

Development of Missionary School in Sarawak 1840-1960

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Abstract

This study discusses the development of missionary schools in Sarawak during the period of 1840-1960s. For this study the qualitative method was used to analyze primary source documents involving a few missionary schools in and around the main towns of Sarawak. The development of basic education and secondary missionary schools in Sarawak during the Brooke era administration in 1840 very much involves the missionaries actively propagating Christianity in order to change the living standards of the rural population which were then still very much lagging behind in terms of education, skills, and modern livelihood. The existence of various medium of missionary schools such as English medium, vernacular, rural Anglican and Catholic missionary schools symbolized the determination of the Brooke administration to ensure the local populace to obtain education and become a source of civil servants for the government's administration machinery. All the data obtained would be arranged into a meaningful source of historical narrative. Overall, this study is very important to further increase our understanding on the missionary school's effort in bringing development to education in Sarawak.

Keyword: Education, Brooke Dynasty, Colonial British, Missionary

Early History of The Development of Missionary Schools in Sarawak

One of the important aspects of the spread of Western civilization to Asia and Islamic countries worldwide is the spread of Christianity besides the economic and political motives. Western civilizations believe with the propagating of Christianity in their colonies, that would help elevate the status of the people in the colonies to a higher and much better position compared to other civilizations. Therefore, in the propagation of Christianity, the Westerners had used various guises in order to attract and influence the indigenous people's thinking in order to bring the indigenous people into a social structure that accept Christianity. Therefore this study also attempts to delve into the development of educational systems that existed in Sarawak during the era of the Brooke administration which had used various acceptable means and methods to ensure the success of Christian propagation amongst the indigenous population. The basic education that was made available during the Brooke administration era was originally for improving the living standards of the traditionally indigenous people. At the same time, the Colonial Office in London made used of education as a major conduit to

achieve its political and social goals in order to ensure that they may remain long as the ruler of Sarawak similarly to what was done by the British in Colonial Malaya.

The century old administration of Sarawak by the Brooke administration showed the adoption of an open policy in education to ensure the continuity of education in Sarawak. In the 27 years of James Brooke's rule, he didn't show any clear effort in giving education to the indigenous people in Sarawak. The Brooke administration considered education as a very important tool to mend the social standings of the indigenous people when in actual fact it was more as a tool for achieving political and social goals. Whereas as for the indigenous people, the advantages in obtaining a formal education were seen as a very high achievement in order to escape from the poverty in their livelihood and going into life with a white collar status in urban areas. Schools that were established based on the western culture gave emphasis on a curriculum which was academically orientated using English as the medium of instructions. It became dominant due to the fact that the school leavers were able to obtain good employment with the government or with the European commerce sectors or even in the field of education.

All throughout the period of the Brooke administration, the field of education weren't given a high priority due to the Brookes practicing a non-interference policy in education until the emergence of a plural system of education even though it then only influenced a small section of the indigenous population. Through the Colonial Office, efforts were made to increase the allocation for education and to standardize its utilization. The Brooke administration also didn't show any initiative to advance education amongst the indigenous people. It was due to the unavailability of any government schools built for the indigenous people of Sarawak during those days. This attitude of James Brooke clearly showed that he practiced a *laissez faire* attitude towards education and was not in favour of spreading education to the Bumiputera community (Pringle, 1970)

The existence of Christian missionary schools in Sarawak showed to the people of Sarawak the basis to master English is a promise and an investment that would be profitable for them economically due to a high demand for English educated school students by the Brooke Dynasty Government and by the European commercial companies. Therefore, with the existence of these missionary schools, they were also actually used by the missionaries themselves to give sermons on the new Christian doctrine while at the same time the government of the Brooke Dynasty depended on English medium schools as a source to obtain civil service personnels for their administrative machinery in Sarawak.

During the era of the Brooke administration, there were two types of missionary schools ie. schools in Kuching town and schools located in the rural areas of Kuching town. For the missionary schools in Kuching town itself, the majority of the students were Chinese students while a large number of the schools in the rural areas had a majority of students from the Dayak community. However, there were a few schools located by the Rejang River which had students from the Melanau community which were Muslims and the Malays and from the Chinese that were trading in the rural areas. The missionary schools in Kuching offered English medium Western education similar to the curriculum in private schools in England. Likewise, the missionary schools in the other towns taught using the mother tongue of the local community. The Malay language was used in the schools in the First and Fifth Divisions while

the Iban language was used in the Second and Third Divisions. Even though in the beginning these two types of missionary schools only offered basic education to the students, during the Brooke administration in the 1930s and throughout it, the larger schools in Kuching gradually began to have lower secondary classes and began to offer education at these lower levels.

However, the Chinese community in Kuching and the Dayaks in the rural areas showed a vastly different reaction towards the educational system that was offered by the missionary schools. For the Chinese community in the towns, they were a very highly ambitious group of people with high ambition and hope in education and viewed English medium Western education offered by the missionary schools as the best opportunity to develop knowledge in the field of economics. The recognized academic qualifications obtained from these missionary schools have actually opened up opportunities for many Chinese to venture into the economic field by joining the Brooke government's civil service as clerks or holding clerical positions in European commercial organizations and banks, either in Sarawak or Singapore and the Malay States. This is because the vernacular education offered by the rural missionary schools that gave more emphasis on the practical curriculum that was strongly encouraged by the Brooke Government, doesn't actually offered this kind of socioeconomic benefits to its students. Furthermore, the Dayak community and the other indigenous people have yet to fully understand the importance of the role of education or formal schooling in changing the pattern of traditional community life to a more civilized way of life in the context of a wider and open job opportunities. Therefore, the Dayak people who mostly lived in the interior and the rural areas were very cold towards and did not care much about the education provided in the missionary schools.

Goals and The Development of Christian Missionary Education

All the Christian missionaries, regardless of the of sect, considered their educational work as a tool to increase the number of Christians. Therefore, the establishment of the missionary schools were actually to spread the values and teachings of Christianity in line with its main goal to improve the living conditions of the people of Sarawak, especially those living in the rural areas, through the education of practical skills in the art of carpentry, agriculture and animal husbandry. S.H. Lawrence, the Principal of St. Thomas Anglican Boys School (1919-1923) said that "*our goal is to Christianize our students*", and another Principal Reverend J. Paisley (1935-1938) asserted that the school "*was planned, first of all, as a tool to develop God's Kingdom*" (Gazette, 1923). The Catholic missionary institutions such as St. Joseph's School and St. Teresa's School and Sunny Hill Adventist School also had the same goals (Rooney, 1981).

The missionary schools had made every effort to create a suitable atmosphere in order to exert a strong influence on their students. The students who were accepted as boarders in the school's hostels were usually put under the close supervision and influence of their Christian teachers and that resulted in the Christianization of a large number of those students who were still inexperienced and easily impressionable. Therefore, it was not surprising if more students who lived in the hostels embraced Christianity compared to the regular students who were also in the missionary schools in Kuching (Annual Report, 1930)

At the same time, the Mill Hill Fathers of the Catholic missionaries also had a great desire to civilize the native population of Sarawak through the medium of education and embracing the Catholic religion (Rooney, 1981). Thus, there were Catholic missionary schools in the rural areas that did not really emphasized on academic achievements, but instead focused more on physical skills such as agricultural activities, animal husbandry, basic carpentry, and the knowledge of hygiene in order to improve the living conditions of the indigenous population (Rooney, 1981). According to a circular found in the Sarawak Church Archives entitled '*Tips on How to Deal with Indigenous Children*', it advised the missionaries not to place too much importance on scientific or academic education alone, but instead to focus on technical education or basic skills (Ong, 1964). The effect of that, an industrial school providing vocational training in farming skills was established in Mukah in the Third Division. At the same time, other Catholic missionary schools in the rural areas also managed their own vegetable gardens and raised pigs and chickens and ducks especially for the students' own consumption.

Besides that, the American Methodist missionaries also focused on the physical and spiritual development of the indigenous population through their work in education and medicine (Ong, 1964). Therefore, the existence of these Methodist schools were more towards to meet the physical, mental, moral and spiritual development needs of its students so that they "*become useful adult men and women*" (Ong, 1964). Similarly, with the existence of the Seventh Day Adventist sect schools in the rural areas, such as the one in Kuching, they expected that it would be able to develop the physical, mental and moral power of their students (Sarawak Gazette, 1930). For the Borneo Evangelical missionaries headquartered in Australia, the stated goal is "*to give an evangelical witness to all the tribes in Sarawak, and to establish a church and indigenous leadership among those who embraced Christianity*" (Gomes, 1911). Thus, all educational matters were focused on the establishment of a Bible School that offers a purely religious curriculum.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the existence of these missionary schools had succeeded in providing basic education to the indigenous population of Sarawak during the administration of the Brooke Dynasty. Strong encouragement and solid support in the development of Christianity enabled the people of Sarawak to change their living standards and be chosen as civil servants in the government. Thus, the existence of basic and secondary education introduced by the missionary schools had had an important impact on the change in the standard of living of the indigenous community in particular. Although there was also the involvement of the Chinese community who were more aware of the importance of education, the main focus of the missionaries was directed towards the Dayak community which were still deemed to be much easier to be molded or tamed through religious missions. Although there was a slack in their focus due to financial constraints, the support of the people in some rural areas especially had convinced the missionaries to continue preaching and strengthen the missionary education system plus the open policy held by the Brooke administration had indeed given them space to preach while at the same time opening up opportunities in education for the indigenous population.

Even though the open policy practiced by the Brooke Dynasty actually failed to prevent the entry of elements of Western education through the strong role of the church and

missionary schools. Since most of the students who attended the missionary schools were of non-*bumiputera*, all the educational facilities and benefits failed to be utilized by the *bumiputera* children. This also proved that the influence exerted by the missionary in spreading Christianity to the people of Sarawak at that time had actually become an important factor in the transmission of knowledge to the Dayak people during the administration of the Brooke Dynasty.

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