



The British educational policy for the indigenous community in Malaya 1870–1957: Dualistic structure, colonial interests and Malay radical nationalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the educational policy implemented by the British for the Malays, the indigenous community of Malaya. Underpinned by the policy of divide and rule, the British implemented a dualistic system of education for the indigenous Malays: one for the Malay peasantry and another for the Malay nobility. The two systems of education served different purposes and needs of the British. The Malay peasantry was provided with a rural-based Malay education which only had limited value in terms of educational mobility. This rural-based education was to serve as a means of social control for the British by entrapping the Malays in the semi-subsistence economy. On the other hand, the British provided the Malay nobility with an elitist English education that was intended to co-opt the ruling Malay traditional elites into their fold. But contrary to the intention of the British, the Malay-educated intelligentsia, in particular those from the Sultan Idris Training College became radical nationalists who adopted an anti-British stand. Such an unintended development was the result of the role played by O.T. Dussek (the college principal), the infusion of nationalistic sentiment from neighboring Indonesia and the threat posed by the Chinese immigrants. However, the radical stand of the Malay-educated intelligentsia was neutralized by the Malay traditional elites who adopted a pro-British stand. It was the Malay traditional elites who eventually led the Malays toward the independence of Malaya.

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1. Introduction

Education of indigenous communities under colonial rule has always been a contentious issue. To begin with, a comparison between the British and French educational and language policies toward indigenous communities in their respective colonies will provide perceptive insights to the topic under discussion. The British and French colonizers differed markedly in the manner in which educational policy in general and language policy in particular were implemented in their respective colonies. The French were generally more single-minded in the prosecution of their language, more conscious of a 'civilizing mission' – a mission that relied at root on education (Butts, 1973), and more intolerant of the use of indigenous languages at any stages of education by resorting to a French-only educational policy. In the main, French direct rule over their colonies was aimed at *la France outre-mer* and the ultimate political union of their colonies with metropolitan France. Thus, except for Indo-China, the French were committed to the mission to 'civilize' the indigenous people to win them over by educating them through the medium of French (Phillipson, 1993). In contrast to the French,

British colonial rule was largely indirect. To facilitate this indirect rule and help control the masses, the British adopted a divide and rule educational policy. As early as the 1830s, the British educational policy toward the colonies had been rather divided between the diffusionists who favored the civilizing mission and the orientalist who favored the conservation of the natives. However, it was the latter group who eventually gained the upper hand by the 1870s. Lord Mayo, the Viceroy of India from 1869 to 1872, for instance, argued against the provision of English education for the Babus in Bengal which he felt was at great expense to the British. He was of the view that "the more education you give them, the more they will keep to themselves and make their increased knowledge a means of tyranny" (Loh, 1975, p. 3). He instead argued for the provision of basic three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) for the rural Babus. This kind of evaluation concerning the effects of English education in India paved the way for the British to implement the divide and rule educational policy to strengthen their indirect rule in the colonies. The divide and rule educational policy was to be effectuated by educating the elites exclusively through the medium of English, but allowed the use of vernacular languages for the non-elites with a few switching to an elitist English education at the secondary level (Phillipson, 1993). Such a policy was aimed at controlling the indigenous people by educating them differently through the colonial and local languages.

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While most historians of education tend to agree that the British colonial educational policy was driven by a deliberate policy of *'divide et impera'*, there are also those who subscribed to different views. Gopinathan, for instance, posits that the British educational policy was primarily underpinned by a policy of *'benign neglect'*, i.e., a policy of doing only minimum necessary and responding only when their interests were threatened (cf. Whitehead, 2005, p. 121). But such a view has not been widely accepted. Whitehead (2005), on the other hand, argues that there was no tangible evidence to conclude that the British sought to use schooling, especially with reference to the establishment of racially based schools in East Africa and Southeast Asia, as a means to divide and rule and that the British colonial educational policy must be judged by the norms, values and expectations of society as it was and not as it is half a century or more later. He maintains that British colonial educational policy was a traditional adherence to the so called *'voluntary principle'* (a British educational practice dating back to medieval times that was premised on the belief that anyone should be free to establish and operate a school provided it met minimum standards of construction, size and hygiene) and the accommodation of broad guiding principles to the practical realities of population distribution, language diversity, cultural traditions and mutual racial antagonisms, resistance to religious proselytization, and the ever-present lack of adequate human and financial resources. While it may be true that the British colonial educational policy was fundamentally underpinned by these considerations, it is, however, difficult to deny in absolute terms the divisive outcome of such a policy even if we are inclined to agree that the British did not, to all intents and purposes, harbor any ulterior political aims in the provision of education in the colonies. It is perhaps for this reason that the British colonial educational policy was construed by many historians of education as an attempt to divide and rule, more so when they also perceived colonialism synonymously with economic exploitation, racial prejudice and secret diplomacy, though colonialism had also brought about positive impacts such as the modernization of the rule of law, the stimulus given to national sentiments, the growth of cities and the import of the European languages and new ideas born of them (Hashim, 1983). In the final analysis, it is reasonable to associate the British colonial educational policy with divide and rule, especially from the perspective of those who have suffered from the negative impacts of British colonialism. Whitehead's contention that the British colonial educational policy must be judged by the prevailing norms, values and expectations of the colonized society and not retrospectively may not go down well with historians of education who are more concerned with the outcome of the educational policy.

Apart from racially based schools, there were other educational means through which the British attempted to divide and rule. The case of the British educational policy for the Malays in Malaya is particularly worthy of note here. The British educational policy for the Malays in Malaya is a strong case in point whereby education has been used to serve the divide and rule intent of the British rather than the interests of the Malay indigenous community at large. This divide and rule educational policy had its origins in 1870 when the British started to propagate a system of Malay education for the Malay masses (the peasantry). Although this system of education was an improvement to the traditional form of education, it, nevertheless, was a rudimentary form of education which was meant to entrap the Malay masses in the rural semi-subsistence economy by denying them educational mobility. The co-option of the Malay ruling traditional elites (the nobility) through the provision of an elitist English education beginning in the early 20th century further consolidated the divide and rule intent of the British. Clearly, the divide and rule educational policy

of the British was embedded in a dualistic structure that aimed at controlling the indigenous community by perpetuating and exploiting the feudal relationships between the ruling Malay traditional elites and the Malay masses. This was because the feudal relationships between the rulers and the ruled were built on the unquestioning loyalty of the Malay masses to the traditional elites (Muzaffar, 1979). In short, the British intended to control the Malay indigenous community indirectly through the co-option of the Malay traditional elites and the preservation of the Malay peasantry by different educational means. The main casualty of this deliberate attempt was the Malay peasantry who was deprived of upward social mobility and became a disadvantaged group within the mainstream society. The divide and rule educational policy worked well for the British until the establishment of the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) in Tanjong Malim, Perak in 1922. The SITC Malay-educated intelligentsia emerged as radical nationalists who adopted an anti-British stand contrary to the intention of the British to maintain the Malay social order by containing the Malay peasantry under the Malay nobility. It was O.T. Dussek – the college principal, who provided the initial impetus to this unintended development. Unlike other colonial officials, Dussek pushed for the advancement of Malay education as a means to strengthen the Malay race and in the process, spurred the growth of Malay nationalism among the SITC students. Subsequent impetus came from neighboring Indonesia (Netherlands East Indies) which was involved in a revolt against the Dutch colonizer. The influx of Indonesian revolutionary literary works together with the propagation of nationalistic ideas by Indonesian leaders who fled to Malaya following the failed revolt against the Dutch and by Soekarno who was leading the revolt invoked strong resentment among the SITC Malay-educated intelligentsia against the British and their allies – the traditional elites. The anti-British stand of the SITC Malay-educated radical nationalists reached new heights in the 1930s as a result of the British policy of engaging the Chinese and Indian immigrants in the tin mining and rubber plantation sectors. The Chinese and Indian immigrants who came to Malaya in large numbers beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had by then developed roots into settled communities and they had made impressive economic gains as compared to the Malays who were entrapped by the British in the rural semi-subsistence economy. The SITC Malay-educated radical nationalists were particularly wary of the attendant economic dominance of the Chinese as well as their increasing numerical strength and their assertiveness in demanding their rights. Engulfed by a deep sense of *"cultural nationalism"* (see Ratnam, 1965, p. 133), they called for the political merger with Indonesia to form *"a larger Malay nation"* (Hashim, 1983, p. 28) as a means to counter British colonial rule. But their anti-British stand was neutralized by the English-educated nobility who adopted a pro-British stand. They were never a match for the traditional elites who were well-entrenched within the Malay social order. Although the Malay masses were well aware of their socio-economic deprivation, they, nevertheless, adhered to the feudal relationships between the rulers and the ruled and gave their support to the traditional elites who eventually led them toward the independence of Malaya in 1957. Despite the attainment of independence, the legacy of the divide and rule policy of the British continued to plague the educational system to the detriment of the Malays. The traditional elites adopted a neo-colonialist educational policy that allowed the continued use of English as a medium of instruction. It was not until the early 1970s that the Malay language was made the main medium of instruction in the national educational system (Omar, 1976).

This paper examines the education of the Malays under British colonial rule in Malaya from 1870 to 1957 with specific focus on three key issues: dualistic educational structure, colonial interests

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