

# EDUCATION AND CULTURAL CHANGE AMONG THE MALAYS

1900 - 1940

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## Summary

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The study examines the educational factors that contributed to the development of a communal identity among the Malay population of several linguistic and cultural groups in the plural society of West Malaya during the period of British Colonial rule.

Archival material from the British Colonial Office and the Malaya National Archives, together with a study of the Malay vernacular press, a series of interviews, and a case study of one district in Selangor provided the data for the study conducted in the period 1967-68.

The study shows the influences of the Malay vernacular schools over the village schools and the religious schools in establishing in the 1930's the Malay language as the focal point of communal identity.

The report emphasises the fact that while the homogenising of the Malay dialects into one language was stimulated by colonial administrative pressures in the interest of effective control, it was the Malays themselves who, consciously and explicitly, shaped the language by which they have defined their identity.

## Report

This research project was financed by a grant from the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Bureau of Research of the Education Department, in 1967-68. Research was carried out in Britain in the library of the Colonial Office, and the colonial records of the Public Record Office, and in Malaya in the National Archives and through interviewing and a case study of the mukim (sub-district) of Ulu Langat. A full report on the research is the subject of a doctoral thesis submitted to the Department of History, through the programme committee for Comparative Tropical History, of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and accepted in June 1970. It is available in reproduction from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan (Ref: 70-19, 167). An interim report to the U.S. Office of Education, which deals more specifically with research techniques and procedures was submitted in December, 1968, and is available from

Following the establishment of British protectorates in western Malaya, in the states of Perak, Selangor and Negri Sembilan, which, together with Pahang, became the Federated Malay States, there was a rapid increase in population, both among immigrant groups of non-Malays (e.g. Chinese and Indians), and among the Malays themselves. This growth in the Malay population, which was marked especially in areas which had been troubled by periods of civil war and disturbance, was only in part due to natural increase, for a considerable proportion was made up of immigrants from various parts of the peninsula, from Sumatra, and from the rest of the Indonesian archipelago. Malay was a term conveniently used by the administration, but until the 1930's they would be more likely to distinguish themselves separately, as Minangkabaus, Madnailings, and so on. Although essentially 'malaysian', in many cases their differing dialects were not mutually intelligible, and they had significant differences in customs and traditions.

The object of the research was to examine the role of education, both directly through the schools themselves and indirectly through the influence of the educated, in assisting the development of a peninsula Malay sense of community to replace earlier and original identifications. The study was concerned primarily with the Malay population and made only passing reference to the other communities in the emerging plural society of Malaya. The influence of these other communities was a negative one, excluding Malays from particular functions and operations, and thus contributing to the limiting definition of the Malay as rural peasant, even though in theory Malays were the legitimate native population of the peninsula. In fact it is possible to suggest a distinction between two Malays; one was the politically dominant colonial entity, a network of centres superimposed on the peninsula, with tendrils reaching out into the growing pockets of economic development, whose resources were marshalled by western enterprise, and garnered by a predominantly Chinese and Indian labour force; the other, an underlying, 'sub-colonial' Malay peasant society, was a predominantly subsistence economy, but, through the agreements entered into by its rulers, it provided the theoretical legitimacy for the colonial enterprise.

The administration accepted responsibility for the basic education of the 'native peoples', the Malays, but the government Malay school system was only one element in the educational patterns of the colonial period. There were also government and mission English medium secondary schools, privately run Chinese medium schools, and some rudimentary Indian medium schools run by employers of Indian labour. For the Malays, however, apart from some special provisions for access for a few to English medium secondary schools, the basic year elementary system was the extent of official educational opportunity. For some this could be extended by teacher training programmes designed to channel them into teaching in the rural primary schools. The study examines the nature and impact of the Malay vernacular schools in some detail, and also discusses examples of other, non-official, Malay schools, sekolah raayat or popular schools set up independently by villages, and sekolah arab or arabic schools, which in most cases were modernised versions of the traditional koran schools. Sekolah Raayat were ephemeral institutions generally, for in most cases they were used in order to pressure the government into opening official schools, and if this object failed the school itself was liable to fail within

a few years. Sekolah Arab were opened by private individuals nominally as religious schools subject to approval by the State Departments of Religious Affairs under the authority of the various Sultans.

In order to make a more specific assessment of the role of education in the development of a Malay community the research project developed two interconnected topics for study. In the first place a case study was made of the introduction of schools in one particular mukim, and of the settlement and development of the mukim itself. Together with this a number of interviews were held with Malay informants, in particular retired school teachers who had been active during the colonial period. These interviews were supplemented by selective study of the Malay vernacular press of the period, in particular journals such as Majalla Guru, the official journal of the Malay teaching profession.

The mukim selected for study was Ulu Langat, a predominantly Malay district in Selangor. Of the six principal kampongs (villages) in this mukim only four had schools during the colonial period, while a fifth had one of the more successful Sekolah Raayat, a school which was never adopted by the government, but which the villagers managed to keep open by themselves. There was also a fairly successful Sekolah Arab which operated under the leadership of one individual in two centres. The report discusses these non-official schools as examples of Malay response to two kinds of deficiency in the official colonial system, deficiency in provision of educational facilities, and deficiency in the kind of education given, which was practical but devoid of cultural values as they had been taught in the old Koranic schools.

Ulu Langat also provided a very clear example of intra-Malay communal differences, since, although by 1940 the pattern was becoming blurred, each village was originally established by a distinct immigrant group, each group conscious of differences from the next village. Indeed, this kind of settlement pattern was the official policy of the district heads (for most of this period of Mandailing extraction themselves) deliberately followed for the purposes of administrative convenience. In the case of both the Sekolah Raayat and the Sekolah Arab the influence of communal differences is illustrated. The villagers who maintained their own school were Korinchi, and, in the words of the district head, were 'troublesome people', for which reason they had been required to settle at the remote end of the district; in turn they regarded the head as unsympathetic, primarily because he did not understand and therefore mistrusted them. The owner of the Sekolah Arab came from a family which derived from Rawa in Sumatra, and also had trouble with the district head, partly because of his considerable personal popularity and influence. At one time there seems to have been an attempt to make him out to be politically subversive; certainly his progressive religious views were in conflict with the more prevalent conversation of the official mukim leadership.

The study of the Malay vernacular press was particularly rewarding, and for this Majallah Guru proved to be a valuable sounding board for Malay opinion generally, for its purpose was to act as a clearing house for any news, discussion or comment that its editors felt to be of special interest to Malays. It was possible to discern four main periods of editorial concern which can be summarised as follows: 1942 to 1930, concerned with the general uplift of the peninsula peoples of the peninsula, with practical advice and exhortation; 1930 to 1933, alert to the problems which Malays faced in competition with other peoples in the peninsula, in particular the Chinese, and drawing

strength from the broad-based pan-Malaysian and Muslim world of the peninsula and the archipelago; 1933 to 1937, defining the 'peninsula Malay' community as a community with particular and peculiar problems, and especially defining the role and responsibility of the educated Malay and the teaching profession. The importance laid upon the definition of identity as a preliminary to the constructive solution of problems is of special interest.

In this process the Malay language itself was of primary importance, for it came to rival, then supplant, religion as the ultimate mark of communal identity. The British had early chosen the Johore-Rhiau dialect as the model for official use. Besides the language, the script too had been standardised, first by establishing an acceptable orthography for Jawi, Arabic script as modified for Malay; then, by the introduction of Rumi, permitting the ready adoption of neologisms derived from English in place of periphrasis drawing on arabic to cope with new terminologies. In a sense one could argue that during this period the Malays learnt to speak Malay; and it is important to stress that while in a sense this homogenising of the languages and dialects into one was stimulated by colonial administrative pressures in the interests of more effective control, the language itself was shaped and adapted by Malays themselves. Particularly in the 1930's this process was very conscious and explicit, and the ensuing debate can be followed in the pages of journals such as Majallah Guru .

This attempt to summarise the study of the role of education in the development of a Malay community in peninsula between 1900 and 1940 has of necessity left out the detailed supporting arguments and illustrations, which must be sought in the original study itself. It is also difficult in a précis version to show adequately how the various parts of the study complement each other. The attempt here therefore has been merely to sketch the kind of material used, and the principal topics discussed. In terms of research procedure no questionnaire, standardised survey, or other such instrument was used, since it was felt that these could only be derived from a previously constructed model which might itself be faulty and thus jeopardise the enquiry. Indeed, many of the original assumptions, used as points of entry into the enquiry, had to be modified in the course of the series of individual interviews which provided the main focus of the study. Based on these interviews, much of the resultant report is biographical and anecdotal, material which does not lend itself to simplified summary.

As it stands, the research report contained in the full version of the thesis is a contribution to a fuller understanding of Malay social history, with particular reference to the role of education. Admittedly in this area there is still a great deal more to be done. It also contributes to an understanding of the processes of societies in a period of rapid cultural adaptations, and, though in this case the discussion is of a specific society under colonial rule, the concluding chapter discusses its relationship to other examples, notably Indonesia and Ceylon; and in subsequent work the author has tried to apply his findings more generally to discussion of theories of culture contact and culture change.