1

INTRODUCTION

Singapore's religious studies graduates form a significant component of *asatizah*, a term which in the context of Singapore's contemporary Muslim community generally refers not only to those who teach religion (also known as *ustaz* for males or *ustazah* for females), but also those who have undergone a degree of formal training in religious schools. So broad is the usage of the term today that it also includes those with religious studies background but whose sources of livelihood are not necessarily in teaching religion but involve other professions which may or may not have anything to do with religious services or education. In the past, it was not uncommon for asatizah not to have acquired formal religious training to teach religion. Their socialization into religious education was informal based on devotion to the teachings of a spiritual master. The prominent ones amongst them are cherished and revered by the community. Others received religious education in one of the full-time madrasahs (Islamic schools) or part-time classes run by mosques or privately run religious schools, such as Bustanul Arifin (formed in 1946 but closed in the mid-1990s)

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and Sekolah Ugama Radin Mas (*tahfiz* or Quranic memorization schools founded in 1956).

Given that the values of Islam touch the lives of Muslims on many fronts, asatizah generally exert strong influence in the religious life of the community and form the major social group that shapes religious thought, beliefs and orientations. As the ethical teachings of Islam underline all aspects of life, their influence is wide-ranging, covering areas beyond matters of worship and faith. Though the advancement of technology has facilitated the possibility of accessing religious instruction and teachings globally via new media platforms, this development has not displaced the significance of the local asatizah who continue to play an influential role in shaping religious thought and understanding through teaching and other religious services they conduct.

Some amongst them are considered as *ulama* based on their contributions to scholarship in matters pertaining to religion. A substantial number also continue to serve as religious functionaries in state religious institutions such as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), Sharia Court, Registry of Muslim Marriages (ROMM) and mosques, while others are involved in faith-based organizations (NGOs), such as Muhammadiyah, Perdaus, and Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas), which provide religious and welfare services for the community as well as religious education in various fields and levels. While their traditional sources of livelihood in these areas persist, asatizah today are also venturing into niche religious businesses that include Islamic finance, halal tourism, Islamic fashion, halal food and beverage industry, "Islamic medicine", and many others.

Islamic Studies Graduates

Not all from the current pool of asatizah are graduates in Islamic studies. Some have obtained religious education from Islamic boarding schools, such as those in Indonesia, Malaysia, Yemen (Hadhramaut) or Syria. They are generally found among the ranks

of the senior asatizah who have had years of experience teaching religion and have gained prominence and strong reputation as being knowledgeable and moderate preachers. Generally, those not from the madrasah including public intellectuals who teach Islam from sociological and historical approaches are not considered asatizah, though their inclusion as religious scholars are not uncommon in societies such as in the United States, Egypt and Indonesia. Going forward, it is highly likely that the future asatizah community will comprise Islamic studies graduates when the current pool of non-graduates phases out. This means that only those with at least a Bachelor of Arts in Islamic studies will be part of the religious elite. This outcome is conditioned by the drive to formalize religious education up to the tertiary level and professionalize asatizah which implies that those who graduated with a diploma or from non-degree issuing traditional institutions may likely be gradually phased out in future.

While in the past those who succeeded in attaining higher religious education were negligible, a combination of socio-economic factors including the changing social structure of the community and the rise of religious revivalism has witnessed a substantial increase in religious studies graduates within the asatizah fraternity. Generally, the majority from this group received their formal education in the local madrasah. A typical asatizah would have undergone at least ten years of madrasah education at primary and secondary levels in any one of the six local full-time madrasahs before pursuing tertiary religious education. A fair proportion of them, however, emerged from part-time religious education conducted on weekends that have sprouted all over the country since the 1980s. In the current landscape of religious education, those who have not arisen from the madrasah may in time find it more challenging to be regarded as an asatizah. The recent advertisement for primary one madrasah registration with the phrase "*Menjana Asatizah masa Depan Melalui Pendidikan Madrasah*", which can be translated as creating the future asatizah through madrasah education, illustrates the point.[1]

The absence of an Islamic university in the country has traditionally propelled asatizah to pursue tertiary religious education in universities either in the region or in the Middle East. Many continue to flock to Al-Azhar University in Cairo which has traditionally been regarded as one of the most reputable institutions for Islamic studies. However, this trend is gradually shifting with the rise of other popular competing colleges in the Middle East including those in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and to some extent Libya, Iran and Turkey. Regional universities particularly Malaysia's Islamic universities and to a smaller extent Brunei, are also no less gaining traction as witnessed by the proportion of local asatizah who have graduated from or are currently studying in these institutions. Their education in religious sciences include the study of theology, theosophy, Quran and *hadith* (narrations of the Prophet Muhammad) studies, sharia law and Islamic history. Apart from Islamic studies, some have also pursued other disciplines albeit from an "Islamic perspective" offered by some of these universities. The rise of a variety of twinning programmes forged by collaboration between local religious based organizations and overseas Islamic educational institutions in the region are also providing more options for asatizah pursuing tertiary religious studies education.

Dominant Discourse on Asatizah

While there has been consistent articulation by Singapore's political and community leaders that asatizah, given their training in religious studies have the potential of contributing, supporting and facilitating the community's adaptation to the demands of change and the modern world, there remains a lack of serious interest and discourse on the nature of religious education they receive locally and from abroad. Little is discussed on the extent to which the education they receive is able to develop critical awareness and relevant skills imperative in developing the ability to harness religious teachings to navigate and guide the community through rapid change and cushion its impact and challenges. While

admittedly advances in technology in our globalized world have come a long way in improving the quality of life in many areas and have facilitated greater interconnectedness, it has, however, also impacted on basic social institutions, values, norms and traditions and worldviews that had evolved from the past and heightened social and economic problems. As education, in its capacity to shape critical and moral thought and values, cannot afford to be aloof from such problems of society, even more so perhaps is the function of religious education. Yet though the need to examine the extent to which Islamic religious education has been effective in nurturing the development of moral and spiritual citizens anchored in their cultural tradition while able to adapt religious teachings to meet the demands of modern and pluralistic society and alleviate problems induced by change, these issues remain underdeveloped.

The lag in critical evaluation is amplified by the fact that robust and critical debates on the meaning of progress in education in our changing and complex interconnected world are being developed by educationalists and practitioners alike. Such education seeks to develop critical awareness of the limits of the traditional approach to knowledge premised on imparting ready information. It is underscored by a strong commitment to developing competencies imperative for analysing attitudes, values and beliefs that lie beneath the surface of texts which are never neutral or independent but project power relations. Understanding how knowledge change in varying contexts, how they are appropriated, by whom and for what ends are integral to education's ethical and social responsibility which is today strongly emphasized in critical literary debates (Luke 2003). Critiques on religious educational reforms by prominent Muslim scholars are also not isolated from this consciousness. They emphasize the need for religious education to develop awareness informed by integration of multidisciplinary perspectives and critical pedagogy in understanding, producing, assessing and accessing religious content (Noor Aisha 2018b; Azhar 2006). Though religious education cannot afford to be isolated from new modes of literacy, there remains a dearth of serious

and critical interest in the nature of dominant types of religious education that asatizah receive, nor has there been articulation for its review within the framework of such reforms. Yet the problem is all the more pertinent today given the vulnerable condition of the world and our interconnectedness.

Except for the brief period in the early 1980s with the formation of Mendaki when the need for institutional religious development for teaching and learning was raised and documented, nothing much has developed since then (Mansor 1982). In the 1990s in the context of the debate on compulsory education, the government did raise concerns on the extent to which madrasah education can prepare students effectively for the knowledge-based economy and the potential marginalization this may pose to madrasah graduates. However, the debate focused on teaching and learning of the national curriculum and did not spark interest in revaluation of religious education within the community. It is only after the attack of 9/11 that religious education of returning asatizah has come under consistent spotlight. Even so, this has largely taken the form of reiterations to the effect that asatizah must be wary of teachings that are not relevant to the conditions of Singapore's pluralistic society. They are constantly reminded and urged to contextualize religious teachings to suit the condition of Singapore's pluralistic society. While efforts are currently in progress in support of asatizah at the community level, the overriding attention is confined to employment issues they face upon their return and attempts at charting pathways for them to be interned, reskilled and retrained for professions which their religious education has not prepared them for. The recent formation of COFA (Committee on Future Asatizah) by the government in March 2019 illustrates the point. The Committee was formed to gather the Malay/Muslim community's inputs on the aspirations for asatizah, identify and provide recommendations on the major problems facing them and their alleviation.[2] In his Committee of Supply speech in parliament, Senior Minister of State for Defence and Foreign Affairs Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman reported that plans were underway for returning Islamic studies graduates to undergo on-the-job training and work-based projects through

a compulsory year-long certification programme, PCICS (Post-Graduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies), before they can be accredited and allowed to teach (Hariz 2020b, B4). COFA's recommendations that encapsulated the need to prepare asatizah as religious leaders, professionalize them and render them as exemplars for the community, had little consideration for examining the kinds of religious education received in relation to the needs and condition of society and their implications, apart from other problems relating to their learning and its implications on the community and the larger society.

Despite the lack of attention to these problems, official discourse persists in reiterating the significance of and need for asatizah in preparing the community to adapt to and cushion the adverse impact of technological advancement to ensure a more satisfactory life for the community and country. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally Speech in 2019, for instance, reflects the dominant tenor of commendations on asatizah for instilling "progressive Islam" crucial for Singapore's multi-racial society. He applauded the fraternity for contributing to promote the spirit of mutual respect, tolerance and inclusivity beneficial for the nation's cohesion and harmony. More recently, the Minister of Manpower Josephine Teo also asserted that "Asatizah serve as a bridge for the community to understand this world and prepare themselves for future challenges" (Siti Aisyah 2020, p. 1). In the same vein, Masagos Zulkifli, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs, has also reiterated that "Asatizah constitutes one of the three significant pillars of the community (apart from professionals and entrepreneurs)" (*Berita Harian* 2020c). They are, he asserted, the bulwark especially in times of crisis not only in matters of religion, but also in the nation's well-being. Such discourse is consistently reported in the Malay press as the recent editorial in *Berita Harian*, the Malay daily, illustrates:

> Our asatizah are an asset of the community and country. Their influence is not only confined to mosques and madrasah. They play an important role in the wider context today as a beacon that illuminates darkness with their guidance for the community

to think rationally and confront complex contemporary challenges. No matter how small their contributions are, even a drop of inspiration and encouragement they provide, goes a long way towards building an Islamic community and a successful and harmonious Singapore (*Berita Minggu* 2020, p. 14).

Context

While the asatizah's pertinent role in facilitating a more satisfactory condition of life for all is certainly undoubted, the constant national spotlight on them is closely intertwined with the rise of religious radicalism and terrorism amongst Muslims in the region, especially since the attack of 9/11. The spate of violence that erupted in the region in its aftermath including the foiled terrorist plot within the country masterminded by Singaporean Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) sympathizers in the name of Islam has conditioned the government's concerns with their implications on the social fabric of Singapore's pluralistic society. Recurrent cases of radicalized Muslims detained for extremist related activities and support rendered to such groups have not alleviated such fear.

In fact, since the country's independence in 1965, concerns have been articulated by the Singapore government over the extent to which the Malay/Muslim community is able to effectively integrate with the nation's development, values and institutions established to safeguard and promote multiculturalism and meritocracy. The community's strong historical, ancestral, ethnic, cultural and religious ties with the region have long been perceived as a factor that may condition conflict of loyalty to the nation in the event of a potential crisis with its predominantly Malay/Muslim neighbours. Furthermore, the pervasive understanding that Malay/Muslims are part of the transnational *ummah* (brotherhood) based on Islam that influences them to think, act or respond to issues in ways that differ from non-Muslims have reinforced the concern. The problem is exacerbated by the community's weaker socio-economic progress relative to the other communities (Lily Zubaidah

1998, pp. 188–89), mainly the Chinese and Indians, despite much improvements in recent decades.

The concern is further fuelled by the rise of religious revivalism in the Muslim world and the region since the 1970s (Muzaffar 1987; Zainah 1987; Azhar 2014). Discomfort and anxiety have been raised over evidence of strong streaks of utopian mentality (Shaharuddin 2005) and neo-fundamentalist (Roy 2004) thinking in religious discourse hitherto unknown. Underlying this is a consistent political motif that challenges or promotes ambivalence towards existing policies, norms and institutions. Persistent themes within this discourse reveal the centrality of the scare and rejection of secularism, the West as "decadent" and in "spiritual crisis", the fallacy of western-based social, political and economic institutions and the quest for an Islamic identity free of western influences. The fixation or yearning for an alternative pristine society or social order presumed to have existed in the early history of Islam is also integral to this phenomenon. Such rhetoric and debates are often couched with unquestioned and often repeated phrases such as "Islamic systems", "Islamic perspective" or "Islamic point of view" (Al-Attas 1993). The emergence of exclusive and authoritarian religious laws and thought by dominant groups in the region witnessed by attitudes towards pluralism and sectarianism has no doubt exacerbated official concerns.

Marked reversals in direction with the tide of revivalism in Singapore have further reinforced long standing perceptions of the community's religiosity and its implications on social cohesion. The growing demands by Muslim parents for their children to be enrolled into madrasah since the 1980s is a case in point. Unlike decades earlier, madrasah came to be seen as providing a safe haven for children and youths against the adverse influence of "secular" knowledge and education system and values. In fact, a segment of the Malay/Muslim community has been making requests to increase the enrolment of madrasah students which has been capped at 400 annually following the debate on compulsory education. For example, in September 2020, some netizens praised newly elected member of parliament Fahmi Aliman, who in his

maiden parliament speech, pledged to uplift the madrasah system (*Berita Mediacorp* 2020). In their Facebook postings, netizens urged the authorities to increase the current quota to 1,000 places. This trend contradicts earlier direction prior to the 1980s when the community moved away from vernacular and religious schools in preference for national schools. It prompted the government to express grave concerns given the performance indicators of madrasah at the national examinations and the impact this has had on its graduates to fit effectively into the demands of a knowledge-based economy. As former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his National Day Rally speech in 1999 asserted, "There are now 4000 students in full-time madrasahs. Many of them dropped out annually. In fact, the majority of them did not get to tertiary levels. That's why I worry that these children may not be adequately prepared for the new economy" (Norshahril 2016, p. 72).

Such concerns posed by the looming threat of Islamist revivalism in the country were compounded by the issue of the *tudung* (headscarf) in a school controversy that erupted shortly after 9/11. It marked another stark episode perceived as demonstrating the uncompromising stance taken by some Muslims against the state to accommodate what they deem as an Islamic teaching which cannot be compromised even though it conflicted with long standing national policy on uniform in school which had not been an issue for Muslims all the while. The demand came under national spotlight again in 2014 when influential religious groups and individuals at the frontline advocated for Muslim women in frontline service sectors, such as nursing and law enforcement, to be allowed to don the headscarf while working. In addition, some Muslims have also urged the government to take a stronger stance against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) and "liberal" Islam. They have taken their campaign to social media, through Facebook discussion groups such as "Suara Melayu Singapura" (The Voice of Malays), "Singapore Muslims for Independent Muis",[3] and "Singapore Muslims Against Liberal Islam". A host of other issues that have emerged within the community also reveal

intolerance among some groups towards Muslims with alternative viewpoints as well as non-Muslims alike. Coupled with arrests and detention of Muslim youths found to be attracted to or supporting transnational radical or violent ideologies legitimized on the basis of Islam such as the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), these episodes have intensified anxieties and concerns of Singapore's leaders.

The sentiment has been further fuelled by episodes revealing the influence of foreign preachers on the community whose teachings were deemed to contain elements offensive to other religions and which transgressed laws devised to protect religious harmony. For example, in 2017, the state sanctioned Imam Nalla Mohamed Abdul Jameel for reciting a prayer during a sermon which condemned Jews and Christians. The prayer was not based on the Quran but supplication transmitted from the past. The imam, who originated from India, was swiftly and publicly reprimanded, fined, and sent back home after he apologized. The ban of two influential foreign Muslim preachers namely Zakir Naik, an Indian national, and Mufti Menk, from Africa, also induced by evidence of insensitivities in their religious thought towards other religions in the propagation of Islam further fuelled persistent concerns of the need for vigilance against religious extremist elements in the country. Though these incidents were not confined to the Muslim community per se, it did not dispel cause for concern.[4] That such episodes were dealt with decisively and swiftly demonstrated the government's non-tolerance for religious teachings that are deemed to impair and threaten harmonious inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations.

Given these developments, it is thus not unexpected that the asatizah have been increasingly seen as a pertinent source of support in facilitating the community's adaptation to the condition of Singapore and its overriding goals and values embedded in the national institutions. The formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group established to counsel radicalized detainees under the Internal Security Act and the Singapore Muslim Identity Project spearheaded by Muis that culminated in the formalization of ten

attributes signifying the cherished values of Singapore's Muslim community are among some of the major initiatives undertaken by the asatizah fraternity in response to the call by the government to promote "moderate" Islam.

However, despite evidence of negative and backward traits of religious thought that impede the well-being of society and the strong potentials for religion to contribute towards their eradication, interest in the nature of the religious training and education received by asatizah and planning for its revaluation that will facilitate their preparedness in fulfilling the roles expected of them are not receiving as much critical attention as they deserve. There is also not much discourse on major factors conditioning the surge in religious education despite challenges that confront Islamic studies graduates during their educational journey and upon their return and the impact of their religious thought and orientations on the well-being of the community and larger society. The problem is compounded by the fact that critical scholarship on the nature of religious studies education especially at the tertiary level for asatizah, hardly exist.

Studies on Religious Education

While there have been some works on religious education emerging in the last two decades, these largely focus on madrasah education in Muslim majority states such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia as well as countries in the Middle East. Serious scholarship on Islamic religious education in Singapore tend to focus mainly on pre-tertiary madrasah education with attention devoted to issues on pedagogy, curriculum, history and state policy implications on madrasah education.[5] Furthermore, though studies on the religious life of the community are mushrooming particularly with the rise of religious revivalism, the impact of this phenomenon on higher religious education obtained by asatizah and vice versa has generally not been the subject of critical review. Substantive scholarship on the nature of Islamic studies institutions, their ramification in moulding the mode of

religious thought of graduates and its impact on the progress of the community and the larger pluralistic society remain wanting as do in-depth studies on the challenges and barriers confronting returning graduates especially in relation to employment prospects and religious development.

Objectives

This book seeks to address these lacunae. It examines the institutions of Islamic higher learning popular among Singapore's religious studies graduates in Southeast Asia and the Middle East and the dominant types of religious orientations that pervade in these institutions. The nature of prevalent religious discourse as a function of dominant religious orientations that prevail within the community propagated via traditional and new media platforms by the asatizah community are also analysed. The implications of such religious outlook on the extent to which the community is able to adapt to the demands and challenges of change will also be addressed. An examination of factors that condition the proliferation of Islamic studies graduates in Singapore, their aspirations and learning experiences abroad both formally and through informal circles, major challenges they encounter during the course of their studies abroad and upon their return including the extent to which they are able to fit into the ever competitive job market of religious sector, are also highlighted to provide a better understanding of the realties confronting the capacity of asatizah and their preparedness in fulfilling the expectations thrusted upon them. The extent to which the concerns of political and community leaders for asatizah reflect the actual thought of asatizah are also touched upon. Equally pertinent, the implications these have on prospects for progress of religious education that can effectively prepare the asatizah to help the community adapt to the demands of rapid change in the value sphere will be highlighted.[6] The book does not attempt to offer a blueprint or formulation for religious educational reform. However, it is hoped that the findings will contribute to providing a deeper understanding of the problems of

Islamic studies education and challenges confronting the asatizah in contributing to the development of the community, their own professional development and the larger society. It is also hoped that the findings will be relevant to policymakers intent on improving the state of Islamic studies education that can strengthen, enhance and promote a progressive religious outlook for the satisfactory condition of society.

Methods

Given the lack of systematic collated data on Islamic studies graduates and difficulties in accessing them, this study utilized primary data obtained from responses to survey questionnaires and focus group discussions involving both religious studies graduates and current undergraduates. In addition, in-depth interviews with religious studies graduates were also conducted. These were complemented by preliminary data obtained from Muis, Pergas and some madrasahs which provided an indication of the dominant universities which the asatizah have graduated from especially those registered under the Asatizah Recognition Scheme. The graduate respondents who participated in the surveys and interviews completed higher religious education mainly in the last two decades. The majority graduated from the more popular Islamic studies universities in Southeast Asia as well as in the Middle East. The inclusion of current undergraduates in this study was to facilitate a better understanding of the extent of continuities in dominant types of religious institutions attended, modes of teaching and learning, the nature of orientations prevalent in these institutions, challenges that confront them in the course of their education abroad as well as changes if any, over time, in all these areas. The focus on the graduates (and undergraduates) avoids entanglement with intra-group debate on who is an asatizah. More importantly, the graduates are the group that will likely form the dominant asatizah in future.

In total, 430 asatizah participated in the surveys, discussions, and interviews. The institutions from which they received religious

studies is a criterion apart from the year they obtained their education. Greater efforts were made to involve the post-1990s graduates because there were significant changes to the madrasah curriculum during this period, including the introduction of compulsory education and the Joint Madrasah System (JMS). Introduced in 2009, three of the six full-time madrasahs participated in this Muis aided scheme, in which Madrasah Al-Irsyad Al-Islamiah offers only primary school education, while Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah and Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah, secondary and post-secondary education. The role assigned to the two secondary schools are also different: Madrasah Aljunied places more weightage on religious education while Madrasah Al-Arabiah focuses on academic subjects (STEM). The other three madrasahs—Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, Madrasah Al-Maarif, and Madrasah Wak Tanjong Al-Islamiah—continue to offer primary, secondary, and post-secondary education.

The purpose of the surveys is to obtain relevant data on the socio-economic profile of graduates including their family's employment status and educational background; factors motivating their choice of religious studies education; basis of selection of institutions of learning and fields of study; their educational experiences abroad; the nature and extent of social/intellectual engagement; intellectual exposure and affiliation; extent of use of social media in developing knowledge on Islam; career aspirations; challenges faced upon returning; and sources of livelihood including barriers to employment. In total, 127 graduates responded to the surveys conducted between 2018 and March 2019. We also surveyed 108 undergraduates on similar issues: 59 per cent of those who responded to the surveys are female students, and 41 per cent males. Furthermore, 26 per cent are currently studying in Al-Azhar University, 27 per cent in Yarmouk University, and 20 per cent in IIUM. Of these, 29 per cent surveyed are majoring in sharia law, and 25 per cent theology.

Between August 2017 and June 2020, a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with current undergraduates in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia. The aim of the FGDs

was to probe more deeply into the survey findings and attempt to gather more data on issues which could not be easily obtained through the surveys. The total number of students interviewed in the FGDs is 140. Of these, 82 are female students. Twenty-eight of them are from Al-Azhar University, 43 from Jordan universities and 11 from IIUM. Data from the FGDs enabled us to compare the learning experience of students with their predecessors, apart from understanding similarities or differences in problems and challenges they encountered during their educational experience.[7]

We followed up the surveys with in-depth interviews with graduates from various Islamic universities. Altogether 49 individuals were interviewed largely through one-on-one sessions. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to obtain more information and a deeper understanding of the lives of the asatizah with a focus on their educational history and factors that influenced it. The extent to which their educational experience has adequately prepared them with relevant skills and knowledge for work and roles in society was also the subject of focus. The advantage of conducting face-to-face interviews rather than FGDs for some is the relative ease in which the participants were able to speak their minds. Seventeen female graduates participated in the interviews. Fourteen of them are Al-Azhar graduates, seven from IIUM, eight from IUM, and the rest from various universities in the region and the Middle East.

Content analysis of religious discourse promoted by dominant asatizah within the community was also conducted. This includes examining their teaching and writings in social media, book publications, sermons, pamphlets, newspaper columns, newsletters, journals and also advertisements in newspapers (for those engaging in business). We also examined closely blogs and Facebook postings in order to understand their mode of thought. Podcasts also attracted our attention as it is now the trend for the graduates to express their views. For those making their livelihood in religious business, newspapers and broadcast media are main channels through which they advertise their religious

services. Examining these sources of information provides insights into the asatizah's dominant orientations and their implications on society. While the impact of education is not the only factor in shaping their religious outlook, this chapter contends that it cannot be overlooked.

Book's Outline

Data from this research are presented in the following manner. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the landscape of Islamic education and compares the traditional, modern, and emerging modes of religious transmission evident in major Islamic institutions today. While in the past, Singaporeans attended boarding schools in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia for their religious training, this is no longer the case today. Since the 1960s, Singapore students consider the Al-Azhar University in Cairo to be the Harvard/Oxford of Islamic studies. The situation is also changing now with more graduates enrolling into universities in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. The latest trend is to enrol into universities in Jordan instead of Al-Azhar. This chapter highlights the different modes of religious orientation that pervade in religious institutions of learning and their ramifications on the nature of religious education that thrive in the Muslim world. It captures competing modes of religious orientations namely traditionalism; revivalism/resurgence and the rise of Islamization of knowledge paradigm; Salafi-Wahhabi orientation and the reformist outlook. Differentiating these modes of thinking at this stage sets the context for understanding the dominant type of religious education impacting local Islamic studies graduates and its ramifications in shaping their perspectives as well as the well-being of the community amid the demands of rapid change.

Chapter 3 presents and discusses the data gathered from the surveys, FGDs, and face-to-face in depth interviews with the graduates. The chapter highlights the graduates' learning journeys, their experiences studying at local madrasah, their struggles while studying overseas, and their challenges searching for jobs

upon they returned. The chapter compares where possible, the experiences of students from the various universities in the Middle East (such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia), and those who had studied in the region (such as Malaysia and Indonesia).

Chapter 4 applies a similar framework to the previous chapter, but focuses on the current undergraduates. This allows one to compare the trajectory of current students, their aspirations and motivations for pursuing Islamic studies, the modes of teaching and learning, the extent and nature of interaction with overseas students, types of support they receive from relevant stakeholders and their intellectual affiliation. Their main concerns upon returning are also explored.

Drawing on data discussed in the previous two chapters, Chapter 5 focuses on challenges and problems faced by the graduates upon their return from overseas. It also discusses the genesis of the conditions that contributed to the current challenges in meeting their expected roles in society, as well as major policies and programmes undertaken by community leaders to resolve their concerns. The chapter also touches on the relevance and effectiveness of current initiatives and policies devised by community stakeholders at addressing these problems.

Chapter 6 analyses dominant religious discourse promoted by the asatizah. It maintains that the asatizah's sense of issues are functions of their religious orientations which reveal swings between traditionalism and revivalism. Their thought and responses to a range of issues such as governance, laws, gender relations and knowledge are analysed to demonstrate the dominance of these religious orientations. While religious education may not be the only factor shaping the asatizah's religious outlook, this chapter contends that it cannot be ignored or overlooked in understanding the asatizah's mode of religious thought. Its overriding aim is to examine the impact of the asatizah's dominant modes of religious thought in preparing the community for the challenges of change and modernization. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes by reflecting on the future of the asatizah and Islamic studies graduates. It also provides some recommendations.

NOTES

1. The advertisement calls for applications to Madrasah Irsyad Zuhri Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah, Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah, and Madrasah Wak Tanjong Al-Islamiah. See, for example, the advertisement in *Berita Harian*, 18 March 2020, for those born between January 2014 and January 2015.
2. See Muis website, "Committee on Future Asatizah", https://www.muis.gov.sg/Our-Services/COFA (accessed 24 February 2020).
3. Muis stands for Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, a statutory board formed in accordance with the Administration of Muslim Law Act (1965). The institution oversees the Malay/Muslim community.
4. In another incident, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) investigated claims about an American Christian preacher Lou Engle who preached intolerant views about Muslims. The speaker was invited to speak in Singapore in 2018; later, he was subsequently banned. In 2019, the authorities rapped a social media personality and her brother for producing a video that insulted the Chinese. Later, in a separate incident, a Chinese actor invited controversy for "brown facing" himself in an advertisement when portraying an Indian character.
5. Read for examples the writings of Intan Azura (2010); Sa'eda (2009); Tan (2009); and Noor Aisha and Lai (2006).
6. Some chose to study in Indonesian universities and Islamic boarding schools, but the numbers are likely to be small. This study should be able to ascertain the exact figures.
7. By now, some of the undergraduates we spoke to have already graduated and returned to Singapore.