



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XLII No. 63

December 1991



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Ooi Keat Gin. (1991). Mission Education in Sarawak During the Period of Brooke Rule, 1840-1946. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XLII (63): 283-373

MISSION EDUCATION IN SARAWAK DURING THE PERIOD OF BROOKE RULE, 1840-1946

Ooi Keat Gin

(Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang)

The Christian Mission schools in Sarawak provided a largely Western literary education that illustrated to the local population that a knowledge of the English language was a profitable acquisition for there was an economic demand for English-educated graduates both by the Brooke Government and the European commercial enterprises. These Mission schools were used by the missionaries to preach Christian doctrine with the primary intention of obtaining converts while the Brooke Government looked to these English-medium schools as a source of supply of public servants for its administrative machinery. To the Chinese who formed the majority of the student population, nothing mattered but the acquisition of a Cambridge School Certificate that was a passport to a clerical position in the Brooke civil service or in any of the European commercial houses and banks. The Dayaks in the rural outstations did not enjoy the same economic gains of a mission education as their urban Chinese counterparts but to a certain extent fulfilled the missionaries' basic aim in their conversion to Christianity. In spite of the Brooke Government's promotion of vernacular education that emphasized a practical curriculum, the reality, particularly in urban Kuching, showed that the English medium academic curriculum dispensed by the urban mission schools was greatly demanded for its economic benefits.

MISSION EDUCATION IN SARAWAK DURING THE PERIOD OF BROOKE RULE, 1840-1946

by

Ooi Keat Gin

(Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang)

The Christian Mission schools in Sarawak provided a largely Western literary education that illustrated to the local population that a knowledge of the English language was a profitable acquisition for there was an economic demand for English-educated graduates both by the Brooke Government and the European commercial enterprises. These Mission schools were used by the missionaries to preach Christian doctrine with the primary intention of obtaining converts while the Brooke Government looked to these English-medium schools as a source of supply of public servants for its administrative machinery. To the Chinese who formed the majority of the student population, nothing mattered but the acquisition of a Cambridge School Certificate that was a passport to a clerical position in the Brooke civil service or in any of the European commercial houses and banks. The Dayaks in the rural outstations did not enjoy the same economic gains of a mission education as their urban Chinese counterparts but to a certain extent fulfilled the missionaries' basic aim in their conversion to Christianity. In spite of the Brooke Government's promotion of vernacular education that emphasized a practical curriculum, the reality, particularly in urban Kuching, showed that the English medium academic curriculum dispensed by the urban mission schools was greatly demanded for its economic benefits.

Brooke Policy Towards Missionary Educational Activities

James Brooke's concern for the welfare and the permanent improvement of the native races of Sarawak led him to consider the introduction of Christian missionaries into the country. He looked upon the Christian mission to educate and to raise the native races in the scale of civilization. Brooke expressed his support for the mission in this tone:

Every aid on my part shall most readily be afforded to advance the interests of the mission, and I can foresee no difficulty in its

establishment, and am sanguine of its success ... I hope with moderation and by means of education that we shall ultimately triumph ...¹

But he was discerning as to the particular type of missionaries that he wanted to labour in Sarawak. What he feared most were the "zealots, and intolerants and enthusiasts, with brains heated beyond the rational point, who preach on tubs and begin the task of tuition by a torrent of abuse at what their pupils hold sacred".² What he had in mind were the missionaries "who live quietly, practice medicine, relieve the distressed, do not dispute or argue, and aim to educate the children".³

Apparently it seemed that James Brooke was more interested and inclined towards the practical work of the mission as was illustrated in his preference of the type of missionary he welcomed. It was not so much, if at all, the evangelizing functions of the missionaries that he sought, but more in favour of their work in the social field for the improvement of the welfare of the native inhabitants that appealed to him. Accordingly he outlined clearly how the mission should conduct itself:

It we proceed gradually; if the members of the mission show a Christian example, give love and confidence, educate, alleviate suffering, attend the sick, gradually and imperceptibly they will change the native character.⁴

He evidently laid little store on the religious work of the missionaries as indicated in his letter to his agent, G. Roupell, in Sarawak.

... if you perceive the least disposition to alarm among the natives on account of their religion laugh it off, and tell them we shall not meddle with their religion unless they ask us to do so.⁵

In a later letter to his barrister, John C. Templer, he confided in the matter of the conversion of the natives.

You know my cautious temper, and how long I have forborne, and how little I would wish for my premature success in converting the natives to Christianity.⁶

On the part of the missionaries, a committee was formed to plan the establishment of a Church of England Mission in Sarawak. In November 1847, the official policy of the newly formed Borneo Church Mission Institute (or B.C.M.I.) stated the immediate aim of their work in Sarawak was to establish "a Church, Mission House and School(s)" with the ultimate objective of "extending the blessings of Christianity throughout the Island of Borneo, and the adjacent countries".⁷ Accordingly two missionaries, the priest-doctor the Reverend Francis Thomas McDougall and the Reverend William Bodham Wright with their respective wives, arrived in Sarawak on 29th June 1848.