Transformation of the culture of Islamic learning: Anthropological Analysis of Malay Muslim Society

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The aim of this thesis is to describe the transformation of the culture of Islamic learning with the development of the modern education system and the reaction of the people to the transformation through the case of Malaysia. Islamic learning have drastically transformed with the expansion of the modern schooling. Majority of the previous studies described such transformation as simple historical fact and often evaluated it as "progress". A few studies analyzed the transformation at the conceptual level but only focused on the acceptance of the framework of modern schooling. These previous studies show common tendency that they take the modern schooling as granted in the discussion of Islamic learning.

This thesis intends to describe the transformation in different way and review such tendency to take it as an inevitable one-way change with the "modernization". Thus this thesis focused on two currents of Islamic learning in Malaysia; one is the transformation of Islamic learning as approximation to the modern schooling and another is the reaction against such transformation. In Malaysia, as in many other Muslim societies, the former is the mainstream and the latter is only found in minor movement. However, the closer investigation revealed that there are not small numbers
of people who feel uncomfortable with such transformation. The unique feature of this thesis is this focus on such reaction that reveals how the previous studies take the modern schooling as granted and how we can reconsider the transformation.

In order to describe the transformation in a way different from the previous studies, I employed a concept of “culture of Islamic learning” in this thesis. It is the web of meaning that consists of all the elements related to “learning Islam” such as the teacher, learner, the relationship between them, the contents and the social institutions. The meaning of “learning Islam” may transform when the elements have changed. The transformation of Islamic learning with the introduction of modern schooling not only happened at the level of its form but it also involved the transformation of the cultural meaning of learning.

This thesis is composed of nine chapters divided into four parts. Part 1 (chapter 1) is the description of the “ideal type” of the traditional culture of Islamic learning as the starting point of the transformation. In chapter 1 I described the culture of learning in the traditional Islamic learning center in Malaysia called pondok. Through the description of pondok, I tried to extract the common elements found in many forms of traditional Islamic learning including pondok. The elements can be divided into five categories: the place, teacher, learner, community, and the learning. For example the elements of the teacher include that the leading teacher (tok guru) was autonomous in the religious teaching and economy and the authority was recognized with his experience of learning under recognized teachers. As for the learning, it was called “kitab learning” that read every line of the classical Islamic texts from “cover to cover”. In the traditional Islamic learning that has many of those elements, the meaning of learning was understood as a part of the religious practice to achieve the reward from Allah and also as a part of transmission of authority of knowledge.

Part 2 and Part 3 discussed how those elements of learning have transformed with the expansion of modern school system. In the early 20th century, modern type of Islamic schools began to spread and became the main institution of Islamic learning instead of traditional pondok. Part 2 discussed how such transformation began. In Chapter 2 I analyzed the articles appeared in a journal “Pengasuh” issued from 1918 and found that the Islamic leaders of that age already had recognition that see the elements of modern education to be useful for the promotion of Islamic learning without changing its nature. Chapter 3 revealed that the modernization of al-Azhar university affected the promotion of such positive attitudes for the application of the element of modern schooling to the Islamic learning.

Part 3 described the transformation after the Islamic resurgence movement
(dakwah movement) of 1970's. The leaders of dakwah movements were the first generation of Malay students who gained chance of higher education. They took the existence of modern schooling as granted and began to discuss how to turn it to be Islamic. Chapter 4 discussed the background of the new leaders of dakwah movement and the new forms of Islamic learning produced by those leaders with the case of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM).

After the 1980's Malaysian government took educational policies that put greater importance on Islam. As a result, nation state became an important element of Islamic learning. Chapter 5 analyzed a subject "Islamic education" taught in the national schools and found that the meaning of Islamic learning came to be understood in connection with the "usefulness" in individual and national success. The new current after the dakwah movement resulted in the transformation of Islamic learning in accordance with the modern education system despite the aim of the leaders were to change the modern education system to be Islamic. Chapter 6 discussed the same tendency found in the case of transformation of the culture of learning in a religious high school.

In contrast, the focus of Part 4 is put on those who feel uncomfortable with such transformation and tries to create different kind of Islamic learning often with reference to the traditional elements. Chapter 7 introduced four cases of such Islamic learning in contemporary Kuala Lumpur that is trying to keep or revive the traditional elements. Chapter 8 discussed a case of the non-formal religious school that is not restricted by the examination system. Chapter 9 dealt with the case of "motivation seminar" to find out the elements that people feel lack in the Islamic education in the school system. What such people are seeking for has similarity with the elements of traditional learning.

The culture of Islamic learning has transformed with accepting many elements of the modern schooling. The meaning of learning as a whole also changed in accordance with the change of the elements. Majority of the previous studies were not aware of such transformation of the meaning but the reaction of the minority that I focused in part 3 and 4 give the clue to be conscious of it. The reaction of such people to get back what is lost in the transformation might be interpreted as the effort to stop the transformation of cultural meaning of Islamic learning. The culture of Islamic learning is not only transforming toward the approximation to the modern schooling but there are various efforts to keep the meaning connected to the worldview of Islam.