

# Missionary Activities in the Colonial World: Malaya Case<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper reviews the importance of educational activities by missionary groups in Malaya throughout the British rule. The existence of the missionaries is regarded as a supportive system in the re-structuring of the colonial socio-cultural system as their existence went beyond these communities' own principal target which was to convert the indigenous people into Christianity.

Proselytization was not explicitly allowed due to the treaties signed between the Malay sultanates and the British Colonial rulers, Notwithstanding, the very outset of the existence of the different missionary groups and their transmission of the Western religio-cultural values via schooling is pondered due to their cumulative impact on the socio-cultural life of the natives. With reference to this, the phenomenon of colonialism is described as missionization of the natives, not only in the sense of religious terminology, but is also viewed as the 'cultural force' that led to the socio-cultural changes among these indigineous societies.

**Key Words:** British Malaya, Mission schools, English schools, weltanschauung, cultural change.

## Introduction

The concept that the mission ideology as unique is related its own expansionist nature fed by the power of revelation and its immanence. In terms of this, it can be deduced that this ideology has been always in line with the political expansionism of the Western powers in Southeast Asia.

Due to the fact that the mission is a well-structured institution, it had a combination of acts and is in the midst of the society in order to be able to intervene among the different social groups and structures using the bottom up approach in a pervasive way. There is a need to investigate how the existence of the missions had an impact or undermined the local socio-cultural and political entity.

Mission ideology, or if we express it in a Weberian way, mission *weltanschauung* was transmitted through various channels established by individuals and groups of missionaries. The fact is this *weltanschauung* was not alienated from the one representing the secular Western world. One of the discussions in the article looks at the cooperation and collaboration between the church and secular government circles and this is considered as a real combination and reflection of the Western religio-political worldview. Notwithstanding, whilst the political leadership was exercised by the secular governmental agencies in the sense of ruling, the force of

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the mission circles cannot be oversimplified. In this context, the Church served as an agent ideology-construction agent and has always been the undercurrent which was internalized fully by the guiding principles meant for everyone including political rulers and agencies. There is no doubt that the socio-cultural paradigm was effectively shaped by the church people. For instance, in the context of Malaya, Thomas Raffles constituted a great example when he inspired the mission circles by placing a great emphasis on education and established it within the fundamental policy (Milner 2002: 72).

One of the concessions is that the missionaries were always in pursuit of the transmission of their weltanschauung in the colonized land. In particular, it is a kind of 'social oligarchy' in the field of education and related domains used to disseminate their ideology. They acquired prerogatives from both the colonial rulers and native authorities in the course of time on the basis of their professionalism, particularly in education. Nonetheless, their efforts were not limited to education, instead there was a triad implementation constituting the church, school, and dispensary (Phillipson 2003: 32; (Northcott 1992: 49; Ong 1965: 58). The first two domains were also closely related to scholarly works such as writing, translation, publication, etc.

Besides these domains, there was the differentiation of the approaches of the various sectors of Malay society in terms of their inclination to obtain education provided by missionaries. In relation to this, the palace circles and nobilities were distinctively taken into consideration as compared to the common people. It is known that the initial conversation of Raffles with the nobility in Singapore gave some clues for this separation.

Approximately half a decade (1889) after Raffles, the mission education infrastructure became exceedingly desirable by the royalty and nobility families. During that time, some states were convinced enough on the importance of Western education, particularly English schools as they invited tutors among mission individuals to "take charge of their children". It is noted that in Negri Sembilan, the children from palace circles were educated in a single Grant-in-aid school founded by Roman Catholic missionaries. For almost two decades, it became a trend among the palace and nobility circles to educate children under the supervision of a tutor or send the children to England (Loh 1970: 55). Eventually, owing to this interest in education, the system was promoted among certain social groups, and modern political elite who participated in the local or international scenes were the products of mission education system (Le Page 1964: 29).

In this first phase of the implementation of the Western education, the inclination of the palace circles became the approach that was accepted by the the common folk as well as for those who were bound to the palace for guidance. As many Malays could not afford to recruit a tutor or send their children to England, they overcame their bias towards the vernacular<sup>2</sup> and English schools established by Methodists and Catholics from 1890s onwards by sending their children to to these insititutions (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia 1975: 14, 63; Loh 1970: 121; Sadka 1968: 294; Robequain 1964: 397; Hicks 1958: 5, 20, 27).

The above-mentioned educational process penetrated deeply into the social fabric of the Malay society. The introduction of this mission is regarded as a turning point in the change of perceptions on the importance of education. This was a pronounced change of ideas among the common Muslim Malays who initially had abstained from sending their children to Western oriented schools (Annual Report on Education 1932: 21; Johan 1996: 155-6). The educational policy of the missionaries either as implementer or administrator of the system pertaining to the dissemination of theoretical and practical Christian/Western values and this was the reason for concern among the Malay families. This new religio-cultural climate for the Malays was one of the factors that was beyond economics and geography and became the reason as to why the Malays did not to give a receptive response as only a small number of Malay pupils had access to English education. (Puteh Mohamed; Malik Munip, 1985, p. 78). Munshi Abdullah should be regarded as an intellectual native and a unique native source of information provider. He assisted the missionaries when they tackled the problem of attendance among the Malay pupils because they requested him to be a moderator to convince the Malay parents about the intentions of the missionary schools (Abdulkadir 1970: 126).

The educated class at missionary institutions promoted the values moulded by a certain ideology. However, one should not assumed that that the educated ones blindly followed whatever knowledge was imparted during the school years because they were independent of what could have been from the transmitted culture and values. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that there were differences in culture and values that appeared between the ones educated in mission or Western schools and the ones who studied in traditional education institutions.

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<sup>2</sup>As a concrete implementation, the British authorities commenced the first Malay vernacular education in around 1860s in the Protected Malay States (Stevenson 1975: ix-x).

### **Church initiative and Convergence of Welthanschauung**

Historically, Christian missionaries had always embedded a revealed religious structure in educational activities. In this context, they were also regarded as paramount educational agents. Furthermore, the concept of 'education' is more than the common definition. As a revered religion, its devotees participated in various distinct intellectual activities such as publication, translation, etc. in the context of education. In relation to these activities, the dissemination of the Church/Western weltanschauung was inevitable among the distinct social groups. This mentality was strongly and consciously developed because according to Raffles, the Malays are used to "looking up to the Arabs as their religious instructors... It is certainly our interest to prevent the increase of the Arab influence among the Malay nations." (Raffles 1991: 82). Thus, the stress on the education is not on Arabization, but instead focussed on weltanschauung of a civilization.

Mission initiatives were the main vehicles for transmitting Western religious-cultural values. Among these institutions, the attachment of the mission communities into the education system was a general application during the colonial rule in Malaya. The existence of the missionaries was inevitably regarded as a supportive system in the restructuring of the colonial socio-cultural system beyond their own principal of *crede*.

The general view of the colonial era was in line with the cultural change whereby missionary schools were significant mediums of transmitting the colonialists' culture to native folks. As mentioned in some reports, young idealist teachers "played a very large part in the educational and spiritual life of the youth" (Hicks 1958: 20). And this cultural transmission was effective on almost all nationals in Malaya. Education in those schools was intermingled with a Christian orientation, naturally. On the basis of some sanctions of the secular government, "they agreed on not to proselyte", but they did not abstain from imparting moral education. For instance, it was seen at that time "that English education has uprooting, deculturizing effects on the Malaysian Chinese" as well (Yuen 1976: 41; Kim 1973: 22).

A significant reason stated in various sources with regards to the expansion of the missionary schools was the medium of instruction. The mission schools afforded education in English by their own European cadres because English schools were not found everywhere. Missionary attempts to open educational facilities were encouraged by the colonial administration due to some technical difficulties which did not allow the administration to do so. Thus, they needed the constructive help of the various missionary groups which have been very much historically involved

in education. As will be discussed below, the combined efforts of these two representatives of Western world-view or *weltanschauung*, caused a cultural strain and had a direct impact on the transformation of socio-cultural structure in Muslim Malay society. In the context of Malaya, missionaries supported by the secular governance of the British administration had focused on education not only in their own institutions in the late decades of the 19th century but also offered it to the Colonial Office in the Straight Settlements. Due to shortage of qualified teaching and administrative staff, missionaries and church members were recruited for the reletad posts (Goh 2005: 48-9; Gungwu 1992: 220; Ong 1965: 83).

Missionary activities including education had an undermining impact on the cultural values of the natives because they built a new world view different from the native's own views. This was done by inculcating the Western values in a systematic way among the native youth. Besides that, the modernization process of differentiation of native people as rural or urban based, educated or non-educated showed that the missionary attempts of schooling had segregative effects on the natives' world view. Hence, the secular schools were claimed not to have played a role in terms of value transformation. An example of segregation through education, the well-known Malay College in Kuala Kangsar in Perak in 1905 was meant to produce subservient Malay cadre in administration and they were taught according to the British policy and the medium of instruction was English. Thus, the graduates acquired a satisfactory level English. In addition to this, the salient function of the school was to introduce the students into British cultural environment (Tilma -no date-: 231). Like other Malay vernacular schools, graduates of this school in Kuala Kangsar would pave the way for the educated class to be recruited for the various administrative positions in the civil service. Since students were not only inculcated with the "world language", but also the modes of thought and culture. This system was implicitly in line with the Western paradigm by disseminating and spreading its values which had an end to itself by remoulding the natives as individuals to become representatives of the Western cultural capital. Taking into consideration the idea of "broader civilizing objectives of colonialism", this policy did not seem very inconsistent. The main aspect of the aforementioned transformation was handled "indirectly" by the missionary groups who were allowed to take the initiatives for youth education (Gould 1993: 13; Hicks 1958: 30; Furnival 1943: 22).

### **Missionary Phenomenon and Initiatives**

The mission phenomenon during the colonial era initiated three types of schools: the vernacular, English and the mission schools. The third type of schools were under the direct management of the missionary groups and their objectives were in line with the attempts of the colonial administration.

Various sources have argued that the first school initiatives were the efforts of “missionary or quasi-missionary bodies” that had been subsidized by the colonial government (Annual Report on the Federation of Malaya 1950: 90). The first educational establishments were the Free schools in Penang and Malacca which were the direct results of the influence of British church (Dartford 1956: 153; Chelliah 1965: 17; Chye 2006: 30). With regard to this, the initial phase of establishing Free Schools marked the effective beginning which was aligned with the secular governance policies. For instance, the Rev. R. S. Hutchings, the head of the Penang Free School (1816), not only founded the school, but also developed a sort of policy to be able to receive funds from Thomas Raffles, the first governor of British colonial rule. During this process, the policy was shaped on the basis of the perceptions of Malay Muslim families. The authorities of this institution considered them accordingly and included them in the cultural establishment. This sensitive approach can be viewed as the foundation which took into account the following reservations: “That great care should be taken that the prejudices of the parents averse to the Christian religion should not by a means be violated” (Federation of Malaya 1954: 3). The classifications of these schools discussed above can be interpreted as a private investment. Those two types of institutions such as the Penang Free School (October 21, 1816) was funded locally and supported by Raffles or British auspices (Report of the Commission 1902: C-111) and was a direct involvement of missions such as Christian Brothers, a monastic order functioned as the educational missionary and Methodist Mission of the American Methodist Church (Federation of Malaya 1954: 4).

Among the missionary groups, *London Missionary Society* (LMS) played a pivotal role as a leading organization in Malacca since the year 1815 by taking over the Anglo-Chinese College founded by William Farquhar, a distinguished British official, who officiated the initiative, (1818) and supported “several Malay and Chinese schools” (Turnbull 1972: 224). LMS also took the responsibility for the implementation of colonial educational policies (Goh 2005: 49). This can be seen in the 1824 London Agreement between the British and the Dutch where they have used these mission groups for the educational investment (Abdullah 1980: 1). Among the aims of Anglo-Chinese College, as a model for educational institution was to “spread Christianity” and “promote the study of English” (Turnbull 1972: 224). This was carried out during this first phase of educational development when the Malacca Free School was established in 1826. This institution had pupils from various racial backgrounds such as Malay, Chinese and Euroasians, and was regarded one of the first few samples of the secular-minded education. As a

catalyst of socio-cultural transformation, this school was significant in the history of the Malay education system (Abdulkadir 1970: 126, 180-1).

The restructuring of education in Malaya by the external powers underwent various processes. The missionary schools commenced did not only made educational attempts in the early stages of British rule in Malaya, but the colonial administration also invited missionary groups to be involved and take the responsibility of government schools in the process (Goh 2005: 48; Holmes 1967: 2; Ong 1965: 79; Furnivall 1943: 32; Nathalie Toms Means p. 77). The colonial administration led missionary circles conducted educational activities for the local youth either by allowing them to be autonomous or demanding directly from these groups which had more experienced in the implementation of educational institutions. This relation resulted in the missionary schools to be merged into the ruling system. Owing to this reason, on the basis of socio-political interpretation, it is difficult to interpret that there was the existence of the British without the missionaries or the existence of missionaries without the British. Following that, the mission groups were regarded as the founders of modern secular education in the country (Watson 1980: 157-8). It can be interpreted that there were concerted efforts which was a combination of effort by the above-mentioned parties to meet their own ideal targets. Throughout the process, it is observed that the transformative power of the missionary groups appeared to be aggressive, since the missionaries' attempts in the field of education were regarded as a part of crusade to enlarge Christendom in native lands (Means (no date): 23; Furnivall 1943: 16). This phenomenon was materialized when mission groups established their schools, either throughout their own initiatives or by having grants-in-aid approach from the colonial administration which were used to build church buildings. Thus, the mission groups could find opportunities to "teach the fourth 'R' -religion or the Christian faith-, beyond conducting the three 'R's' (Ong 1965: 23, 35; Means: 69).

In the course of time, due to the demand for English education particularly in town and city settlements, the number of English Christian mission schools gradually increased and "came to form the bulk of the English stream of education." (Yuen 1976: 35).

The issue of proselytization in the midst of these developments has to be considered though the general approach of the British colonial administration was not aimed "to Anglicize and Christianize the native populations", but the role and function of the missionaries should not be overlooked. As such, these mission groups from Catholic, Anglican and Methodist backgrounds predicted the great benefits of the English school as a "major instrument for the transmission of

Christianity”. English education as an “enterprise” was a more of a channel to have access to the Malays, particularly the non-Muslims. Notwithstanding, if the role and function of the mission schools were restricted only to conversion, the overall picture would not be seen as *welthanschauung*. Furthermore, while the mission groups exercised their ideologies via these English schools, the latter was also a gross agent and catalyst for modernization process (Yuen 1976: 33, 34; Loh 1970: 53).

The conducive conditions experienced by the missionaries were meant to improve their self-oriented religious activities which were materialized in curriculum or extra curriculum activities. These activities were supported by transferring Christian literature into Malay language, such as Bible stories, Christian tracts, hymns, a Malay version of the Bible” (Raffles 1991: 502; Proudfoot 1993: 5; Ong 1965: 327). Nonetheless, their involvements were not limited to education domain, instead translations and publications played salient roles in terms of meeting the needs of churches and schools. At that time, the Mission organisations such as LMS, American Presbyterians and Methodists settled in Singapore and Malaya, and also employed printing and publication activities for “evangelical enterprise” (Proudfoot 1993: 5, 9; Hunt 1993: 37). In the early 20th century, the *nouveaux riches* natives, due to the economic boom, requested the British authorities to establish schools and they also competed for limited grants that would their children to study in a Roman Catholic Missionary School provided by the British government. For instance, this can be seen as a reflection in the increasing of Malay enrolment proportionately in English schools in Perak between 1902 and 1905. (Loh 1970: 120-1). This ‘self-transformation’ was proved by the increasing number of pupils studying in missionary schools which was approximately 70%, in pre-WWI. The existence of the non-Muslim minorities and the Muslim Malay parents could also have been re-oriented in terms of their concerns for schools run by the Christians.

Many of the Malay parents were described as “indifferent and suspicious” to the religio-cultural climate which was moulded either by the secular British administrators or missionary groups for the Malays. This had caused many parents not to give positive responses, whereby only a small number of Malay pupils had access to English education (Mohamad 2011: 12; Puteh&Malik 1985: 78; Stevenson 1975: 119). The 1920s were turning points for majority of the Malay parents as they began to adopt the Western type of education which was Vernacular Malay schools, English schools or relatively missionary ones (Gullick 1964: 69). During that time, both government/English schools and private/mission schools were established in urban areas, where the number of Malay population was less than 15%. Owing to this reason, the number of Malay students who were



educated was relatively lower than the migrants (Watson 1980: 157-8; Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia 1975: 63; Hicks 1958: 5-7, 20, 27).

## **Conclusion**

When the British was involved in the Malay Peninsula, it caused not only political but socio-cultural changes as well. Owing to their interference, the British orchestrated a cumulative change the roles of the natives in political domain and also redirected the education system by organizing the English schools and allowing the missionary groups to be involved in education.

In almost all of the colonized lands, missionaries had a common predilection in the domain of education such as the ones found in Malaya as well. Besides that, the educational reports proved that there was no direct control of the colonial office on missionary schools. Instead, mission schools and mission groups' contribution left indelible mark in the education system. For instance, E. C. Hill (1895: 173) mentioned in his report of the year 1894 that "...English education of the colony is almost entirely in the hands of missionary bodies or of committees over which government has no direct control". Besides, the missionary agencies were involved not only in educational institutions, but in other social institutions such as the health sector by providing medical services in clinics. This was the result of an understanding that "education and medical work are part of evangelistic task of the church" (Holmes 1967: 1; Ong 1965: 140).

Although the missionary activities were assumed to be involved directly in the conversion of non-Christian individuals, the outputs of these initiatives, especially in relation to education, were not be as planned. One of the reasons of this unexpected situation in missionary education was based on the priorities of the colonial government. The general inclination was that the British administrators did not want to be involved directly with the religio-cultural domains and issues of the natives, including Muslim Malays as agreed in the treaties with the various states in Malaya. This political commitment was a restriction on the educational initiatives of missionary societies. If the colonial administration sensed any beneficial development such as similarities in their policies, they would have given privileges to mission groups without any hesitation (Holmes 1967: ix). Local establishment and worldview were channeled out of its own socio-cultural environment by overall education and interests of common people which were converted to include external world which was the western world (Roff 1972: 1). In other words, the overall education included studying English which has been associated with the modernization process throughout the colonial era and nation-state building. Modernization has been inevitably regarded as "depending on

Western institutions and practices”. In the context of this paper, mission and English schools were the leverages used to transmit English as a modern language by being functional in the political and economic reconstruction process. There is no doubt that while the society became modernized, convergence of welthanschaung cannot be seen as a trivial matter. As a summary and as urged by Tollefson (1981: 203) who wrote “in modernizing countries, ESL professionals are agents of modernization, bringing methods and materials that claim to empower citizens but in fact help to sustain existing power relationships”.

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