirmed their desire to protect their own religious institutions.[15] The madāris, besides fulfilling their original mission to educate the Muslim children in the Islamic faith and to nurture religious elites for the community, thus proved to be a challenge to the British social and educational agenda. In this way, they thus served the strategic and utilitarian ends of the Muslim community.

It is instructive to note that the Malay Muslims were able to successfully construct and legitimise their alternative discourse through madrasah schooling because they had control over their own evaluative criteria as well as their rules of operation and mobilisation; these enabled the madrasah's pedagogic practice to be smoothly transmitted and acquired. As private religious schools founded and administered by individuals and their descendants, the madāris were not subject to state jurisdiction. Without state control, the madāris were free to establish and maintain their own evaluative criteria and rule of operation in appointing their own officials, determining their curriculum, setting their own examinations, and maintaining external links with higher religious institutions such as Al-Azhar in Cairo. Consequently, the madāris were able to offer the rewards of higher education, employment opportunities, rich resources, high power and status, and strong ties with external pedagogic agents.

In terms of the rule of mobilisation, the madāris enjoyed strong links with external pedagogic agents, such as overseas Islamic universities and other madāris in the Islamic world. The fame and good career prospects enjoyed by the madrasah graduates also contributed towards the madāris' success. The popularity of the madāris was seen in their

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[12]   Aljunied Syed Muhd Khairudin / Dayang Istiaisyah Hussin, *"Estranged from the Ideal Past: Historical Evolution of Madrassahs in Singapore"*, in: *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 25/2, 2005, pp. 249-260.
[13]   Doraisamy (ed.), *150 Years of Education in Singapore*.
[14]   Ibid.; Hikmatuallah Babu Sahib, *"Islamic Education in Singapore: Past Achievements, Present Dilemmas and Future Directions"*, in: I. Alee et al. (eds.), *Islamic Studies in ASEAN: Presentations of an International Seminar*, Pattani: College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University 2000, pp. 69-85.
[15]   William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*; Hikmatuallah Babu Sahib, *"Islamic Education in Singapore: Past Achievements, Present Dilemmas and Future Directions"*; Aljunied Syed Muhd Khairudin / Dayang Istiaisyah Hussin, *"Estranged from the Ideal Past: Historical Evolution of Madrasahs in Singapore"*.

ability to attract many students from the region, such as from the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia and Brunei.[16] In particular one madrasah in Singapore, *Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah*, attracted many students from the region, who made up almost half of its student population.[17] Its graduates, many of whom later set up their own madāris in their countries of origin, became established religious scholars and educational leaders locally and regionally; others distinguished themselves in secular fields such as trade and politics.[18] These madrasah alumni scattered in various parts of Asia expanded the network of external pedagogic agents, thereby increasing the madāris' control over the criteria for the transmission and acquisition of their pedagogic practice. The madāris were so accomplished that they made a contribution towards Singapore becoming the hub of Islamic education in the region by the early 20th century. By way of an example, the first Islamic scholarly journal in the region, *Al-Imam*, was founded in Singapore in 1906.[19]

It is important to note that the Malay Muslim community, in challenging the official discourse for their schooling, was not homogenous or united in its vision and actions. The fragmented nature of the community could be seen in three ways. First, the madāris did not work together, despite their common opposition to the Malay schools. In reality there was intense competition among the madāris to attract more students to their madrasah. Secondly, there was no consensus as to the ideal philosophy and curriculum of the madāris, especially on the issue of reforming or modernising the madrasah. A third disagreement among the Muslims was the debate on the proper place of 'secular' subjects (academic subjects such as the English language, mathematics and sciences) in the madrasah curriculum.

Despite the aforementioned internal disagreements, the madāris were valued by the Muslim community during the colonial period, and not just for their traditional role in transmitting religious values to the young and producing religious teachers and scholars. These institutions *also* functioned as the basis for a counter-hegemonic discourse – for the Muslim community to resist the plan by the British colonial rulers to enrol the Malay Muslims into Malay schools (and to a lesser extent, English schools).

2.2 After Singapore's Independence

With Singapore's independence in 1965, the new government led by the People's Action Party (PAP) produced and legitimised an official discourse to enhance national economic development and foster social cohesion among the religious and ethnic communities – a discourse that is still being promoted today. The government set out to replace the 'vernacular schools' (i.e. the Malay-medium, Chinese-medium, and Indian-medium schools) with secular state schools (known as 'national schools') for all Singaporeans. Key educa-

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[16] Mohamed Khairunan Bin Ali, *"Islamic Religious Education in Singapore: Making it Relevant to Global Demand"*, Master's thesis, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University 2007.

[17] Min Fui Chee, *"The Historical Evolution of Madrasah Education in Singapore"*, in: Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman / Ah Eng Lai (eds.), *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore*, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish 2006, pp. 6-28.

[18] Min Fui Chee, *"The Historical Evolution of Madrasah Education in Singapore"*.

[19] Hussin Mutalib, *Islam in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publications 2008.

tional reforms included a common national educational system, English as the medium of instruction for all subjects except the mother tongue languages, a common curriculum that emphasised the English language, mathematics, sciences and technology, locally produced textbooks highlighting national history, culture and identity, and compulsory moral and citizenship education. Underpinning these educational reforms was a secular, technocratic and utilitarian view of education which stressed the need to optimise Singapore's limited manpower in order to produce a competent, adaptive and productive workforce.[20] The national schools are secular in the sense that they have never taught religious education as a subject, apart from a short-lived experiment with 'Religious Knowledge' in the 1980s. They also require all students to wear common school uniforms which cannot be modified by the students regardless of religious beliefs.[21]

In contrast to their resistance towards state schools during the colonial period, the majority of the Malay Muslims chose to send their children to the national schools instead of the madāris in the years following independence. Economic considerations played a decisive role in this change of mindset: madrasah graduates in the mid-1960s and 1970s found themselves greatly disadvantaged in their employment opportunities and prospects as compared to those from the English schools. Centuries of rejection of the state schools by the Malay Muslim community had resulted in a disparity between the academic achievements and socio-economic status of the Malays and those of other ethnic groups – a gap that has persisted until the present day.[22] Most Muslim parents consequently realised that educating their children in a secular national school was the most pragmatic option in order to provide for their offspring's survival, economic gain and social mobility. While religion remained important, Muslim parents opted for part-time religious instruction in mosques or at home for their children after school hours. The result was reduced enrolment in the madāris, with the number of madāris falling from about 50 schools in 1966 to the current six; today about 96% of Muslims attend the national schools, whilst the remaining 4% study full-time in the six remaining madāris.[23]

In response to the decision of many Malay Muslims to prefer secular state schools to the madāris, some madrasah leaders took steps to reform the madrasah, so as to make it an attractive alternative to secular state schools and to ensure the schools' social and economic survival and long-term viability. The functionalisation was achieved in three ways: by modifying the madrasah's traditional mission, its original evaluative criteria, and its rules of operation and mobilisation. First, the madrasah leaders have positioned the madrasah as more than just a religious institution commissioned to produce Islamic teachers and scholars. Instead, it is portrayed as an academic institution that offers a balanced curriculum aimed at producing religious teachers and scholars as well as Muslim profession-

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[20] Charlene Tan, *"Globalisation and the Reform Agenda for Madrasah Education in Singapore"*, in: *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 3/2 (2009), pp. 67-80.

[21] An exception is the right granted to Sikhs to wear turbans when attending school. This, however, originated in the colonial period, with the Singapore government choosing to retain that practice in the national schools.

[22] Charlene Tan, *"Narrowing the Gap: The Educational Achievements of the Malay Community in Singapore"*, in: *Intercultural Education*, 18/1 (2007), pp. 71-82.

[23] Abdullah Bin Othman, *The Role of Madrasah Education in Singapore: A Study on the Philosophy and Practice of Madrasah Education in a Secular State and Plural Society*, Master's thesis, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation, International Islamic University Malaysia 2007.

als who are grounded in Islamic values. For instance, one madrasah in Singapore states its mission as being the following:

> "[T]he Madrasah offers an integrated curriculum encompassing both academic as well as Islamic sciences. This model has proven to be successful as seen from the products [sic] that the Madrasah has produced. *Alhamdulillah*, the Madrasah's alumni excel in both Religious as well as Academic pathways doing well in both Islamic and Academic Universities."[24]

Cognisant of the changing socio-economic conditions in the late 1960s following independence, some madāris began to offer 'secular' or academic subjects such as English and mathematics which are perceived to have high economic and social value for their students. For example, *Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah* incorporated academic subjects in 1966 in its attempt to better prepare students for the job market.[25] All six madāris existing in Singapore today offer both religious and academic subjects with between 30% and 60% of lesson time allocated to academic subjects. Such a move signifies an adjustment of the madāris' long-standing tradition of devoting themselves to religious nurture and marginalising 'secular' subjects.

Such a functionalisation of the madrasah – positioning it as a religious-cum-academic institution that offers a balanced curriculum – is acceptable and possible as academic subjects such as English, mathematics and science are not necessarily viewed as 'secular' in Islam. There is a strong Islamic tradition of regarding all knowledge, whether 'religious' or 'secular' in nature, as coming from God and arriving to humans through various channels; hence both religious knowledge and secular knowledge should be integrated and inclusive. The eminent Muslim theologian al-Ġazālī posits that both religious sciences (or sacred knowledge) such as the articles of faith, and non-religious sciences (or profane knowledge) such as arithmetic and natural sciences are important in Islamic thought and should be combined in the school curriculum.[26] However, this tradition has not been prominent in the history of madrasah education in Singapore; the case of the failed attempt of a reformist madrasah in 1908, that ambitiously attempted to teach both religious and modern academic knowledge, is a case in point.[27] Most madāris in Singapore had simply chosen to concentrate on religious knowledge, and it was not until the late 1960s that the madāris began to seriously offer academic subjects and to prepare their students for national examinations.

Secondly, in incorporating academic subjects such as English, mathematics and science into their curriculum, the madāris had also modified their evaluative criteria by accepting the external assessment of the academic subjects for the purpose of social and economic utility. In 1971, *Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah* began to prepare their students

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24 Charlene Tan, *"Globalisation and the Reform Agenda for Madrasah Education in Singapore"*, pp. 75-76 [italics in the original].

25 Min Fui Chee, *"The Historical Evolution of Madrasah Education in Singapore"*.

26 Sa'eda Buang, *"Religious Education as Locus of Curriculum: A Brief Inquiry into Madrasah Curriculum in Singapore"*, in: Ah Eng Lai (ed.), *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Institute of Policy Studies 2008, pp. 342-361. For a discussion on Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia that balance religious and academic subjects as well as promote values of rationality and autonomy, see: Charlene Tan, *Islamic Education and Indoctrination: The Case in Indonesia*, New York: Routledge 2011.

27 William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*.

to sit for the General Certificate of Education 'O' (Ordinary) and 'A' (Advanced) level examinations as private candidates. In this way, they hoped to enhance their students' educational and employment prospects.[28] Today, almost all madāris prepare their students for the secular national examination set by the Ministry of Education at the primary level (known as Primary School Leaving Examination) and for the secondary level (GCE 'O' levels).[29] In addition, three madāris also prepare their students to take GEC 'A' level examinations. The evaluative criteria of religious subjects remain within the purview of the madāris in collaboration with *Majlis Ugama Islam* (MUIS) (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore), which is a statutory board and the highest bureaucracy in charge of Muslim matters in Singapore.

Related to the changes in the evaluative criteria are the adjustments to the madāris' rules of operation and mobilisation. In terms of operation, some madāris have revised their curriculum and pedagogies by increasing the time allocated to academic subjects, switching from Arabic to English as a medium of instruction for most subjects, using the Ministry of Education's syllabi for English, mathematics and science and adopting teaching strategies used in secular national schools. The latter approach includes dividing students into different groups corresponding to their academic abilities and providing remedial lessons and workshops for English, mathematics and science. An increasing number of madrasah teachers are replacing (or supplementing) their traditional teacher-centred pedagogies with more student-centred approaches such as group discussion, project work and games. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is also embraced in order to encourage students to exercise their initiative and shape their own learning.[30] These madāris also mobilise the support from the government, MUIS, the National Institute of Education, external vendors and other organisations to obtain funding, resources and other forms of assistance to upgrade the teachers' knowledge and skills and prepare their students for the national examinations.

Due to the efforts made by the madāris as well as favourable external conditions such as Islamic resurgence worldwide, the enrolment for all the six madāris increased progressively from the 1980s to the 2000s, with the madāris having to turn away applicants due to lack of places. For example, while 135 Primary 1 students were enrolled in the madāris in 1986, this number had risen to 464 in 2000; the total student population also increased from over 2.000 in 1991 to about 4.500 in 2001.[31] The number of applicants to the madāris has constantly outstripped the number of places offered in all six madāris due to these schools' logistical limitations to take in all the applicants. Today the madāris remain popular, although they are still unable to match the national schools in terms of academic outcomes due to a host of factors such as their limited resources, the lower qualifications of

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[28]   Min Fui Chee, *"The Historical Evolution of Madrasah Education in Singapore"*.

[29]   Currently, only four madāris offer primary education. This is because two of the madāris, *Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah* and *Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah*, decided to stop taking in Primary 1 pupils in 2009. Instead, these two madāris have decided to focus on providing secondary and post-secondary level education and higher education for the madrasah students.

[30]   Charlene Tan / Diwi Binti Abbas, *"The 'Teach Less, Learn More' Initiative in Singapore: New Pedagogies for Islamic Religious Schools?"*, in: *KEDI Journal of Education Policy*, 6/1 (2009), pp. 25-39.

[31]   Charlene Tan, *"Globalisation and the Reform Agenda for Madrasah Education in Singapore"*. See also: Charlene Tan, *"Contesting Reform: Bernstein's Pedagogic Device and Madrasah Education in Singapore"*, in: *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 42/2 (2010), pp. 165-182.

their teachers and other constraints. Besides, their ability to enrol more students is restricted by the government's decision to cap the total number of enrolments at madāris in Singapore at 400 each year from 2003 onwards.

It can be observed that by revising their educational goals, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and relationship with the state and other educational stakeholders, the madāris evinced their willingness and flexibility to modify their original traditions, values, evaluative criteria and rules of operation and mobilisation for their own social and economic utility. In this sense, the madrasah leaders are similar to the modern-educated elites in Egypt, who see Islam as compatible with modernity; to use Starrett's terms, "functionalisation occurs without the desacralisation of the material"[32] for the madāris in Singapore.

3. Functionalising the Islamic Headscarf

The madrasah is not the only intellectual object in Islam that has been functionalised to serve the social, cultural and political needs of the Malay Muslims. Another religious symbol, the Islamic headscarf ('hijab' in Arabic but more popularly known as 'tudung' in Malay in Singapore) was also utilised by a segment of Malay Muslim population in recent years to challenge the state secular educational policy. The fact that the great majority of Muslim students (about 96%) are enrolled in national secular schools does not mean that all Malay Muslims have embraced or acquiesced to the official discourse. Some Malay Muslims are constantly torn between the need to gain access to material rewards and socio-economic progress through the national schools on the one hand, and the desire to remain faithful to their religious requirements on the other. Among the Malay Muslims who face this dilemma is a small segment of Malay Muslim parents who would like the government to adjust its pedagogic practice to accommodate their religious needs in the national schools. This desire particularly concerns the issue of Muslim girls wearing the tudung in the national schools.

The tudung controversy began in 1999, when a Secondary 2 Muslim girl, Sheila Zulkifli, was suspended from a national school for insisting on wearing a headscarf in school.[33] A few years later, in 2002, four girls (two aged six and two aged seven) arrived at school wearing headscarves and modified school uniforms covering their arms and legs on the first day of the new term. As a no-tudung rule had been imposed by the government, three were suspended from school while the fourth was withdrawn to be home-schooled. However, the mother of the home-schooled girl later changed her mind after divorcing her husband and requested her daughter to be re-admitted into the school without the headscarf. But the parents of Sheila and three primary school girls continued to defy the no-tudung rule and decided to take the matter to court, claiming that the tudung ban violated their constitutional right to religious freedom. One father was quoted as saying: "I have a right as a Muslim to practise my religious rules, but I also want her to go to school."[34]

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[32] Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt*, p. 153.

[33] *"Back to school: Siti Amirah returns to Yuhua Primary without tudung"*, in: *The Straits Times*, June 9th, 2002a, LexisNexis Scholastic Edition database (accessed July 31st, 2009).

[34] Shahida Ariff, *"Third Tudung Girl Suspended"*, in: *The Straits Times*, February 12th, LexisNexis Scholastic Edition database, 2002 (accessed July 31st, 2009).

It appeared that the Muslim parents also had the public support of other Muslim individuals and organisations. It was reported that some Muslims had attended a dialogue session with the Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to appeal for Muslim girls to be allowed to wear headscarves in national schools; they argued that doing so would reduce the increasing number of Muslim parents wishing to educate their daughters in the madāris.[35] A small section of the Malay Muslim community seemingly did not accept the official discourse and attempted to replace it with their own version – one that they believed was more aligned to their religious identity and preferred pedagogic practices. A pedagogic agent was the Singapore Malay National Organisation, a small opposition political party whose members turned up at the school gates with the parents to "express [their] solidarity with the parents".[36] Another vocal supporter was the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (PERGAS) that spoke up in favour of Muslim girls donning the headscarves. This association claimed that "[no] Muslim is allowed to remain complacent and feel satisfied with such hindrance towards fulfilling the religious obligation of the modest covering of 'aurat' [parts of the body that must be covered]".[37] Its press statement also called out to fellow Muslims to back the Muslim parents:

> "We hope and appeal to everyone in the Muslim community to do their part and carry out our common responsibility to find (the best) ways such that our children can be permitted to don modest attire (as required by Islam) while they are in school. Our appeal for greater understanding of our (religious) needs must be sought from the government as well as every citizen in this multi-racial / multi-religious Singapore."[38]

The controversy also attracted reactions from contesting forces outside Singapore. Several political parties from Malaysia, especially the Umno Youth, the Democratic Action Party and the opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) urged the Singapore government to change its stance, and to allow headscarves to be worn in national schools. They argued that the tudung ban marginalised Muslims and hindered their entitlement to freely practise Islam.[39] Other international non-governmental organisations, such as the Association of Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights (KARAMAH) also submitted a formal letter of protest to Singapore's ambassador to the United States. In addition, a statement from Malaysia's Deputy Education Minister that his ministry would consider an application by one of the Muslim girls to study at a Malaysian state school, where headscarves are allowed, compounded the external pressure.

At the same time, however, other Muslim individuals and groups opposed the parents' action and argued that it was prudent and religiously acceptable for the Muslim girls

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[35] Suzaina Kadir, *"Islam, State and Society in Singapore"*, in: *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 5/3 (2004), p. 367.

[36] Shahida Ariff, *"Third Tudung Girl Suspended"*.

[37] Lee Hoong Chua, *"Tudung Controversy a Test in Art of Negotiation"*, in: *The Straits Times*, February 20th, LexisNexis Scholastic Edition database, 2002 (accessed July 31st, 2009).

[38] PERGAS, *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, Singapore: Pergas 2004, p. 346.

[39] *"Malaysians' remarks on tudung issue 'regrettable'"*, in: *The Straits Times*, February 6th, 2002b, LexisNexis Scholastic Edition database (accessed July 31st, 2009).

to attend national schools without their headscarves. These included the Malay Muslim Members of Parliament, the Mufti Syed Isa Semait – who is the highest authority on Islam in Singapore –, and other Muslim organisations, such as Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS, Islamic Religious Council of Singapore), the Adult Islamic Religious Students' Association (Perdaus) and the Islamic Fellowship Association, who all joined in to echo the same sentiment.

The upshot of the tudung controversy was that the government succeeded in maintaining its tudung ban and the Muslim parents failed to change the status quo. That the government was able to assert its official discourse was due to its firm control over the evaluative criteria and rules of operation and mobilisation in the national schools. Two main factors determined the outcome of the debate between the state and the Muslim parents over the issue of the tudung. These were firstly the degree of control that an agent has over the evaluative criteria and rules of operation of the contested site, and secondly the degree of support and mobilisation the agent enjoys from the Malay Muslim community.

First, unlike the madāris which are autonomous private schools, the national schools are directly under the control of the Ministry of Education. In other words, the state creates, regulates and determines school policy, the examination system, curriculum, materials and assessment. The Malay Muslims (as well as other ethnic and religious communities in Singapore) are well aware that they have little say over the common school uniform and limited influence on state educational policy and practice. The only option remaining for Malay Muslims who insist that their daughters should wear a headscarf at school is to withdraw them from the national schools and enrol them in the madāris, where the headscarf is part of the school uniform. That, however, is not the preferred option of many Malay Muslims, who pragmatically want their children to be highly proficient in the English language and to obtain modern secular knowledge through schooling in national schools, so as to increase their chances of being in a socio-economic sense successful in life.

The second factor for the state's success is the degree of support and mobilisation it receives from the Malay Muslim community. Although Muslim parents had the support of PERGAS and other Malay Muslim organisations and individuals within and outside Singapore, they did not receive public endorsement from the more influential agents: the Mufti, MUIS and the majority of the Malay Muslim community. In a Straits Times poll conducted in February 2002, 72% of Muslims indicated that they agreed with the Education Ministry's tudung ban in national schools.[40] The figure was close to the 80% of non-Muslims who held the same view. It suggests that the majority of the Muslim community was prepared to accept the official discourse and to let Muslim girls attend national schools without their headscarves, and yet at the same time be 'good' Muslims. They are willing and able to reconcile their religious obligations with the ethos of a multicultural state that upholds secularism in the public space.

If the external pedagogic agents supporting the Muslim parents in the tudung controversy had succeeded in putting international pressure on the Singapore government, the parents may have been more successful in getting the government to reconsider its no-

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[40]   *"Greater fostering of racial ties needed"*, in: *The Straits Times*, February 22nd, 2002c , LexisNexis Scholastic Edition database (accessed July 31st, 2009).

tudung rule. However, this was not the case. Although the Muslim parents had the support of the Malaysian politicians and interest groups, their ties with these agents were tenuous and further weakened by the strong intervention from the Singapore government. This, together with the limited public support which the Muslim parents received from the Malay Muslim community, meant that the Muslim parents had failed in their endeavour to challenge and change the official discourse in the national schools.

Although the Muslim parents in the tudung controversy did not succeed in getting the government to revise its no-tudung stand, they have obtained a small victory in the form of an assurance from the former Prime Minister of Singapore that the government remained open to the possibility of allowing Muslim girls to don the headscarves in the future. The whole tudung saga shows that the garment is more than just a means and symbol of female modesty and religiosity; it also functions as a strategic and utilitarian means to further the social and educational agenda of a segment of the Muslim population. The event also illustrates the contested nature of competing Islamic discourses in the public space. The case in Singapore parallels the controversies in other Muslim minority countries, such as France, Britain and the United States, where the Islamic headscarf is becoming a symbol of religious identity and political resistance.[41]

4. Conclusion

By focusing on the attempts by segments of the Malay Muslim community and madrasah leaders to functionalise two Islamic objects – the madrasah and the Islamic headscarf – this article highlights the influential and active roles played by believers in putting to work appropriate religious objects for their social, cultural, economic, educational and political projects. The discussion presented in this article testifies to the dynamic relationships between Islamic symbols and the changing social, cultural, economic and political circumstances in Singapore from its colonial era through to the present time. The Singapore example reminds us that Islam is a discursive tradition that links past, present, and future through an interplay between the everyday practices and discourses and the socio-political realities faced by Muslims.[42]

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[41] See e.g. Lina Molokotos Liederman, *"Religious Diversity in Schools: The Muslim Headscarf Controversy and Beyond"*, in: *Social Compass*, 47/3 (2000), pp. 367-381; C. El Hamel, *"Muslim Diaspora in Western Europe: The Islamic Headscarf (Hijab), the Media and Muslims' Integration in France"*, in: *Citizenship Studies*, 6/3 (2002), pp. 293-308; Michelle D. Byng, *"Symbolically Muslim: Media, Hijab, and the West"*, in: *Critical Sociology*, 36/1 (2010), pp. 109-129.

[42] Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt*.