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**COUNTER-DISOURSE OF ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY IN THE  
NON-FORMAL MADRASAHS IN MALAYSIA**

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***Abstract***

This paper aims to describe the nature of contemporary discourses on Islamic Epistemology. Islamic epistemology has gone through a reconstruction through the process of development of modern education system. While many contemporary Muslim scholars had tried to recover the "true" epistemology in Islam, the personal epistemology among the ordinal Muslims has rarely been discussed empirically. This study aims to fill the gap by identifying the nature of the contemporary Muslim's epistemology through an analysis of counter-discourse based on the dimensions of personal epistemology. A series of field research was conducted in two non-formal Islamic schools (madrasahs) in Kuala Lumpur and Terengganu between 2010 and 2016. The nature of epistemology in the madrasah can be explained in comparison with the four dimensions: (1) peers, not only the teachers, are important "source of knowledge" ( Schommer, 1990) (2) but that is true only when people also have a trust in the traditional authority. Learning should take a long time as opposed to the belief in (3)"quick learning" ( Schommer & Dunnell, 1994) and in relation to the dimension of (4) "certainty of knowledge" (M. Schommer, 1990), knowledge is static but it should be reached through a process of construction of meaning. It is also found that in addition to the four dimensions, a dimension of (5) learning as a process of moral development should be considered to analyze the nature of Muslim discourse of epistemology.

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## 1. Introduction

In Islam, learning is considered to be a primary obligation for every Muslim. Knowledge has been taken as the very basis of Islamic belief and civilization. Thus it is natural that epistemological discussions, such as the concept of knowledge, nature of learning and master-disciple relationship, are found in many theological or ethical writings of Islam.

However, a summary of the classics cannot represent the Islamic epistemology or the ideas of learning in the contemporary Muslim world. It is because the process of colonization, modernization, and globalization have transformed not only the form but also the substance of Islamic learning in the Muslim societies. This transformation has kept contemporary Muslims debating over the "real" Islamic learning. While previous studies discussed below have tried to present the "real" epistemology from some different points of view, the process of discussion and transformation of ideas have rarely been focused. This study aims to fill the gap by analyzing the interaction of mainstream discourse and counter-discourse in the case of Malaysia.

What is excluded in the previous discussion of epistemology in the Muslim society is the view of "ordinary" Muslims who are not academics or intellectuals? The western influence means that Muslims after modernization began to see education in a way somehow different from the "original" epistemology in Islam. While some authors were successful in preaching the "original" Islamic epistemology to address the problems, the problems in the contemporary Muslims' view on education has not been studied empirically.

A framework that helps to explore this understudied issue can be found in the growing study of the personal epistemology. Personal epistemology is an individual belief or theories about the nature of knowledge, knowing and learning ( Schommer, 1990). Such beliefs may be socially constructed in the social reality (Flores, 2001). In the case of Muslim societies, the personal epistemology should be discussed separately from the philosophical ideas of Islamic epistemology. For example, at the ideal or philosophical level, the importance of Islamic education for a Muslim might be explained such as "to fasten the belief in God" or "to lead one to the heaven." However, at the level of social reality, other components of the importance of Islamic education cannot be neglected, such as "to score high marks in the centralized examination" or "to get a better job."

The latter aspect of the importance of Islamic education can be taken as a result of the modern education system which is developed under the influence of modern Western civilization. Many Muslim scholars have discussed this matter from the philosophical comparison between Western and Islamic epistemologies, e.g., (al-Attas, 1980; al-Faruqi, 1982; Azram, 2011). However what Muslims came to believe about education as a result of their exposure to the modern education is not necessarily same with "pure" western philosophy of education. For example, the nature of modern school system to be a system of discipline and control as revealed by Mitchel Foucault is not precisely discussed as Western "ideal" of education (Foucault, 1979). It is in this sense that the comparison between Islamic and Western epistemologies at the philosophical level will not be suitable to discuss the problem of contemporary Muslim belief on Islamic education.

The concept of personal epistemology enables the discussion to include the aspects of social construction. What did the majority of contemporary Muslims come to believe about Islamic learning in

the social context where the modern education system became a crucial part of the social system? How are the smaller number of Muslims criticizing the majority's views and trying to avoid the influence of modern school system? In what points the dominant epistemology and its' counter-discourse present a clear contrast? This paper attempts to address these questions by taking an example of the counter-discourse of Islamic epistemology that is found in the non-formal Madrasahs in Malaysia.

## **2. Problem Statement**

### **2.1. Personal epistemology in the context of Muslim education**

The concept of personal epistemology, however, requires a critical review before being applied to a study of Muslim society. Studies on personal epistemology have been developed mainly in the area of educational psychology in the US. Many of the early studies focused on the university students and students teachers, e.g., ( Schommer, 1990). Thus the bias in the sampling was criticized in later studies. While increasing number of studies expanded the scope of studies to wider participants such as teachers on the job, school students, examination of cross-cultural differences are still waited to be explored to review the Western or American bias ( Hofer, 2008; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997).

Some of the more recent studies have tried to re-examine the concepts in Asian contexts and have suggested new dimensions to be taken into consideration. For example, a five-factors structural framework of epistemological belief which was proposed by Schommer based on her research in the USA was re-examined in various cultural contexts (Schommer & Dunnell, 1994). Chan tested its applicability through the questionnaire survey among Hong Kong teachers using items taken from Schommer's research and found a new dimension labeled as "authority/expert knowledge." Hong Kong teachers tended to believe that knowledge acquisition is achieved by individual effort rather than by being taught by the authority (Chan, 2008). Chan interpreted that the belief in the effort is related to the Confucian teaching that emphasizes education, effort and hard-work (Chan, 2008). Such examination of models to explore multiple dimensions of epistemological beliefs in Asian countries is increasing recently in other Asian countries such as Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia.

While these studies significantly contributed to add different dimensions of epistemology in various cultural contexts, such "cross-cultural" studies have never questioned the impact of modern western school. Here the idea of personal epistemology as the social construction needs to be highlighted. Personal epistemology is continuously constructed and reconstructed in the social reality, and it also reconstructs the social practice of education. If such social reality is considered, the condition of modern education system in the society under study will be crucial, especially when the study is conducted in the non-Western societies or community of minority citizens who attend schools established by the majority who are culturally different. Each culture may have own way of looking at knowledge and knowing. If so, what happened to these cultures when they accepted a school system that was developed based on an epistemology of other culture? Such question on the impact of this education system seems to be absent in previous studies on personal epistemology.

This absence of the impact of the modern education system is equally found in the previous discussion of epistemology in the Islamic philosophy. Many Muslim scholars, especially after the 1980's have tried to find out the "true" Islamic epistemology to make it as guidance for re-establishment of Islamic

scholarship that is not influenced by Western epistemology, eg. (al-Attas, 1980; al-Faruqi, 1982; Azram, 2011). Of course, behind these scholars' concern was the recognition that the modern system of education is giving destructive impact on Muslim epistemology. While being successful in raising the Muslim scholars' consciousness of the difference between the Western and Islamic view on knowledge, these studies tended to be limited to the textual analysis of classical Islamic and Western literature. The belief of ordinary Muslims, what they came to believe as a result of exposure to modern western epistemology, have never been an object of such studies.

Therefore, the current study fills the gaps in the two areas of study, by revealing the issues of changing personal epistemology among Malaysian Muslims in the social context. As a preliminary experiment to describe how Muslim's personal epistemology was constructed, being influenced by both modern education system and Islamic philosophical epistemology, this study focuses on counter-discourses that criticize Islamic education in modern education system. "Counter-discourse" of Islamic epistemology here means ideas and opinions that challenge the dominant view on it. cf. (Tiffin, 1995). The people in the non-formal institution of Islamic learning in this study presented a critical view of the Islamic education in the modern education system and refused to join the system or to import elements of it to their place. These people and their view are a minority in Malaysian Muslim society, but their opinion provides an important hint to understand the influence of modern schooling on the dominant epistemology of Islamic learning. To explain the relationship between the dominant and counter-discourse of Islamic epistemology in the case of Malaysian Muslim society, following section overviews the historical development of Islamic learning in the country.

## **2.2. Historical development of Modern Islamic Education in Malaysia**

This study discusses cases of non-formal madrasahs in Malaysia. The madrasah A and B are non-formal institutions of Islamic learning that is operated outside the national school system. It is considered to be "outside" because their curriculum only includes religious subjects that are entirely different from the government curriculum for religious subjects, and no other subjects are offered. The school neither let students take any national examinations even though it does not prevent the students from taking them as individual candidates. Instead, the madrasahs have own system of grades and exams. It is in this sense such madrasahs are categorized as "non-formal," not "informal." "Informal" palace of learning may include learning at home or public lectures where such system of grades and exams do not exist. "Non-formal" means the school has a system that gives a sense of formality, but differently from the "formal" education system under the government.

It is important to point out in the beginning that madrasah A and B in this study are unique and rare cases in Malaysian Islamic learning. I categorized these madrasahs as "non-formal" to contrast with other types of modern schools, including various types of Islamic schools. To understand the sense of "non-formal" here, following part explains the development of Islamic education in Malaysia as a part of modern and formal education system.

The Islamic learning in the Malay Peninsula before the introduction of modern education was conducted privately at home or publicly at the prayer houses. In the northern part, institutions of Islamic learning that are called "pondok" were widely found. Pondok is often equated by modern researchers to

"boarding schools," but this kind of equation may mislead its nature of learning and epistemology behind the practice that is entirely different from that of modern schools.

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some Muslims who were educated in these traditional places of Islamic learning came to be exposed to the ideas and practice of modern schooling. The exposure was through many channels, from their encounter with modern secular schools in the Peninsula that was established by the British colonial government to that with the modernized system of Islamic institutions such as al-Azhar in Egypt (Kushimoto, 2015). Being inspired by such varying levels of experience of modern schooling, the Muslim leaders of the age began to establish institutions of Islamic learning that look similar to modern school. The most famous of this kind is Madrasah al-Iqbal that was founded in Singapore in 1907. Similar cases of modern "madrasah" had spread throughout the Peninsula by 1930's. What is interesting here is that there was no evidence of cynical view on such trend of changing Islamic learning into the form of modern school, even from the side of so-called "kaum tua (old group)." Many of the tok gurus, the leaders of pondoks, also willingly accepted the new form of Islamic learning (Kushimoto, 2012).

The modern madrasahs were gradually integrated into a loosely unified system under the leadership of the offices of Islamic matters of each state. After some decades of such coordination under the states' Islamic offices, the majority of these Islamic schools were put under the direct control of the federal ministry of education, as Government Assisted Religious Schools (Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan: SABK). Even though there are some other types of Islamic school such as private schools or those under the local state governments, these schools now implement two kinds of curriculums simultaneously, namely the curriculum for religious subjects and the curriculum for other subjects that prepare students for national examinations.

Other than these modern Islamic schools, the government schools also gradually included Islamic learning into the system. At the time of independence, the curriculum of government schools set two periods for Islamic learning for Muslim students. After the Islamic resurgence of 1970's, the time was increased more than twice under the New Curriculum of Secondary School (KBSM) in 1980's. On the other hand, Islamic courses in the higher education were also increased during this era. The establishment of International Islamic University in 1983 that aimed to integrate the Islamic epistemology into all areas of studies symbolized the trend of integrating Islam into the national education system (Rosnani, 1996).

Therefore, in the Malaysian history of education, institutions of Islamic learning were merged into the national education system while the national education system gradually integrated Islamic subjects into the system. As a result for the majority of Malaysian Muslims, now there are plenty of chances to learn about Islam within the national education system.

It is in this context the madrasahs under study dare to operate as the non-formal institution. They choose to be so because they believe that neither Islamic schools nor Islamic subjects in the government schools can achieve what they think as "real" Islamic learning. It is why their practice and believe shows clear and intentional contrast with the formal religious or government schools. The following section will discuss the establishment and practice of two non-formal madrasahs and the epistemology shared by their teachers, students, and parents.

### **3. Research Questions**

The findings of this research will answer following research questions: (1) How the people in Madrasah present their epistemology of Islamic learning? (2) In what points their epistemology is contrasted to that of the formal schools?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to describe the emergence of counter-discourse of Islamic Epistemology based on an anthropological observation of two non-formal places of Islamic learning in Malaysia.

### **5. Research Methods**

#### **5.1. Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for this study was collected through a series of field research that has been conducted intermittently between January 2010 and August 2016. Two research sites in this study will be called as Madrasah A in Kuala Lumpur and Madrasah B in Kuala Terengganu. The field research included observation of educational practice and unstructured interview to the teachers, students, and a few parents. Observation at Madrasah A was conducted almost every day for approximately two months in January and February 2010. The classes were not video-recorded, but the lessons and people's behavior were written down in detail on field notes. The students and teachers were approached during the break times and after school for informal conversation. The classroom discourse and informal conversation were in Malay which was the mother tongue of almost all students and teachers. In addition to the lessons and activities inside the Madrasah, some religious lectures for ladies held in the area of Madrasah A were also visited for additional information. Such lectures were attended by many mothers of the students of Madrasah A. It was an opportunity to interview mothers' view on their decision to send their children to the Madrasah, not the government schools. "Interview" was always conducted in the context of a natural conversation, and important points of the conversation were recorded in the field notes only after the fieldwork of the day. No classroom discourse and interview was digitally recorded. The data were reconstructed from the field notes to make it as close as the actual utterance of the people.

The reconstructed texts were categorized into groups of similar topics and expressions, then analyzed by referring to four related dimensions that were identified by previous researchers as factors which define the personal epistemology. The four dimensions include (1) source of knowledge (M. Schommer, 1990) (2) authority/ expert knowledge (Chan, 2008) (3) quick learning (Schommer & Dunnell, 1994) and (4) certainty knowledge ( Schommer, 1990). A group of discourse that could not be related to any of these four dimensions was further studied to propose a new dimension that should be added to discuss epistemology of Islamic learning.

#### **5.2. The Field**

Madrasah A is an institution of Islamic learning exclusively for girls. It is located in a town of southern Kuala Lumpur and surrounded by rather new housing areas for upper middle class. Madrasah A started operation in the late 1990's, but the exact date is difficult to be identified because it had been gradually grown into something like "a school" from an informal study circle. At the time of the field

research, the madrasah was operated in a pair of the linked house. Madrasah A is a girls' section for a boys' madrasah which is located beside a large mosque about 1km away of madrasah A. The boys' madrasah which is established in 1995 has a curriculum that is designed to complete reading of six canons of *hadiths* in eight years. The curriculum for girls' madrasah is designed to finish reading only three out of the six canons of *hadiths* in six years. The two madrasahs run as two separate schools regarding the organizational structure, but some teachers of the boys' madrasah were also teaching in the girls' madrasah. On the other hand, there were no female teachers teaching in the boys' madrasah.

To understand the nature of learning in Madrasah A, it is important to see another example of similar madrasah. Madrasah B in Kuala Terengganu is considered as a "brother" for the boys' section of madrasah A. Even though there is no official connection between the two *madrasahs*; they share a distinct feature. Both are strongly connected to one of the Islamic movements in Malaysia, Jama'a Tabligh. Jama'a Tabligh is a religious movement that began in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India. The movement has been spread among Malay Muslims since 1970's and now has a substantial number of followers (Abdul Rahman, 1992). Both Madrasah A and B are influenced by Jama'a Tabligh in the sense that almost all male teachers are involved in the activities of the Jama'a Tabligh while most of the students are from a family where at least one of the influential male member is involved in the movement. However, it is important to note that the *madrasahs* are not under the organization of Jama'a Tabligh but operated as independent institutions. The *madrasahs* of the similar kind neither have connections such as headquarter and branches despite their strong similarities regarding teaching and learning.

Madrasah B is the oldest madrasah of this kind. It was established in 1982 by the teachers who returned from Deoband schools in India and Pakistan. It was the only example of madrasah that was established with the support of Jama'a Tabligh center of Nizamuddin in India and some Indian teachers were sent to help the establishment. The foreign teachers were gradually replaced by Malaysian teachers when increasing number of Malaysian students returned from their study at Deobandi Schools (Interview at Madrasah B, 2011). This background made the curriculum of the madrasah to be similar to that of Deobandi madrasahs in India and Pakistan, and it also explains the reason of similarity between the madrasahs of this same kinds. They are similar to each other because they take Deobandi madrasahs as the common model. Madrasah B has successfully and constantly gathered students from all over Malaysia and neighborhood countries, and in August 2016 about five hundred boys were enrolled in the madrasah (Interview at Madrasah B, 2016).

## **6. Findings**

### **6.1. Teaching and Learning in the Madrasah**

The uniqueness of the madrasah's background is reflected in the practice of teaching and learning of the madrasah. Explained below is the details of practice in Madrasah A, based on the intensive observation from January 2009 until June 2009. First of all, the appearance of madrasah was different from the formal Islamic schools. The students, about ninety in total at the time of observation in 2009, were divided into seven grades (from a preparation grade to grade six) according to their level of study. Since the madrasah accepted students of any age above twelve, their "classes," called as "jama'a (group)" using Arabic term, were a mixture of young and older students. There were even a couple of mother and daughter studying

together. All students must start either from the preparation class or the first grade regardless their previous level of education. This was, according to an ustazah (female teacher), because everybody needed to be accustomed to the way of learning in the madrasah even when they had certain previous knowledge about the religion and Arabic. This shows that the madrasah's way of learning is intentionally made different from other places.

Their costume was also different from the uniform of formal schools, all students and teachers wore all black dress and black head scarf with black "purdah" to cover their face except for eyes. The "classroom" occupied every corner in the link houses, only equipped with low tables that were commonly found in Malaysian mosques to be used for Qur'an reading and small whiteboard for teachers.

The classes started at seven in the morning and finished at one thirty in the afternoon. In between, there were seven periods of forty minutes, breaks, and prayers of Dhuha and Zuhr. All subjects were about the religion or Arabic language. The classes included the Hadith (the Prophet's traditions), tafsir (interpretation of al-Qur'an), tajweed (recitation rules of al-Qur'an), fiqh (Islamic law), tawhid (theology), sirah (the Prophet's biography), adab (ethics), nahu (Arabic grammar), sarf (Arabic morphology) and Arabic language in general. While the lower grades focused on the basic branches of Islamic studies, the higher grades focused on the three canons of hadiths, namely the hadiths collections of al-Bukhari, Muslim, and Termizhi.

The teaching and learning in the class were quite different from government school or formal Islamic schools in many aspects. First, the atmosphere of all classes was extremely tense. Even though many of the ustazah were very young, some were still in their twenty's and even younger than their students, they kept serious faces during the sessions and strictly observed the students' activities. Students were highly concentrated on the lessons, and no voice of chatting or laughing was heard during the class.

A distinct feature in the flow of lesson was the frequent use of pair works and the longer time given for the students to show their ability of recitation and interpretation. The pair works are called "mudhakarrah" where students read the text and explain to each other what they understood from the explanation of teacher. It was emphasized in the class that one of the most important things in the madrasah was such effort for understanding until they can explain what was written in the text using their own words. The pairs were fixed for some months, and every student was required to be responsible for each other's learning. Thus they should always study together even after the school hours to make sure both of them were doing preview and review.

At the same time, it was also important to read out fluently. It was especially highlighted in the classes of higher grades where the students were required to read the Arabic texts of hadith rapidly. Most of the class time was given for the students to read and translate one after another. Compared to the normal practice in the formal schools, the students in the madrasah seemed to be given more time to speak in front of others. These heavier tasks given to the students meant that they could not come to the class without preview.

During the observation, there were some cases that the students could not perform well when they were nominated to read out or to explain the text. Once such less-prepared students were found, the teachers would quickly instruct all students to have a meeting to find out the reason why the student could not perform. This kind of meetings was only observed in the lower grades. During the meeting, students were



given the opportunity to think and discuss explicitly the way of learning in the madrasah. Including such meetings, the learning process of madrasah in the lower grades included many chances to learn about how to learn. It resulted in the quiet and smooth flow of class activities in the higher grade where in many cases students could process the required activities without waiting for the instruction from the teachers.

## **6.2. Counter-Discourse of the Religious Learning in the Madrasah**

During the observation, the teachers, students, and parents of the madrasahs frequently expressed their view on knowledge and knowing explicitly or implicitly. These points were written down in my field notes then later asked in the individual unstructured interviews for further explanation. This section summarizes the epistemological beliefs in the madrasahs based on the four dimensions mentioned in the literature review, namely (1)source of knowledge, (2)belief in authority, (3)quick learning and (4)certainty of knowledge, then proposes a new dimension of (5)moral development that should be added for an analysis of Muslim context.

### **1) Students' independent learning occupies larger part of learning process**

This belief is related to the dimension of the source of knowledge in Schommer's study (1990) that is the belief about teachers' and learners' role in learning. This dimension has been discussed in several different ways, for example, Flores adopted this dimension to discuss whether the teacher believes their role as facilitator or the provider of knowledge. The researchers' assumption behind this dimension is that the latter role as a provider of knowledge is traditional or simpler. Even though the madrasah labeled themselves as "traditional" institute of learning as further discussed in following parts, surprisingly, the teachers and students in madrasah A believed that the teachers were more like facilitators who would help students to reach understanding. While this importance of students' effort was stressed throughout the observation, one of the students expressed this point as follows;

Here, three-quarters of knowledge should be acquired through the preview. Ustazah will add only the last quarter (A Student of Madrasah A).

Students read first, then teachers correct the mistakes. It is not the teachers to initiate the learning. Students know 50% already before the teacher comes to the class. (A teacher of Madrasah B)

This emphasis on the students' effort and their self-recognition as "traditional" seems to be a contradiction at a glance, because "traditional" learning may assume the greater role of teachers. However, some previous studies also have pointed out that the importance of effort is often found in traditional values of the East. For instance, Chan has found a similar emphasis on students' effort among teachers in Hong Kong who are influenced by the Confucian culture (Chan 2008). An important difference in the case of Islamic context should be noted that the role of self-effort is interpreted about the role of the God. In Madrasah A, whenever the importance of self-effort is emphasized, ustazahs would add that,

First, you should read aloud. Then understand. Study without understanding is meaningless. Then if you have the part you cannot understand, look for the meaning. When you really cannot find the answer, ask ustazahs. If you offer supplication sincerely, Allah gives the answer (An ustazah of madrasah A).

### **2) Learning Islam is to learn from the authority**

Chan added the dimension of belief in authority in her studies of Hong Kong teachers. This dimension is about whether the knowledge is handed down by the authorized figures or experts (Chan 2008). While the dimension of authority is supposed to be more sensitive to the cultural differences and some previous studies in Asian countries confirmed the significance of this dimension, Chan found that Hong Kong teachers' belief in authority was lower than expected (Chan 2008).

In Madrasah A, belief in the religious authority, especially those who recorded the teachings in the canonical works are at the core of their belief. It is found in their way of learning which they call as "from cover to cover" or "pondok style." An ustazah who had learned in a formal Islamic school contrasted the learning in the madrasah and the formal school as follows;

Our system is like a pondok. In our term, it is called "from cover to cover." This way of learning allows us to learn deeper. ...The formal schools follow the syllabus, so it is recognized by the government. Here we employ the pondok system, learn following kitabs (classical religious books). Even though our certificate is not recognized by the government, our knowledge is better (than the government school). Since we learn every lesson deeply, our students can be accepted anywhere even without the official certificates (An ustazah of madrasah A).

What is meant by "from cover to cover" here is to learn every single line of a text from the front cover to the back. It implies the importance of learning exactly as what has been learned by the predecessors. This method of traditional Islamic learning is often highlighted to show its' difference from the study in formal schools. The study in the government schools or formal religious schools is described as "points only," as opposed to the concept of "cover to cover." The formal schools tend to teach the "points only" on various topics of Islam based on the national syllabus and ultimately to prepare for the national examination. There is no direct reference to the traditional canons, even though the formal schools' textbooks are the compilation of the contents written in the holy sources and canonical works. Thus the type of belief in the authority is one of the most important parts of the identity of Madrasah A that intentionally differentiate their teaching and learning from the formal schools.

### 3) Learning Islam takes time and requires full devotion

This aspect is related to the belief of "quick learning" (M. Schommer & Dunnell, 1994). As discussed earlier, learning in madrasah is supposed to take time. The belief that learning Islam takes time is explained as one of the reasons for the madrasah not willing to be integrated into the formal school system. Learning in the madrasah is only about the knowledge for the hereafter. We do not want to mix religion with other subjects, first because there are already many other schools that mix religious subjects with others. Second, if we integrate the government system, we cannot keep the system of learning based on Deoband model. Then if we mix, the students can focus on neither one of them (An ustaz of madrasah B).

Here we learn for the heaven, to serve the God (An ustaz of madrasah B).

One of the principal teachers in madrasah B who has obtained a master's degree from a local university compared the study of madrasah and that of formal schools or universities;

...In the madrasah, we do not teach the social application of the knowledge they learned. Once they have graduated, they will do it in the society. In the schools and universities, students are asked to apply before they learn the basics. We do not teach the skills, but information is more [than the schools]. (An ustaz of Madrasah B).

Similar discourses were often found among the members of madrasah A. It is not rare for the students of the Madrasah to take national examination and go for formal higher education after graduation. Thus in that sense, they are not refusing the formal education system. What they insist is that the study of religion requires full devotion for a certain period to make a basis for the rest of life.

#### 4) Knowledge is static, but it should be reached through a process of construction of meaning

The dimension of "Certainty of knowledge" has frequently been used in previous studies of personal epistemology, but it is one of the most problematic dimensions when it is applied to the Islamic learning. The dimension is to determine the belief of whether knowledge is static or changing and tentative. Schommer (1990) who proposed this dimension explains the view on knowledge as static is found among simple and less sophisticated people. When a student grows older, he/she will adopt a sophisticated view and begin to think that knowledge is changing. Most of the researchers in personal epistemology seem to agree on this view, especially when their aim of the study is the successful introduction of constructivist pedagogy in the educational reform.

The practice of Madrasah rejects this evolutionary perspective. The learning of classical canons, especially that of hadith, is to preserve the knowledge as it was passed down from the past great scholars and it should not be changed. However, it does not deny the constructive approach regarding the learning of the "static" text. As it was described in the previous section on the practice of madrasah A, peers played a critical role in the students' process of learning because the students were required to construct the meaning by themselves. Teachers might need to correct their understanding, but the process of understanding was constructive in a sense. This example poses a question on the dichotomy between the view on knowledge being static or changing that has been applied in previous studies.

#### 5) Learning is the process of moral development

This statement was often repeated in the madrasah discourse but cannot find a link to any of the four dimensions above. The relationship between knowledge and moral development is almost absent in the previous discussion of personal epistemology. The moral development is one of the critical components of the identity of the madrasahs. Teachers of Madrasah A and B often contrasted their madrasah against the formal religious school using a pair of concepts, "study (belajar)" and "education (tarbiyah)." One of the ustazahs in madrasah A reflected her experience in a formal religious school as follows;

The school that I attended was a religious school which used to be a pondok. The atmosphere of pondok remained, and tok gurus (religious teacher with a certain level of charisma) were still there. However, the atmosphere inside the school was just a school. They focused on "study (belajar)," but there was no "education (tarbiyah)." Here we practice "education (tarbiyah)." We often call students one by one to discuss various matters and advise them....in the schools outside, teachers are busy and cannot take care of each student's understanding or attitude. Here in this madrasah, we collaborate with parents and pay full attention to both of their learning and life as a whole. (An ustazah in madrasah A)

The members of madrasah A often used the term "the schools outside (sekolah luar)" to contrast the nature of formal school to their madrasah. Learning religion is understood to be an integral part of the moral development and the nature of "schools outside" is marked with the separation of learning and moral development.

## 7. Conclusion

The discourse of Islamic epistemology in the case of two non-formal madrasahs can be taken as a counter-discourse against the dominant discourse in the Malaysian formal school system. Islamic learning in Malaysia has been well integrated into the modern education system since the early 20th century. The influence of modern schooling is so strong that the majority of Malaysian Muslims have never questioned the foreign epistemology that is at the base of the system. The counter-discourse presented by a small minority who reject the integration of Islamic learning into the modern system, by contrast, highlights the strong influence of foreign epistemology behind the modern schooling on the dominant discourse of Islamic learning. It emphasizes the maintenance of "genuine" epistemology of Islamic learning by practicing the "tradition."

Some unique features of the epistemological beliefs in the madrasahs were identified through an analysis based on the four dimensions of personal epistemology, namely (1)source of knowledge, (2)belief in authority, (3)quick learning and (4)certainty of knowledge. A new dimension of (5)moral development that should be added for an analysis of Muslim context.

One of the unique features related to the belief of (1)source of knowledge and (2)belief in authority is the emphasis on the individual effort in learning that seems similar to the case of Hong Kong Chinese teachers (Chan 2008). However, a great difference between the two cases should be noted. While the individual effort in the Chinese case is explained to opposite to the belief in authority, in the case of the madrasahs the individual effort was emphasized together with respect for traditional authority. In the belief of Madrasah people, Islamic Learning is to pass down the authority of the past prominent scholars from generation to generation. For them, such succession of authority cannot be achieved in the formal school system, because Islamic learning there follows the syllabus that is defined by the ministry based on the social needs, not based on the books written by the authoritative scholars based on the Islamic epistemology. About the dimension of (3) quick learning, it was found that the counter-discourse takes Islamic learning as a long journey which is impossible to be completed within the normal duration of formal schooling, especially when the students learn Islam together with other subjects.

Another uniqueness was identified with regards to the dimension of (4) certainty of knowledge. While the madrasah people believe in the Islamic knowledge to be static and unchanging as the ultimate truth from the God, they also emphasize the importance of reaching to the knowledge by themselves. Peers play a critical role in the process of learning and students are expected to construct the meaning. This dimension in the counter-discourse shows that the conflict between dominant and counter-discourse cannot be simply summarized as "modern" and "traditional." The counter-discourse even criticize the Islamic education in the modern school system to lack some elements of latest pedagogy such as student-centered learning and constructivists' perception of the learning process.

Lastly, it was found that new dimensions should be added to the analysis of epistemology in Islamic learning. One of them is the dimension of moral in knowledge and knowing. Lack of moral guidance is one of the most serious points of criticisms against the modern school education which is identified as the reason for the existence of the madrasah. Such dimension is a key to understanding the culturally specific aspect of epistemology, and it can only be found through a qualitative research that aims to construct a framework from the case, not to apply the framework to the case.

It should be notified that the counter-discourse is never free from the influence of modern education, even when they claim themselves to be the protector of the tradition. Both sides of discourses are continuously constructed at the cross-road of epistemologies of Islam, the West, and the modern education. This study was not meant to judge which discourse was right in the light of Islam. It instead revealed the points where the significant difference is found between the epistemologies in the dominant and counter-discourse to explore the influence of modern education upon cultures, in this case upon the Islamic epistemology. The concepts and dimensions of personal epistemology helped to highlight the contrast between the dominant and counter-discourse. Further study is required to analyze more specific discourses from the dominant discourse side as well as from discourses in the classical Islamic texts that were written before the influence of modern education.

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