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Interaction of Prophet Muhammad SAW with Isolated Communities and Its Relevance to Indigenous Peoples

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Abstract

Prophet Muhammad SAW serves as a role model for Muslims in all aspects of life, including his approach to interacting with isolated communities such as the Bedouin Arabs and new converts (muallaf). New converts, who are isolated in the cultural context, and the Bedouin Arabs, who live in rural areas and lead lives isolated from urban society, require different approaches compared to urban dwellers or those who have long embraced Islam. Indigenous peoples share similarities with these groups in a socio-cultural context. Therefore, this study will examine the guidance and approach of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in interacting with isolated communities to provide guidance for preachers and educators when dealing with Indigenous Muslim communities. This study uses a fully literature-based approach by reviewing documentation analyses, including classical Islamic texts, journal articles, seminar papers, and others. The findings indicate that the position of Indigenous peoples is nearly akin to that of the Bedouin Arabs at the beginning of Islam and also includes new converts. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) approached them with kindness and gentleness, as he understood the nature of the Bedouin Arabs and new converts. Leading people from disbelief to the light of Islam was the most important agenda at that time, followed by the gradual and easy introduction of Sharia obligations. Therefore, the Indigenous Muslim communities should also be approached in such a manner so that Islam is seen as a religion that is easy to practice.

Keywords: Mualaf, Arab Bedouins, Indigenous Peoples, Taysir, Tadarruj.

1. Introduction

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is regarded as an 'uswah hasanah' or the best example for humans to follow. His interactions with society, whether with his companions, isolated groups, non-Muslims, or enemies, can serve as guidance and models for behavior. He approached them in various ways, considering the background and circumstances of each individual. The approach to those who have long embraced Islam differs from that towards new converts. Similarly, the approach to urban residents differs from that towards rural residents. This demonstrates the wisdom of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in conveying the teachings of Islam so that Islam is seen as easy and not burdensome.

The isolated groups that received special attention from Prophet Muhammad (SAW) were the Bedouin Arabs and new converts (muallaf). They were isolated in terms of socio-cultural aspects, and the Bedouin Arabs lived far from urban areas. Indigenous peoples in Malaysia are seen as having similarities with these groups. Their position can be said to be similar to that of the Bedouin Arabs in the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), as a group isolated from urban society. The isolation of Indigenous peoples can be seen in geographical and socio-cultural aspects. Similarly, the isolation of the Bedouin Arabs can also be seen in the same aspects. Bedouins are a community that lives in the desert, located in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula, and do not settle in urban areas. They lead a nomadic lifestyle, moving from place to place in search of food and water (Jawad 'Ali, 1968). They only enter cities when necessary. Therefore, their demeanor is somewhat rough and they lack knowledge (Al-Syawkani, 2007). Similarly, the Indigenous peoples in Malaysia inhabit rural areas, specifically in the Titiwangsa Range of Peninsular Malaysia. Almost all of them live in rural or suburban areas, with only 1% residing in urban areas (Muhammad Yusuf, 2017). Their daily life pattern is similar to that of the Bedouins, where they forage for food around them to sustain life and move to new places when resources are depleted.

The Bedouins have a very low literacy rate. They do not possess high levels of knowledge due to their distance from urban areas. Their skills are limited to aspects such as livestock farming, agriculture, and hunting for their survival (Mohd Faizal, 2019). Their ignorance also makes their testimony unacceptable. This can be understood from a hadith narrated by Abu Hurairah RA as follows:

Translation: From 'Ata' bin Yasar, from Abu Hurairah RA. I heard the Messenger of Allah (SAW) say: "The testimony of a Bedouin Arab against a city dweller is not permissible" (Sunan

Abi Dawud, Book of Judgements, Chapter on Witnesses in Matters of Suckling, hadith no. 3602) The above hadith indicates that the testimony of the Bedouins is not accepted due to suspicions about their credibility stemming from their ignorance of Islamic law and their inability to provide reliable testimony against city dwellers (al-Bayhaqi, 1989). The physical isolation of the Bedouin community is evident as they reside in resource-scarce desert areas, and their weak mastery of knowledge leads to a very low intellectual level. This, in turn, affects their memory strength and makes them unable to provide reliable testimony before a judge. Additionally, they do not understand the importance of the value of testimony and the responsibility associated with it, which makes their testimony questionable (Al-'Abbad, n.d.). This factor has also long affected the Indigenous peoples. Their high illiteracy rate is due to the neglect of education, despite various forms of assistance (Wan Afizi, 2017). This shows that both the Bedouins and Indigenous peoples share a similar value of isolation in terms of knowledge acquisition.

Furthermore, the Bedouin community also has a relatively low level of religious knowledge compared to other Arab tribes. Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) communication with them was very concise and focused on basic religious matters. This is also true for the Indigenous peoples, whose level of religious knowledge is very shallow. Most of them do not practice religious obligations despite various efforts. The main factor affecting them is the deeply ingrained animism and minimal awareness (Abdul Ghafar Don, 2014).

The position of Indigenous Muslims also falls into the category of new converts (muallaf). The term muallaf is mentioned in the Quran, referring to one of the categories of zakat recipients. Al-Shafi'i explains that muallaf here means those who have embraced Islam. Hence, zakat cannot be given to non-Muslims (Al-Shafi'i, 1993). Some jurists expand the definition of muallaf to include non-Muslims whose hearts are to be inclined towards Islam (Al-Nawawi, n.d.). Al-Qardawi, when discussing the verse concerning al-mualafah qulubuhum, refers to them as those whose hearts are to be softened towards Islam or to strengthen their hearts, or to prevent harm to Muslims, or to expect their help in defending against enemies, among other benefits (Al-Qardawi, 1973). In summary, muallaf refers to those who are inclined towards Islam or new converts. They are also known as new brethren (Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat, search: muallaf).

In the Sunnah of the Prophet, the term al-muslim aljadid (new Muslim) is not used. The terms hadith 'ahd bi kufr or hadith 'ahd bi syirk or hadith 'ahd bi jahiliyyah are used instead (Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, 1959). This can be seen in a hadith narrated by Aisyah RA:

Translation: "O Aisyah! If your people had not recently abandoned disbelief, I would have demolished the Kaaba and rebuilt it on its original foundation. I would have made two doors for it, one on the east and one on the west. I would have added six cubits from the Hijr Ismail. Indeed, the Quraysh restricted it when they rebuilt the Kaaba" (Hadith reported by al-Bukhari, Book of Hajj, Chapter on the Virtues of Makkah and its Construction, hadith no. 1586)

This hadith also shows the approach of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in dealing with new converts, as he avoided actions that might cause tension and dissatisfaction among the Quraysh who had recently embraced Islam. He did not proceed with his intention to restore the Kaaba to its original structure (Ibn al-Mulaqqin, 2008). This action reflects the wisdom of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in managing his community.

New converts to Islam often have weak faith and simultaneously need to fulfill all Sharia obligations such as the obligatory prayers, fasting during Ramadan, covering the aurah, consuming halal food, and so on. These practices may seem foreign to them as new Muslims. Practices they had been accustomed to might need to be abandoned or modified as they contradict Islamic teachings. This transition is not easy and can be challenging to change long-held habits. Additionally, they must fulfill several obligatory duties. All these require significant changes, and if not handled properly, new converts might be tempted to revert to their original religion (Abdullah Ibrahim, 2021), forming the perception that Islam is a difficult religion filled with prohibitions.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the example and guidance of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in dealing with isolated communities, specifically the new converts and the Bedouins. This guidance can serve as a reference for educators and preachers in approaching and interacting with Indigenous Muslim communities in Malaysia."

2. Research Methods

This study employs a fully literature-based approach by reviewing documentation analysis consisting of classical Islamic texts, journal articles, seminar papers, and other materials. According to Yin (2003), document analysis is often used in qualitative case studies, which are intensive studies that produce extensive descriptions of a phenomenon, event, organization, or program. For data collection through this document approach, the researcher visited several university libraries such as the library of the Academy of Islamic Studies at

the University of Malaya, the main library of the University of Malaya, and the library of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perak Branch. The search focused on printed materials such as books, texts, theses, magazines, and others. Additionally, the researcher also referred to digital software, specifically al-Maktabah al-Syamilah version 4.0. The search targeted classical figh texts containing the core discussions and debates of the jurists on the issues under study. The university library databases were fully utilized. The researcher used the databases UiTM's at library (https://library.uitm.edu.my/en/collection), which has licensed access to journal articles, e-books, and theses, as found in online databases, e-books, institutional repositories, e-journals, research repositories, and more. Some of the databases accessed include Emerald, Taylor & Francis, SAGE Knowledge, SpringerLink Open Access. ScienceDirect, Web of Knowledge, Wiley Online Library, and others.

Furthermore, the researcher also accessed freely downloadable websites such as Google Scholar (https://scholar.google.com), Academia.edu (https://www.academia.edu), and Researchgate (https://www.researchgate.net). To facilitate journal article searches, the researcher took advantage of the Mendeley software, where the system identifies articles similar to those already downloaded and recommends direct downloads to the user.

3. Results and Discussions

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) had a specific approach in engaging and interacting with isolated communities, especially new Muslims and Bedouins. New Muslims come from various backgrounds. Some have a basic understanding of Islam due to their exposure to the Muslim community, while others are completely unaware due to factors such as location. There are also those deeply rooted in traditional practices that are difficult to abandon without a strong resolve to transition to Islamic ways. Addressing such issues requires a wise approach. The Prophet (SAW) had a distinctive method in interacting with new Muslims, as follows:

3.1 The Approach of Gradualism (Tadarruj)

New Muslims should be treated gently and with compassion. Therefore, they should not be burdened with tasks beyond their capacity or be subjected to excessive rigor at the initial stage of their understanding of Islam. When faced with questions from new converts, the Prophet (SAW) would address the most fundamental and important aspects of Islam. He did not teach all aspects of Islam at once, considering their newness to the faith and the need for time to adjust to their new religion (Jum'ah Amin, 1999). This is reflected in a hadith narrated by Talhah bin 'Ubaidillah: Translation: A man from Najd came to the Prophet (SAW) with disheveled hair and an unclear speech until he came closer. He asked about Islam, and the Prophet (SAW) replied: "Pray five times a day." The man asked: "Is there anything else for me?" The Prophet (SAW) said: "Nothing except additional voluntary prayers." The Prophet (SAW) then said: "And fast during Ramadan." The man asked again: "Is there anything else for me?" The Prophet (SAW) replied: "Nothing except voluntary fasting." The Prophet (SAW) continued: "And Zakat." The man asked: "Is there anything else for me?" The Prophet (SAW) replied: "Nothing except voluntary charity." Talhah said: The man left saying: "By Allah, I will not add to this or diminish from it." The Prophet (SAW) said: "He will be successful if he is truthful" (Hadith reported by al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Iman, Bab al-Zakat min al-Islam, Hadith no. 46).

This hadith suggests that it is sufficient for new Muslims to practice only the obligatory acts initially until their faith strengthens and their understanding of Islam becomes clearer. Once they reach this level, performing voluntary acts will become easier for them (Al-Suyuti, 1998). If they are burdened with obligations they cannot perform or if the gradual approach is not respected, it might lead them to abandon Islam or merely practice it superficially.

Islamic legislation also came in stages, not all at once, to allow new Muslims to accept obligations according to their capability, as 'Aisha RA said:

Translation: "The first surahs revealed were from the group of surahs known as mufassal, which included stories about Heaven and Hell. As their Islam became more established, the laws of halal and haram were revealed. If the first revelations had been prohibitions on alcohol, they would have said: 'We will never abandon alcohol.' Likewise, if the first revelations had been about prohibiting adultery, they would have said: 'We will never abandon adultery'" (Hadith reported by al-Bukhari, Kitab Fadail al-Quran, Bab Ta'lif al-Quran, Hadith no. 4993).

This hadith indicates the gradual nature of Islamic legislation, starting with the call to monotheism and then progressing to legal matters. The ease, convenience, and flexibility are concepts frequently highlighted in interactions with new Muslims. This is also reflected in the communication between 'Umar bin 'Abd al-'Aziz and his son 'Abd al-Malik when the son wished to implement the entire Shariah at once, leading 'Umar to advise:

Translation: "Do not be hasty, my son. Allah condemned wine twice in the Quran and prohibited it on the third occasion. I fear that if I enforce the truth all at once, people will reject it entirely, and this would be a trial." In another hadith, the Prophet (SAW) accepted a man's conversion to Islam with the condition that he would only perform the prayers of two times a day, as narrated:

Translation: A man came to the Prophet (SAW) and said that he would only convert to Islam if he could pray only twice a day, and the Prophet (SAW) accepted this condition (Musnad al-Imam Ahmad, Hadith rijal min ashab al-Nabiy SAW, Hadith no. 20286).

The Prophet (SAW) accepted this man's request to ease his heart towards Islam. It may be that some non-Muslims do not fully understand Islamic teachings or find the obligations overwhelming. Their initial acceptance into Islam, followed by explanation, teaching, and guidance, will, with time, lead them to adhere to the Shariah (Muhammad Salih al-Munjid, 2009).

3.2 The Approach of Facilitation (Taysir)

Islam is a religion of ease. The approach of facilitation is a key characteristic of the Prophet's method in dealing with new Muslims. This can be seen in the hadith narrated by Abu Hurairah:

Translation: "This religion is easy. No one burdens themselves with it but they will be defeated. Practice correctly, do what you can, and receive good news. Seek help from Allah in the morning, evening, and end of the night" (Hadith reported by al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Iman, Bab al-Din Yusr, Hadith no. 39).

This hadith clearly indicates that excessive or extreme practices will lead to failure, weakness, fatigue, and ultimately destruction. Allah does not like it when someone burdens themselves to the point of suffering. The misconception that more difficult practices are superior is false (Ibn Taymiyyah, 2004). The approach of facilitation is evident in the Prophet's instructions to his companions: 'Make things easy, not difficult' (al-Bukhari, 1422H). Al-Nawawi, in his commentary, emphasizes the need for gentleness when approaching those new to Islam, children nearing puberty, and those seeking repentance. They should be approached with kindness and given the teachings of Islam gradually, rather than all at once. They should not be required to make up for all the missed obligations from before their conversion, such as prayers, fasting, and charity (al-Syangiti, n.d.).

Bedouins, also known as al-'Arabi, can be categorized as isolated communities due to geographical factors, socio-cultural differences, and very low literacy rates. As a group that is isolated in various aspects, the Prophet's legal and interactional approach with them was significantly different from that with urban residents. Hence, the approach used by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in interacting with them was quite distinct compared to that with urban communities. This approach can be summarized as follows:

3.2.1 Ease and Avoiding Burden

The Prophet (SAW) understood the isolated Bedouin communities well. Therefore, their questions were answered in a simple and unburdened manner. This can be seen in a hadith narrated by Abu Hurairah:

Translation: Abu Hurairah (RA) narrated that a Bedouin came to the Prophet (SAW) and asked: "O Messenger of Allah, tell me about an action that will bring me into paradise if I perform it." The Prophet (SAW) said: "Worship Allah alone, do not associate partners with Him, perform the obligatory prayers, give the mandatory zakat, and fast during Ramadan." The man said: "By the One in Whose Hand is my soul, I will not do more than this nor less." When the man left, the Prophet (SAW) said: "Whoever wishes to see someone destined for paradise, look at this man" (Hadith reported by Muslim, Kitab al-Iman, Bab bayan al-Iman alladhi yudkhalu bihi al-Jannah, Hadith no. 14).

In another hadith, the Prophet (SAW) said:

Translation: Talhah bin 'Ubaidullah (RA) narrated that a Bedouin came to the Prophet (SAW) with disheveled hair and asked: "O Messenger of Allah, tell me which prayers Allah has made obligatory for me." The Prophet (SAW) answered: "Five daily prayers, unless you wish to add voluntary prayers." The man asked: "Tell me about the fasting Allah has made obligatory for me." The Prophet (SAW) said: "Fasting during Ramadan, unless you wish to add voluntary fasting." The man asked: "Tell me about the zakat Allah has made obligatory for me." The Prophet (SAW) explained the Islamic law to him, and the man said: "By the One who has honored you, I will neither do any additional acts nor reduce any of what Allah has made obligatory." The Prophet (SAW) said: "He is successful if he is truthful or he will enter paradise if he is truthful" (Hadith reported by al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Sawm, Bab Wujub Sawm Ramadan, Hadith no. 1792).

This hadith shows the Prophet's explanation of basic Islamic principles. Notably, he answered according to the questioner's background. The Bedouin's limited socio-cultural background meant that his understanding of religion was minimal. The Prophet's brief response to their inquiries and his emphasis on essential practices demonstrate a facilitative approach that was achievable for the Bedouins. The Bedouin's response of not adding or subtracting any obligations reflects their adherence to the minimum required based on their capacity.

3.2.2 Tolerance

The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) used a tolerant

approach when dealing with Bedouins who were uncivilized in the mosque. In a hadith narrated by Anas:

Translation: Anas bin Malik (RA) said: "Once, while we were in the mosque with the Prophet (SAW), a Bedouin came and started urinating in the mosque. The companions of the Prophet (SAW) scolded him, but the Prophet (SAW) said: 'Do not interrupt him; let him finish first.' So they allowed the Bedouin to finish urinating. Afterward, the Prophet (SAW) called him over and advised him: 'This mosque is not for urinating or impurity; it is a place for remembering Allah, praying, and reading the Quran.' Then, the Prophet (SAW) instructed someone to bring a bucket of water and clean the area" (Hadith reported by Muslim, Kitab al-Taharah, Bab Wujub Ghasl al-Bawl wa Ghairih min al-Najasat idha Hasalat fi al-Masjid, Hadith no. 285).

This hadith guides us on how to deal with individuals according to their state. The Bedouin was not a city resident and was unaware of the wrongdoing. If he had been an urbanite, the Prophet (SAW) might have acted differently. But in this case, the Prophet (SAW) responded to his ignorance with gentleness and kindness.

3.2.3 Good Treatment

The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) always treated people well even when they were harsh towards him. Anas (RA) narrated:

Translation: Anas bin Malik (RA) said: "Once, I was walking with the Prophet (SAW) while he was wearing a thick Najran cloak. A Bedouin came and pulled the cloak strongly, leaving a mark on the Prophet's shoulder. The Bedouin said: 'O Muhammad, give me from the wealth Allah has given you.' The Prophet (SAW) turned to him smiling and then asked a companion to give him something" (Hadith reported by al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Libas, Bab al-Burud wa al-Hibarah wa al-Syamlah, Hadith no. 5472).

This hadith shows that the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) understood the rough nature of the Bedouins. Despite the harsh treatment, he responded with tolerance and forgiveness. Al-Nawawi commented that the Prophet's positive response was due to the possibility of the Bedouin being ignorant. Responding to harshness with kindness and forgiving those who err due to ignorance demonstrates the Prophet's patience and compassion.

4. Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it can be seen that the position of the indigenous people is similar to that of the Bedouin Arabs at the beginning of Islam and also falls under the category of new Muslims. The Prophet SAW approached them in a kind and gentle manner because he understood the situation of the Bedouin Arabs and those who had recently embraced Islam. Bringing people from disbelief to the light of Islam was a primary agenda at that time, followed by the gradual and facilitative implementation of Islamic obligations. Therefore, the indigenous Muslim community should also be approached in such a manner so that Islam is perceived as an easy religion to practice.

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