Exploring the Potential of Pondok Institutions as an Islamic Spiritual Tourism Product- The Case of Malaysia

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to explore the potentials of developing Pondok Institutions as an Islamic tourism product. Due to Islamic tourism growth, there is a need to diversify Islamic tourism products to cater to Muslim spiritual tourists’ niche market. In order to explore various attributes of Pondok institutions, a series of in-depth interviews with the Pondok operators throughout the country was conducted. The interviews were transcribed and coded into different themes. The research findings revealed four main themes describing Pondok institutions’ potentials as an Islamic spiritual tourism product. These were grouped under distinct themes: tranquility of the Pondok environment, curricula and facilities and services. Based on the Pondok attributes identified in this paper, future studies might focus on the pondok visitors’ characteristics using quantitative study. Exploring the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the Pondok operations might also be conducted.

Keywords: Islamic tourism · Spiritual tourism · Religious tourism

1 Introduction

Islamic tourism is identified as one of the emerging tourism products catering to one of the biggest niche markets in global tourism. The growth of Muslim tourists is unprecedented, and these particular market segment actively participate in halal tourism activities due to increasing access to travel information and the availability of Muslim travel-friendly travel services [2]. It is estimated that there were 1.8 billion Muslims in the world as of 2015, representing 24% of the global population [9]. The number of Muslims also is expected to increase by 70% from 1.8 billion in 2015. With the expansion of the Muslim population worldwide, Islamic tourism is expected to contribute significant economic benefits to Muslim countries and non-Muslim countries. Many countries target Muslim travelers to expand their tourism businesses such as Japan, Taiwan, and other western countries. According to the report on international tourism by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) countries, the demand of Islamic tourism will continue to grow [13]. It is predicted that the market will be worth US$243 billion by 2021. The emergent phenomenon is good for the OIC countries such as Malaysia, United Arab
Emirates, Indonesia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar and these countries are among the top Islamic tourism destinations. Turkey and Malaysia are considered popular Islamic tourism destinations in the world characterized by the diversity of Islamic environments such as the majority of their Islamic populations, the availability of mosques, and serving halal food. As stated by [1], Muslim tourists require special religious, cultural and facilities aligned with the shariah requirements where the industry players need to pay attention for.

The increasing number of Muslim populations globally and Arab countries’ advancement has contributed to the rising trends of Islamic or halal tourism. There is a growing number of literature on the economic potential of Islamic tourism and the need to diversify Islamic tourism products and services [10]. The rise of Islamophobia in many western countries has made it difficult for Muslims to travel and participate in tourism activities. The negative sentiment towards Muslims and its religiosity has changed Muslim tourists’ perception of vacationing in western countries. As a result, there is a shift from the Middle East to the UK and the US, especially after September 11, 2000, to other Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and within Arab countries. The increase in demand for multiple halal products and services and demographic changes within the Islamic community have contributed to new opportunities for diversifying Islamic products and services. The vast potential of Islamic tourism has demanded more products and services in accordance with Islamic beliefs.

This paper presents the potential of Pondok institutions or Islamic religious seminaries to be developed as an Islamic tourism product. As mentioned previously, there is a need to diversify Islamic tourism products that cater to a growing number of Muslim travelers. This paper explains that Pondok institutions particularly in Malaysia can be developed as an Islamic tourism product that caters to growing Muslim travelers interested in learning about the religion. Islamic spiritual tourism is a subset of Islamic and halal tourism that provides an opportunity for tourism marketers to focus and expand on this niche market [4]. This study proposed that Pondok institutions are viable Islamic spiritual tourism products that can be introduced into mainstream tourism given support from the government and the Pondok operators. In order to explore the viability of Pondok to be marketed as one of the Islamic spiritual tourism products, this study conducted empirical research by interviewing selected Pondok operators in various locations in Malaysia. The selected Pondok operators who were also Islamic scholars were inquired about the issues and challenges of marketing their institutions as an Islamic spiritual tourism product.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the related literature and highlight what spiritual or religious tourism is all about. Section 3 briefly explain what is pondok institution from the historical context and how such establishments may attract visitors. Section 4 describes the design of the study and data collection method. Section 5 discusses interesting findings of the study. Finally, Sect. 6 concludes the paper, states the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

The limited literature on Pondok institutions presents these establishments as a traditional Islamic learning institution; however, this paper argues that these establishments can offer attractive spiritual tourism products among Muslim markets. Nowadays, many Muslims travel to different parts of the world to learn Islamic knowledge from various
scholars. For example, in Malaysia, there are multiple annual events organized by local organizations featuring international Islamic scholars from abroad to attract Muslim visitors from Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. Attending such an event may provide spiritual enlightenment to Muslim attendees and allow them to connect with other fellows Muslims from different places. Likewise, most Muslims visit Pondok institutions to learn Islamic knowledge in-depth and get to know other visitors with similar interests. This suits well with the purpose of Islamic tourism proposed by [3] who stated that Muslims travel to achieve a spiritual and social goal. The spiritual goal is to reinforce one’s submission to God’s ways and the social purpose is to encourage and strengthen the bond of silaturrahim (Muslim fraternity) among the Muslim community.

Traditional Pondok institutions are attracting an increasing number of visitors, especially among senior tourists, for learning about Islamic religion and experiencing Islamic values and lifestyles. Visiting Pondok can be for a longer period but also for a few days to learn about Islamic education delivered by Islamic scholars. In Malaysia, Pondok institutions are encouraged to provide rooms and facilities for visitors and promote them as one of the Islamic tourism products. There are many relevant stakeholders involved in Islamic spiritual tourism such as public and private tourism providers, accommodation providers, and various Islamic institutions and madrassas [5]. Pondok institutions are one of the Islamic educational institutions that can be developed and eventually marketed as one of the Islamic tourism products. In Malaysia, various traditional Pondok institutions are undergoing continuous adaptation and change demanded by the government to maintain their survival. The government has decided to transform a selected number of Pondok institutions to be developed as Edu-tourism as part of the Islamic tourism diversification strategy. According to the Ministry of Tourism, the Islamic Tourism Center (ITC) has been instructed to identify several Pondok institutions in the country that are ready to accept visitors from abroad to attend short courses and offer accommodations for them during their study there. As suggested by the ministry, the institutions should also provide Islamic curricula that would be of interest to overseas visitors.

2 What is Spiritual or Religious Tourism?

The growth of the interest among tourism academics in spiritual tourism is not new. The various international conferences organized and journal publications about the area indicate that spiritual tourism is getting a place within the academic tourism circle [6]. Many factors have led to the emergence of rapid growth in spiritual tourism. These factors include the increasingly hectic pace of living, high stress levels among the workforce, and the resultant desire to slow down, simplify, and find meaning in life [14]. The term religion and spirituality are highly debated but conceptually, there is common agreement among many scholars that both religion and spirituality are closely related [15]. From the western perspectives, religious tourism is about visiting sacred places for worshipping, spirituality and devotion which include visiting places like English Cathedrals, temples and others and visiting religious buildings or sites to study about the historical, architectural and artistic elements of the building itself [7]. However, in Islam, the concept of spiritual or religious tourism is classified into different categories which include performing hajj or umrah, rihla, ziyara and musafir. Hajj is the obligatory
(if possible) visits for all Muslims to Mecca once in their lifetime whereby *umrah* is not compulsory. *Umrah* can be performed throughout the year, while *hajj* has to be performed on the 9th and 10th of Zulhijjah, the last month of the Islamic calendar. According to [11], historically, *Rihla* is a Muslim’s long and risky journey searching for knowledge, and Muslim travellers will normally make oral or written comprehensive reports on their travel experiences. *Ziyara*, is described as a Muslim’s journey to visit friends and family, mausoleums and historical places. *Ziyara* is also performed for spiritual healing by meeting with famous Islamic scholars or attending religious festivals and seminars to strengthen Islamic knowledge. In short, Muslims travel to perform *Hajj, Umrah, Rihla* or *Ziyara* can be classified as an Islamic spiritual tourist [4].

Based on the above explanation about religious tourism, Pondok institutions may be suggested as an ideal place for Muslims to perform *Ziyara or Rihla*. By attending Pondok institutions for a specific period of time listening to the face-to-face lecture from tuan guru or grandmaster, that person may reflect about being a true Muslim. While staying at the Pondok with no contact from the outside world, such as the internet and mass media, people can focus on religion and seek meaning in their lives. Presently, Pondok institutions are not opened for non-Muslims. Visitors are only among Muslims who want to learn about basic knowledge of Islam such as reading Quran, Tauhid, Fiqh and Tasawuf. Learners also will be exposed to other subjects such as Quranic interpretations, eloquent recitation, traditions of the prophet Muhammad pbuh, jurisprudence and others. The text used is written in original Jawi Malay by Islamic scholars who received Islamic education in Mecca. Each Pondok student is required to purchase the text and to get ready in front of the tok guru or grandmaster for talaqqi (face to face) session. The teacher will read and explain sheet by sheet and any question raised about a particular topic will be explained in detail.

3 What is Pondok Institution?

Pondok institution is a traditional Islamic education school in Malaysia. The institutions are historically significant to the Muslim community in Malaysia. The spread of Islam in Southeast Asia in the 15th century resulted in more education centered on religion among society [8]. The central role of Pondok institution is to provide religious instruction and also in deepening the community’s understands of Islam. Moreover, it is closely related to the Malay-Muslim identity and often acts as the axis of the Malay social life. Traditional features in Pondok education has become one of the tourist attractions for religious travelers. These institutions are currently able to attract visitors as far from Cambodia, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. Pondok education is very popular among people in Kelantan, Kedah and Penang.

The word Pondok (literally: hut) is an Arabic word *alfunduq* meaning ‘residential house, hostel or house. It is also defined as accommodation for three or four students in a form of small houses. Pondok system also is popular in Indonesia and it is known as ‘pesantren’ meaning religious students. Based on the definition provided by Kamus Dewan (a Malay Dictionary), pondok means ‘madrasah’ (school) or hostel which is as a place to learn about Quranic recitation and religious knowledge. In the traditional pondok systems, everyone can apply to learn about Islam under the supervision of tuan guru or
grand master. The religious experience and Islamic environment provided by Pondok is very interesting indeed. The method of teaching practiced by Pondok institution is unique. Students are seated in a semi-circle holding a selected religious texts or *kitab* and listened attentively from *Tok Guru* (religious teacher). There will be different sessions during the day and each session may take around 2–3 h. The learning process was slow and could extend over ten years. The same pedagogy of teaching is also practiced at Masjid Al Haram in Mecca and should the students wanted to further their studies in Mecca, they would face little difficulties adjusting their learning style [8].

In Malaysia, Pondok institutions are identified as one form of Islamic tourism products, to attract Muslim visitors locally and also from other countries that have Islamic populations such as Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand and Brunei. According to the Tourism, Arts and Culture ministry, pondok institutions are identified as one of the tourism attractions. Such institutions has high potential to attract tourists and students alike to learn about Islamic knowledge. Islamic Tourism Center (ITC), an agency established under the ministry, is responsible for implementing the initiatives to enhance Islamic tourism activities in the country. Generally, pondok institutions offer visitors a unique experience including traditional Islamic learning, special Islamic events, and getting to know Muslims from different parts of the world. Many pondoks have their own mosques for visitors to pray and learn about Islamic knowledge and they also rent small houses to stay. A visit to a Pondok institution is often a spiritual experience for visitors. They only focus on learning about Islamic knowledge from qualified religious scholars and have more time to reflect and contemplate upon their beliefs.

Many Pondok institutions, particularly those established in the 19th still retain much of the traditional Islamic education values by offering Islamic taught subjects that attract many students to pursue their studies on Islam. These Pondok institutions or hut institutions and madrassah emerged in the Malay peninsula, particularly in Kelantan, Kedah, Perak and Penang towards the end of the 19th century after the second world war [12]. Pondok institutions contribute important roles in expanding Islamic teachings and therefore they attract many visitors to learn about Islamic teachings and experience Islamic environment from traditional perspectives. A number of Islamic scholars manages Pondok institutions and these scholars also teach part time in state mosques and plan activities of the pondoks in their respective area. These scholars even live nearby pondoks closure to the mosque and they normally do not earn a fixed monthly salary. However, many people give charity to the pondoks. Therefore, the amount of money provided through charity helps to pay the scholars and fund some of the activities organised by a mosque and religious gatherings such as the celebration of the blessed Prophet Muhammad SAW birthday. Visitors are allowed to stay at one of the huts for a small fee and they have the opportunity to learn multiple Islamic subjects such as Islamic law, Qur’anic recitation, life history of the prophet and interpretation of tradition.

Nowadays, according to the list provided by the Center of Pondok Development, there are ninety-five Pondok institutions available throughout the country (Table 1). The increased numbers of Pondok institutions in Malaysia are among the evidence that Pondok education is still relevant among Islamic communities. At the same time, Pondok institutions also may serve as a tourism destination for visitors who want to seek Islamic
knowledge and heal their spirit by meeting with the Islamic scholars at various Pondok locations in the country.

Table 1. Number of Pondok Institutions by States in Malaysia

| State          | Number of Pondok Institutions |
|----------------|-------------------------------|
| Kelantan       | 39                            |
| Terengganu     | 12                            |
| Kedah          | 27                            |
| Pahang         | 6                             |
| Perak          | 1                             |
| Negeri Sembilan| 2                             |
| Melaka         | 2                             |
| Selangor       | 3                             |
| Johor          | 3                             |
| Total          | 95                            |

4 Methodology

This study aims to explore the potential of Pondok institutions to offer Islamic tourism religious products as part of Islamic tourism in Malaysia. To achieve this objective, this study involved observation and in-depth interviews with six well-established Pondok operators operating in multiple states in the country. The interviews discussed the issues and challenges faced by the operators in managing their pondoks and identification of pondoks attributes to effectively market the institutions as an Islamic spiritual tourism product. The interviewees selected for this study were among Pondok scholars who also in charge of planning the Pondok activities. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted at respective pondoks located in the states of Kelantan (3 institutions), Kedah (2 institutions) and Penang (1 institution). In order to capture data effectively, the interviews were audio-recorded with verbal permission from each interviewee. Each interview lasted at least 60 min.

In order to explore the opportunities and potentials for Pondok operators to offer spiritual tourism products that can attract visitors to their institutions, the following questions were asked from the participants:

- What are the facilities and services provided to the visitors?
- How unique is Pondok institution compare to other Islamic learning institutions?
- Have you developed specific courses or activities that may attract visitors?
- Would you be interested in promoting your institution as one of the Islamic tourism products?
- Have you received any visitors from other countries?
As noted above, this research aims to identify various Pondok attributes that can be developed to transform the institutions as an Islamic tourism attraction. Therefore, it focuses on Pondok institutions available in the state of Kelantan, Kedah and Penang. Based on the list provided by the center of Pondok development, there are ninety-five Pondok currently operated in the country. A total of six pondoks agreed to participate in this study and the details are as follows (Table 2):

Table 2. List of Pondok Institutions approached for in-depth interviews

| Pondok Institution                                      | Location                        | Years of establishment |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Center of Pondok Education (Islamic Foundation Kelantan-YIK) | Kandis, Bachok, Kelantan        | 2005                   |
| Madrasah Diniah Bakriah                                | Pasir Tumboh, Kota Bharu, Kelantan | 1954                   |
| Madrasah Ar Rahmaniah Ad Diniah                        | Lubuk Tapah, Pasir Mas, Kelantan | 1931                   |
| An Nadhoh Foundation                                   | Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang   | 2003                   |
| Pondok Bandar Hilir                                    | Sik, Kedah                      | 1992                   |
| Madrasah Ar Rahmaniah                                  | Sik, Kedah                      | N/A                    |

5 Findings and Discussion

Based on the interviews with the management of the Pondok institutions, the following important attributes are identified in order to establish the institutions as an Islamic tourism attraction:

Experience the Tranquillity of Pondok Environment
When asked about why people might be interested to visit Pondok Institutions, most participant mentioned that most people visit pondok institutions to learn about Islamic religious knowledge and at the same time to experience the tranquillity of pondok environment. In Malaysia pondoks are commonly located far away from the city in a peaceful countryside where life is simple, communities are close-knit in a village setting area. Therefore, visiting Pondok and staying there for a period of time is a spiritual experience particularly for those who want to reflect one’s identity and to strengthen their faith.

Curricula Contents
One of the factors that attract visitors are the design of curricula and learning experiences provided by pondok institutions. One of the participants mentioned that the traditional ways of teaching Islamic using reference resources in the form of old (yellowish) texts written in original Jawi Malay attract visitors especially elderlies and young students. Grand master or Tok Guru is responsible for teaching where students are gathered in
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Facilities and Services
When asked about the potential of pondok to attract more visitors, most participants seemed excited to receive those visitors. Some of the participants mentioned that certain hotels and local travel agencies are interested to collaborate with them in designing travel packages. However, they pointed out that more visitors meaning more facilities and services needed. Most of the participants mentioned that more funding is needed to increase number of rooms, hostels and other relevant accommodation as well as eating places to get ready for large number of visitors. Participants also stated that they need to recruit more religious teachers and to convince them to stay around pondok area should they increase the number of visitors.

6 Conclusion
This paper reports the research findings on the potential of Pondok institutions in Malaysia to be developed as a spiritual tourism product. Based on the evidence from the in-depth interviews with six Pondok operators in the country, the potential of Pondok institutions or Islamic religious seminaries to be developed as a spiritual tourism product is very promising. All the operators seem to agree to the suggestion of opening up their institutions to the wider market. They also appear to support marketing Pondok as a tourism destination more extensively, especially through the internet to reach for a broader audience. However, most of the institutions are still lacking in terms of basic facilities such as accommodation, classrooms and the number of religious teachers. The Pondok’s management structure is also not clear seems most of the Pondok are managed and run as a family-owned institution. It is difficult for the management to make decisions if the owner is not available. From the Pondok operators’ point of view, they are interested in promoting their Pondok institutions to spread Islamic religious knowledge to society. However, due to the financial constraints and lack of human resources such as religious teachers, they seem not convinced in promoting Pondok institutions as a religious tourism product. Pondok operators also need to improve the way they manage the institutions. The operators must commercialize the institutions by doing marketing and educating more people to seek Islamic religious knowledge. Based on the demand for specific courses taught at Pondok, the operators should develop tourism packages in collaborating with other tourism organizations such as travel agencies and hotels. It is hoped that Pondok institutions may contribute to the success of the growing Islamic tourism demand and to become one of the popular Islamic tourism products.

Covid-19 pandemic has seriously impacted the growth of travel and tourism industry as people are not allowed to travel conveniently. At the time of this writing, international
travel is not resumed completely. Similar to other countries, Malaysia has to rely on domestic market to sustain its tourism sector. In the context of Islamic religious tourism, there is a need to develop a framework or guidelines to avoid too many visitors crowded the area of interest at one time. Mass gathering in the mosque is also not allowed unless there is standard operating procedures is followed. As a result, pondok operators are required to establish a new norm for visitors such as to maintain physical distancing during congregational prayers and to keep at least 1 m distancing among congregants. The class setting also need to change to reflect with the standard operating procedures as required by the Ministry of Health, Malaysia. Future research should focus on the acceptance of these new norms and the compliant level among visitors especially during this Covid-19 pandemic or post-Covid 19 recovery.

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