

THE IMPACT OF BRITISH EDUCATIONAL POLICY ON THE MALAY-MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN MALAYSIA

Ab. Halim Tamuri

Introduction

In general, the Malaysian education system prior to the British colonial period was closely related to the Islamic religious teaching which took place at home, in the *surau* and mosque and it played a significant role in the development of the local Malay-Muslim community.¹ During the occupation of Malaya by the Portuguese and Dutch, both colonial powers were inert towards the development of education for the Malay-Muslim community, particularly in the development of Islamic education. Only in 1548, did the Portuguese found a school for local Eurasians in Malacca, the Roman Catholic School.² After that, however, it is understood that there was no other school founded by the Portuguese nor the Dutch. In fact, evidence of religious activities and Islamic education in the Malay community is hard to find since there are few resources that mention the pattern of education systems during the Portuguese and Dutch colonial periods. Basically, there were several reasons that might have influenced the situation, namely:

- (i) They (the Portuguese and Dutch) were uninterested in supporting and developing the existing educational system which was closely associated with Islamic education.
- (ii) They were more concerned to protect their economic interests.
- (iii) Local political and economic rivalry created tension and wars between the political powers in the area.³

In addition, the positions of the Portuguese and Dutch in the Peninsula in Malaya were described as follows:

The main contact between Portuguese and the Malays was generally warlike, for the former were either trying to gain control of trade or spread Christianity ... although the Dutch were to hold Malacca for over a century and a half, the influence which they had on the inhabitants of the Peninsula was possibly even less than that of the Portuguese. The Dutch

were to use Malacca rather as the subsidiary collecting point for their commerce with the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra ... Malacca itself was never of paramount importance to them.⁴

Larson states that

... the Portuguese were more interested in trade than in subjugation. The effect of their conquest was to disperse the Malays, not to convert or contain them. The same was true after the Dutch took over Malacca in 1641. They were interested in maintaining a permanent base for purposes of strategy and trade.⁵

These might be the main factors that caused the insignificant development of education system in the peninsula during the Portuguese and Dutch colonialism. It seems that the education system in Malaya before the British arrival was primarily associated with informal Qur'ānic learning and religious instruction. This kind of informal system remained until the arrival of the British who later made a significant impact on the education system in Malaysia. The *Story of Abdullah* and the *Malays Annals* give valuable information regarding the traditional Malay-Muslims' education system and educational activities in the early period of British colonialism.⁶

Pre-World War II Educational System

The British intervention in Malaya began in 1786 with the occupation of Penang by Francis Light and was followed by the possession of Singapore by Stamford Raffles in 1819. The Treaty of London in 1824 significantly resulted in the division of the Malay world into two main parts, Indonesia under the Dutch and Malaya under the British. From this period, the British directly or indirectly ruled the Malay Peninsula and Singapore while the Dutch controlled the Indonesian Islands.

The British government introduced several policies in its colonial states including education. In Singapore for example, the earliest administrators had an ambitious desire to develop the state as a centre of civilization and learning in Southeast Asia but the ambition failed. Raffles' idea was to establish Singapore as a center of education which could stimulate the revival of wealth and civilization in Southeast Asia. He wanted his school to be involved in research studies on the customs, language, history and religion of the region.⁷ His aim was modelled on the Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca (1818). However, his ambition failed after he returned to England. The failure was partly a result of British educational policy and partly because of the nature of the population.

In the Malay Peninsula, the British had started to introduce a Western style education system in the early 19th century. Rudner wrote:

From the very beginnings of British rule in the Straits Settlements, the structure of education was therefore divided

according to linguistic and communal streams having separate organization, financial provision and orientation.⁸

Andaya and Andaya have observed that the British education policy in the early 20th century "... relinquished much of the direction of non-English medium schools in the first few decades of the twentieth century to the respective ethnic communities."⁹ Furthermore, it is argued that the main aim of its education system was to produce clerical officers.¹⁰ Bedlington argues that there were two aspects that influenced the British education policy before the Second World War, "first to maintain the traditional structure of indirect rule, and, second, to impart a degree of education to the majority of Malays (excluding the privileged élite) that would keep them happy".¹¹ Before World War II, four main types of schools emerged in the Malay Peninsula, excluding the religious education system, namely English schools and Malay, Chinese and Indian vernacular schools. This article, however, will deal only with the English and Malay vernacular schools, which had a direct relationship with the Malay-Muslim community.

(a) English Schools

The earliest school of the British pattern in Malaya was the Penang Free School, which was established with the support of the Church of England and the East India Company in 1816.¹² It was followed by the foundation of other 'free' schools in Malacca (1826) and Singapore (1834).¹³ After that, many English schools were developed particularly by the Christian missionary organizations, such as the London Missionary Society, Roman Catholic Mission and the American Methodist Mission, as well as the Church of England and the government itself. Most of these schools were secondary schools and had a primary section. Only a few of them were feeder primary schools. During this period, primary education consisted of seven years of schooling and was followed by four years of secondary education. English was the medium of instruction and the schools used the British-oriented curriculum which complied with the examinations conducted by the Cambridge University Examination Syndicate.¹⁴ In 1905, the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, primarily intended to fulfill the needs of the Malay élite and royal children, was founded to provide the government with Malay administrative officers.

The English schools were the only schools attended by all communities in Malaya but particularly by the upper levels of Malayan society since they only existed in the urban areas. Generally, there were three types of English schools, government schools, aided schools and private schools. The government fully supported the first type of school; the second were funded by the Christian missionary organizations and the government; and the third were privately organized by individuals.

Usually, the graduates from the English schools had better opportunities to continue their education, whether in local or overseas educational institutions and to find jobs, whether in the government service or private sector. These circumstances strengthened the perception of

many Malay parents that “English education might better assure Malay children of social and economic opportunities.”¹⁵ Therefore, the social and economic advantages, high wages, reputation and also the level of technical or professional education increased the demand for English education among the Malay community, particularly in town areas. In other words, an English education was seen as a chance “...to create a privileged, Westernized, English-speaking élite geared to administrative office-holding and the free professions.”¹⁶ Harrison describes how “Malay pupils flock to the English schools ...”.¹⁷ The post-World War I trade recession later forced the British government to extend the English education of the Malays since they had “...to economize on expatriate salaries”.¹⁸

(b) Malay schools

The Malay vernacular schools originated from the traditional Qur’anic classes and were founded by A. M. Skinner in 1871 in the Straits Settlements to regenerate the previous Malay education system which had been introduced by Governor Cavengah. However, his Malay schools failed to attract the majority of Malay parents in the Straits Settlements. The schools were only a success in Malacca, and they failed in Penang and Singapore.¹⁹ A. M. Skinner attempted to re-establish Malay vernacular schools which should be “supplementary to the existing system”. In these schools, Malay lessons were given in the morning session, which was funded by the government, and the Qur’anic teaching was available during the evening session. The Malay vernacular schools generally had a four-year course (Standards I-IV), and only a few Malay pupils could enter Standard V and VI, the Teacher Training College, and the School of Agriculture.²⁰ The students studied, usually from 7 to 11 am, several subjects, such as mathematics, geography, writing, reading and composition.²¹ The emphasis was on the three R’s in the Malay language.²² In 1903, R. J. Wilkinson brought Malay literature written in *Rumi* in the Malay vernacular schools.²³

In 1916, another educational reform was made by R. O. Winstead, who introduced a ‘rural-bias’ and ‘practical’ curriculum in these schools. After being appointed as Assistant Director of Education (Malaya), he visited Java and the Philippines, where he was very interested in their systems of industrial education. He believed that the most suitable curriculum for the Malay vernacular schools was “the prospect of excluding purely ‘academic’ subjects from the vernacular curriculum and emphasising instead such ‘practical’ arts as basket-making and horticulture”.²⁴ Rudner states that basket-making became the identity of the “new” Malay education policy.²⁵ The Malay vernacular schools, usually located in the countryside, gradually developed. For example, in 1924, there were 840 schools and in 1938, 1,169.²⁶ There was no Malay secondary school, and only English secondary schooling was available. Therefore, only a few excellent pupils from Malay schools could enter secondary education, after two years of special Malay classes, and they were sponsored by the government.²⁷ Frank Sweetenham states that “The most promising boys in

the vernacular schools are helped, if they desire, to pass on to a school where English is taught.”²⁸ Only after 1922 was another higher educational opportunity available for the Malay vernacular pupils when the government established the Sultan Idris Training College.

Post-World War II Educational System

World War II left huge damage and anarchy in Malaya where the British Government then faced a major problem when Chinese guerrillas started to attack the government, using the weapons supplied by the Allies during the Second World War. The main purpose of these guerrillas, according to Steven Warshaw, was “...to create a Malayan revolution that would duplicate the one that Mao Tse-tung was carrying forward in China”.²⁹ In other words, they attempted to create a communist revolution in Malaya. Therefore, a state of emergency was declared by the British Government. The government launched the “New Village Policy” to fight the communists, where 500 new villages were built for 450,000 Chinese and 130,000 non-Chinese.³⁰ Nevertheless, in terms of enduring impacts, the situation was to raise political and educational awareness among the Malay-Muslim community in Malaya where several Malay-Muslim political parties emerged, for example, the Malay National Party (1945), United Malay National Organisation (1946), al-Hizbul Muslimin (1948) and Pan Islamic Party (1951).

During the Japanese occupation, from 1942-1945, the British education system had been abolished and replaced by a Japanese oriented one. After recapturing Malaya, the British government tried to reopen the schools. The immediate education policy was “...to restore schools as quickly as possible to their former condition and to make provision for all who are deprived of education owing to war.”³¹ However, Ong describes how “... seven years after the conclusion of World War II the Federation educational system remains almost unchanged in its essential factors.”³²

In fact, it was opportunities in administration during the Japanese rule that had fomented the eagerness for independence among the Malays. The Malayan community in general, however, was disparate and people did not have a common sense of identity. The blame was laid upon the communal and language-oriented education which had resulted in the division of the Malayan people. Therefore, an essential step was taken. As Hall states:

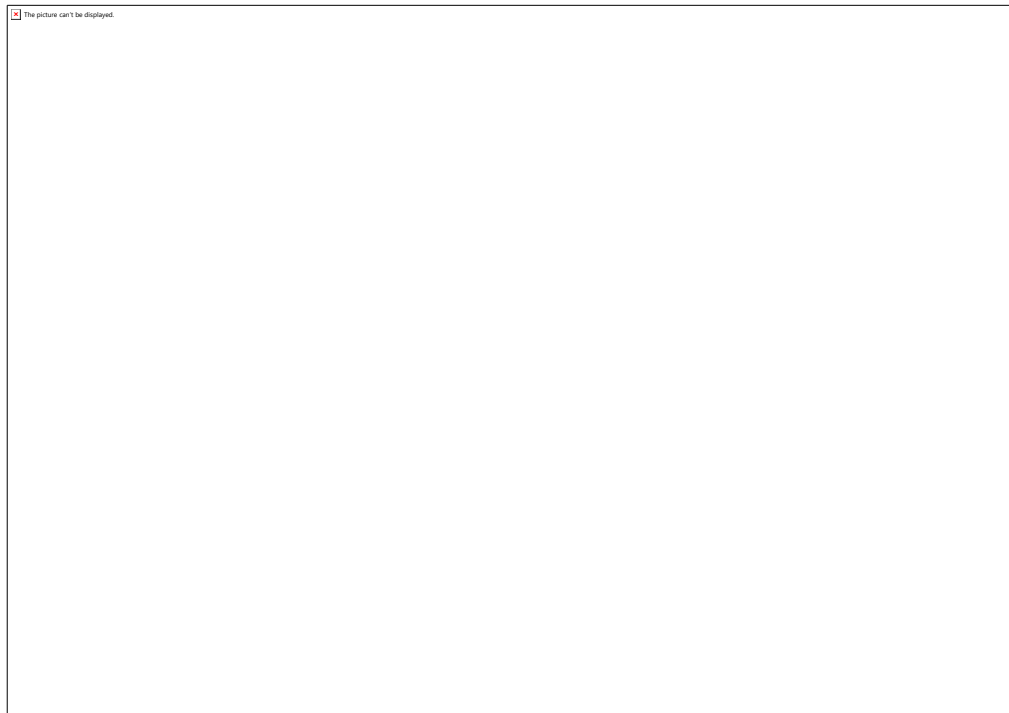
The creation of a common Malayan citizenship from among the diverse racial groups in the country, without which political advance towards self-government was recognized to be impossible, was the most urgent problem of the new area, and special attention was directed to the framing of an education policy which should contribute towards its solution.³³

The diversity of the system of education at independence made the government realize "... the necessity of re-organizing the pre-war system, including the content of education to be taught in schools".³⁴

Thus, the first attempt was made in 1949 by the formation of the Central Advisory Committee on Education, whose recommendation, similar to the Cheeseman Reports, was to introduce English as the main medium of instruction in all schools and as the lingua franca in Malaya.³⁵ The strongest reason to introduce English in all schools was that:

... it will simplify the school system and provide that one essential unity which [is] lacking in the Malayan educational system—a common language.³⁶

Fig. 1: The number of pupils in the Federation of Malaya in 1950



The idea, however, was rejected by the Federal Legislative Council since it ignored the Malay language as the main medium of instruction. This decision led to the establishment of another committee by the Government in 1950 chaired by L. J. Barnes. This committee suggested that primary schools should be instrumental in building a common Malayan nationality—the vernacular schools would be replaced with new National Schools; and Malay and English should become the medium of instruction.³⁷ However, the Chinese and Indian communities disagreed with the proposal and

wanted to persist with the existing system.³⁸ After considering the views of all parties, the Educational Ordinance of 1952 was enacted—some of the main elements were the establishment of National Schools; English and Malay became the media of instruction; six years of primary education became compulsory; Chinese and Tamil schools were to be maintained; and the teaching of other languages as third languages was introduced.³⁹

After the 1955 election, the Malayan Government commissioned an education committee led by Tun Abdul Razak Hussein to study the Federation education policy. The main suggestions of the reports were: every school should use a common curriculum; the present primary schools should be maintained and should modify their curricula with local elements; and a single type of secondary education should be introduced in which Malay and English were compulsory.⁴⁰ The reports led to the 1957 Educational Ordinance.

British Educational Policy: the Impact on the Malay-Muslim Community

Generally, the foregoing discussion shows how the formal Western type education system was introduced into Malaya by the British government. Comparatively, the British seem to have been more concerned about education in Malaya than the previous colonial powers and in fact, the formal education system in Malaysia today originates from the education system established during the British colonial period. Undoubtedly, it made a significant contribution to the development of education in Malaysia.

However, there have been criticisms regarding British education policy in Malaya, particularly of the Malay and English vernacular schools. For example, the nature and the orientation of Malay vernacular education were explained as follows:

The stress was always on “the dignity of manual labour”... Rather, vernacular schooling for Malays aimed expressly at keeping peasantry in their station, while teaching the discipline of industry, punctuality, and obedience.⁴¹

This education policy also neglected the intellectual development of the Malay-Muslim pupils. Rudner in his analysis found fault with Winstead’s rural bias curriculum because it “...implicitly denied the very desirability of intellectual pursuits.”⁴² The Maxwell’s reports proved this claim as it stated that:

The aim of the government is not to turn out a few well-educated youths, nor a number of less well-educated boys—rather it is to improve the bulk of the people, and to make the son of the fisherman or peasant a more intelligent fisherman or peasant than his father had been, and a man whose education will enable him to understand how his lot in life fits in with the scheme of life around him.⁴³

The above statements clearly show that only a few Malay-Muslim children could receive a better education than their peers during the British colonial period: They would have done so in the English school, which was highly regarded by the government and the people at large. The fact was that the majority of Malay-Muslim students, particularly in the rural areas, were neglected and they only received basic knowledge relevant merely to this rural situation and to necessity. Sir Frank Swettenham also criticized the financial allocation for education as he states "... the Protected State have spent, and continue to spend, too small a proportion of their revenues on education."⁴⁴

It is also argued that the British education policy was designed to maintain their position and power in the Malay community.⁴⁵ The following statement by Harrison shows the success of teaching the habits of respect and obedience among the Malay-Muslim pupils:

Thus the young man taking up his duties for the first time will probably get a pleasant surprise when he realizes how biddable all these strangely different boys are, and with what eagerness they welcome the right type of British master.⁴⁶

The value of a British educational policy was, according to Sir Frank Swettenham: "To the Malay [...] to teach him habits of order, punctuality and obedience."⁴⁷ Another problem faced by the Malay schools was attendance, although education was compulsory, free and offered with textbooks and slates. Andaya and Andaya see this problem as a result of the irrelevance and the limited usefulness of secular education, for example arithmetic and the Malay language, in the agricultural Malay-Muslim community,⁴⁸ and also in the existence of its own traditional religious instruction.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the main purpose of Chinese and Tamil schools was to serve:

...the culture needs of these two respective immigrant communities, but at the same time they tended to reinforce the ethnic and linguistic differences of these two communities.⁵⁰

In terms of educational opportunity, English education was criticised since it was almost solely directed at the upper classes who would become the English-educated administrators and created a social gap in the Malayan community. It is stated that:

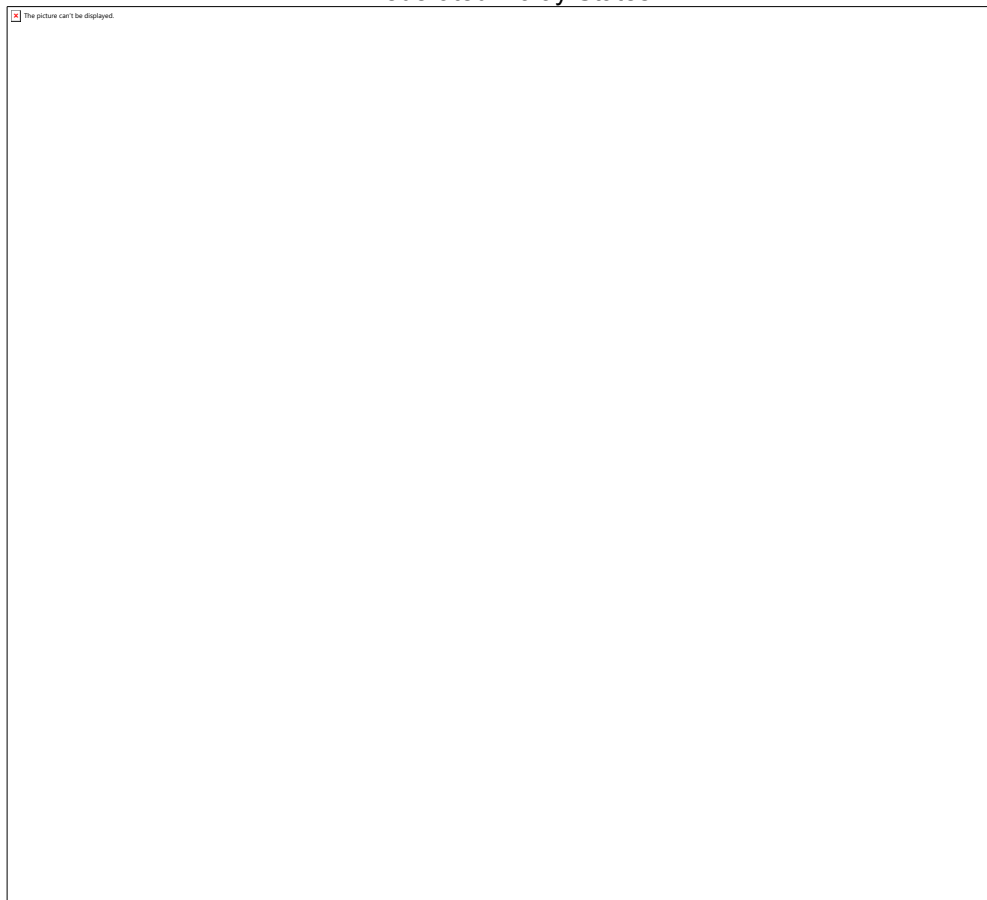
Only a small local élite would be given the privilege of an English education to equip them for clerical duties within the colonial government bureaucracy or in European-controlled companies.⁵¹

Moreover, Rudner claims that English education:

...was definitely not seen as an agency for broader social modernization... The deliberately narrow provision of English-medium education for urban and upper income groups limited its developmental impact upon Malayan society as a whole.⁵²

Although there was a high demand for English education and the number of Malays enrolling in English schools increased, the percentage of Malay-Muslims was still small, as is shown Fig. 2 below.⁵³

Fig. 2: Percentage of enrollment in the English schools in the Federated Malay States



The main reason for the low enrollment was the location of English schools in urban areas, which were dominated by the Chinese, while the majority of Malays lived in poor rural areas. Thus, only a minority of Malay-Muslims who lived in the cities had access to English education. Fear of religious conversion, the rejection of materialism and skepticism about Western values and cities were the other reasons which influenced this mistrust of

English education.⁵⁴ However, the prospect of employment and better earnings changed the Malays' view of the British education system. It is stated that:

For social and religious reasons the Malay community was even more opposed to sending its daughters to school. This attitude changed with time as it became clear that an education opened the way to employment which, even if lowly, produced a better income than a peasant farmer could earn.⁵⁵

Many Malay-Muslim parents preferred an English education for their children and some of them even did not feel confident about education unless the medium was English. Thus, the major challenge or threat for the Malay Vernacular Schools as well as religious schools at that time was "...the strength of English as an established element in the system and its obvious economic advantages."⁵⁶ In fact, English education was still valued by some Malay-Muslim parents as a guarantee of their children's future, even though Malaya had gained its independence.

Although the education system before independence might have satisfied ethnic interests by the presence of four vernacular schools, it failed to unite the whole Malayan community. Jomo argues that British educational policy with its four types of language-based schools only retained class and ethnic differences and the ethnic identification with economic activities.⁵⁷ This was why educational policy after World War II emphasised unification of the disparate Malayan community before independence could be possible. Hence, after independence, the education policy to integrate the diverse Malayan community was continued. The use of Malay as the common language, standard syllabuses and common public examinations in the education system were the government strategies to achieve national integration.

Nevertheless, the existence of private schools and primary national-type schools, which were permitted to use their own languages, was also seen an obstacle to making Malay the common language in the education system.⁵⁸ The proposals in the Razak Reports (1956) and in Rahman Talib's Reports (1960) to maintain the language-based primary schools were also against the earlier committee's recommendation to have only a single type of primary school, i.e. National Schools, which were open to all races.⁵⁹ The presence of language-based schools, for example, Chinese and Tamil primary schools, after independence was criticised as preserving the colonial education system while calling it a "National Education System".⁶⁰

Conclusion

In summing up, we may understand that the education system in Malaysia began with informal education which took place in houses or mosques. Since there was no significant development during the Portuguese and Dutch colonial periods, it is argued that the Malaysian education system,

whether the religious or secular systems, only started to develop significantly in the mid 19th century. The traditional system was significantly changed by the introduction of the formal Western-style schooling system by the British in the 19th century. The British education system gradually developed and became the foundation of the existing education system in Malaysia. The establishment of Malay vernacular schools by the government, however, created several major problems among the Malay-Muslim community, such as the taking over of the Qur'anic schools' buildings by the government. In fact, the introduction of Malay language classes in the morning session diminished the importance of religious and Qur'anic education. Since they were taught in the evening session, religious and Qur'anic education were not valued as they used to be and became only additional or secondary subjects. In the Barnes Reports, it is stated that:

Owing to the absence of religious instruction from the curriculum, there is practically no character training. ... Many of the small pupils aged 6-8 find it very exacting to do seven or eight hours work every day.⁶¹

Abdullah Ishak also argues that the separation of "religious knowledge sessions" and "non-religious knowledge session" within a school building was a new kind of doctrine introduced in Malaya.⁶² Therefore, the separation between Malay language classes and Qur'anic classes introduced by Skinner was seen as the starting point of the process of secularising the education system in Malaysia.⁶³ English education was highly valued by many parents since it had better educational facilities and also promised economic advantages. As a result, the graduates from other type of schools were neglected and regarded as "second class students". The establishment of English schools also created a social gap in the Malayan community since these schools were located in the urban areas and exclusively directed at the upper classes. The establishment of language-based schools during the British colonial period only prolonged the diversification of the Malayan community and ethnic identity, although the system, in the short term, might have satisfied ethnic interests. The black event of 13th May 1969 demonstrated the failure of several attempts by the government after independence to unite the disparate Malaysian community. In the context of Malaysia, the issue of language became one of the reasons for the disintegration of the Malaysian community after independence.

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