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Introduction

THE focus of this study is on some major aspects of the British approach to educational development in the former Federated Malay States, namely, Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang, which are now constituent states of Malaysia. The period covered extends from 1874, when British control was first introduced into the Malay States, to 1941 when the entire Malay Peninsula along with the rest of South-East Asia came under the control of the Japanese Military Command.

Under British rule the Federated Malay States became a major producer of rubber and tin. This was made possible largely through the use of immigrant labour from British India and China. A consequence of this immigration was the emergence of the Federated Malay States as a ‘plural society’. The term ‘plural society’ appeared initially in Furnivall’s well-known work, Colonial Policy and Practice (Cambridge, 1948) in which he defined it as ‘a unit of disparate parts which owes its existence to external factors, and lacks a common social will’. He described it in greater detail as follows:

... in each section the sectional common will is feeble, and in the society as a whole there is no common social will. There may be apathy, even on such a vital point as defence against aggression. Few recognize that, in fact, all the members of all sections have material interests in common, but most see that on many points their material interests are opposed.1

The Federated Malay States emerging after 1895 as a single political unit under British rule could be viewed as a plural society in Furnivall’s terms. Analytically such a view is helpful, providing a useful pointer to the nature of the educational problem confronting the British Government in the Federated Malay States. From about 1920 onwards it became apparent that the three major ethnic groups in the Federated Malay States could be readily identified as three separate socio-cultural entities, each virtually isolated from the other. The Malays were predominantly a subsistent rice-planting peasantry, the Chinese formed the bulk of industrial urban workers, traders and shopkeepers and the Indians (Tamils from South India
and Ceylon) were the rubber tappers, railway workers and government clerks.²

Faced with such a situation the British Government could have intervened to change it through the development of a homogeneous school system (e.g. a single-language school for all the ethnic groups) and the implementation of a training and employment programme which would have eradicated the division of labour along ethnic lines. Alternatively, it could have refrained from any kind of intervention. This study deals with the educational options chosen and attempts to locate the contexts of their implementation, their rationale and their consequences.

At the outset of British Intervention in the Malay States, the Residents were very much influenced by the educational policies followed in British India and the neighbouring Straits Settlements. As a prelude to the analysis of educational developments in the Malay States, a brief summary of those two influences is necessary.

British attitudes concerning the education of their Indian subjects during the nineteenth century tended to identify with one of two major biases. British orientalists for a long time exercised a pervading influence on British educational policy, directing it generally towards an emphasis on the use of native languages as the media of instruction, especially in the elementary schools. In the 1830s a bias towards the use of English emerged, as part of the Liberal programme for social change in India. The point of departure from the orientalists’ concern for the conservation of native customs and native languages is customarily identified with Macaulay’s 1835 Minute on Education, in which he argued that:

... English is better worth knowing than Sanskrit or Arabic; that the natives are desirous to be taught English, and are not desirous to be taught Sanskrit or Arabic; that neither as the languages of law, nor as the languages of religion, have the Sanskrit and Arabic any peculiar claim to our encouragement; that it is possible to make natives of this country thoroughly good English scholars, and that to this end our efforts ought to be directed.

It would be easy to interpret this as an ethnocentric attitude. It is more relevant to our task to consider rather the Liberal’s bias towards Western science and utilitarian knowledge. Macaulay, spokesman for the Liberal point of view, argued unequivocally for English on the assumption that the Western-educated natives could then diffuse their Western knowledge to the rest of India.

This bias towards allowing oriental literature and scholarship to fall into neglect influenced Bentinck, then Governor-General of India, who soon directed the future allocation of funds for educa-
tional purposes towards English education. Protests by certain orientalists, scholars such as H.H. Wilson, that this would destroy India’s individuality as well as its literature were ignored. The subsequent implementation of Macaulay’s English programme, though temporarily hindered by the outbreak of the Afghan War in 1838, was substantial enough to cause Earl Curzon (then Governor-General of India), to complain in 1901 about India’s ‘too slavish imitation of English models’. ‘Ever since the cold breath of Macaulay’s rhetoric passed over the field of the Indian languages and textbooks’, Curzon wrote, ‘the elementary education of the people in their own tongues has shrivelled and pined’. Curzon set about to reverse the trend.

Both biases had their effects on the Straits Settlements, adjoining the Malay States. Neither in India nor in the British territories east of India, however, were these divergent views mutually exclusive. Macaulay’s diffusionist concept was concerned mainly with higher and secondary education, though its repercussion on elementary education, as it turned out, proved considerable. Likewise, though the orientalists’ conservation theory was not confined to the context of elementary education, its impact was much more significant in that segment of formal schooling. The concepts of the two opposing schools were complementary in their subsequent functions. Macaulay’s diffusionist idea underpinned British colonial policy for the education of a native elite, while the conservation theory influenced the British approach to the education of native masses.

Though a significant rejection of the diffusionist concept is closely associated with Curzon’s policy in India, active disquiet over Macaulay’s views dated from the 1870s. Macaulay’s ‘filtration’ or diffusionist theory had to contend not only with a persistent orientalist questioning but also the high costs of English education. Both of these concerns led Lord Mayo, Viceroy of India from 1869 to 1872, to write as follows:

I dislike this filtration theory. In Bengal, we are educating in English a few hundred Babus at great expense to the State. Many of them are well able to pay for themselves and have no other object in learning than to qualify for government employment. In the meantime we have done nothing towards extending knowledge to the millions. The Babus will never do it. The more education you give them, the more they will keep to themselves and make their increased knowledge a means of tyranny. If you wait till the bad English, which the four hundred Babus learn in Calcutta, filters down into the forty millions of Bengal, you will ultimately be a Silurian rock instead of a retired judge. Let the Babus learn English by all means. But let us try to do something toward teaching the three Rs to Rural Bengal.
This kind of evaluation concerning the effects of English education in India, as perceived by observers like Mayo, formed the backdrop to the formulation of educational policy in the Straits Settlements and later in the Malay States. In the Mayo mould, Skinner, a young British official of the Penang Administration, argued for the establishment of 'village schools of an entirely vernacular character'. In support of this proposal, his superior, the chief administrator of Penang, set out the *raison d’être* in a letter addressed to the Governor of Singapore, as follows:

> I agree with Mr. Skinner in his suggestion that we must commence these schools as supplementary to the existing system, whereby the child is only required to know by heart a few texts of the Koran. By this means we shall carry the Priests with us and avoid the opposition that would doubtless arise to the establishment of any education where the Koran was not taught. I have little fear that when these semi-Government schools have been fairly started we shall be able to appoint duly qualified schoolmasters in the place of these Hadjees, and thus improve the standard of education.  

Skinner, appointed Inspector of Schools in 1872 for the Straits Settlements, was able to implement a Malay education policy very much along the lines of his original proposal. The actual extent of this implementation could be seen in the marked growth of enrollment in the Malay schools, from somewhat less than 800 in 1872 to a little more than 7,000 in 1900. The strategy incorporating the Koranic component into the Government secular Malay school seemed to have paid off, even though the teaching of the Koran was to become but a minor part of the school's activity.

The curriculum of the Malay school changed but little throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century it was defined as follows:

> The object of these schools is to give an elementary education to Malays in their own language. In a four year course the children can learn to read and write Malay fluently and well, both in the Malay modification of the Arabic character and in Romanised character. Besides reading and writing, the four simple rules of arithmetic, with local weights, measures and money, are taught, and a little geography. . . . The instruction given appears sufficient for the class of people for whom it is provided.

The above provisions for Malay education in the Straits Settlements, reflecting in part a conservative reaction to Macaulay’s 'English' bias, considerably influenced the future development of a school system in the newly acquired Malay States.
BRITISH INTERVENTION

In this section the manner in which Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negri Sembilan were brought under British control will be outlined briefly. The present boundaries of these states were finalized during the 1890s. British control dates from the appointment in 1874 of a British Resident in Perak under the terms of a vaguely formulated treaty, the well-known Pangkor Engagement, signed by Sultan Abdullah of Perak and the Governor of the Straits Settlements. The powers of the British Resident were, according to the treaty, advisory. As it turned out, the Resident ruled, though the Sultan’s symbolic position as head of state was carefully upheld and maintained.

Perak had existed as a Malay State for several centuries prior to British control. The traditional power of its ruler stemmed in part from the Malay belief system which embodied in his person both daulat (majesty) and kuasa (supreme temporal authority). His role was to symbolize and to preserve the secular and religious unity of the State. Outside his symbolic and supernatural attributes, the reality of his temporal power revolved around his ability to control his hereditary chiefs who, like him, were customarily entitled to impose taxes and collect levies and tolls as chiefs of traditionally assigned territories. Throughout the nineteenth century it was apparent in Perak that the ruler’s authority in this connection did not extend beyond his own royal district.

The Perak political system, based on a system of hereditary chieftainships whose command of wealth was often more extensive than that of the Sultan, was persistently in a state of disequilibrium. There was a perennial contradiction in the relation between the Sultan and the chieftains, in the real world if not in the belief system. The Sultan was the fount of nobility and symbol of the State’s identity and unity. The chiefs could do no less than support the Sultanate if not the Sultan. To erode away the Sultanate was to destroy their own legitimacy and position. In Perak the period of the 1850s to the 1870s was marked by persistent conflict. From 1850 to 1857 a civil war raged between the Sultan and the major chiefs. The arena of conflict then shifted to a struggle between supporters of different claimants to the vacant office styled Raja Bendahara, third in the line of royal succession. In the 1870s two claimants to the throne, Raja Abdullah and Raja Ismail, competed for the succession. The machinations and intrigue of the wealthy chief known as the Mantri of Larut, whose district was in the rich Larut tin district, brought