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**THE BRITISH EDUCATIONAL POLICY FOR THE INDIGENOUS
COMMUNITY IN MALAYA: DUALISTIC STRUCTURE, COLONIAL
INTERESTS AND MALAY RADICAL NATIONALISM**

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Abstract

The British Educational Policy for the Indigenous Community in Malaya: Dualistic Structure, Colonial Interests and Malay Radical Nationalism

The educational policy implemented by the British for the Malays, the indigenous community of Malaya, was underpinned by the policy of divide and rule. The British implemented a dual system of education for the Malays: one for the Malay peasantry and another for the Malay nobility. These two systems of education served different purposes and needs of the British. The Malay peasantry was provided with a rural-based Malay vernacular education, which had limited value in terms of educational mobility. This rural-based education was to serve as a means of social control for the British. On the other hand, the British provided the Malay nobility with an elitist English education that was intended to co-opt the Malay traditional elites into their fold. But contrary to the expectation of the British, the Malay-educated intelligentsia had become radical Malay nationalists. Alarmed by the threatened position of the Malays from the encroachment of the immigrant communities, in particular the Chinese, and spurred by the Indonesia nationalist movement, the radical Malay nationalists soon adopted an anti-British stance. However, the radical stance of the Malay educated intelligentsia eventually gave way to the traditional elitists who adopted a pro-British stance.

Keywords: Educational policy, Malay education, indigenous community, colonialism

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Introduction

Driven by the need to safeguard their commercial interests, in particular trade with China, the British, through the trading house of the East India Company, acquired Penang in 1786, Singapore in 1819 and Malacca in 1826 as colonies. These colonies were combined to form a single administrative unit known as the Straits Settlements (SS) in 1826. The SS were initially administered by the East India Company (1826-1851) and later by the India Office (1851-1867). The British's influence in Malaya spread to the Malay states. Problem of succession to the throne in the Malay state of Perak led to one of the claimants seeking the aid of the British to assure his ascendancy to the throne. The Pangkor Treaty was signed in 1875 to pave way for the intervention of the British. A British resident was appointed to serve as an advisor to the Sultan. In the same year, another Malay state, the state of Selangor, sought the intervention of the British. Like Perak, the reason for intervention stemmed from disputes over succession to the throne. In 1887, the British made further inroad into the Malay states. The state of Pahang came under its indirect rule. In 1895, it was the state of Negeri Sembilan that engaged the advisory service of the British. These four Malay states were collectively known as the Federated Malay States (FMS). The British control of Malaya extended into the Malay states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu under the terms of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty signed in 1909. The four states, collectively known as the Unfederated Malay States (UMS), were accorded British protection from Siamese military intrusion. There was a sharp contrast in the manner in which the British exerted their influence in the FMS and the UMS. In the FMS, the British rule was more direct than was stipulated in treaty arrangements resulting in the deprivation of the Malay ruling classes of their traditional political and administrative roles, whereas in the UMS, the British established a separate State Civil Service where Malay rights within the system of Rule by Advice were acknowledged.¹

The British educational policy for the Malays in Malaya was designed primarily to preserve the traditional feudal structure of Malay society already in existence for centuries. The feudal structure of Malay society was characterized by the absolute authority of the rulers (sultans/rajas) and the nobility at the top of the social hierarchy and the abject servitude of peasantry at the bottom of the social hierarchy.² This was done through a dualistic system of education for the Malays: one for the Malay nobility and the other for the Malay masses. The Malay nobility was provided with an elitist English education to prepare them for government administration. Meanwhile, the Malay masses, the majority of whom were rural peasantry, were encouraged to go through Malay vernacular education, which had little upward mobility. The British was obviously wary that over-educated Malay masses might lead to the rise of political consciousness detrimental to their interests. The dualistic system of education implemented by the British was central to its divide and rule policy, which was primarily aimed at strengthening the political position of the British in Malaya. But contrary to the expectation of the British, Malay education had become one of the driving forces of Malay radical nationalism challenging the legitimacy of British colonial rule. But the strategy of the British to co-opt the Malay traditional elites proved to be an effective strategy, as these elites adopted a pro-British stand and thus neutralized the challenge from the radical Malay educated counter elites.

¹ Khasnor Johan, *The Emergence of the Modern Malay Administrative Elite* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), vii.

² Zawiah Yahya, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2003), 62.

Education of the Malay Nobility

J. P. Rodger, the Resident of Perak, plays an instrumental role in the provision of English education for the Malay nobility in the FMS. In the Rulers' Conference held in 1903 in which the virtual absence of Malays in the prestigious Malayan Civil Service was one of the major topics in the agenda of the Conference, Rodger used the occasion to remind his colleagues of the British obligation to the Malay nobility:

It must never be forgotten that these are Protected Malay States and not British Colonies and that the British officials are here to advise and assist and not to supersede the Rulers in the administration of their own States. One of the most difficult problems to be solved is how best to employ in the administration, the sons and near relations of Rajas and Chiefs, who but for British intervention would now be in full administrative charge of large and important districts.³

While some key British officials were skeptical about the ability of the Malays to serve in the Civil Service, Rodger did not share their views. After the Rulers' Conference, he suggested to W. H. Treacher, the Resident-General, to establish a special English school for the Malay nobility. However, his suggestion was not well received by Treacher and Frank Swettenham, the Governor and High Commissioner, though Treacher and Swettenham conceded the need for a greater effort to educate the Malay nobility. Things changed when R. J. Wilkinson, who arrived in the SS as a cadet in 1889, was appointed the Inspector of Schools of the FMS in 1903. He soon took up Rodger's proposal to establish a special English school for the Malay nobility. Wilkinson's job was made easier by the departure of Swettenham, the main opponent to Rodger's suggestion, in December 1903. In a memorandum to Treacher dated December 12, 1903, he argued for the establishment of a residential English school for the Malays on the grounds that existing English schools were of an insufficient standard to produce reliable native officials, Malay students in these schools were neglected and it was too costly to upgrade existing English schools.⁴ Wilkinson's proposal to establish a residential English school for the Malays though initially rejected by the Acting High Commissioner, W. T. Taylor, was subsequently approved by Sir John Anderson who succeeded Swettenham as the Governor and High Commissioner in 1904.⁵ In 1905, the Malay Residential School was opened with three teachers and eight students on an experimental stage. It was located in a temporary premise in Kuala Kangsar, the royal town of Perak, and catered primarily to the sons of the Malay nobility. The reason for the location of the school in the royal town of Perak was the Sultan of Perak, Sultan Idris, had earlier shown keen interest in the establishment of the school. By the end of 1905, E. W. Birch, the Resident of Perak, proclaimed the school an established success.⁶ In 1907, the success of the school was also reported in the Supplement to the Perak Government Gazette of 12 July.⁷ In 1909, the school was re-housed in a new building and officially known as the Malay College.

³ Minutes of the Conference of Chief of the FMS held at Kuala Lumpur on 21st, 22nd and 23rd July 1903. Cited in Francis H. K. Wong and Gwee Yee Hean, *Official Reports on Education: Straits Settlement and the Federated Malay States, 1870-1939* (Singapore: Pan-Pacific, 1970), 2-3.

⁴ Philip Loh Fook Seng, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), 22.

⁵ Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policies towards the Malays 1875-1906* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), 181-183.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁷ Khasnor, *The Emergence of the Modern Malay Administrative Elite*, 29.

Referred to unofficially as the ‘Eton of Malaya’ or the ‘Eton of the East’, the Malay College was run along the lines of an English public school.⁸ Its school curriculum prepared the students for public examination conducted by the University of Cambridge examination syndicate. Although Malay language and literature were taught for some years, English history, language and literature had a special place in the school curriculum with the aim to inculcate a distinctively “English” orientation among the Malay nobility.⁹ In the main, the Malay College prepared the Malay nobility for prominent positions in the Malay Administrative Service (MAS) created by the British in 1910. The MAS was the subordinate of the elite Malayan Civil Service (MCS) dominated by the British. Some Malay nobility eventually made it to the MCS. To the Malay nobility, the Malay College provided another symbol as well as a practical means by which to bolster their position and status in relation to both the Malay society and the new plural society that had arisen under the British rule.¹⁰ The provision of English education to the Malay nobility by the British was mainly to serve the British colonial interests. The British found in the Sultanate, and often in the personal influence of the Sultan himself a politically viable device to facilitate its work of government.¹¹ Thus, it was through such a measure that the British intended to control the Malay masses. The Malay psyche has traditionally been one of harmony and conformity with the Malay social order and going against the Malay nobility was deemed an act of *derhaka* or betrayal.

Education of the Malay Peasantry

In 1870, the Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council to Enquire into the State of Education in the Colony (the Wolley Report) was released. This report was a watershed in the development of Malay vernacular schools in Malaya.¹² Although the Report focused on the educational development in the SS, it, nevertheless, had a profound impact on the educational development of the Malay states as many of the officials in the Malay states during the first decade of residential rule were either seconded or transferred from the Straits Civil Service. The Report recommended a large extension of Malay vernacular schools in place of the Quran schools so that children would be educated in their mother tongue and learnt the rudiments of sound knowledge and to read and write in the native and Roman character.¹³ The Wolley Report’s particular emphasis on the expansion of vernacular education led to a spectacular growth in the number of Malay schools during the late 1870s and early 1880s.¹⁴

The person who provides the impetus for the growth of Malay education is A. M. Skinner, a young British official of the Penang Administration. In 1872, when he was appointed Inspector of Schools, he proposed the idea of adopting the Quran classes as the basis for the

⁸ Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policies towards the Malays 1875-1906*, 189.

⁹ Zawiah, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse*, 65.

¹⁰ Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policies towards the Malays 1875-1906*, 189-190.

¹¹ Philip Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940*, 7.

¹² “Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council to Enquire into the State of Education in the Colony (the Wolley Report), 1870”, in Francis H. K. Wong and Gwee Yee Hean, *Official Reports on Education: Straits Settlement and the Federated Malay States, 1870-1939*, 11-14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14

¹⁴ Rex Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policies towards the Malays 1875-1906*, 24.

Malay schools.¹⁵ The Quran classes existed long before the British set foot in Malaya and were conducted in a number of ways. In small villagers, they were conducted in the house of the religious teacher. In big villages, they were conducted in the *surau* (a building used for religious purposes) or on the steps of the mosque. In the SS and in the northern Malay states of Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, they were largely conducted in the *pondok* (hut).¹⁶ Skinner was of the opinion that no progress could be made in Malay education until and unless the teaching of Malay was separated from the teaching of the Quran. Skinner's proposal kept separate religious instruction from the teaching of ordinary school subjects, which was held in the morning, while the teaching of Quran was confined to the afternoon.¹⁷ Despite initial hiccups, the number of Malay schools increased at a phenomenal rate. In the SS, for instance, there were only 16 Malay schools in 1872 with an enrolment of 596. The number of Malay schools increased to 85 in 1882 and 189 in 1892, with an enrolment of 2,230 and 7,218 respectively.¹⁸ Meanwhile, in the FMS, the number of Malay schools increased from 168 to 400 between 1900 and 1920 and the average enrolment rose from 6,000 to 20,319.¹⁹ The period from 1916 to 1921 saw a marked infusion of life into the system of Malay education culminating in the opening of the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) in Tanjong Malim, Perak in 1922.²⁰

However, Malay vernacular education could only provide limited educational mobility to the Malays. They were restricted to four years of primary education. The only available option for them to further their education beyond the rudimentary level was by switching, at the fourth grade for boys and third grade for girls, to the Malay Special Classes in government English schools.²¹ After two years of intensive coaching in English, they were then allowed to proceed to secondary education in English. However, such opportunities were not many. Thus, education of rural Malays was largely confined to four years of rudimentary education. Many Malays remained entrapped in rural areas without any possible means of upward social mobility. Only a small number of Malays had the opportunity to advance to secondary education through the Special Malay Classes attached to English schools since 1919. Undoubtedly, Malay education during the colonial period was a form of social control aimed at confining the rural Malays in their social milieu.²² Even the establishment of the SITC, "the apex of Malay primary school system"²³ in 1922 to train Malay schoolteachers was directed towards this end. The SITC was a college to mould the people who would return to the village to make village folks more satisfied with the

¹⁵ D. D. Chelliah, *A History of the Educational Policy of the Straits Settlements with Recommendations for a New System Based on Vernaculars* (Kuala Lumpur: The Government Press, 1947), 62-64

¹⁶ Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policies towards the Malays 1875-1906*, 15-16.

¹⁷ Paul Chang Ming Phang, *Educational Development in a Plural Society: A Malaysian Case Study* (Singapore: Academia Publications, 1973), 13.

¹⁸ Chelliah, *A History of the Educational Policy of the Straits Settlements with Recommendations for a New System Based on Vernaculars*, 64

¹⁹ William R. Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1974), 127.

²⁰ Francis Wong and Gwee, *Official Reports on Education: Straits Settlement and the Federated Malay States, 1870-1939*, 61.

²¹ Chai Hon Chan, *Education and Nation-Building in Plural Societies: The West Malaysia Experience*. Development Studies Centre Monograph No. 6 (Canberra: The Australia National University, 1977), 18-19.

²² Haris bin Md. Jadi. "Ethnicity, Politics and Education: A Study in the Development of Malayan Education and Its Policy Implementation Process" (PhD diss., University of Keele, 1983), 27.

²³ Philip Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940*, 87.

village ways of life.²⁴ The contrasting roles played by the SITC and the Malay College were best exemplified by Roff:

On the one hand, at Kuala Kangsar, there were the sons of the traditional ruling class and wealthy, undergoing training for entry into the English-speaking world of government and administration and occasionally the professions; on the other, at S.I.T.C., the sons of the peasantry and the poor, undergoing training for return to the Malay-speaking world of the rural village school.²⁵

It is clear that the dualistic educational policy implemented by the British for the Malays, which was patterned along the traditional Malay structure, created a wedge between the Malay educated masses and the English educated elites. The policy of maintaining a useful role for these traditional elites in both administrative and judicial organizations of the state, dictated as much by practical considerations as by political caution, had a conservative concomitant: the preservation of the State's peasantry. The stability of the Malay social order required attention to both the apex and the base.²⁶

The policy of depriving the Malay peasantry of educational mobility was central to the policy of divide and rule of the British. The British were particularly concerned with the possible backlash of "over-education" among the Malay masses that would lead to the emergence of political awareness. Such development, as their experience in the Indian sub-continent had shown, was detrimental to their interests.²⁷ Thus, too much education for the Malay peasantry was viewed as a bad thing.²⁸ Frank Swettenham, for instance, had argued strongly against the provision of English education to the Malays. On May 1891, he wrote in his annual report on Perak for 1890:

The one danger to be guarded against is to teach English indiscriminately. It could not be well taught except in few schools, and I do not think it is at all advisable to attempt to give the children of an agricultural population an indifferent knowledge of a language that to all but the very few would only unfit them for the duties of life and make them discontented with anything like manual labour.²⁹

Some Malay nobility also shared the view of the British on the provision of English education to the Malay peasantry. One of them, Raja Chulan, argued in the Federal Council:

We have to avoid the mistakes committed in other parts of the world. History has taught us that under-education is not as serious an evil as over-education, especially education of a kind that does not provide a means to keep its young occupied.³⁰

²⁴ Awang Had Salleh, *Pelajaran dan Perguruan Melayu di Malaya Zaman British* [Malay Education dan Teacher Training in Malaya During the British Period] (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1980), 139.

²⁵ Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, 143.

²⁶ Philip Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940*, 7.

²⁷ Zawiah, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse*, 62.

²⁸ Diane K. Mauzy, "Language and Language Policy in Malaysia," in *Language Policy and National Unity*, ed. William R. Beer and James E. Jacob (New Jersey: Roman & Allanheld, 1985), 153.

²⁹ Cited from Stevenson, *Cultivators and Administrators: British Educational Policies towards the Malays 1875-1906*, 57.

³⁰ Shahrudin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development: From Feudal Lord to Capitalist* (Singapore: Times, 1988), 57.

Thus, during the first two decades of their control over the Malay States, the preservation of the traditional Malay peasantry became the main concern of the British in maintaining a *de jure* Malay Sultanate and a *de facto* British Administration.³¹ Consequently, the Malay peasantry was only provided with rudimentary education that focused mainly on the basic three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), elementary agriculture and learning of habits of cleanliness and punctuality. When R. O. Winstedt was appointed an Assistant Director of Education in early 1916 with special responsibility for Malay schools in the FMS and the SS, he was asked to inquire into and make recommendations concerning Malay vernacular education. He was appointed on the ground of his reputation as a person conversant with Malay culture and literature. He visited Java and the Philippines to study their systems of vernacular and industrial education.³² On his return, he submitted his report in 1917. The main aim of the Winstedt Report or the Report on Vernacular and Industrial Education in the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines was to maintain the status quo of Malay vernacular education, despite the dire need of new directions.³³ Winstedt recommended that the basic character of Malay education should be rural and with a strong manual, agricultural bias in which basket making and handicraft were to be given emphasis in order to instill the idea of the dignity of labour.³⁴ He recommended the inclusion of handwork, gardening and netting in the Malay school curriculum.³⁵ He also recommended the reduction of schooling from five to four years. The Winstedt Report in fact laid the foundation for rural biased Malay education.³⁶ Though industrial education was one of the focuses of the Winstedt Report, it was not intended that Malay vernacular schools should deliberately supply vocational training.³⁷ Thus, although Winstedt was highly regarded for his writing about Malay literature and history, he was criticized for his recommendations on Malay vernacular education:

... Winstedt showed a fundamental lack of concern for Malay intellectual development ... At heart an administrator and an analyst rather than a creator or a true scholar, he showed little real understanding of the Malay spirit and its strivings ... Nothing in his 1917 report strikes one more than the absence of any thoughtful reflection on the aims and effects of vernacular education ... or any concern at all beyond the practical aims of British colonial rule. It is difficult indeed to discern amid the plethora of comment and recommendation anything approaching a guiding principle for the educational process other than that expressed in a stray assertion that it should be “designed to develop the mind and not to deaden it with half-understood detail”.³⁸

The need to preserve the rural Malay peasantry by educational means was put even more starkly by George Maxwell, a prominent colonial administrator. In 1927, Maxwell stated that the primary aim of Malay education was to make the son of a fisherman or a peasant a more intelligent fisherman or peasant than his father had been, and a man whose education will enable him to understand how his own lot fits in with the scheme of life around him.³⁹ Thus, an important feature of the Malay school was its connection with the people it served. As the 1938

³¹ Philip Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940*, 24.

³² Francis Wong and Gwee, *Official Reports on Education: Straits Settlement and the Federated Malay States, 1870-1939*, 61; Shahrudin, *Malay Ideas on Development: From Feudal Lord to Capitalist*, 56.

³³ Philip Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940*, 27.

³⁴ Shahrudin, *Malay Ideas on Development: From Feudal Lord to Capitalist*, 56.

³⁵ R. Nagendralingan, *The Social Origins of the Education System in Peninsular Malaysia* (Tanjong Malim: Penerbit Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 2007), 34.

³⁶ Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, 137.

³⁷ Chelliah, *A History of the Educational Policy of the Straits Settlements with Recommendations for a New System Based on Vernaculars*, 71.

³⁸ Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, 139.

³⁹ Cited from P. Searle, *The Riddle of Malaysian Capitalism: Rent Seekers or Real Capitalists* (St. Leonard, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 29.

Education Report puts it, this connection provided “the links between the schools and the life and homes of villages”.⁴⁰ The rural character of Malay education remained a permanent feature up until the outbreak of the Second World War. The rural character of Malay education was in fact looked upon as the poor man’s education.⁴¹ The lack of social mobility had resulted in many Malay parents losing their hope in Malay schools. Thus, Malay education as an agent of change was irrelevant as far as the British educational policy towards the Malay peasantry was concerned.⁴²

The Problem of Educational Mobility Among the Malays and Its Implications

Malay vernacular education during the colonial period was largely in a pathetic state. Malay vernacular schools were essentially village elementary schools, housed in simple and often makeshift quarters, with few skilled teachers and little equipment, and providing at best only four years of rudimentary drilling in the three R’s.⁴³ The greater part of the British’s organizational effort was geared towards the English schools. There were two types of English schools during the colonial period: the first was the government English school managed by the government where all expenses were paid for by the government; the second was government aided English school which received grants-in-aid from the government and controlled by its own government body. Mission schools set up by the Christian missionary fall under the second category of the English schools. The emphasis given to English schools was to fulfill the increasing demand from government and private business alike for English-trained staff. Consequently, the Malay school system was left largely to look after itself.⁴⁴ It is then not surprising that at the turn of the twentieth century, Wilkinson found the atmosphere surrounding Malay vernacular education stifling and unreal:

The natural gifts and abilities of pupils seemed often to be suppressed rather than encouraged by the dull processes of learning by rote that were a feature of most schools. Teacher training was wholly inadequate, despite the establishment of a vernacular training college in the F.M.S. in 1898, and teaching was for the most part poor, unimaginative, and hampered by lack of suitable books.⁴⁵

The pathetic state of Malay education led to increasing pressure from the Malays, especially in the developed areas, to be given greater opportunities to receive English education. In 1913, for instance, the Malay residents of two rice-growing districts, Lenggong and Krian in the state of Perak, made requests for English schools.⁴⁶ However, the prevailing view among the British officials was against the provision of English education to the Malay peasantry. Instead, they opted for an improved vernacular education in line with their objective to preserve the Malay rural peasantry. The only avenue for the Malays to receive English education was through the Malay Special Classes mentioned earlier. Thus, the number of Malays attending English schools

⁴⁰ H. R. Cheeseman, “Education in Malaya 1900-1941,” *The Malayan Historical Journal* 2, no. 1(1955).

⁴¹ Wong Hoy Kee and Ee Tiang Hong, *Education in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1971), 78.

⁴² Haris, “Ethnicity, Politics and Education: A Study in the Development of Malayan Education and Its Policy Implementation Process”, 27.

⁴³ Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, 129.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴⁶ Philip Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940*, 81.

was alarmingly low. The following table shows the percentage of enrolment of Malays, Chinese and Indians in English schools in the Federated Malay States between 1919 and 1937:⁴⁷

Total Enrolment in English Schools in the FMS (by percentage)

Year	Total	Malays	Chinese	Indians	Europeans & Eurasians	Others
1919	8,456	9	48	30	10	3
1920	9,208	10	48	30	10	2
1921	10,105	13	47	29	9	2
1922	10,450	15	46	29	9	2
1923	11,594	18	46	26	8	2
1924	12,806	18	48	24	7	3
1925	13,768	19	49	23	7	2
1926	14,509	19	49	23	7	2
1927	16,283	18	49	25	6	2
1928	16,185	17	49	26	6	2
1929	17,113	16	50	26	6	2
1930	17,997	16	49	27	6	2
1932	17,477	15	50	27	6	2
1933	16,417	17	49	27	6	1
1935	16,496	16	50	27	6	1
1937	17,161	15	50	28	6	1

One of the main reasons for the low Malay enrolment in English schools was that Malay students were required to go through four years of Malay primary education before they were allowed to enter the English schools, whereas the Chinese and Indians were not subjected to the same requirement. This had given the Chinese and Indians an advantage in gaining an English education. Although the Malays, among them the Sultan of Perak and the Sultan of Johore, questioned the requirement imposed on the Malay students, the British were not in favour of a change in existing policy. Also, as a large number of English schools were set up by Christian missionary groups, this had deterred the Malays, who were Muslims, from attending these schools as they were worried about the potential proselytisation effect of these Christian mission schools. In 1941, for instance, not more than 400 Malay students were enrolled in the Christian mission schools.⁴⁸ As English education was generally considered the best means of social mobility during the colonial period, it follows that as a consequence of the lack of opportunity to attend English schools, the Malays had lagged behind the Chinese and Indians in terms of upward mobility.

Educational mobility of the Malays was also seriously hampered by the reluctance of the British to establish Malay secondary schools as well as to use the Malay language in government departments despite O. T. Dussek's efforts to promote the development of Malay education and the use of the Malay language. In 1924, Dussek was appointed Assistant Director of Education in

⁴⁷ Annual Reports on Education FMS 1919 to 1937. Cited from Philip Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940*, 106.

⁴⁸ McLeish, 1941 cited from Ghazali Basri, *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Nurin, 1990), 9.

charge of Malay schools. He proposed the establishment of Malay secondary schools in a few centrally located towns. Also, as an effort to enhance the instrumental value of Malay secondary education so that it could lead to job opportunities comparable to those available for the English educated, he proposed a considerable increase in the use of Malay in government departments. However, both his proposals did not find favor with the British Administration.⁴⁹

It is obvious that the Malays were deprived of educational mobility by the British. By so doing, the British had also deprived the Malays of socioeconomic mobility via the provision of education. Further complicating the matter was the fact that the Malays were purportedly encouraged by the British to engage in the rural traditional sector, which provided them with little socioeconomic mobility. In line with its divide and rule policy, the British did not encourage the Malays to engage in the modern sector of the economy.⁵⁰ The modern sector remained largely the preserve of the Chinese. Thus, the Malays were reduced to a peripheral role and excluded from the modernizing process of economic development initiated under the British rule.⁵¹ Contrary to the expectation of the British, the deprived position of the Malays did not subvert them into a docile population. Instead, spurred by some external factors, it had led to the rise of radical Malay nationalism spearheaded by the Malay intelligentsia from the SITC. In this regard, the SITC had become a cradle of Malay resurgence.⁵²

Malay Intelligentsia and Radical Nationalism

The SITC plays a vital role in the emergence of Malay schoolteachers as a leading group of nationalist intelligentsia. The SITC was originally planned as an institution with a strong practical rural bias. However, its subsequent development took a different direction culminating in the emergence of a nationalist intelligentsia. The person who was instrumental in bringing about this change was Dussek. Dussek served as the principal of SITC from its inception in 1922 until 1936. While serving as the principal of SITC, Dussek was also appointed the Assistant Director of Education in charge of Malay schools. Although Dussek shared most of Winstedt's idea about the kind of education for the Malays, he, nonetheless, found it impossible to restrict the intellectual content of teacher training in the SITC. As one who had come to acquire a passionate affection to the Malay people and a strong desire to be of service to them, he promoted the study, use and development of Malay language, literature and history. He pursued a monolingual policy in which the teaching of English was kept out of the Malay schools and the SITC, as he saw no practical relevance for the Malays to be associated with English. He was not only committed to educate teachers as well as train them, but also to raise the standard of Malay vernacular schools gradually until secondary education was possible and to press for the use of the Malay language as the language of the government,⁵³ though as previously mentioned, his proposal to establish Malay secondary schools and to increase the use of Malay in the government failed to materialize. Dussek's Malay policy at the SITC was possibly the most significant British contribution to the growth of Malay nationalism prior to World War II.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Philip Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940*, 88.

⁵⁰ Collin E. R. Abraham, *Divide and Rule: The Roots of Race Relations in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Insan, 1997).

⁵¹ Firdaus Haji Abdullah, *Radical Malay Politics: Its Origins and Early Development* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1985), 2.

⁵² Cheah Boon Kheng, "SITC: Cradle of Malay Resurgence," *Straits Times*, June 12, 1973. Cited from Firdaus, *Radical Malay Politics: Its Origins and Early Development*, 8.

⁵³ Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, 145-147.

⁵⁴ Philip Loh, *Seeds of Separatism: Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940*, 88.

The transfer of the Malay Translation Bureau to the SITC in 1924 marked a watershed in the development of Malay language and culture among the SITC students. It was through this bureau that translated literary works were made available to them. Soon, the SITC became the hub of modern Malay literary activities.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the influx of literary works published by the Balai Pustaka (Hall of Literature) in Indonesia (Netherlands East Indies) not only had a catalytic impact on Malay literary development in Malaya, but also on the rise of social awareness among students of the SITC.⁵⁶ Literary works from Indonesia were noted for their revolutionary tone. More importantly, the 1920s and 1930s were two crucial periods of radicalism and nationalist activities in Indonesia. The failed Indonesian revolt against the Dutch in 1926 provided the impetus for the rise of political awareness among the students of SITC. Some leaders of the failed revolt took refuge in Malaya and spread their idea of revolt against the established authority. The establishment of the Parti Nasional Indonesia (PNI) (Indonesia Nationalist Party) in 1927 by Sukarno further imbued the students of SITC with revolutionary political ideas.⁵⁷ The anti-colonial, anti-feudal programme of the PNI caught the imagination of the Malay educated intelligentsia.⁵⁸ Some of the SITC students secretly enrolled as members of the PNI.⁵⁹

The position of the Malays as the indigenous community under the British colonial rule soon became the main concern of the Malay intelligentsia of the SITC. By the 1930s, a plural society had been fully instituted in Malaya as a result of the British policy of encouraging the influx of Chinese and Indians as indentured workers in the mining and plantation sectors.⁶⁰ The immigrant communities, though transient in the beginning, had by now developed roots in Malaya and overshadowed the Malays in the economic sphere. The Chinese in particular were making their demands to the colonial government over their rights through such channels as the legislative council and the newspaper columns.⁶¹ The Malays were particularly alarmed by the growing assertiveness of the immigrant races who, in addition to their increasing economic dominance and significant demographic growth, had now gained political access by virtue of their expanded number in membership of the State Councils.⁶² All these were construed by them as a threat to the position of the Malays in Malaya. Most vigorous in defending the position of the Malays was the radical Malay intelligentsia of the SITC. One of them, Ibrahim Yaacob, later became the founder-president of the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) or the Young Malay Union.⁶³ Ibrahim Yaacob joined the SITC in 1929 and graduated in 1931. On graduation, he became a teacher at the Malay School in Bentong in Pahang. In 1937, he was transferred to teach at the Police Depot in Kuala Lumpur. He later resigned from teaching and became a journalist.⁶⁴

⁵⁵ Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, 147-148.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 153-157.

⁵⁷ Radin Soenarno, "Malay Nationalism, 1861-1941," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 1, no 1(1960): 20.

⁵⁸ Khong Kim Hoong, *Merdeka! British Rule and the Struggle for Independence in Malaya 1945-1957* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information Research Development, 1984), 23.

⁵⁹ Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star Over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict During and After the Japanese Occupation, 1941-1946*, 3rd ed. (Singapore: Singapore University Press), 11.

⁶⁰ Rustam A. Sani, *Social Roots of the Malay Left* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development, 2008), 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶² Firdaus, *Radical Malay Politics: Its Origins and Early Development*, 59.

⁶³ Insun Sony Mustapha, *Malay Nationalism before UMNO: The Memoir of Mustapha Hussain* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications, 2005), 137.

⁶⁴ Rustam, *Social Roots of the Malay Left*, 46.

It was while studying at the SITC that he first came into contact with the Indonesian refugees. This contact obviously made him fully immersed in political ideas.⁶⁵

The KMM, founded in April 1938, was the first pre World War II Malay political party to transcend state boundaries within the Malay Peninsula.⁶⁶ It has to be pointed out here that the KMM was not the first Malay political organization in Malaya. The first Malay political organization was the Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (Malay Association of Singapore) formed on May 14, 1926.⁶⁷ But the Kesatuan Melayu Singapura was, in the main, a state-led political organization. By the time of the formation of the KMM, other state-led political organizations, such as the Persatuan Melayu Selangor (Selangor Malay Association) and the Persatuan Melayu Pahang (Pahang Malay Association), also came into being. These political organizations were mostly led by English educated traditional elites who were pro-British. It was never the aim of the traditional elites to mobilize the Malay masses further along the path of social change in the face of external threats that came from the immigrant communities. Instead, they sought to preserve the traditional Malay political system – with political power diffused among the individual state rulers.⁶⁸ They plea for continued Malay privilege and were against anti-colonial nationalism. The British were regarded by them as the guardian of Malay rights, especially in preserving the Sultan.⁶⁹ Thus, they favored general cooperation with the British⁷⁰. Although the state-led political organizations lacked political mobilization across the various states in Malaya, they were the major political strand of the 1930s. They were the roots of later developments in the main strand of Malay politics, which was to reach its height of mobilization with the formation of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) after World War II.⁷¹

In contrast to the state-led political organizations, the KMM was led by Malays who were of rural origins. It formed branches in Penang, Malacca and in all the nine sultanate states except Perlis. Most of its founding members were the alma mater of SITC who were in constant contact with each other either by direct personal correspondence or intellectually through the various journals and other forms of publication. In many ways, they were counter-elites to the traditional elites. Ibrahim Yaacob claimed that even before the KMM was officially formed in 1938, it had already existed as an amorphous underground movement as early as the 1930s.⁷² It is obvious that the KMM first found its footing in the SITC. During his three-year stay in SITC, Ibrahim Yaacob became the acknowledged leader of a group of students, some thirty-five in number, who found political inspiration in the Indonesia nationalist movement and sought to reproduce it in Malaya.⁷³ He attacked the British colonial rule and called for the merger of Malaya and Indonesia⁷⁴ under the concept of *Melayu Raya* or ‘larger Malaya’⁷⁵ – a political union of the Malay Archipelago

⁶⁵ Radin Soenarno, “Malay Nationalism, 1861-1941,” 21.

⁶⁶ Firdaus, *Radical Malay Politics: Its Origins and Early Development*, 8.

⁶⁷ Rustam, *Social Roots of the Malay Left*, 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁹ Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, 235-247.

⁷⁰ A. J. Stockwell, *British Policy and Malay Politics during the Malayan Union Experiment 1942-1948*. Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society Monograph no. 8 (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1979), xvi.

⁷¹ Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, 19-20.

⁷² Firdaus, *Radical Malay Politics: Its Origins and Early Development*, 65.

⁷³ Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, 172.

⁷⁴ Chris Read, “The Importance of 1919 as a Watershed Year in the Political History of Singapore and Malaysia”, *Journal of the South Seas Society* 50, no. 1& 2 (1995): 6.

⁷⁵ Rustam, *Social Roots of the Malay Left*, 29.

based on the Malay race.⁷⁶ On December 1, 1932, he wrote in a Malay vernacular press to propagate the concept of Melayu Raya:

...it is obvious that the peninsular Malays have not yet understood the idea of nation and nationalism. Oh, my Malay people, the entire peninsula and the Indonesia archipelago is the possession of our common ancestors, the Malays. The names Minangkabau, Bugis, Brunei, Aceh, Lampung, Palembang, Rawa, Kampar, Kelantan, Perak, etc. are not the names of nations but states. Our real ethnic identity is 'Malay'. The entire Indonesia possesses a custom similar to that of the peninsula Malays. What is then that sets us apart? It is simply the fate of our unity under the yokes of two colonial powers, i.e. the Dutch in the Indonesian Archipelago and the British in the peninsula. But this should not give way under the impact of the rain nor crack under the impact of the sun.⁷⁷

Ibrahim Yacob's writing articulated a clear conception of the Malay nation that challenged old attachments and enunciated a forthright and ideological anti-colonialism: they were a call to awareness and political action.⁷⁸ The KMM was critical of British colonial rule for the exploitation of Malaya's resources and people. It condemned the local allies of the British – the Sultans, the nobility and the English educated for working with and ultimately supporting the British.⁷⁹ It also considered the stated-led Malay associations "feudalistic", too absorbed with state rights and with allegiance to the rulers and the British administration.⁸⁰ By late 1939, *Warta Malaya*, the party organ of the KMM, carried articles and editorials with a strong anti-British flavor.⁸¹ *Warta Malaya* was bought by Ibrahim Yacob with the financial support of the Japanese with whom he had made contact before the outbreak of World War II.⁸²

The British were particularly alarmed by the dangerous intention of the KMM despite the fact that the KMM "failed to gain a mass following within the Malay community"⁸³ because "relatively few Malays were prepared to think in terms of political unification of the separate states, let alone any form of union with Indonesia".⁸⁴ Between December 13 and 18, 1941, the British arrested and detained 150 KMM leaders and supporters. This had crippled the KMM. However, following the occupation of Malaya by the Japanese during World War II and with the release of the KMM detainees, the KMM was able to reestablish itself. As a matter of expediency, Ibrahim Yacob adopted a cooperative policy with the Japanese, while clandestinely collaborating with anti-Japanese resistance movements: the Malayan Communist Party and the Malayan People Anti Japanese Army. But the Japanese soon became aware of the activities of the KMM and decided to ban it and thus the demise of the KMM.⁸⁵ However, leaders of the KMM were not arrested by the Japanese. Instead, the Japanese formed the Giu Gan or the Pembela Tanah Ayer (PETA – The Avengers of Motherland), which was headed by former KMM leaders. The Japanese intended to use the PETA as a bridge to establish rapport with the Malay masses. But things changed when the Japanese began to realize that the war was not going to end in their

⁷⁶ Cheah, *Red Star Over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict During and After the Japanese Occupation, 1941-1946*, 11.

⁷⁷ Rustam, *Social Roots of the Malay Left*, 63.

⁷⁸ T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 32.

⁷⁹ Khong, *Merdeka! British Rule and the Struggle for Independence in Malaya 1945-1957*, 23.

⁸⁰ Cheah, *Red Star Over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict During and After the Japanese Occupation, 1941-1946*, 13.

⁸¹ Radin Soenarno, "Malay Nationalism, 1861-1941," 22.

⁸² Rustam, *Social Roots of the Malay Left*, 25-26.

⁸³ Stockwell, *British Policy and Malay Politics during the Malayan Union Experiment 1942-1948*, xv.

⁸⁴ Roff, *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*, 235.

⁸⁵ Firdaus, *Radical Malay Politics: Its Origins and Early Development*, 67.

favor. As a means to prevent the possible return of the British, the Japanese allowed the formation of the Kesatuan Rakyat Indonesia Semenanjung (KRIS) or the Union of Peninsular Indonesians headed by former KMM leaders to work for Indonesia-Malaya independence. This plan was in line with the concept of Melayu Raya propagated by the KMM in the 1930s. However, the plan was abandoned with the sudden defeat of the Japanese in August 1945. A new party, the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM) or the Malay Nationalist Party of Malaya, was formed by former KMM leaders.⁸⁶ Subsequent development shows that the PKMM could not challenge the political appeal of the UMNO during the period of decolonization after World War II. It was UMNO that managed to lead the Malays to seek for the independence of Malaya from the British colonial rule.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The British educational policy for the Malay indigenous community in Malaya was, in the main, driven by the policy of divide and rule. The British adopted a two-pronged strategy as far as the provision of education to the Malays was concerned. It was the intention of the British to maintain the Malay traditional societal structure that the British had provided for the Malay peasantry an education that was rural biased with limited value of educational mobility. On the other hand, the Malay nobility, which was highly regarded by the Malay masses, was given an elitist English education that allowed them to work in the British administration. In this way, the British managed to gain political mileage from alliances with the traditional leadership of the masses.⁸⁸ On the face of thing, this two-pronged strategy seems to work for the British. But the British were seemingly unaware of the fact that the influx of the immigrants and their attendant economic dominance as well as their assertions for their rights in Malaya had caused much discontent among the Malays indigenous community. The Malay educated radical nationalists from the SITC were quick to response to this threat as they were spurred by the nationalist movement in neighboring Indonesia. They saw the possibility of merging with Indonesia under a larger concept of a Malay nation. This nation of intent propagated by them was meant to subvert the threat by the immigrant communities. They adopted an anti-British stance as they did not see any benefit derived from the British colonial rule. Similarly, they were against the English educated traditional Malay elites who not only collaborated with the British, but also established political organizations to protect their interests. However, the Malay radical nationalists could not match the strength of the traditional elites who had chosen to work with the British to safeguard Malay interests.

⁸⁶ Rustam, *Social Roots of the Malay Left*, 26-28.

⁸⁷ For a detailed account, see K. J. Ratnam, *Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1965).

⁸⁸ Zawiah, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse*, 64.