

# A Brief Overview of Relations Between Malay Language and National Awareness

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**Abstract**—This article attempts to explore the relation between the Malay language and development of modern nationalism during the colonial era. In regards, the present writer has focused on a different strain of analysis based on some core passages in related documents.

**Keywords;** Malay language, vernacular schools.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The present article argues that a closer relationship between language and national awareness resulted from the institution of Malay language, which has both Arabic (*Jawi*) [1] and Romanised (*Rumi*) scripts being as the medium of instruction in education as well as the publishing of Malay classical literature works as intellectual heritage during the colonial era. This led the masses to acquire a national self-consciousness and identity. It should be mentioned that the education of the indigenous Malays did not show immediate results, instead it was a “slow and gradual” process.[2] In this regards to this, one is reminded of the significance of Thomas Stamford Raffles’ opening a discussion on the concept of nation during the early stages of British colonialism.[3]

In keeping with the belief that language has an organic relationship with cultural identity and “is a key tool in the construction of society”, [4] the establishment of the Malay language as a medium of instruction in vernacular schools and the publishing of Malay classical literature works built up the social and national identity in schoolchildren. This gradually led to nationalistic movements during later periods, an unanticipated result of the British government’s policies. In order to sociologically understand what occurred in Malaya, it should be emphasized that the power of language, as a social phenomenon, “is a zealous inheritance of the social groups” and an inevitable cultural resource for each community.[5] It is agreed that there is an inevitable connection between “*nation*” and “*language*” and that these two phenomena have become intertwined. As a result of this, every self-respecting nation has to have a language, on an existential level. [6]

## II. MALAY LANGUAGE

In its extensive history, Malay society is known to be an oral society that transmits values, norms and belief systems to subsequent generations, like other social groups in Southeast Asia. The Malay language became the *lingua*

*franca* during the *Sufis* and Muslim traders’ process of introducing Islam to the native peoples in the region, and in the creation of colonies comprising Eastern and Western trade groups. And these two functions of the Malay language continued during the British colonial era. [7]

In line with socio-political and economic changes in Malaya, the Malay language saw a great change during the colonial period. Thus, there was a need for a national language, given the two virtually distinct Malay languages based on the existence of the multi-ethnic social structure in Malaya. The first of these two languages was the Malay language written in Arabic that could be read by Muslim Malays. The second was the Romanised “*Bazaar*” Malay or “Low Malay”, which was used by the Chinese in their daily lives and had limited vocabulary and “little grammatical power”. [8] The poor communication and interaction due to the limited vocabulary of certain members of society was a hurdle in building up social unity and discouraged the achievement of common ideals.[9] When Wilkinson discovered the distressing Malay language capability in some sectors of society, he compiled a Malay-English dictionary using rich classical texts such as *Hikayat Abdullah* as source materials.[10] His endeavour, although comprehensive, was not the first attempt at such a dictionary; one had already been compiled at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. [11]

New generations encountering these and similar works written in Arabic (*Jawi*) and Romanised scripts, even in their relatively short period of education, experienced a kind of upsurge of national pride and confidence and gradually became actors in and contributors to Malay nationalistic movements that occurred in the first part of the 20th century. This was stressed upon by Mustapha Hussain, in his memoirs titled *Malay Nationalism before UMNO*. Hussain admitted that some classical works such as *Hang Tuah*, led the young Malay generation including himself, during the very first decades of the 20th century to acquire the consciousness of freeing Malayan states from the colonialists. [12]

## III. MALAY VERNACULAR SCHOOLS

Malay vernacular schools -secular educational institutions-, in which Malay history as well as “Malay reading and writing, arithmetic and some geography” were taught, were first opened around the 1860s in the Straits

Settlements. Among the subjects taught geography and history should be understood as a factor in the emergence of Malay nationalism. [13]

“The basic Malay school course was for four years, the traditional minimum course for literacy in the mother tongue.”[14] Even though the vernacular schools were intended to provide seven years of education students generally did not pursue school after the fourth year; and over time, for years of schooling became the norm. However, this is not of concern here; thus, the reasons for the high drop-out rate are not discussed. Over time the number of students attending vernacular schools increased, but there was a dearth of facilities and materials, such as literature in both Arabic and Romanised scripts.[15] However, because of the Malay students’ traditional education in the mosque where they learned to read Malay works in Arabic script, these students did not encounter any difficulty reading the Arabic scripts. Malay journals published in both Arabic and Romanised scripts created a new medium for the circulation of information and correspondence among the young Malay generation and also exposed them to writings about new nationalistic movements. [16]

The efforts of A. M. Skinner, who was appointed the first Inspector of Schools in 1872, played a role in gradually improving educational facilities in the Malay language as well as English. Skinner introduced Romanised Malay in Malay schools. [17] Some researchers, such as M. A. Rauf and J. M. Gullick, admitted that the aim of establishing Malay vernacular schools was to transform the traditional Qur’an classes in the indigenous villages. One important difference between these two schools was the literacy level of the students. Whilst in the Qur’an classes students were trained in the question-and-answer method, education in the vernacular schools was based on teaching reading and writing skills in the Arabic script. [18]

#### IV. ROLE OF MALAY LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

British colonialism caused some changes in the form of a renewal and reproduction of the Malay language and literary culture. Planned as a short view on the issue, this article provides only limited emphasis on leading figures such as Thomas Stamford Raffles, Frank Swettenham and particularly R. J. Wilkinson, who have been credited with taking initiatives on establishing Malay vernacular schools with the medium of Bahasa Melayu and reproducing almost forgotten Malay classical texts. [19]

Raffles was the first person who gave serious attention to education in Malaya. His interest in educating the natives of Malaya started during the early period of the British colonial government. Based on his research, he penned some reports in 1823 on how to develop literacy and intellectuality among the native people. He announced that native employees of the East India Company, if they demanded it, would be provided educational facilities; unfortunately, this did not translate into practice. Not much information is available about Malay education at the pioneer school known as

Raffles Institution, which was founded in 1823.[20] Raffles also initiated the concrete action of publishing authentic Malay texts to be reproduced by the the institution noted above.[21] However, even with his “splendid vision for Malayan youths’ intellectual improvement” not much was done. [22]

No further innovative changes followed until 1872, when the establishment of the Education Inspectorate paved the way for a further initiative to pay attention to providing education in the native language or Bahasa Melayu, and establishing the Malay vernacular school project under the support and control of the British administration.[23] Frederick Weld, appointed as the Governor of the Straits Settlements in 1880, could not provide for a comprehensive change, but he at least endeavoured to open the first Malay vernacular schools. This initiative by Weld contributed to the acceptance of a general policy to open a Malay vernacular school in each relatively high-population village.[23] However, taking into consideration some 1890s reports, such as those regarding educational institutions in Malacca, it is questionable at what pace this policy was implemented.[24]

Malay vernacular schools again came to the forefront with the appointment of Frank Swettenham in 1890, when the efforts in Malaya reflected the desirability of providing education to every child. This had been a topic of public discussion around the 1870s in the Britain. The Swettenham’s report stressed that the exposure of young Malay children in rural areas to English education was not feasible, given their village lifestyle. Rural Malaya did not need English in their daily lives.[24] Supporting his idea, Swettenham recommended that if Malay youths were to be educated with Malay as the *lingua franca* in the Peninsula, it would be more practical, favourable and *safe* for the British.

“...At present the large majority of Malay boys and girls have little opportunity of learning their own language, and if the Government undertakes to teach them this, the Koran and something about figures and geography (especially of the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago), this knowledge, and the habits of industry, punctuality and obedience that they will gain by regular attendance at school will be of material advantage to them ... Whilst we teach children to read and write and count in their own language or in Malay ... We are safe...”[25]

In order to not overlook the policies and decision-making processes that impacted education during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attention should be given to R. J. Wilkinson. Wilkinson, who had not only a solid education but also a sound intellectual background, may be regarded as a Malay scholar. He played a prominent role in education by personally initiating the reproduction and distribution of authentic Malay texts into circulation in public forums, e.g., village schools and libraries.[26] Being one of the distinctive figures amongst the aforementioned idealistic British officials, Wilkinson formulated and implemented specific strategies. He had a great vision for Malayan youths to communicate in their own

language, and for them to be exposed to contemporary issues via Malay journals.[27] He proved this through his attempts - like others- to improve education in Malay as a common language and to adapt the Malay language into the modern era; this was needed for national unity at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Malaya. The schools that were transformed largely due to Wilkinson's contributions later became the foundation for modern primary schools in the Malay education system.

In spite of his short term, Wilkinson played an influential role in education in Malaya. His efforts were more purposive and showed greater initiative than other administrators', even before his appointment to the post of Federal School Inspector from 1903 to 1906. He served as the founding father of the Malay College in 1900.[28] Wilkinson is noteworthy for his contribution to the expansion of Malay vernacular schools, as well as for reintroducing the young Malay generation to Malay classics,[29] and he is distinguished as a prominent and leading figure for future developments regarding nation-building and the establishment of Malay as the national language in the modern era.

He clearly saw the need for educational change and submitted the following proposals: (a) Romanised script should replace Arabic, so the new generations would practise using a common language; (b) Romanised script should be taught to the Chinese and other "Asiatics"; (c) The government should give priority to the publishing of classical Malay texts in Romanised Malay; (d) A committee would oversee and control all these processes; (e) A Malay training school would be opened in Malacca. [30]

The purpose of Wilkinson's giving importance to the Malay language and classical texts was to make Malay peoples succeed in their encounter with the modernisation process. Wilkinson expressed his idea perfectly in his article titled "The Education of Asiatic":

*"... Books of this type may not appeal to the modern Englishman, but they represent the road along which his own culture has travelled, and the destruction of this road will hardly expedite the progress of our Asiatic fellow-subjects."*

[31]

Wilkinson's *Malay Readers* were not the only material taught at vernacular schools; there were also some other publications that were contributed to school libraries, and these publications were the first initiatives for the development of the publishing sector in Malaya.[32] The vernacular schools benefited greatly from these attempts.

Despite these successes, there were several factors that prevented the policies from becoming a sound success and having the intended results. These included the aforementioned individuals holding their posts for only a limited periods, and the central government placing greater priority on political and economic developments.[33] It cannot be denied that the endeavours of the distinguished administrators contributed to the awareness of Malayness at

various levels. Leading Malay intellectuals were able to find a channel to use the Malay language as a medium for propagating nationalistic ideas. Although it is a potential research subject, it should be stated here that the reasons for the discontinuation of the Malay vernacular schools included insufficient funding from the British central authority, and lack of teaching staff, especially for the upper-level students etc.[34]

There were some developments around the 1920s regarding the argument based on the relation between language and the development of national consciousness. In the process, the Malay masses who were educated not only in English but also in their own native language at the Malay vernacular schools gave direction to social movements by demanding more civil rights and, eventually, independence.[35] It cannot be said that Wilkinson intentionally planned this result, but it is in some way ironic given that the initial purpose of the colonial government was "to make the son of the fisherman or peasant *just* a more intelligent fisherman or peasant than his father". What happened in Malaya in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century should be taken into consideration as a social development induced by language and education reforms. By reaching and using the media, the Malay masses that had created their own intellectuals started interacting with Western circles in Malaya and were exposed to developments in the West. After an analysis of developments through the decades, it may be concluded that the Malay intelligentsia were the products of a vernacular education system".[36]

The significance of Wilkinson's reformist initiative was proven when the education program was "geared to the maintenance of a plural society in Malaya" in the second part of 1940. The revitalisation of the idea of a national language was congruent with Wilkinson's attempts at bringing the peoples of Malaya together with the unity of language. All these endeavours resulted in Malay being accepted as the national language (*bahasa kebangsaan*) in the 1950s.[37]

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Language as a social phenomenon plays an important role in building national identity, and it is through this function that language may be being called the ultimate symbol of a national union. In the case of Malaya, the use of the Malay language and the adaptation of classical texts led to the creation of a socio-political environment conducive to national consciousness. If close attention is paid to Thomas Stamford Raffles' writings about Malays it is evident that he was an unhesitating proponent of the Malay language and the Malayan nation.[38] In addition to Raffles' efforts, the standardisation of language, giving priority to the mother tongue in educational institutions and improving vocabulary among students were important factors in creating unity in Malaya society. This in turn helped with the establishment of a nation-state. All these features can be seen in Wilkinson's educational policy.

To sum up, there were three main initiatives in the context of the relation of the vernacular language with the nation-building process: (a) Standardisation of the Malay language in Romanised script; (b) The collection and reproduction of Malay classical works; (c) The Malay language in both Arabic and Romanised scripts was introduced as a medium of instruction in Malay vernacular schools. Throughout the various periods during which these ideas evolved into practice, success was not immediate; but these initiatives were inevitably congenial to the creation of a Malay national consciousness.

During the colonial era, educational institutions were established and gradually developed through the individual initiatives of certain British officials as well as through the colonial government's policies. Through the creation of a new "society of outsiders" thanks to the British policy of facilitation the migration of Indians and Chinese, the Malay people gradually interacted with people of other ethnicities both passively under the British strategy of divide and rule, and actively as participants in educational and governmental institutions. Despite all the obstacles faced by Malays in acquiring a qualified education as stated in Swettenham's report, those who had the opportunities to be educated in Malay vernacular schools regained a consciousness of nationality over time. This slow and gradual change in the form of a politically well-aware Malay intelligentsia at the eve of the modern time may be explained as an "unintended and unanticipated consequence of action" according to Weberian sociology.

As a follow-up to the acquisition of national awareness and identity, Malay politicians and intellectuals stressed the importance of having a common language as a social cement in order to create a new nation. The thinking of the political elites was embodied in the acceptance of Bahasa Melayu as the national language to unite all peoples in Malaysia.

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