

The Role of Church Institutions in Advancing Missionary Education in Sarawak from 1840 to 1960

Sidek Pawi, Khairi Ariffin

Faculty of Human Sciences, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of church institutions in advancing the development of mission schools in Sarawak between 1840 and 1960. The research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in documentary analysis of primary sources, focusing on several mission schools located in the major urban centers of Sarawak. The expansion of primary and secondary education through mission schools during the Brooke administration, beginning in 1840, was closely linked to the active involvement of church institutions in establishing schools and contributing to the broader development of education in Sarawak up to the period of British colonial rule. The presence of four major denominations such as Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Seventh-day Adventist was not confined to the propagation of Christianity; rather, these institutions assumed a more dynamic role as educators, social custodians, and agents of change within Sarawak's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The success of church institutions in expanding mission education provides an exemplary case of how the church was transformed from a purely religious institution into a formal educational body, significantly contributing to the modernization of local communities.

Keywords: Education, Brooke Dynasty, British Colonialism, Missionaries

INTRODUCTION

The role of church institutions in the development of education in Sarawak cannot be separated from the broader context of colonial rule and the mission of spreading Christianity in the region. Since the arrival of the first missionaries during the reign of James Brooke, the church emerged as a central institution in establishing schools, providing teachers, and formulating the foundations of educational curricula (Andaya, 2017). Beyond serving as a spiritual center, the church also functioned as an intellectual hub and an agent of social development among the indigenous population. This positioned the church particularly the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) denominations as the backbone of formal educational advancement in Sarawak throughout the colonial era (Chai, 1977).

The initial aim of church-administered education was primarily oriented towards the dissemination of Christian teachings through basic and secondary education (Chai, 1977). Education was regarded as the principal instrument for “civilizing” indigenous communities according to Western frameworks that were firmly rooted in religious values. Over time, however, these objectives expanded to encompass broader social dimensions such as literacy, ethics, and leadership development. For instance, an official document of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1850 emphasized that “education is the most effective instrument of evangelism and moral reformation” (Church Missionary Society, 1850). Thus, the inculcation of Western moral values and cultural norms was perceived both as an extension of religious evangelism and as a mechanism to shape what was deemed a more “civilized” society.

From the perspective of Western civilization, Christianity was interpreted as a vehicle capable of elevating colonial societies to higher levels of civilization compared to other belief systems (Lenski, 1962). In his seminal work *Human Societies*, Lenski argued that the process of Christian conversion constituted a primary medium through which concepts of civilizational progress were introduced to indigenous populations within colonial territories.

"Christian missions were an important force for modernization. This was due primarily to the mission school, which introduce, literacy and elements of western culture"
(Lenski, 1962)

Moreover, missionary schools served as one of the most significant channels for transforming the lives of individuals who lacked access to knowledge, as he himself also emphasized;

"Mission schools and mission hospitals have been very important factors in changing tribal society"
(Lenski, 1962)

In pursuit of the mission to "civilize" the colonized societies, the Western missionaries endeavoured to employ various strategies and subtle means within the process of Christian evangelization, with the aim of capturing the attention of the indigenous population and gradually guiding them into a social structure that shaped their worldview, ultimately leading to their conversion to Christianity.

Problem Statement.

Historical studies on education in Sarawak have generally focused on the changes in the education system following the Japanese occupation or after the formation of Malaysia. Nevertheless, the significant role of missionary institutions in pioneering primary and secondary education in the region has received relatively little systematic and in-depth scholarly attention (Tan, 2007). The history of mission education is often narrowly framed through a purely religious lens, whereas other equally important dimensions such as administration, curriculum structure, levels of community acceptance, and its influence on Sarawak's social dynamics have yet to be adequately addressed within academic discourse.

Moreover, there is a tendency in certain writings to interpret mission education solely as an instrument of colonial domination, functioning to reinforce imperial hegemony. While such a perspective has its basis, historical evidence also demonstrates that mission schools contributed substantially to the educational and social development of local communities. These contributions encompassed the provision of access to knowledge, character formation, and broader opportunities for social mobility among indigenous groups (Chew, 1990). Hence, there is a pressing academic need to examine the development and contributions of mission schools in Sarawak between 1840 and 1960 in a more comprehensive manner, taking into account educational, social, and administrative dimensions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach based on document analysis, with an emphasis on primary sources supported by secondary materials. Primary sources were selected to ensure the authenticity of facts and the reliability of historical evidence, while secondary sources serve to complement interpretation and provide a broader analytical framework (Mohd Shafie Abu Bakar, 1991). The research design was constructed through an in-depth examination of primary documents, which were then systematically interpreted before being narrated as a scholarly historical account.

Data collection was carried out through library research involving manuscripts, official government records, colonial reports, journals, old newspapers, articles, theses, books, and other relevant official publications.. In addition, the private papers of Brooke officers, particularly those produced in the post Second World War period, along with a series of Colonial Office (CO) documents housed in the Public Record Office, were also consulted to understand the policies and strategies of colonial administration in Sarawak. This study further involved research in several major archival and library institutions, including the Sarawak Museum Library, the National Archives (Sarawak Branch) and the Sarawak State Library.

In addition, fieldwork was conducted by visiting primary and secondary schools established during the colonial period in order to examine original documents relating to their foundation, development, and achievements. Visits to churches in the research locations also provided further confirmation of information concerning

missionary education and the networks of educational institutions managed under their auspices. Consequently, this study is able to present the development of missionary education in Sarawak in a systematic, accurate, and source-based manner (Shafer, 1974).

The Educational Mission of Anglican Church.

Through the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Anglican Church was among the earliest institutions to play a pivotal role in the development of education in Sarawak. The arrival of the first missionary, Reverend Francis Thomas McDougall, in 1848 marked the beginning of missionary educational traditions with the establishment of St. Thomas's School in Kuching. The school received direct support from Rajah James Brooke and is recognised as the oldest boys' school in Sarawak that remains in operation to this day. Less than two years after its founding, Reverend McDougall, together with his wife, established St. Mary's School specifically for girls, which became the cornerstone of formal female education in Sarawak (Chew, 1990).

St. Thomas's School grew into a significant institution that produced the first generation of local administrators, assistant missionaries, and teachers who later contributed to the advancement of education and governance in the state. Its curriculum not only emphasized basic literacy skills such as reading and writing but also instilled values of discipline, leadership, and Christian moral teachings. In its early years, the school also served as a training centre for teachers prior to the establishment of specialized institutions such as Batu Lintang Teachers' Training College. By the 1920s and 1930s, St. Thomas's had produced numerous alumni who played critical roles as civil servants, educators, and early political leaders. The presence of these alumni was instrumental in shaping the emergence of Sarawak's professional middle class.

The significant contributions of the school were also documented in the Sarawak Annual Report of 1938, which recorded an enrolment of over 300 male students, including those from the Malay and Dayak communities. The report affirmed that St. Thomas's stood as a symbol of the early success of missionary education, not only in the dissemination of literacy but also in cultivating leadership qualities, instilling a work ethic grounded in Western traditions, and creating pathways for social mobility among the local population. The provision of free education and scholarship opportunities further acted as crucial catalysts in improving the living standards of indigenous communities.

The Educational Mission of Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church began expanding its mission in Sarawak at the end of the nineteenth century through the Mill Hill Mission, a missionary organization based in England and the Netherlands. Under the leadership of figures such as Bishop Edmund Dunn, educational initiatives were pioneered with the establishment of schools in areas with significant Chinese and Iban populations, particularly in Sibü, Kanowit, and Sarikei. Among the most influential schools during this early phase were Sacred Heart School in Sibü, founded in 1902, and St. Anthony's School in Sarikei (Sarawak Catholic Mission Annual Reports, 1930).

Sacred Heart School initially functioned as a boys' primary school administered by Catholic priests and Brothers. However, by 1935, the institution had expanded into a full secondary school equipped with boarding facilities and operating under a curriculum modeled on the British educational system. This development positioned Sacred Heart as a major educational hub, especially for the Foochow and Iban communities, as it provided access to secondary education and opportunities to enter government service, entrepreneurship, and the teaching profession. Indeed, the Colonial Office Education Report of 1950 praised Sacred Heart as a "model of Catholic contribution to rural education in Sarawak" (Colonial Office, 1953). Many of its graduates went on to become community leaders, while others chose to return as Catholic clergy or as teachers within the mission system.

Meanwhile, St. Anthony's School in Sarikei played a vital role in extending educational access to the rural interior of central Sarawak. It became a principal institution for Iban children, who had previously enjoyed little opportunity for formal schooling (Methodist Mission Report, 1939). In addition, the Catholic Church introduced specialized training programs, such as catechist training, designed to prepare graduates as religious instructors and elementary educators within their home villages. The Sarawak Catholic Mission Annual Report of 1937

recorded that student enrolment had surpassed 1,000 within a decade, a figure that underscored the degree of local acceptance of Catholic education (Sarawak Catholic Mission Annual Reports, 1937).

The principal strength of Catholic education lay in its holistic approach, which integrated academic instruction, religious formation, and social welfare. Beyond formal education, several Catholic schools also offered basic healthcare services through small clinics that operated alongside the schools. This comprehensive model ensured that the Catholic mission functioned not only as an educational institution but also as a community centre, significantly contributing to the improvement of living standards among local populations.

The Educational Mission of Methodist Church.

Methodism consolidated its presence in Sarawak in the early twentieth century, particularly with the arrival of Bishop James Hoover in Sibü in 1903 and the subsequent establishment of the Methodist School Sibü. Initially, the school functioned as a primary institution primarily catering to Chinese students, with the objective of providing basic literacy alongside Christian religious instruction (Methodist Mission, 1941). Hoover, together with his wife, expanded these educational efforts through the creation of a teacher training centre and boarding facilities to accommodate students from rural areas.

During the 1920s, the Methodist English School in Miri was established to address the educational needs of children of petroleum industry workers and the rapidly growing urban community (Seventh-day Adventist Borneo Mission, 1955). Methodist schools quickly gained recognition for their pragmatic approach, emphasizing technical education, business training, and moral development rooted in Christian values. In Sibü, in particular, the Methodist School played a crucial role in shaping the early Foochow generation of literate citizens, providing educational opportunities for the children of smallholders and timber mill labourers who had migrated from China to the Rejang Basin.

The Methodist Mission Report of 1939 recorded that nearly 40% of students from the Methodist School Sibü advanced to secondary education, subsequently entering teacher training or serving as clerks in the colonial administration (Methodist Mission Report, 1939). The school also offered foundational courses in business and small-scale entrepreneurship, enabling graduates to operate family-run grocery stores and craft workshops. Many of these alumni later emerged as teachers, clerks, church leaders, and respected community figures.

Beyond the academic curriculum, Methodist education placed strong emphasis on vocational training, including agriculture and food processing, which aligned with the socio-economic needs of local communities. Annual reports highlighted that more than 60% of students were the first generation in their families to receive formal education, thereby breaking cycles of poverty and illiteracy among Foochow and Dayak communities in the Rejang region (Methodist Mission Report, 1939).

The Educational Mission of Seventh-day Adventist Church

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church began to expand its influence in Sarawak during the 1930s, particularly in the interior regions such as Singai and Batu Lintang. In 1939, an Adventist school was established in Singai as part of the SDA mission's strategy to strengthen basic education and healthcare among the Bidayuh community. Situated in the highlands of Bau, this school emerged as a central educational hub for surrounding villages, serving as an avenue for the advancement of literacy and fundamental skills for the first generation of rural communities gaining access to formal education (Seventh-day Adventist Borneo Mission, 1939).

The education provided by this school was not confined merely to academics but also placed strong emphasis on community health and sustainable agriculture. The SDA introduced the "learning by doing" approach, a form of practical education whereby students were encouraged to manage school gardens and engage in livestock projects. Although official documentation regarding agricultural programs in SDA schools in Sarawak remains limited, Catholic institutions such as St. Joseph's School in Bau recorded the implementation of practical curricula based on coffee plantations and other crops (Roman Catholic Mission, 1935). This suggests that holistic education was a common feature of Christian mission schools during that era, and it is highly likely that SDA schools adopted similar practices.

According to the Borneo Mission Annual Report of 1955, the illiteracy rate among communities with access to SDA schools declined by nearly 40% over a decade, marking a significant achievement in efforts to improve the living standards of rural populations (Seventh-day Adventist Borneo Mission, 1955). In addition to academic instruction, the school placed importance on spiritual discipline, health education, and agricultural skills. The Adventist Home School in Kuching, established in the early 1940s, for instance, integrated academic learning with personal hygiene and basic medicine, consistent with the SDA philosophy of “education for whole-person development,” which emphasized balance between intellectual, physical, and spiritual growth (Seventh-day Adventist Borneo Mission, 1942).

SDA schools in Sarawak also trained students to become teachers, nurses, and church workers (Seventh-day Adventist Borneo Mission, 1955). Graduates from areas such as Bau and Serian subsequently acted as agents of social change, introducing modern agricultural techniques, promoting public hygiene practices, and emphasizing healthy lifestyles. The 1955 report highlighted that SDA education “had contributed to reducing disease rates through health education and expanding access to basic literacy” (Seventh-day Adventist Borneo Mission, 1955). Although SDA resources were comparatively more limited than those of other Christian denominations, the mission nonetheless played an important role in the development of rural communities in Sarawak.

CONCLUSION.

Overall, the church as an institution not only played a role in providing basic education but also served as a pioneer in the establishment of school administration systems, teacher training, and the formulation of early curricula. The ability of the church to adapt its educational approach to local social and cultural realities ensured that mission education was more readily accepted by the diverse ethnic communities of Sarawak. However, the church’s dominant influence in the educational sphere began to diminish with the arrival of British colonial administration, which introduced a secular public education system, most notably through the Education Ordinance of 1952 (Government of Sarawak, 1952). Nevertheless, the church has continued to maintain its position as a key operator of a number of schools to the present day, albeit through more formalized collaboration with the Ministry of Education.

Furthermore, the position of the church as a pioneer in the development of education in Sarawak throughout the Brooke era and into the British colonial period is undeniable. By establishing schools, training teaching personnel, and formulating the foundations of early curricula, the church played a crucial role in shaping the basis of the local education system. Without the active contributions of these religious institutions, the emergence of formal education in Sarawak would, in all likelihood, not have occurred as early, nor on the scale that has been recorded in historical development.

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