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"[WOMEN] SHOULD BE HELPMATES AND NOT DRAGS UPON THEIR HUSBANDS": FEMALE EDUCATION IN SARAWAK DURING THE PERIOD OF BROOKE RULE 1841-1941*

Ooi Keat Gin

The provision of education was not given serious consideration by the Brookes, and it was the Christian missionaries that started the schools with formal curriculum. But the supporters of education for girls faced an uphill task of scaling the wall of conservatism; their eventual success owed to their ability in convincing parents that sending daughters to schools would transform them into accomplished home-makers. Home economics and the practical skills of managing a household were the central theme in the curriculum of female education. Progress in schooling for girls was gradual and achievements modest, particularly encouraging results was among the Chinese which in time appreciated the advantages of an English-medium mission education for their daughters. But within Malay and Iban communities, female education did not make much headway. Most of the Malay community members frowned upon young girls going out of their houses and taught by strangers in schools. The general indifference exhibited by the Ibans towards schools and education in general negated most efforts in encouraging schooling for girls (or boys, for that matter).

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Unfavourable Attitudes towards Formal Schooling for Girls

The Brookes did not have a clear-cut policy on education for Sarawak throughout the century of their rule. The Brookes perceived education and formal schooling, particularly along Western lines, as a disruptive influence to the traditional way of life of the inhabitants; Brooke intention, as far as possible, was to maintain the general status quo of the people and country. Understandably development in the field of education was sluggish and marked by official unenthusiasm and overall indifference. Apart from some efforts by Charles Brooke in sponsoring Malay schools and the institution of the Government Lay School, the Brooke government left the task of the provision of education and the establishment of schools to Christian missions and Chinese communities. The mission established head schools in Kuching and Sibu which largely catered for the Chinese population, and smaller and lesser schools in the rural areas for Dayak¹ children. The Chinese, wherever

they have sizeable settlements, would endeavour to have schools that provided vernacular education which utilized the dialect of the community.

Traditional views within Malay and Chinese societies in pre-War Sarawak of the role of girls and young women as wives and mothers worked against the attempts at female education. A typical Sarawak Malay outlook towards female education is exemplified by the opinion of Datu Isa, wife of the *Datu Bandar*,² the most senior Malay noble. When asked by Renee Margaret, wife of Rajah Charles Brooke, about the idea of how beneficial it would be if she (the Ranees) and other Malay women were to learn to read and write in Malay, Datu Isa's reply was as follows:

No, that would never do. Writing amongst women is a bad habit, a pernicious custom. Malay girls would be writing love letters to clandestine lovers, and undesirable men might come into contact with the daughters of our house. I do not agree, Rajah Ranees [Margaret], with the idea, and I hope it will never come to pass (M. Brooke, 1913: 159).

Although Datu Isa's retort might appear narrow-minded, her reaction was more to protect the good name of the women of her household rather than to obstruct their acquisition of knowledge per se as demonstrated by her later actions.

Malay girls in pre-war days led sheltered lives. They received religious instruction from their mother or other close relative. At the same time they were being instructed early in childhood to perform household chores. Such training in domestic work was considered an important part of a young girl's upbringing in preparation for her future role as a competent wife and homemaker. Unlike their male siblings, Malay girls were not allowed to mix freely outside the family circle and were constantly chaperoned during public functions lest their morality was questioned which might affect adversely their chances of marriage. Having unmarried daughters brought shame and ridicule to the family; a situation no respectable Malay would endure. Attending a public school, even in an all female institution, was greatly discouraged as it was considered inappropriate for young unmarried girls to be taught by strangers.

Notwithstanding the Chinese reverence for education, young Chinese girls were not afforded education for reasons not unlike those in Malay society. Although education for boys was given top priority and provided at great sacrifice by poor families, female education was generally neglected among the Chinese irrespective of their socio-economic status. The conservative Chinese considered it unbecoming for their daughters to attend schools and taught by strangers. The public appearances of maidens were few