

KEEPING THE MALAY COLLEGE EXCLUSIVE: PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF BRITISH OFFICIALS AND THE TRADITIONAL MALAY ELITE

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The pre-war history of the Malay College is as interesting as it is significant. It was an institution that was founded in 1905 by the British in order to give, in particular, the children of the traditional Malay elite of the Federated Malay States (F.M.S.) an education and to prepare the more capable of them for a career in the Government. The provision of an English education for the traditional elite was felt necessary in view of the fact that the British authorities in the first decade of the 20th century began to accept the idea that more Malays should be integrated into the Colonial Administrative Service ostensibly in order to train them how to rule their own country. It was a concession made in the light of an increasing awareness that an anomalous situation had emerged in which direct government had been imposed, in practice, upon a colonial framework that was, in theory, one of indirect rule. In the circumstances, the Malay ruling classes had found themselves displaced as administrators, the modern and alien colonial government machinery rendering them ill-equipped and therefore irrelevant. Thus when the principle was accepted that the Malays should have a share in the administration of their own country, it was natural that the traditional elite should be seen by both the British and the Malay Rulers as having first claim to that share.

When the Malay College was set up it was inevitable that the traditional Malay elite should look upon the institution as its preserve. Traditional Malay society emphasised the gap between the ruling classes and the ruled. The upper classes consisted of the rulers and all of royal blood who bore the honorific *Raja* or *Tengku* and the non-royal aristocrats or nobles and their families and relatives. In this category were included also the religious leaders, the *sheik* and *ulamak* as well as the Arab descendants of the Prophet Muhammad identified by the honorific *Syed* who were revered by the Malays. In general all who had blood ties with the ruling sector of the Malay population from the level of the village heads to the territorial chiefs and other titular leaders of the community were set apart from the ordinary people, the commoners or *rakyat*, in

the traditional Malay society. The former, were the *orang baik-baik* (literally, good people — the English equivalent of good family or good birth) while the latter were the *orang biasa* or *kebanyakan* (ordinary people).

The main originator of the idea of setting up the Malay College, R.J. Wilkinson, then the Inspector of Schools for the F.M.S., had hoped that the privilege of attendance at the institution would be given on the basis of proven merit as much as on class considerations.¹ This had resulted in a small number of commoner boys finding their way into the institution in the early years. As it turned out, this situation was not looked upon favourably and in the years that ensued, the question of the social classes allowed entrance into the College became a contentious issue. The Malay ruling classes saw the institution as an elite school catering primarily for the needs of their children and the higher orders of the Malay society to the exclusion of other deserving boys. In the light of such insistence, it was inevitable that the clear preponderance of the traditional elite was maintained in the period before the Second World War.

The image of the Malay College as a class institution was shaped right from the start. Only a month after the opening of the College E.W. Birch, the Resident of Perak, referred to the institution as the Malay Raja School.² In October the same year, anxious that the institution should appeal to the “Malay boy of good birth who has hitherto had nothing to distinguish him from the raiat” he expressed the hope that the school would reflect “that kind of exclusiveness which is more a part of the well-born Malay than it is of the well-born Englishman”.³ Not surprisingly, these sentiments were shared by Sultan Idris of Perak who at the first Annual Speech Day of the school reminded the boys that as the institution was reserved for the sons of Rajas and Chiefs it was necessary that they should try to maintain their position by keeping good company.⁴

Soon after its appointment in 1917, the Board of Governors for the Malay College,⁵ in reviewing the aims and objectives of the institution, affirmed that the College was for the Malay upper classes. Notes of a meeting held on 28 November 1919 indicate clearly the preferences of the authorities.

The first question related to the aims and objects of the College — Was it an institution at which princes and nobles should receive an education befitting their rank or was it an establishment where princes, nobles and gentry were educated with a view to their admission to the Government Service? In the discussion that

ensued the general opinion appeared to be that the College had originally started as the one, and owing to its object not having been defined or kept in view, had gradually drifted in the other. The general opinion too seemed to be that only princes and nobles of Malaya should be eligible for admission.⁶

The misunderstanding of Wilkinson's original aims demonstrated in this passage reflects at best the fact that none of the members of the Board had in any way been concerned with the scheme in 1904 but it also suggests that British official opinion continued to be strongly sympathetic to the interests of the Malay royalty. It is significant that this particular group of Governors voted in favour of upholding the idea that the school should be the exclusive property of the traditional elite.⁷ The conservatism shown appeared to have been unanimous.

The Board of Governors had found it necessary to examine the aims and objectives of the College in general and discuss the question of its social composition in particular at this juncture when the institution was already fourteen years old. The discussion could scarcely have been a matter of routine although the precipitating factors remain obscure. Of some significance was the fact that there was a serious attempt to ensure that the Board's decisions were implemented during the following year. In the interest of creating a more ordered system, a new requirement was made that applications for entry into the College must be on special printed forms supplied by the Government. In itself the formality imposed may appear trivial but the type of information which candidates were required to furnish was evidence of the efforts taken by the Board to prevent further encroachment upon aristocratic privilege by the lower classes of the Malay community. In particular, applicants were asked to state the social rank of their parents, the position of the family in the past, any relationship to a powerful chief, and the presence of relatives at the college now or in the past.

As was mentioned earlier, due to Wilkinson's more democratic outlook, non-royal and non-aristocratic boys had in fact attended the Malay College from the beginning a factor borne out by the strict observance of class distinctions in daily life at the institution. When the school first opened using temporary and makeshift facilities, of the 39 boarders in the early months, seven boys who were sons or close relations of the Malay Sultans stayed with the Headmaster, three of lesser rank were taken in by the assistant master, while the remaining 29 were housed in abandoned railway quarters for clerks.⁸ After the permanent buildings of the College were completed when all the boarders were housed under the same roof, these distinctions remained for some years as evident from

the following account by Tan Sri Datuk Dr. Mohammad Said, who was at the school between 1919 and 1925:

The sons of the rulers were accommodated in special rooms or cubicles. There were five of these rooms sandwiched between the prayer room and one of the three dormitories. The rest of the Tengkus, Rajas and Syeds, had to rough it out with the "lesser" breeds in the dormitories.⁹

Where the question of food was concerned, a distinction was made in the quality made available to the students. The first class boarders paid \$15 out of their scholarship for their food each month, the second class \$9, while the third class paid \$7.¹⁰ When the permanent buildings were built, incorporating a dining hall, the first class boarders were served their meals at a separate table as attested to by Tan Sri Dr. Mohamad Said:

At meal times, the sons of rulers, Tengkus, Rajas and Syeds sat at a separate long table where they ate special food called First Class Diet.¹¹

Yet events in the following years did not indicate that the problems of class background had been solved permanently. In 1927, Datuk Abdullah bin Haji Dahan the Undang of Rembau member of the Federal Council, deemed it necessary to draw special attention to this issue, by requesting from the Federal Council a clarification of whether or not the College was exclusively reserved for the education of boys belonging to a particular section of the Malay community, and if so, what section.¹² To this the Government replied that preference was given to boys of "good birth" but that no hard and fast rule was laid down.¹³

The term "good birth" in itself was controversial for although it was generally used to refer to the aristocratic class, nonetheless its vagueness lent itself to more than one interpretation. And, as we shall see, the Resident of Perak, B.W. Elles, in 1930 was refer to yet another category, that of "fair birth" in classifying the boys of the college. Even Datuk Abdullah had to admit that "good birth" is not the sole and exclusive natural privilege of boys belonging to a particular section of the Malay Community.¹⁴

The revival of an issue supposedly settled in 1919 implies that the policy of a particular group of Governors was hardly binding and did not restrict the actions of its successors, with the result that the College had either not discontinued or had resumed the practice of admitting commoner boys. But it was equally obvious that this was causing disquiet in some quarters. Datuk Abdullah's statement tends to support this supposition.

First, it has come to my knowledge that there is a certain amount of suspicion existing in the minds of certain Malays about the birth of certain boys who have from time to time been admitted to the college. These Malays say that as the result of the admission of these boys an equal number of sons or relations of the Chiefs, the Rajas or the Warith Negri have not been able to gain admission due to the presence in the college of those boys whose position in the Malay society does not — so these Malays say — entitle them to be educated in the college at Kuala Kangsar. Rightly or wrongly these Malays are under the impression that the college is only reserved for the education of the sons or relatives of the Chiefs, the Rajas and the Warith Negri...¹⁵

As is obvious, the “certain Malays” referred to by the *Datuk* belonged to the upper class, a class now increasingly aware of the importance of education in general and that offered by the Malay College in particular. If voices were raised in protest it was inevitable. The Malay College was to them a symbol of the privilege that still rested with the ruling class. Moreover, they were acutely aware that as a nursery for entrance into the ranks of the administrative services of the Government, the institution provided the golden opportunity of maintaining their position as the elite of Malay society.

The rumblings of dissatisfaction in the corridors of Malay power appeared to have persisted for in 1930 another serious attempt was made by the authorities to resolve the question. In an effort to get to the crux of the problem, the original aims of the College were traced and laid out. Memoranda on the school by the Resident of Perak, as Chairman of the Board of Governors, and by the Acting Director of Education, indicated that on examination of the documents related to the opening of the College they had come to the conclusion in contrast to the common view held, that it was never intended by the originators that the College be the preserve of the ruling and aristocratic classes.¹⁶

A report by the Headmaster, Charles Bazell, showed that out of 124 F.M.S. boys at the College in 1930, 46 were sons of nobles and territorial chiefs, while 78 were sons of *penghulus*, *dato*'s of lower rank and commoners.¹⁷ From the statistics given it is clear that boys of the highest birth and those of “good family” predominated, although Bazell's classification and the Resident of Perak's contention that only the former group were boys of good family, tended to give the impression that there were more boys from the lower classes in the college than might have been supposed. The Resident recommended that the proportion of boys of “good family” in the college should be two-thirds of the total enrolment, in view of the increasing number of such boys seeking education, the remaining one-third to be made up of boys of “fair

birth", such as sons of penghulus, and commoner boys.¹⁸ With the greater number of other sorts of English school which Malay boys could now attend, he said, this proposal would not in any way deprive commoner boys of an English education. The Acting Director of Education later suggested that the proportion should be half and half, for, he wrote, to "reserve the College for the anak raja" would be to encourage the growth of a "class-distinction" which he believed should be avoided.¹⁹

Neither the Resident nor the Acting Director of Education supported the idea of reserving the school solely for the sons of rajas and chiefs but they were at the same time clearly in agreement that the traditional elite should predominate. The Malay rulers on the other hand had never doubted that the school was for the sons of rajas and chiefs. The Yam Tuan of Negeri Sembilan was definite on the point that the rulers had been told before 1905 that the school was to be confined to the higher classes. At a meeting with the Acting British Resident of Negeri Sembilan he was reported to have said,

When it was agreed to build the College, we rulers were informed that it was to be a school for the sons of rajas and chiefs. For some time after its opening it was one of the very few schools in which Malays could get English education, and in the interest of my state I did not want to stand in the way of the most promising boys going there if there was nowhere else for them to go. I did not like the mixing of the social classes however, and now that there are many English schools... I think that we should revert to the original purpose of the school... I do not like the idea of the children of rajas and chiefs sitting²⁰ in school side by side with the children of people who were once our slaves.

Even while maintaining that the College was for the highest born Malays, the rulers and chiefs who aired their views were not, however, complete opposed to having some other sorts of boys in the institution. At the same interview mentioned above, the Yam Tuan also stated,

I would not confine the College to sons of Rajas or to sons of Major Chiefs; I would allow the sons of Lembagas and Kepala Waris to enter because Lembagas and Kepala Waris never were slaves. At present however, there are many boys of the college who are not even sons of these village headmen.²¹

The Datuk Klana of Sungei Ujong and the Datuk Penghulu of Rembau, Datuk Abdullah, like their Yam Tuan were principally concerned that such commoner boys as there were in the College should not be descendants of slaves. Datuk Abdullah noted that boys of lowly birth had from time to time been admitted, for he had seen while in the College that there were certain boys, not from Negeri

Sembilan, whose parentage was known to be "disreputable".²² Perhaps the state alluded to by the Datuk was Selangor, but the British Resident of Selangor minuted in its defence,

Complaint has been made against Selangor of lowering the standard of the College. The Minute of the Headmaster shows that Selangor is the only state in which the sons of the nobility outnumber the others.²³

Selangor, however, was apparently more accomodating than some states, for the Resident also stated that the view held by the Sultan and the Raja Muda was that although preference should be given to the sons of the ruling classes, sons of other deserving persons were not to be debarred.²⁴

In the final analysis, the common factor among contending opinions was the recognition given to the right of the upper classes to an education at the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar, with the result that the character of the institution underwent very little change until 1941, although Bazell had hoped that the school would revert to the original policy. "I am of opinion", he wrote, "the school would be valued more and do better if Wilkinson's original ideas were adhered to".²⁵ In the Headmaster's words are implied the true state of affairs at the College. Despite reports of the good tone of the school and of the fairly reasonable standard of academic achievement of the boys, there was room for improvement. Boys of the raja and the aristocratic classes sent to the College, it may be observed, were not chosen on account of merit but chiefly because of their status. The authorities had sacrificed progress and high standards in the course of upholding aristocratic rights and privileges.

Apprehensions felt by the Malay ruling class were understandable. With the passage of time English education was becoming more and more popular with Malays, both for its own sake and for the material returns it promised. For the Malay aristocracy this meant increased competition. They could not help but view the situation with some misgivings the more so when they began to notice that among the Malays equipped with English education who had made good in the Public Services were a number of commoner elements. The restrictions on entry to the Malay College must have been a source of disappointment and regret for the aspiring Malay parent who desired the right type of education for his child, but was unable to gain access for his son to the College. However, no known attempts were made to force open the door of the institution for the benefit of the general Malay public. The only inroads into the "royal" school were usually made by commoner elements

possessing strong ties with the “right” people such as the sons of Malays who were in constant contact with the rajas and chiefs and those who had done useful service for them and consequently were in their favour. Among them were included adopted children of rajas and chiefs and sons of court retainers.

Thus, throughout the period before the Second World War, the question of the social classes allowed entrance into the Malay College was of fundamental importance. Undoubtedly, the traditional Malay elite jealously guarded the institution from encroachment from below, seeing the school as its preserve. This perception was encouraged by British conservatism and their conciliatory attitude towards the Malay leadership who in turn viewed the College as a bulwark of elite privileges. The end result was that the Malay College played a major role as a conduit through which the elite was conveyed from its traditional setting to modernity, preserving and enhancing its status and enabling it to remain relevant within the Malay socio-political order in the context of the new colonial polity and later, the emerging new nation.

NOTES

¹Wilkinson in favouring merit over status had proposed that the ratio should stand at twenty boys of distinction to five boys of good family. Wilkinson to W.H. Treacher, Resident-General, F.M.S., 24 February 1904, text in Minutes, Conference of Residents, March 1904, H.C.O., RG 422/1904.

²Birch to W.T. Taylor, 19 February 1905. H.C.O., Perak 278/1905.

³Birch to Taylor, 7 October 1905, H.C.O., Perak 1630/1905.

⁴*The Times of Malaya*, 26 October 1905.

⁵The Board of Governors of the Malay College consisted of the British Residents of the F.M.S., the Director of Education and a Malay representative from each of the four states of the Federation, nominated by their respective Rulers. The Malay representatives usually belonged to the highest order of the Malay social hierarchy.

⁶Notes of a meeting of the Board of Governors of the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, held at Kuala Lumpur, 28 November 1919. TBF, unnumbered of 1930, cross-referenced to Federal Secretariat (G) Perak 1964/1930, containing copies of minutes and enclosures on the College.

⁷The members of the Board of Governors attending this meeting were British Residents, W.G. Maxwell (Chairman), A.H. Lemmon, J.R.O. Aldworth and C.W.C. Parr; the Director of Education, H.W. Firmstone; and the Malay members, Raja Chulan, son of ex-Sultan Abdullah of Perak, Tengku Suleiman, son of Sultan Ahmad of Pahang and the Datuk Klana of Sungai Ujong. Raja Musaeddin, the Tengku Mahkota of Selangor was not present at this meeting.

⁸Report, the Headmaster, William Hargreaves to Federal Inspector of Schools, 17 March 1905, H.C.O. RG 546/1905. Raja Kamarulzaman bin Raja Mansur, a grandson of ex-Sultan Abdullah of Perak, stayed with the assistant master which puts him in the category of boys of lesser rank or second class boarders. See, Raja Kamarulzaman bin Raja Mansur, "Some Early Impressions at College, 1905-1908, *Malay College Magazine*, 11, 1, 1950, p. 60.

⁹Tan Sri Datuk Dr. Mohamad Said, *Memoirs of a Mentri Besar: Early Days* Heineman Asia, Singapore, 1982, p. 126-127.

¹⁰Raja Kamarulzaman bin Raja Mansur, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-61.

¹¹Tan Sri Datuk Dr. Mohamad Said, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

¹²Datuk Abdullah bin Haji Dahan, in Federal Council Proceedings, 8 August 1927, p. B65.

¹³High Commissioner, in Federal Council Proceedings, 8 August 1927, p. B66.

¹⁴Datuk Abdullah bin Haji Dahan, in *op. cit.*,

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. B98.

¹⁶Memoranda on the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, B.W. Elles, 25 April 1930 and M.B. Shelley, 13 May 1930, in TBF *op. cit.*,

¹⁷Bazell to Secretary to Government, Perak, 11 April 1930, in *Ibid.*

¹⁸Memorandum on the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar, B.W. Elles, 25 April 1930, in *Ibid.*

¹⁹Memorandum on the Malay College, M.B. Shelly, 13 May 1930, in *ibid.*

²⁰Memorandum on the Malay College, A. Caldecott to Chief Secretary, 21 June 1930, in *Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³Minutes on the Malay College, J. Lornie, 4 June 1930, in *Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Bazell to Secretary to Resident, Perak, 11 April 1930, in *Ibid.*