

# A Brief Overview: Breaking of Islamic Tradition of Education in Malaya<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This article attempts to explore the relationship between Qur'an schools or classes and vernacular Malay schools, as also the metamorphosis of the native educational system into a modern rational institution. This transformation process initially commenced as a personal initiative of some British administrators such as Thomas Stamford Raffles and R. J. Wilkinson, and eventually led to an overhaul of the existing educational system into an organized secular format by the authorities of the British colonial administration around the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The rational basis of the establishment of Qur'an schools or classes was a direct impact of being a Muslim community. After accepting Islam as the 'national religion', Malays initially adopted the Arabic alphabet as their writing script in a common cultural and religious process experienced in almost all Islamic communities around the world. Since Islam is regarded as the source for acquiring practical knowledge in daily community life, Malays established Qur'an schools in order to educate their future generations. In the process, the implementation of this system of education created its own tradition and was internalised within the community. However, the arrival of the British as colonialists altered the scenario somewhat. They were regarded as catalysts in the transformation of Malay society, spearheading their thrust first by making inroads into the existing system of education.

Planned as a short view on the issue, this treatise has a limited focus on general policies, and on some distinguished figures such as Thomas Stamford Raffles, Frank Swettenham and especially Richard J. Wilkinson who are perceived as having taken the initial initiatives on the setting up of Malay vernacular schools. The research is based on the period starting from approximately the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and its direct results on the developments concerning educational transformation until the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The attempts of the aforementioned British officials at social engineering in Malaya, through the establishment of vernacular schools, contributed to the transformation of the traditional Qur'an schools.

**Key Words:** Quran schools/classes, Malay language, vernacular schools, Stamford Raffles

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## 1. INTRODUCTORY PERSPECTIVES

Education in Malaya, just as in many other aspects of Malayan life, is an offshoot of the colonial period. The phenomenon of colonialism is primarily related to direct exploitation of the resources of native countries. Besides that, colonialism itself has an intrinsic transformative power. The colonialists, among whom were missionaries, merchants and administrators, had various types of “intentions, beliefs, hopes and ambitions” which led them to conduct diverse approaches “from the most unscrupulous to the most philanthropic” in their relations with the natives.<sup>2</sup>

The present article argues that there was a transformation of the educational system in Malaya after the British settlers established their own administrative machinery. In this preliminary article, the writer will focus on the intentions and implementations of some leading British administrators that pertain to improving the educational level of native Malays during the colonial period in Malaya. For instance, Thomas Stamford Raffles’ discovery of Singapore Island is regarded as the initial milestone in the transformation of Muslim Malay society. Within a decade, his personal initiative to open a Free School made a dent in the traditional educational life of the Malays. And the last phase of this long and painful process was the implementation of a colonial educational policy which shall be discussed later in this treatise. The subject of the colonial transformation of the educational system is very crucial to understanding the ideology of the British colonial administration towards the reconstruction of the peoples’ social arrangement in Malaya. As a result of this transformation, Muslim Malays acquired a new *weltanschauung*, which may be called an adaptation to modernity, via the new education system.

The transformation of the education system from a religion-based form to the rationalized Western type of education is regarded as a secularization process. Secularization as a phenomenon, and its practical implementation, was imported into Malaya by the British administration as seen in some details mentioned below. Prior to British colonial rule, the form of education was religion-based; the Qur’an schools and *sekolah pondok*, which were more institutionalized. Being Muslim and therefore a part of an Islamic community, various sections of the society, including children of the Royal family, dignitaries, and the general public, were

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<sup>2</sup>Steve Fenton, *Durkheim and Modern Sociology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, p. 125.

exposed to these forms of religious education.<sup>3</sup> This aspect is clearly witnessed in what Lebai Abdul Razak, who taught the Qur'an in Malacca in the very beginning of the 19th century, told Raffles:

*“The guardian of these children direct them to be taught the Qur’an first. And if, after they have acquired it, then they can learn the Malay language. Such is our way. Furthermore it is not the custom of this country that people place importance in learning Malay language”.*<sup>4</sup>

Education was a matter of concern during the colonial era. Though the first initiatives towards the reformation of education commenced in the very early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the actual development and implementation of a streamlined colonial education policy needed to be put on the back-burner until the middle of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

On account of the restrictions of this research, the educational policies of the British administration are discussed in two steps. The first step involves the personal initiatives of some distinctive administrators such as Thomas Stamford Raffles - which later became sporadic attempts to educate the Malay elite at English schools, as witnessed in Raffles' establishment of an educational institution. The other step, which is the central focus of this article, concerns the transformation of Qur'an schools or classes into vernacular Malay schools under the auspices of the Education Inspectorate that was founded in 1872.<sup>5</sup>

British colonialism caused some changes in the restructuring and reproducing of the Malay educational system. Planned as a short view on the issue, this article only provides limited emphasis on leading figures such as Thomas Stamford Raffles, M. Skinner, and R. J. Wilkinson, who have been credited with having taken the initial steps towards establishing Malay Vernacular Schools in the Bahasa Melayu medium, and reproducing classical Malay texts.

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<sup>3</sup>Abdul Razak Baginda-Peter Schier, *Education in Malaysia: Unifying or Divisive?*, Malaysian Strategic Research Centre Konrad-Adenauer Foundation, Kuala Lumpur, 2005, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>Abu Bakar Hamzah, *Al-Imam: Its Role in Malay Society 1906-1908*, Pustaka Antara, Kuala Lumpur, 1991, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup>Frederic Mason, *The Schools of Malaya*, Eastern Universities Press, Singapore, 1959, p. 24; William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, University Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1967, p. 23; Francis Wong Hoy Kee-Gwee Yee Hean, *Perspectives: The Development of Education in Malaysia and Singapore*, Heinemann Educational Books, Kuala Lumpur, 1972, p. 11; Tham Seong Chee, “Negativism, Conservation and Ritualism in Modern Malay Literature”, *Nanyang Quarterly*, Vol. III, Nos. 3&4, December, 1973, p. 15-6.

## II. TRADITIONAL EDUCATION BEFORE BRITISH INFLUENCE

The quality of the original religious education gradually improved in line with the Islamization of Malay society. The first educational facilities were established through the efforts of religious scholars of various degrees who accompanied Muslim traders over the centuries. These distinguished scholars were welcomed both by palace and aristocratic circles, and also by common people.<sup>6</sup> Traditional education in Malaya was explicitly imparted at suraus, masjids, and, additionally, in the home of the *Imam*. Occasionally, homes of distinguished people were also used as centers to impart the traditional form of schooling. Arabic and Qur'anic exegeses were introduced to the younger generation particularly through rote-learning. Since the syllabus was mainly limited to teaching the Qur'an, this educational activity was referred to as Qur'an school or class. In addition, the students were taught a little Malay later, after they had learned to read and write the Qur'an in Arabic.<sup>7</sup>

In some regions of Malaya formal education was indeed conducted in traditional religious seminaries called *pondok*, where the daily life of students was organized wholly around teaching and practice. It might be useful to refer to the *pondok* system as the core source of Malay moral culture, containing not only religious texts but also classical Malay literature. Traditional religious education was conducted at *pondoks* over several generations. '*Pondok*' is a word of Arabic origin, namely '*findûk*' which means accommodation place (*Berarti Tempat Penginapan*).<sup>8</sup>

Sociologically, traditional religious education was in line with the basic needs of the people in rural areas. Taking into consideration the fact that traditional life followed a rustic and pastoral pattern, each village had a religious institution of some kind within its milieu; and it is not exceptional to say that each young boy, starting from the age of six, could attend the local Qur'an classes. It might be assumed that those pupils with abilities and talents could continue their studies in some distinguished *pondok* where they could further their education. As the title suggests, in addition, students were taught how to write in the *Jawi* script, Malay written in Arabic alphabet. M. A. Rauf mentions that there is a possibility that the teaching of the Malay

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<sup>6</sup>M.A. Rauf, "Islamic Education", *Intisari*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Kuala Lumpur, 1965, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup>Francis H. K. Wong, Gwee Yee Hean, *Official Reports on Education in The Straits Settlements and The Federated Malay States 1870-1939*, Pan Pacific Book Distributors, Singapore, 1980, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>Abdul Latif Hamidong, "Institusi Pondok dalam Tradisi Budaya Ilmu", Tan Sri Ismail Hussein-A. Aziz Deraman-Abd. Rahman Al-Ahmadi, (eds.), *Tamadun Melayu*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1993, s. 745.

language was also in the curriculum.<sup>9</sup> Both, foreign ulama and the native religious scholastic cadre, took part in the teaching process. They were able to establish a system of teaching several religious subjects, among which learning how to recite the Qur'an was the prime focus, generation after generation.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, there appears to be no lay school of any kind, whether run by private individuals or under the Sultanate's administration, in the pre-colonial era.

Even though there is scant information regarding the curriculum of these traditional schools, it is known that the most salient aspect of the curriculum was, in fact, the teaching of the basic tenets of Islam. It is assumed, however, that the syllabus included the composition of the basic forms of Islamic education conducted by following some Malay works such as *Masail al Muhtedi*, *Tanbih al Gafilin*, and some others, in addition to the Arabic language and grammar, calligraphy, rote-learning of the Qur'an, Hadith, fiqh, and some classical novels called *Hikayat* relating to history and literature. It appears, from the data contained in colonial educational reports, that no arithmetic, geography, or similar topics, were taught in these institutions. Munshi Abdullah acquaints us with some aspects of traditional religious education in his *Hikayat*. According to him, some capable women taught not only Islamic courses such as the Qur'an, but also the Malay language and some texts from Malay manuscripts, to village girls and boys in Malacca.<sup>11</sup>

### **III. MILESTONES IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

Various steps preceded the introduction of modern education in Malaya. From the reconquest of Penang by the British in 1786 onwards, a new concept of education that took the form of secular or lay schools, was commenced in Malaya. Hitherto, the initiative in education was generally not taken by the government but rather by religious missions and independent groups. Following this paradigm, schools run by missionaries played a leading and restructuring role "in the early evolution and subsequent development of education", particularly in newly developing industrial towns and port cities where mainly non-Malay residents predominated.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>M. A. Rauf, "Islamic Education", p. 16.

<sup>10</sup>Abu Bakar Hamzah, *Al-Imam*, p. 62.

<sup>11</sup>A.H.Hill, (tr.) *The Hikayat Abdullah*, Abdullah bin Abdulkadir, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1970, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup>Report of the Central Advisory Committee on Education, CO 717/190/52336, p. 63.

Penang Free School (1816) and Singapore Free School (1823), for example, were the first to be founded by the British authorities.<sup>13</sup>

The next step was the provision of mass primary education in the Malay language. These schools were first established in the early 1860s in the Straits Settlements, and then extended to the Protected Malay States.

The actual transformation of traditional Malay education began in 1867 when the authority of the British administration was transferred from the East India Company to the Colonial Administration. Thus, secular education commenced in the Straits Settlements in 1871 as a part of colonial office policy, and in the Malay States - for instance, in Kelantan in 1903, 32 years later. In the process, religious education ceased to be formal and gradually became restricted to the private domain. It was differentiated against in the curriculum at vernacular schools, as is evidenced by the separation of teaching hours.<sup>14</sup>

The first endeavour to establish Malay Vernacular Schools fully aided by the British was mooted in the year 1854 by Brundell. Malay circles, however, responded negatively to this.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, efforts to effect a change in the educational system remained almost dormant until 1867, when the Malay states ceased to be under the East India Company and became a separate Crown Colony, under the Colonial Office in London. Following this structural and administrative change, the first serious constructivist initiatives by British officials took shape and had formative influences on planning for education, a fact that is attested by several successive committee reports, such as the Woolley Report (1870) and the Isemonger Report (1894).<sup>16</sup>

The Federation of the Protected Malay States in 1896 led quickly to more unified government, increased official activities and economic expansion. The civil service, judiciary

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<sup>13</sup>R. H. K. Wong, "Education and Problems of Nationhood", In Wang Gungwu (eds.), *Malaysia: A Survey*, Donald Moore Books, Singapore, 1964, p. 199; Francis H. K. Wong-Gwee Yee Hean, *Official Reports on Education*, 1980, p. 2; F. J. Morten, "Annual Report on Education in the Straits Settlements for the Year 1935", *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1935*, Volume II, Singapore, 1937, p. 277.

<sup>14</sup>Norton Ginsburg; Chester F. Robert, *Malaya*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1958, p. 156; Abu Bakar Hamzah, *Al-Imam*, 1991, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup>Abdul Razak Baginda-Peter Schier, *Education in Malaysia: Unifying or Divisive?*, 2005, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup>Ven. D. D. Chelliah, *A History of The Educational Policy of The Straits Settlements with Recommendations for a New System Based on Vernaculars*, G. H. Kiat, Singapore, 1960, p. 31-2; Hyacinth Gaudart, "English Language Teaching In Malaysia: A Historical Account", *The English Teacher*, Vol. XVI, December, 1987, p. 1-2; Wee Tong Bao, "An Overview of Singapore's Education System from 1819 to the 1970s", *Biblioasia* Vol. 5, Issue 2, July, 2009, National Library Singapore, p. 4; R. H. K. Wong, "Education and Problems of Nationhood", Wang Gungwu, (eds.), *Malaysia: A Survey*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1965, p. 200.

and police force were streamlined, and federal departments created to deal with public works, posts, land, education, and other matters.<sup>17</sup>

The year 1872 is earmarked as an important stage in the development of Malay education due to the efforts of A. M. Skinner, who was appointed the first Inspector of Schools in that year. He played a role in the reopening of the Malay schools in Province Wellesley (Seberang Prai of Penang) as an experiment. He had no alternative but to follow the time-tested path of the traditional system. His attempt was based on the retaining of Qur'an schools. "*These boys who gathered themselves in most of the villages to read the Qur'an will be his pupils. Haji or Khatib who teaches them will be their teacher, and the mosques or other places of reading outside the mosques will be their classrooms*".<sup>18</sup> This quotation lucidly clarifies that the new policy of the British administration intentionally aimed at the transformation of the traditional system of education. Towards this end, Skinner took the concrete step of introducing Romanized Malay in Malay schools.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Skinner also realized that no progress could be made in Malay education until and unless the teaching of Malay was separated from the teaching of the Qur'an. These early Malay schools, which originated in the Qur'an classes, were partially assisted by the East India Company during the early part of the nineteenth century. Later, the state governments took over this role. Over time, these fledgling schools developed into Government Malay Schools which were financed by public funds and were the forerunners of Malaysia's present day National Primary Schools.<sup>20</sup>

Some measures were taken by the authorities to address the reservations of Malay parents towards the newly established vernacular schools. Since the British aimed to change the attitude of the Malay families, Qur'an classes were incorporated into the primarily western type of curriculum. Due to social pressure from the Malay community A.M. Skinner, the School Inspector, allowed religious education in the afternoons in addition to formal education in the mornings.<sup>21</sup> As the table below illustrates, the number of schools, and the number of students enrolled, increased exponentially post this measure.

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<sup>17</sup>C. Mary Turnbull, *A Short History of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei*, Graham Brash, Singapore, 1980, p. 171.

<sup>18</sup>Abu Bakar Hamzah, *Al-Imam*, p. 62.

<sup>19</sup>H. R. Cheeseman, "Education in Malaya 1900-1941", *Malaysia in History*, Special Issue, Journal of the Malaysian Historical Society, Vol. 22, May 1979, Kuala Lumpur, p. 127; Ven. D. D. Chelliah, *A History of The Educational Policy*, p. 62; Hyacinth Gaudart, "English Language Teaching In Malaysia", p. 2.

<sup>20</sup>Francis H. K. Wong-Gwee Yee Hean, *Official Reports on Education*, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup>Abdul Razak Baginda-Peter Schier, *Education in Malaysia: Unifying or Divisive?*, p. 15.

Year	Number of Schools	Student Enrollment
1872	16	596
1882	85	2230
1892	189	7218

Around the 1880s, the idea of appointing a Federal Inspector of Schools for the Malay States was mooted as an official step to gradually take care of educational problems and issues among the Malay people.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, the British colonial government began to pay attention to the educational backwardness of native Malays by establishing secular educational institutions called Malay Vernacular Schools.

### **i) BRITISH EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND REACTIONS**

Based on an agreement with the Malay States, the British were committed to a policy of protecting the Malays. Although the colonial administration was reluctant to educate children of common Malay families, cardinal political factors made it necessary and incumbent to educate the sons of traditional ruling elite.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the policy with regard to education was based on two directives: a) The creation of a vernacular education system as outlined below and b) English medium education at the secondary school level. In the form of paternalistic obligation, this policy was expressed through the provision of free primary education for a period of four years in the vernacular tongue.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the policy implementation process, encouraged and motivated British authorities at various levels, particularly the ones who had an especial interest in Malay language and culture, made the initial attempts at establishing vernacular Malay schools which were indeed planned to provide education to the children of common Malay citizens. The British administrators were not in favour of setting up separate educational institutions, and it is understood from governmental correspondence and minutes that Qur'an schools were transformed from religious institutions to lay schools. On the other hand, the British intentionally planned an *Anglicanization* of the school system in the years ahead. In

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<sup>22</sup>Philip Loh Fook Seng, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1975, p. 18; Ven. D. D. Chelliah, *A History of The Educational Policy*, p. 27; Hyacinth Gaudart, "English Language Teaching In Malaysia", p. 3.

<sup>23</sup>Ven. D. D. Chelliah, *A History of The Educational Policy*, p. 16; J. M. Gullick, *Malaya*, Second Edition, Ernest Benn, London, 1964, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup>Paul Chang Min Phang, *Educational Development In A Plural Society: A Malaysian Case Study*, Malay Publishing, Kuala Lumpur, 1973, p. 11.



the meanwhile, the absorption and transformation of the old religious institutions led to the introduction of new subjects in the curriculum, which were seen as necessary to improve the material conditions of rural life.

The reaction from the Malay community towards the British educational policy is worth noting. On the one hand, there were diverse opinions between the ruling elite and the common people. The former seemed to be in favor of it, and, in line with this approach, they did not react as the common Malays did. One explanation for this pro British education stance could be that since the ruling elite foresaw or anticipated the future political configuration, there was mutual understanding between the British and them. “In the upper class there was less parental mistrust of European education. Many of the sons of the upper class were sent to English-medium schools in the towns.”<sup>25</sup> Hence, they declined to send their offspring to the Qur’an schools and instead willingly permitted them to attend the British schools established in city centers. However, Malay parents were traditionally always apprehensive about British involvement in education and remained aloof from the new type of schools for a long time. Till the end of the 19th century, however, vernacular Malay schools had not been established and, indeed, little had been done by the British colonial administration to further their educational enterprise.

On the other hand, the common Malay people did have their reservations about the newly established vernacular schools. There were various reasons for their mistrust, and the most salient one was the religious one. In other words, the foreigners were seen as representatives of Christianity. The Malays, prompted by an understandable fear of conversion to an alien faith, did not send their children to schools established by the British. In addition, Malay families insisted on religious education for the character development of new generations of their countrymen.<sup>26</sup>

It is also worth noting the reactions of Malay families to the vernacular schools, since their very inception. Munshi Abdullah, in his book, penned some views on the reactions of the common people. He claimed that since Malay families declined to send their children to the vernacular schools, he was ordered by the authorities to convince them of the merit of these centers of learning.<sup>27</sup> Despite this, obstacles, as mentioned earlier in this article, cropped up and

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<sup>25</sup>J. M. Gullick, *Malay Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Beginnings of Change*, Oxford University Press, Second Impression, Singapore, 1991, p. 269.

<sup>26</sup>*Report of the Committee on Malay Education, Federation of Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur, 1951, pp. 8, 30.

<sup>27</sup>A.H.Hill, (tr.), *The Hikayat Abdullah*, p. 126.

impeded his attempts for a while in several places, except in Malacca. In order to overcome such major problems as low attendance, resistance, and concerns of parents against British attempts and intents, the officials took a decision to implement Qur'an classes in the afternoons in these schools, and differentiated sensitively between secular morning classes and afternoon Qur'an classes. The implementation of this new policy convincingly overcame the concerns of the Malay families.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the British administration was constrained to amend its policy, based on both the lack of attendance and complaints of Malay parents. All the attempts towards the improvement of education did not meet with a positive approach from Malay parents since the very beginning, as experienced in Penang and Malacca.<sup>29</sup> The attendance problem in particular compelled the British, after the formation of the Federation, to take counter measures. In order to encourage parents to send their children to vernacular schools, certain inducements were ushered in. For example, the village head began conducting home visits to persuade parents, Qur'an classes were added to the curriculum in the afternoon, and sports activities and food allowances were also added to the package. The point is clearly expressed by renowned author William Roff:

*“Much of the distrust of government sponsored education evidenced by village Malays lay in the fear that their children would be seduced from Islam to the alien faith with which the British were associated. To counteract these fears, the government adopted a system of appointing Kur'an teachers of the old-fashioned kind to take afternoon classes in Kur'an reading following the morning's lessons in Malay.”*<sup>30</sup>

This matter is occasionally and variously expressed in some reports around the 1890s. For instance, F. A. Swettenham's report observes, *“The classes meet in the afternoon and the ordinary work of the schools is not therefore interfered with.”* The carefully selected local teachers contributed greatly to the higher attendance figures after the afternoon classes were included in the curriculum.<sup>31</sup> Significantly, Qur'an classes continued for many decades after

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<sup>28</sup>W. H. Treacher, “Annual Education Report, For the Year 1893, Appendix”, *Straits Settlements Annual Education Report, For the Year 1893*, p. 492; H. R. Cheeseman, “Education in Malaya 1900-1941”, 1979, Kuala Lumpur, p. 126; Philip Loh Fook Seng, *Seeds of Separatism*, 1975, p. 13; Ven. D. D. Chelliah, *A History of The Educational Policy*, p. 64; William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 76.

<sup>29</sup>T. J. Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*, Volume One, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1971, p. 93, 171.

<sup>30</sup>J. M. Gullick, *Malay Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Beginnings of Change*, Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1987, p. 266; William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup>F. A. Swettenham, “Annual Report by the British Resident of Perak For the Year 1892”, *Straits Settlements Annual Departmental Reports*, Volume I.D/32, 1892, Government of the Colony of Singapore, p. 406.

being introduced, bearing testimony to the insistence of Malay parents on religious education.<sup>32</sup> A yearly report dated 1930 mentions the Qur'an classes, thus validating the claim that they continued well until the latter years of the colonial administration.<sup>33</sup>

Another step taken by the administration was to make attendance at school compulsory by using the enforcing power of the *penghulus* (village heads). To change the attitudes of parents against the British-supported schools, some measures were taken and implemented. One of them was to use the power of the Government which "compelled the compulsory attendance of children by law," as reported in Council Minutes Perak of the years 1880-1882.<sup>34</sup>

Notwithstanding the plethora of sops, inducements and measures to encourage and ensure attendance at the British-supported schools, the secular nature of education did not much convince the Malay families and they continued to reject them. They demurred from sending their children to these schools since they considered religious education paramount for the character development of their children. The main concern of the families was that Christian propaganda would have an impact on the psyche of their children at school.<sup>35</sup> Even though this kind of obstacle for the establishing of the primary level of education remained as a constant, the number of students gradually increased over the years. The pragmatic British altered their approach in line with the prevailing sentiment and allowed some religious education at vernacular Malay schools. It was the ultimate inducement to convince sceptical and doubting families to send their children to the new schools. This represents a very significant and unique change in the history of religious education in the Malayan land. For the first time religious education was conducted away from the *surau*, *masjid* or individuals homes, as was the case previously. Besides, the authority of this education was not directly the Imam or a religious scholar, but the bureaucracy and bureaucrats of the British educational system. Thus, the newly established vernacular schools grew to be institutions that imparted dual education, both secular

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<sup>32</sup>C.W.H. Cochrane, *Federated Malay States, Annual Report for 1929*, Colonial Report, Annual, No. 1498, Kuala Lumpur, 1930, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup>Colonial Reports-Annual, No. 1750, *Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of the State of Perlis (Unfederated Malay States) Report for the Year 1353* (16<sup>th</sup> April 1934-4<sup>th</sup> April 1935), Printed in Kedah, London 1936, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup>Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya*, 7<sup>th</sup> Impression, George Allen, London, 1955, p. 257-8; R. J. Wilkinson, "Council Minutes Perak: 1880-1882", *Papers on Malay Subjects*, R. J. Wilkinson (1907-1916), (eds.), Selected and Introduced by P. L. Burns, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1971, p. 261.

<sup>35</sup>*Report of the Committee on Malay Education Federation of Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur, 1951, p. 30; William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 76.

and religious. However, the British went to great lengths to differentiate between these two distinct types of education, so that they did not impact each other directly. To this end, they separated religious education from the main curriculum by conducting it in afternoon sessions after the morning regular classes. However, it cannot be said that there were no problems during this period. Some families who could not adapt to this system, and were dissatisfied with the religious teaching offered at school, recruited religious scholars to teach their children privately at home. On the other hand, throughout this process of implementation, another concern arose among some British authorities that children who spent almost seven hours at school did not register as much literary improvement as might be expected.<sup>36</sup>

The direct impact of some other socio-economic factors that occurred over the decades changed the attitude of most Malay parents towards Western education. They witnessed, first or second hand, the opportunities that accrued through a good British education and the tide, slowly but surely, turned in its favour.<sup>37</sup> This development has been monitored, and can be seen statistically. For instance, by 1896, there were 130 vernacular schools in the Federated Malay States. This figure rose to 171 at the beginning of the new century. The years between 1900-1920 witnessed a conspicuous change. As socio-economic changes continued apace, the figure rose to 400, and the number of students studying in them reached 20,319. This change was not limited only to the Federated States, but the unfederated states and Johor Sultanate also reflected substantial changes in the number of vernacular schools. By 1920, there were 757 vernacular schools with 46,000 students aged between 5 and 15, which was 12% of the total Malayan population then. Correspondingly, in the second part of the 1930s, the number of vernacular schools in Johor State reached 155.<sup>38</sup>

## **ii) THOMAS STAMFORD RAFFLES AND MALAY EDUCATION**

Thomas Stamford Raffles is generally regarded as the founding father of British educational policy due to his personal initiative at the very beginning of the British administration. Since he was a loyal servant of the British monarchy, he stated that this initiative for educating native people was a moral responsibility: "... *Education of the local people was not*

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<sup>36</sup> *Report of the Committee on Malay Education Federation of Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur, 1951, pp. 29, 30.

<sup>37</sup> C. Mary Turnbull, *A Short History of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei*, p.191.

<sup>38</sup> W. E. Pepys, *Johor Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of Johor for 1938*, Johor Bahru, Government Printed Office, 1938, p. 41; Puteh Mohamed-Malik Munip, "The Development of National Education System", *Malaysia in History*, Journal of the Malaysian Historical Society, Vol. 28, 1985, p. 81.

*only a matter of expediency but a moral duty laid on the colonizing power.*” Raffles thought that modern educational facilities would create a path into Malay society, beginning from the ruling elite circles. He gave voice to his thought, in a meeting with the Sultan and Malay nobility in Singapore on 1st April, 1823, as follows: *”It is my special wish that the Malays shall have facilities for study through the medium of their own language.”* Based on his educational policy the children of the elite strata or the upper crust would be educated in their native language, aided by the supportive materials of ancient Malay sources, the Hikayats.<sup>39</sup> After careful research, he penned some reports in 1823 on how to develop literacy and the intellectual capacity of the native people. He announced that the native employees of the East India Company, if they so desired, would be provided with educational facilities. Not much information is available about the consequence of the pioneer education institution, or English School, known as Raffles Institute, which was founded in 1823.<sup>40</sup> Although it is mentioned in the aforementioned quotations as the initial efforts of Raffles, it did not fructify or bloom in the same period. However, it is undeniable that it had established itself constructively as a stimulation and perhaps role model for the next generation of British administrators.<sup>41</sup> In addition, Raffles also took the initiative, the first recorded concrete and commendable step, of publishing scattered authentic Malay texts to be reproduced by the Raffles Institute.<sup>42</sup> However, even with his “splendid vision for Malayan youths’ intellectual improvement” the results were not very prolific.<sup>43</sup>

The educational philosophy of Raffles portrayed clearly the internalization of a secular approach towards education. When he shared his ideas pertaining to teaching the sons of the Malay ruling elite for the very first time in Singapore, he suggested a cosmopolitan institution which would be open to all circles, irrespective of religion and racial background; each social group would have a right to conduct education in its own mother tongue. What is significant in our point of research is that Raffles did not give any place principally to any particular kind of religious education in this institution. Instead, education imparted by the institution would be

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<sup>39</sup>A.H.Hill, (tr.), *The Hikayat Abdullah*, pp.178, 180, 181.

<sup>40</sup>Board of Education, *Special Reports on Educational Subjects*, Vol. 14, (London, 1905), Reproduced, Rinsen Book Company, Kyoto, 1974, pp. 136, 138; T. J. Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*, p. 288; Philip Loh, “The Beginning of Higher Education in Singapore: Raffles College 1928-1938”, *Malaysia in History*, Malaysian Historical Society, Volume IX, No. 1-2, 1965, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup>Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 72.

<sup>42</sup>Board of Education, *Special Reports on Educational Subjects*, p. 136.

<sup>43</sup>Ven. D. D. Chelliah, *A History of The Educational Policy*, pp. 25, 39.

restricted to ‘liberal education’ such as literature, mathematics, geography, history, and a host of similar subjects. Munshi Abdullah, the founder of modern Malay linguistics and literature, who became a very close friend of Raffles, also stated in his work that the policy of new education would be secular and inclusive without discrimination against any group of children from different religious backgrounds.<sup>44</sup>

### iii) VERNACULAR MALAY SCHOOLS: REACTIONS AND CHANGES

The roadmap that was followed on the way to establishing vernacular Malay schools pertaining to the education of native peoples is briefly discussed below, post the initial efforts of Raffles. It is known that, from the second half of the 19th century, the priority of the colonial government concerning educational reforms among native people, was based on the English language. Correspondingly, a report prepared by the Education Committee, that focused on the first time that Arabic and Romanized scripts were used as the medium of instruction at Malay schools in 1867, was accepted as a milestone in colonial educational policies.<sup>45</sup> No further innovative changes followed till 1872, when the establishment of the Education Inspectorate paved the way for a further initiative that revolved around the imparting of education in the native language or Bahasa Melayu, and set up the Malay Vernacular School project under the support and control of the British administration.<sup>46</sup>

Some half a century after the first decision of Raffles to restructure the education system in Malaya, Skinner, in 1871, introduced the vernacular Malay schools by collating ideas firstly from the established structure of the traditional Qur’an schools or *Bandarsyah* Schools, as they were often referred to. Thus, Qur’an schools were replaced by Malay Vernacular Schools in rural areas where the majority of the Malay populace lived.<sup>47</sup> The British authorities believed that the teaching of the Qur’an as part of the school curriculum was against the main principals of the newly established liberal education system. However, as stated previously the authorities were compelled to address the exigencies of the situation and introduce the teaching of the Qur’an in

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<sup>44</sup>A.H.Hill, (tr.), *The Hikayat Abdullah*, p. 181.

<sup>45</sup>Committee on Malay Education, *Report of the Committee on Malay Education Federation of Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur, 1951, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup>Board of Education, *Special Reports on Educational Subjects*, pp. 140, 144; Tham Seong Chee, “Negativism, Conservation and Ritualism in Modern Malay Literature”, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup>Francis Wong Hoy Kee-Gwee Yee Hean, *Perspectives*, p. 7. See for some examples: Ven. D. D. Chelliah, *A History of the Educational Policy*, p. 63.

order to satisfy and perhaps entice Muslim Malay families. Despite this, the authorities ensured that the Qur'an classes were separated from the regular curriculum which was conducted in the morning. Qur'an classes were held, instead, in the afternoon, after the main curriculum was completed. The curriculum was therefore dual in nature, this system continuing until the first decades of the 20th century. For instance, the annual report of 1929 mentions that Qur'an classes were still being conducted in the vernacular schools.<sup>48</sup> The beginnings of Malay vernacular education in the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States have their roots well entrenched in Qur'an Schools. In these schools, the pupils were taught the principal prayers in Arabic. In addition, they were taught a little Malay after they had learned to read and write the Qur'an in Arabic. Chelliah believes that the first recorded formal instruction given to Malays in Malay was in the Penang Free School premises in 1821, and in the Singapore Free School in 1834.<sup>49</sup>

The Malay Vernacular Schools were secular educational institutions in which "Malay reading and writing, arithmetic and some geography" were taught, and, additionally, Malay history. Their doors first opened around the 1860s in the Straits Settlements. New vernacular schools continued to mushroom from the 1880s onwards in the western and southern Malay states to impart education to Malay children.<sup>50</sup> Frederick Weld, appointed Governor of the Straits Settlements in 1880, could not provide for a comprehensive change, but at least endeavoured to open the first Malay Vernacular Schools.<sup>51</sup> However, taking into consideration some reports of the 1890s with regard to educational institutions in Malacca, the pace at which this policy was implemented is questionable.<sup>52</sup>

#### **iv) ROMANIZED MALAY, PUBLICATION AND TEACHING MATERIALS**

There is also another aspect to the transformation of the education system that concerns the usage of script. Even though the medium of instruction was Bahasa Melayu, the choice of

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<sup>48</sup>Ven. D. D. Chelliah, *A History of The Educational Policy*, p. 73; David James Radcliffe, "Education and Cultural Change Among the Malays 1900-1940", PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1970, p. 34.

<sup>49</sup>Francis H. K. Wong-Gwee Yee Hean, *Official Reports on Education*, 1980, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup>Soda Naoki, "The Malay World in Textbook: The Transmission of Colonial Knowledge in British Malaya", *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2, September 2001, p. 188; Frank Swettenham, *British Malaya*, p. 257; William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 76.

<sup>51</sup>Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policy Towards the Malays 1875-1906*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1975, pp. 30-1.

<sup>52</sup>C. W. Sneyd Kynnersly, "Administration Report, Malacca, For the Year 1893", *Straits Settlements Annual Reports For the Year 1893*, Microfilmed by the Government Microfilm Unit, p. 112.

script by the British educational authorities was also an eye-opener and crucial to their designs. Traditionally, Malay society was accustomed to the Jawi script in all aspects of social communication. Nevertheless, through the new policy of the British administration, the Roman script was introduced as a parallel medium of writing and reading. Romanized Malay script was planned to be taught at vernacular schools besides the Arabic script. The purpose of this policy was to create an educational milieu for Malay children to be exposed into the English learning process in the future. This was defined as the ‘*Anglicanizing*’ of education.<sup>53</sup> Even though the Jawi and Roman scripts were taught parallel to each other at vernacular schools for a long time, eventually, at a relatively late period, the Jawi script was removed from the curriculum. The justification for this policy was based on the premise that dual scripts created a burden on young children in the point of pedagogy, and recommended, in lieu, the use of only the Roman script.<sup>54</sup> This new policy was supported by publications in Romanized Melayu after R. J. Wilkinson became directly involved with the educational system in the beginning of the 20th century. In addition to the transliteration of classical Malay works, some examples of British literature were paraphrased into Bahasa Melayu in the Romanized script.

The first publications in the Romanized script were introduced into the Malay education system by missionary circles. This process, set in motion either by missionary circles or translation offices under the British education department, led English literature to become more influential at schools. It appears that there was an agenda to introduce various English sources, not confined only to the cultural, but also extending to religious transformation of young generations of Malay society through the propagation of Christianity.<sup>55</sup>

R. J. Wilkinson was directly involved with publication works in line with the expansion of Malay Vernacular Schools. Malay Readers, compiled from various texts and the abridged forms of classics such as *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Abdullah* were the course materials at the schools.<sup>56</sup> It might be said that Wilkinson felt the compulsion of change and submitted certain proposals relating to sound developments in education: a) The Romanized script should replace

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<sup>53</sup>E. C. Hill, *Annual Educational Report, 1894, Straits Settlements Annual Reports For the Years 1894*, Singapore, Printed At the Government Printing Office, 1895, p. 172.

<sup>54</sup>*Report of the Committee on Malay Education Federation of Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur, 1951, pp. 29, 30.

<sup>55</sup>William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 51.

<sup>56</sup>William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 130; Philip Loh Fook Seng, *Seeds of Separatism*, p. 24; Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators*, p. 106; Committee on Malay Education, *Report of the Committee on Malay Education Federation of Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur, 1951, p. 1.



the Arabic one, so that the new generations would be united through the use of a common language; b) The government should give priority to the publishing of classical Malay texts in Romanized Malay.<sup>57</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Social institutions and units such as family, religion, economics, and education, in any society, have convergent relations with each other. A change in any single unit of society has a cascading effect on all units under the societal umbrella, and a great impact on society as a whole. The changes in education, therefore, triggered corresponding upheavals in other institutions as well. Malay society underwent a tremendous change due to the reforms effected by the British authorities in the traditional education system. Thus colonial administration, as a political unit, moulded and remoulded continuously, driven both by the attempts of some distinguished British figures and their policy towards the native educational system in Malaya.

In Muslim Malay society there existed a dual system of education. The first wind of change was the direct initiative of the colonial administration aimed to reach the children of the ruling elite, especially boys. The second spurt addressed the Qur'an schools or classes, conducted by religious figures around the surau and mosque, targetting them to extend a reach to the children of commoners.<sup>58</sup> It was indubitably a transformation of a religious form of education into a secular model. Since this is itself a specific and detailed subject of discussion, the writer did not address the matter in this paper. However, it should be mentioned briefly that the vernacular Malay schools became the medium for the secularization of the traditional religious education system. The fact that the tweaks and changes, effected over the years, worked on the psyche of Malay society is abundantly borne out by the gradual increase in the number of vernacular schools. Initially, parents were opposed to the idea of schools that did not impart religious education and theology. They were wary about secular education and resented sacrificing their sons to the new schools. However, towards the end of the 19th century the number of children attending the vernacular schools gradually increased. By around 1900 in Malaya, there were no fewer than 25,000 pupils in schools of all types.

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<sup>57</sup>Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators*, 1975, p. 109; H. R. Cheeseman, "Education in Malaya 1900-1941", *Malaysia in History*, 1979, Kuala Lumpur, p. 129.

<sup>58</sup>Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics*, University of London Press, London, 1970, p. 18.

Generally conducting a four-year period of education in rural areas, the vernacular schools functioned as the primary level of education since their inception. The Malay language was taught not only in the Arabic but also in the Romanized script, which was accepted as a sign of the modernization process in education.<sup>59</sup> The significance of this change is better understood when later developments, particularly after World War II, inevitably led to the building of the nation-state.

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<sup>59</sup>Board of Education, *Special Reports on Educational Subjects*, p. 144; William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 129.