Rahmah El Yunusiah:  
Pioneer of Islamic Women Education in Indonesia, 1900 – 1960’s

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ABSTRACT: Rahmah El Yunusiah is one of the figures and fighters for the Indonesian women. Rahmah El Yunusiah (REY) was born on December 20th, 1900 in the city of Padang Panjang, West Sumatra District, a small town in the western part of Indonesia. In the history of Indonesia, REY is known as the founder of the “Perguruan Diniyah Putri” or Ladies Religion School in Padang Panjang which is quite famous. The school still exists up to the present and has produced thousands of alumni who are scattered in various regions in Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. The success of REY in managing the school was apparently supported by several things, among others, the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system. Women as mothers or “Bundo Kanduang” have a kinship system and the freedom to carry out their ideals. With the properties owned by REY, she successfully managed to establish the school. Until her death in 1969, REY still remained faithful to maintain the existence of the school she started. Currently, the Ladies Religion School has various levels of education starting from kindergarten to university.

KEY WORDS: Rahmah El Yunusiah, position and roles the women, Minangkabau matrilineal system, and Islamic education institution.

INTRODUCTION

Rahmah El Yunusiah is one of the figures and fighters for the Indonesian women. Rahmah El Yunusiah (here and after abbreviated as REY) was born on December 20th, 1900 in the city of Padang Panjang in West Sumatra district, a small town in the western part of Indonesia. In the history of Indonesia, REY is known as the founder of the Ladies Religion School (Perguruan Diniyah Puteri) at Padang Panjang which is quite famous. This school still exists to this day and has produced thousands of alumni who are scattered in various regions in Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia.

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REY came from the Minangkabau ethnic families (here in after referred to the Minang ethnic/tribal) that embraces the matrilineal system (based on maternal lineage). In theory, the position of women in this matrilineal system is respected, in which the kinship system is centered on women (Alfian, 2010a:44). The lineage based on the mother’s lineage means that all kinds of rights and obligations within the family accounted for only through the mother’s lineage. The child’s tribes are taken from the mother’s tribe. The rights over properties are held by women as the owners, while the right of maintaining these properties belongs to the brothers as the managers (Subekti ed., 2007:44). According to some anthropologists, it is said that the system adopted by the Minang community is very unique (Kato, 2005).

In line with his function and duty, the brother who is called Mamak represents the family. His duty is to look after the family, to guide them, and takes care after the children of his sister physically and spiritually, including managing the products of the family’s properties and solving all kinds of conflicts which might arise among the members of the family (Mansoer, 1970:8-10).

Matrilineal lineages contain high favor values, meaning that every Minang human being honors their mothers/women, protects them, and treat them not arbitrarily. One of the fairy tales or folktales which is quite popular in the Minangkabau society is the Malin Kundang. In this story, it is told that Malin Kundang which has just came back from overseas (merantau) with a beautiful wife and wealth has no longer recognized his poor birth mother in the village. When his mother heard that Malin Kundang was back to the village (hometown), she then came to pick up her son at the port. But what happened was that Malin Kundang apparently did not recognize his mother anymore because he was ashamed to have a mother who was poor and dirty. With feelings of sadness and melancholy, the mother prayed and asked God to prove whether or not the boy who arrived was her son. Then the mother said “If the boy who arrived is really her son (Malin Kundang), please change him into a stone”. It turns out that the mother’s praying was answered, the perfidious Malin Kundang was then changed into a stone (Alfian & Anwar, 1983:7).

The main message to be conveyed by these stories is story that the position of the mother or the woman is very noble. A child should not fight against disobey and hurt his mother. This is the ideal position of a mother/woman. The position of a mother/woman is also implanted through the religious values of Islam, as an expression which says that “heaven is under the mother’s feet”. For the Minangkabau society, which is known as a devout Moslem, such a teaching has very deep meaning (Alfian & Anwar, 1983:8).
Traditions has taught all Minangs to have a sense of respect towards women because they are the ones who gave birth to human beings; therefore, it is not right for someone to treat women badly or dishonor them, especially their own mother.

ON THE EDUCATION IN MINANGKABAU SOCIETY

The Minangkabau society is very strict in carrying out their social principles; strict to follow the Islamic religion, the habit to leave their families and hometown. For outsiders, this tradition looks like a puzzle, a paradox which probably makes people confused. They are strong believers of the Moslem religion, but their marriages are patrilineal; at the other side, they carried out the matrilineal system. Although they are very mobile, they are very faithful in keeping their strong ethnic identity which is deeply rooted in their homeland (Azra, 2008).

Historically, the Minang society has experienced education long before the Etische Politiek in 1899 was introduced by Mr. van Deventer. In 1873, for example, a school was already established in Bukittinggi named Sekolah Raja (the Prince School); it was a secondary high school which graduated government officials like attorneys. This school also had a very important role in developing the Malay language because van Ophuysen, who was the person who formulated the spelling of the Malay language, was also a teacher there (Mansoer, 1970:69).

Except for the formal school, like Volksschool, Vervolgschool, and Raja School, the society of Minangkabau since the past was also taught in the Surau. The Surau as a “local genius” in the collective memory of the Minang society which has graduated a number of big spiritual scientist, who not only played an important role in the field nationality but they also protected the uniqueness of the Minang social traditional culture (Azra, 2008:561).

The schools established a new social group in the Minang society, i.e. the intellectuals. They were the persons who later formulated, pioneered, and struggled for the Indonesian independence. They were the persons who later built the schools and educational institutions and accepted indigenous students. The Adabiah School was, for the example, an Islamic school which education was like in the Surau, sitting on the floor without a table to write, they sit down like when reading the Qur’an. Since 1909, this system changed and was modernized. Besides the Adabiah School, there was Diniyah School established in 1915 by Zainuddin Labay, a brother of Rahmah El Yunusiah (REY); and the INS (Inlandse Normaal School) Kayutanam which was under the management of M. Syafei and established in October 1926 (Depdikbud, 1981).
In general, the Minang’s society who were successful mentally and physically after a process to become matured individuals by having experience leaving their home or hometown for a certain period is called *merantau*. This activity has become a tradition for a long time. *Merantau* means leaving the hometown to obtain knowledge, to get famous and wealth. This leaving the hometown phenomena has attracted many people like the intellectuals, for example. According to Mochtar Naim (1969), leaving the hometown gives them many profits like knowledge, experience, and wealth; and *merantau* also is an initiation rite which can be found in Minang aphorism:

*Ka rantau madang di hulu
Babuah babungo balum
Merantau bujang dahulu
Di rumah baguno balum* (cited by Alfian, 2010b).

This aphorism suggests to young Minang to leave the hometown first before obtaining a formal position in society or before to become success. On the contrary, for the women to stay at home is an ideal attitude as “*a limpapeh rumah nan gadang*” (she decorates the big house).

In the records of the Indonesian history, the Minang society has extended an important contribution to the Indonesian nation-state. At the end of 19th century, a Minang religious lecturer like Syaikh Ahmad Khatib al-Minangkabawi also enriched the archipelago Moslem thought. He was followed by a generation of ulemas and reformist thinkers who played an important role to instigate the reformist and modernist Islamic movement like Haji Abdul Karim Amarullah (Haji Rasul), Abdullah Ahmad, Zainuddin Labay Yunusi, and Rahmah El Yunusiah.

Furthermore, Minang people who became involved in the Indonesian national struggle in the independent movement like Haji Agus Salim, Mohamad Hatta, Sutan Syahrir, Muhammad Yamin, and Tan Malaka. Those names are a pride in the collective historical memory of the Minang ethnicity up to the present (Azra, 2008:551-552).

**THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN MINANGKABAU SOCIETY**

When seen from the Minangkabau’s point of view, mothers who give birth or *Bundo Kanduang* have a very high position. It can be seen from the phrase/expressions below:

*Bundo Kanduang, limpapeh rumah nan gadang, umbun puruak pagangan kunci, umbun puruak aluang bunian, pusek jalo kumpulan tali, sumarak di dalam kampuang, hiasan dalam nagari, nan gadang basa batuah, kok hiduiak tampek banasa, kok mati*
The purpose of these expressions shows that a *Bundo Kanduang*, or the oldest woman in their family, have the some special features which are: (1) *Bundo Kanduang as Limpapeh Rumah nan Gadang*, meaning that women are the central pole in a house or building, a place to focus all the energy of other poles. If the main pole collapsed, then others will go down with it; (2) *Bundo Kanduang as Umbun Puruak Pagangan Kunci*, meaning that when a Minang woman is married, her duty increases as a wife with properties of wisdom, solemnity, and reverence as well as “tired feet, light handed” or diligent/clever; (3) *Bundo Kanduang as Pusek Jalo Kumpulan Tali*, meaning that women are household managers, the source of determining good or bad in their family members; (4) *Bundo Kanduang as Sumarak Dalam Nagari*, meaning that women are members of the society, without them there is no society because it is missing its elements. Without women, families or countries will not be vibrant; (5) *Bundo Kanduang as Nan Gadang Basa Batuah*, meaning that a woman is a symbol of pride and glory who starts of the offspring the raises and to be respected, nurtures, and the keep them away from religious and traditional restrictions (Subekti ed., 2007).

According to the Minangkabau customs, the *Bundo Kanduang* have equal voting rights with men in deliberations. Women’s voice and opinion will determine the smoothness of a work that will be performed. The Minang tradition that supports the equality between men and women is “*duduak samo randah, tagak samo tinggi*” which means that there are equal relationships between men and women, and it is not a hierarchy.

Minang women are also required to be independent. Not economically dependent on others. She should be able to manage her own life, so as not to burden others. Minang women are famous to be tenacious. They can work in fields, trade, sow, and do embroidery. They are also involved in breaking the ice on problems faced by their families and are willing to work hard for her family. Their independence are reflected in the quote below:

* Nan dikatokan parampuan,  
  namuah bajariah bausaho,  
  pandai malukih manarawang,  
  pandai maukia jo batanun,  
  tahu disuri mato karok,  
  tahu di batang rabah tagak,  
  arif bijaksano digunokan,  
  kok tak pandai bak kian,  
Meanings from the above quote are that Minang women should be aware of not only their ability, but also should be given the opportunity to develop the potential within them. In the Minang traditional life, which respected the women, a female character should be smart enough and tough. After witnessing injustice against her people (women) and social inequality in her society increase sharply, then Rahmah El Yunusiah (REY) thought that women should step forward because they have an important role in life. Therefore, education for women is absolute, not just limited to formal education and religion but also education related to skills and duties of women in general.

**THE ROLES OF RAHMAM EL YUNUSIAH**

Rahmah El Yunusiah (REY) grew up in an environment with customs and strict Islamic religion. Since childhood, REY never enrolled in primary school. She learned to write and read from her two brothers, Zainuddin Labai El Yunusiah and Muhammad Rasyad. REY who liked to read gained knowledge from her brother’s private library (Zainuddin Labai) with many different languages namely Dutch, German, French, and Arabic (Rashad, 1982:137). The readings were very helpful to REY in understanding a range of knowledge and improved her knowledge and intellectuality.

Since the age of 10 years, REY was pleased to attend and listen to the recitations of the mothers (women) in the *Surau* in the city of Padang Panjang. Through this activity, she gained knowledge about Islam, especially related to women issues such as marriage laws, divorce, and women roles in the society. This activity continued until she reached adulthood.

In 1915, REY enrolled in the *Perguruan Diniyah Putri* (Ladies Religion School) managed by her brother, Zainuddin Labai. Because of her high literacy ability and intellectual skills, REY was then accepted directly in the third grade. At the *Perguruan Diniyah Putri*, REY gained much practical knowledge regarding the association as well as the variety of human nature. From the introduction of a variety of existing characters, she then began to realize about herself and her environment, especially those associated with the presence of women. Various questions arose in her mind that could not be solved. According to REY, almost every facet of life has something to do with women and it is necessary to peel deeply in order women could understand their rights and obligations. Her thoughts were not acquired at the college where she studied, and this made her feel unsatisfied (Anonymous, n.y).

Her feelings of un-satisfaction were discussed with her three girlfriends: Rasuna Said, Nanisah, and Djawana Basjir; so, they agreed to increase their
knowledge of religion in the Surau Jembatan Besi which is a famous place to gain knowledge in religion in West Sumatra at that time. Actually, the Surau which was under Sheikh Haji Abdul Karim Amarullah only educated young men. Nevertheless, REY and her three friends who tried hard to register as students were accepted. This was the first time for a Surau to accept female students. This was most likely due to one of the four women, REY – who is a sister of Labai Zainuddin – is the founder Diniyah School (Rashad, 1982:66).

Although she had gained in-depth studies in religion such as Fiqih, Sufism, Tawhid, and the History of Islam in the Surau Jembatan Besi from the great scholars, she was not yet satisfied. She did not find many problems associated with women during her studies in the Surau; so, she then appealed to Sheikh Haji Abdul Karim Amarullah to give her private lessons at her home. Here, REY explored the problems of religion and women, in addition to Arabic, Fiqih, and Usul Fiqih. In the private lessons, REY could discuss about anything, especially relating to religion and the role of women. Here, she felt a certain satisfaction and found what she was looking for (Anonymous, 1978).

The results of the discussions she obtained from Sheikh Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah, REY concluded that male teachers seemed less open in discussing issues on religion related to women. This is due to the presence of men and women in one class (co-education). Therefore, REY thought that a religious education institute for women was needed and should be separated from men (Abdullah, 1971).

**RAHMAH EL YUNUSIAH AND PERGURUAN DINIYAH PUTRI**

Aware of the injustices suffered by women and the presence of social inequality in society, Rahmah El Yunusiah (REY) planned to establish a special school for women. According to her, women have an important role in life. Women are the educators of children who will continue with in their next life. Therefore, education for women is a requirement a necessity. Besides formal and religious education, education related to skills and tasks of women should also be given (Alfiand ed., 2006).

REY wanted a school for women students only and separated from the males. To make her dreams realized, REY took the initiative to look for a different model of school different from Perguruan Diniyah School which was founded by her brother and the place when she studied. Her intention was conveyed to her brother, Zainuddin Labai, and her friends joined in Diniyah School Students Union, a Diniyah student organization. Zainuddin Labai and her friends approved her ideas and thoughts (Rashad, 1982).
On 1st of November 1923, her ideals were realized in the founding of Perguruan Diniyah Putri (Ladies Religion School) in Padang Panjang. In the first year, the school led by REY has had 71 students consisting of mothers and young women. Initially, the education took place in the Mosque of Pasar Usang. This school aimed to establish an Islamic religion school for women and to form the competent, active, and responsible educators for the family, welfare home, and community welfare. The school which is now called Perguruan Diniyah Putri is continuing to develop physically and mentally, curriculum, and education programs. The school, which began in the form of a Madrasah, was later developed as a modern education institution by integrating in the education and formal education religious sciences, including extra-curricular activities such as weaving, plaiting, sports, and music (Rashad, 1982:2).

Other developments occurring were in the field of teaching methods. Initially using the Surau traditional methods, by sitting cross-legged on the floor facing the teacher’s desk, then, using modern methods like other schools. More improvements were made on the staffs. Originally, there were only 4 female teachers, now female and male teachers are teaching according to their field of expertise. With this, the knowledge gained by the students becomes more complete (Anonymous, 1978).

The education institution of the Perguruan Diniyah Putri (Ladies Religion School) gave priority to the education at all aspects; it did not make any other affiliation like with socio-political or any religious organization. This was the reason why this education institution was offered to join the Muhamadiyah Islamic organization which to change the name from “Perguruan Diniyah Putri” into “Asyiah School” or “Fatimiyah School”. In this context, REY refused in a friendly way. The independent character of REY made her also refused to teach politics in this school. According to REY, if the school was under a certain party or another social organization, it would probably endanger the continuity of the school (Rashad, 1982).

During the Dutch colonization, REY professed a non-cooperative policy. Aids or subsidy were time and time again offered to her by the colonial Dutch government which always was refused. She also was active in opposing the laws against Undang-Undang Sekolah Liar or Wilde Schoolen Ordonantie (Act of Illegal School), which according to her was very restraining. The Dutch government seeing the stubborn attitude of REY was very worried if this school will create militant freedom fighters and would be against the government (Abdullah, 1971).

The number of students were increasing with the advanced and development of the school. In the beginning, the students only came from
the city of Padang Panjang and surrounding areas; now they come from other parts of Indonesia such as Aceh, Medan, Tapanuli, Jambi, Palembang, Lampung, Jakarta, and Sulawesi, and some even from Singapore and Malaysia. This indicates that the school is successful in educating their students. This school has become a sample which is, then developed in more affluent areas and expressed as a branch of the Perguruan Diniyah Putri. According to the words of managers, the Rector of Al-Azhar University in Egypt, Sheikh Dr. Abd. Rahman Taj, during a visit to this university in 1956, he expressed his admiration towards the school. Six years later, in 1962, Al-Azhar University established a “Khalliyatul Banat”, a school which is the same type as the Perguruan Diniyah Putri or Ladies Religion School (Rashad, 1982:9).

The admiration of Sheikh Dr. Abd. Rahman Taj partly is because the school was founded and managed by a woman and used the modern educational system. In general, religious institutions founded and run by men are not the same as the one he had seen in Minangkabau, Indonesia. As a reward, Rahmah El Yunusian (REY) was invited visit to the University of Al-Azhar in 1957. During the visit, REY was awarded the degree Syaikhah by the university, which is the highest degree that is usually only extended to male religious scholars (Sheikh). Similarly, the admiration of Prof. G.H. Bousquet from the University of Algiers. Before Prof. G.H. Bousquet began his lecture, he asked his disciples in what language should it be given, in Dutch or English, the students replied in unison in “English”. He did not expected that the college students were proficient in English, as at that time the Dutch language was the most popular (Anonymous, n.y.:43).

The success of REY in managing the school is apparently supported by several things, among others the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system. Women as mothers or Bundo Kanduang hold the kinship system and have the freedom to carry out their ideals. With the wealth owned by REY, she has successfully managed to establish the Perguruan Diniyah Putri. She did not hesitate to take off and sell the jewelries she wore for the fund to start the school. In fact, she spent most of the rice fields, farms, and fish ponds to support the need for supplement the school facilities (Anonymous, 1978).

REY only requested the help of her family when she realized that she could not solve the financial problems of the educational institution. This request took place in 1928, at the time she faced a deficit when she was making a new building and other educational facilities. The cost for the building were estimated about 7,000 Dutch Gulden; and this she could not obtain through selling her belongings, so she then borrowed 2,000 Dutch
Gulden from Abdul Gani who was a great businessman (great trader) and returned the loan in installments (Rasyad, 1982:12).

The main characteristic of the school was the goals to be accomplished, these were to prepare, the ladies to be educators in their own households and to be responsible for the welfare of the people and homeland. When compared with similar religious institution, generally, they were only aimed at educating mission interpreters and religious scholars. In addition, the curriculum materials were not only concerned with the subject of Islam and the Arabic language itself, but also the general subjects, primarily related to skills such as handicrafts, sewing, and other family education.

Another distinctive feature is the system of education that combines education, household, and dorm. All students that are accepted at this school must live in the dormitories that have been provided. Boarding is not just a place to live, but also as a place to do activities that can support the school curriculum. Students are not allowed to leave the dorms for no apparent reason. If there was an important reason, they have to obtain written permission from the caretaker of the dormitory. Arguably speaking, the system used in this school is quite rigorously, it aims to enforce discipline to the students.

CONCLUSION

From the above description, it is evident that Rahmah El Yunusiah (REY) has shown that education to achieve progress have to start from oneself. REY did not wait for others to teach her but she herself looked for knowledge from others and try to learn by her own (self-taught). Therefore, the existence of REY as the pioneer and a fighter for the religious education of her people is not doubted. She was very consistent with the struggle to defend and develop women capacities. Until her death in 1969, REY still remained faithful to maintain the existence of the school she started. Now Perguruan Diniyah Putri (Ladies Religion School) has various levels of education starting from kindergarten level to the university. REY succeed in managing the school was proven from the awards she received, among others were Doctor H.C. (Honoris Causa) from Al-Azhar University in 1957 and the Bintang Mahaputra Adipradana from President B.J. (Baharuddin Jusuf) Habibie in 1999.

Like other regions in Indonesia, the Minang women also experienced a modernization process, especially in the field of education. This process has motivated the Minangkabau women to get out of a world secluded, the household and take part directly in school life. The awakening movement of women which was pioneered by Kartini in Java influenced the opinion of
women in the Minangkabau. From the beginning of education was only for men, later also for girls. This was proven by the establishment of Perguruan Diniyah Putri in Padang Panjang, West Sumatera, Indonesia.

The educational opportunities for women in Minangkabau had opened the possibility for a high mobility in the geographical, social, and economy, included in political field. For men, mobility is a must to insure their future life, but for women that opportunity is another alternative in their traditional life. The development of education in Minangkabau should be taken as an advantage for the women because it gave them opportunities to develop better; although the social and economic status is actually already established according to the tradition. The function of women is not only limited as Limpapeh Rumah nan Gadang, they have obtained opportunities to go into the professional and political world, so that the Minang women figures emerge as pioneers like Rohana Kudus, Rasuna Said, and Rahmah El Yunusiah (REY) in the field of women religious educational institutions in West Sumatera, which is most probably the oldest in Indonesia. It is not profuse to say that REY is named as the “Kartini of the Islamic educational institution in Indonesia”.

References


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Rahmah El Yunusiah