Ethnicity and British Colonialism; the Rationale for Racially-Based Schools

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This paper examines the rationale for ethnic schooling in former British colonial territories in East Africa and Southeast Asia. Critics, especially of British rule in Malaya and Singapore, have traditionally claimed that ethnic schools were established as part of a British political strategy of 'divide et impera'. An examination of the evidence suggests otherwise. There may be some support for the view that ethnic schooling was generated, at least in part, by a policy of benign neglect on the part of the British but the most plausible explanation lies in Britain's longstanding adherence to the principle of voluntaryism and the accommodation of broad guiding principles to the practical realities of population distribution, language diversity, cultural traditions and mutual antagonisms, resistance to religious proselytization, and an ever-present shortfall of human and financial resources. To suggest that the British deliberately encouraged ethnic schools to maintain their colonial hegemony is to ascribe to colonial policy far more foresight and rationality than is merited by the available evidence.

Adherence to the voluntary principle - the belief that anyone should be free to establish and operate a school provided it met minimum standards of construction, size and hygiene - had been a feature of English educational practice dating back to medieval times. Arthur Mayhew, Joint-Secretary of the Colonial Office Advisory Committee on Education, drew attention to the fact that private enterprise and non-official agencies had been 'a fundamental feature of English education policy at all times and in all places'. They ensured a variety of aims and methods and a defence against official standardisation and rigid uniformity 'which the English detest'. Ethnic schools were also established for a variety of sound practical reasons including the fact that local ethnic communities helped shoulder the financial cost of establishing and maintaining schools. To have attempted to establish national systems of multi-racial schools in the colonies, especially in the years between the two world wars, would have been impossible both financially and in practical terms. Instead,

British colonial education policy was an exercise in pragmatism - or what Lord Hailey described as the exercise of a traditional skill in accommodating principles to circumstances. Moreover, to argue that education policy was geared primarily to political ends is to imply that the British had a clear understanding of the role that education played in national life, a view vehemently denied by Sir Fred Clarke. British education policy both at home and abroad clearly reinforced social class divisions but to suggest that it was primarily motived by ulterior political ends is to credit British officials with far more insight than they would have claimed or is warranted by the evidence.

Schools established and maintained by ethnic communities were a common feature of many former British colonies, especially in East Africa [Tanganyika, Uganda, Kenya, Zanzibar and Nyasaland] and Southeast Asia [Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak] Elsewhere the existence of racially -based schooling was most noticeable in Palestine, Cyprus and Fiji. Critics of British colonial rule, especially in Southeast Asia, have traditionally argued that the practice was part of a deliberate policy of '*divide et impera*'[1] The following extract from the *Revised Report of the Royal Commission on the Teaching Services, West Malaysia*, published in 1971, while not the most reliable of sources, reiterates a commonly held view of the nature of British education policy in pre-Independence Malaya: 'Under colonial rule, Malayan educational policy apparently took the line of least resistance which suited admirably the colonial policy of "divide and rule"'.[2] More recently, however, this argument has been discredited, mainly because of the lack of any convincing evidence. S.Gopinathan, a leading historian of education in Singapore, rejected the '*divide et impera*' argument but accused the British instead, of an educational policy of 'benign neglect', doing only the minimum necessary and stirring only when their interests were threatened. His assertion is open to challenge but it certainly provides little or no support for the belief that the British used education policy as a deliberate ploy to promote their hegemony in Southeast Asia. This paper examines the origins and the rationale for racially-based schools in Britain's former colonies in order partly to discredit still further the 'divide and rule' argument but mainly to argue that they were the logical outcome of traditional English educational practice which had always been, and still is, characterised by both the absence of any coherent national educational philosophy and by an enduring faith in pragmatism or the ability to improvise in the light of on-the-spot circumstances.

Detailed case studies of the origins of western schooling in all of Britain's former colonies demonstrate a traditional adherence to the so-called 'voluntary principle' and the accommodation of broad guiding principles to the practical realities of population distribution, language diversity, cultural traditions and mutual antagonisms, resistance to religious proselytization, and the ever-present lack of adequate human and financial resources. To suggest that the British deliberately encouraged schooling based on ethnicity to maintain their colonial hegemony is to ascribe to colonial policy far more foresight and rationality than is merited by any study of documentary evidence.

Adherence to the voluntary principle, or the belief that anyone should be free to establish and operate a school provided it met minimum standards of construction, size and hygiene, had been a central feature of English educational practice dating back to medieval times. It is not surprising, therefore, that it became the dominant feature of schooling in Britain's colonial territories. The principle and its justification were clearly outlined in the *Memorandum on the Education of African Communities* prepared by the Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies and published in 1935.[3] In paragraph 23, which bears the unmistakable imprint of Arthur Mayhew, one of the Committee's Joint-Secretaries,[4] it was stated that 'The English tradition in education in contrast with that of many other countries has been distrustful of too close and rigid control of education by government. It has allowed large scope for voluntary effort in education and has favoured variety, elasticity, and freedom of initiative and experiment. These make for increased vitality in the educational system'. Elsewhere Mayhew stated that the British Government supported 'the utmost elasticity in school management and curricula' to ensure that it was not robbed of all its colour and all the contributions that local circumstance and personalities were capable of making.[5] In 1938, in his book, *Education in the Colonial Empire*, Mayhew drew attention to the great importance attached to private enterprise and non-official agencies as 'a fundamental feature of English education policy at all times and in all places'.[6] He claimed that it ensured a variety of aims and methods and a departure from official standardisation and rigid uniformity which the English detest. The state dominated French and German school systems provided the obvious point of contrast. It was the widespread and consistent adherence to *laissez-faire* principles rather than any predetermined political strategy which encouraged the proliferation of a wide variety of schools in British colonies, many of which were established and maintained by and for distinct ethnic communities.

In most British colonies schooling developed on a largely *ad hoc* basis often long before the colonial administration assumed any formal responsibility for education. It was generally the Christian missionaries who established schools but in territories like Cyprus and Palestine ethnic schools had long been established by Greeks, Turks, Arabs and Jews respectively. In East Africa indentured Indian labourers were introduced to build the railway from Mombassa, through Kenya to Kisumu on Lake Victoria. The Indian communities which later established themselves in Kenya and neighbouring Uganda also established their own schools. The same applied in Malaya and Fiji where indentured Indians were imported to build railways and provide plantation labour in the rubber and sugar industries. They too, settled permanently and established their own schools. The Chinese who settled in British East Africa and to a much greater extent in Southeast Asia also had their own schools. Permanent white settlement in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia together with a significant, even if transitory expatriate population in most other colonies, also provided a ready clientele for European schools. Schooling for indigenous populations was generally provided by the missions but in some cases, as in Malaya and Fiji, the colonial government established village schools for the people as part of treaty arrangements, and/or special schools for the sons of the indigenous elite. as in the case of the Queen Victoria School in Fiji and the Malay College in Malaya.

British colonial administrations often actively encouraged the establishment of ethnic schools not only in conformity with the voluntary principle but also for sound economic reasons. The voluntary principle was accompanied by a system of government grants-in-aid which were paid to schools which conformed to basic building and teaching staff requirements. The grants covered only a proportion of school costs, generally in the form of subsidies to staff salaries, but the system enabled colonial administrations to eke out the meagre financial resources generally available to education while at the same time maintaining some overall control of basic standards. The Christian missions received the baulk of grant-in-aid funds but other religious and ethnic groups also took advantage of government financial assistance. As one former British colonial director of education once told the author, 'The missions were able to invoke The Almighty when raising funds for schooling, an option that was not open to colonial officials'.[7] Local Chinese and Indian communities were likewise able to appeal to racial pride and cultural identity in campaigning for financial support for schools within their own communities. From a purely pragmatic

viewpoint, any school, no matter who ran it or how it was funded, was better than no school at all. Given the ever-increasing popular demand for schooling throughout the colonies, especially in the late 1920s and thereafter, it is hardly surprising that British officials actively encouraged all types of voluntary effort to establish and maintain schools including those based on race.

Ethnic schools were also established for other equally sound practical reasons. For example, the distribution of the population in colonies like Fiji and Malaya, often meant that racial groups lived apart in different geographical areas of the country. The Fijians, for example, lived primarily in the hinterland of Fiji whereas the Indians were clustered in the sugar growing areas and also in the urban centres where they eventually dominated the retail trade. It was, therefore, only natural that Fijians should establish their own schools and the Indians likewise. Similar circumstances prevailed in Malaya where the Malays were a predominantly rural village based people whereas the Indians and the Chinese inhabited the towns or the areas associated with tin mining, or rubber and agricultural plantations.

The desire to maintain cultural identities through ethnic schooling was further strengthened by a combination of practical considerations, mutual animosity, and in some instances by fear of Christian proselytization. The diversity of languages spoken in many colonies presented an obvious practical problem for educators. Understandably, Indians and Chinese had no wish to have their children educated in Malay or Swahili or Fijian and indigenous peoples likewise, had no wish to have their children taught in some foreign language, with the possible exception of English which fell into a different category. A mixture of children speaking a variety of languages in the one class necessarily meant that the owner of the school had to determine which language would be used as the medium of instruction. The problem was generally overcome by the practical expedient of establishing schools where a majority of pupils spoke the same language. In this context, ethnic schools made good sense. The supply of teachers to schools was also dependent on their ability to speak the language of instruction. In Fiji, for instance, Fijian teachers had no wish to learn one of the several Indian languages in use while Indian teachers equally showed little or no desire to master the Fijian language. The availability and supply of textbooks used in schools were also largely dependent on the language of instruction. In Malaya and Singapore, the Chinese schools not only used the Chinese language and writing script

but also adhered closely to the curriculum laid down for use in mainland China.

The London-based Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies had long thought it educationally sound to start schooling in a child's native language and to delay the introduction of English as a medium of instruction until at least the fourth year.[8] This principle was widely adhered to in practice. To have maintained the principle in a predominantly multi-racial school it would have been necessary to cater for a variety of different language groups but that would have been impractical given the small size of many schools and the lack of suitably qualified teachers.

The variation in educational standards experienced amongst children of varying cultures also posed serious practical educational problems. Expatriate Europeans expected their children to be taught according to the curricula and examination requirements of the English education system but few schools could command the resources or teaching staff to satisfy such demands. The Chinese, likewise geared their schooling to the model of the Chinese mainland which did not correspond to the English system. The age at which children began their schooling also varied depending on race, proximity to schools, and the importance attached to education by the local population. Any attempt to impose uniformity would have been impossible to sustain.

A variety of cultural differences centred on codes of social behaviour including food and eating habits, dress, religion, festivals, and even contrasting standards of personal hygiene also generated widespread mutual animosity between different ethnic groups which, in turn, posed serious practical difficulties for educators who sought to establish multiracial schools. For example, many Moslem parents disliked sending their children to mission schools for fear of proselytization. In Northern Nigeria, where the indigenous population was almost exclusively Moslem, Christian missionaries were expressly forbidden to enter the region and establish schools for fear of offending the local emirs. Malays, who are also Moslem, had their own exclusive system of government schools. Moslem parents were also opposed to coeducation and many also refused to send their young daughters to schools where the teachers were predominantly men.

A practical consideration not often alluded to in the literature but important for Europeans living in Fiji in the interwar years was the high prevalence of tuberculosis amongst many Indian and Fijian children. The health risk this posed to young European children was

such that many parents refused pointblank to countenance their children attending racially mixed schools.

J.S.Furnivall described the social composition of colonies like Fiji and Malaya, and the same applied to Kenya, Uganda and Northern and Southern Rhodesia, as 'plural societies' in which various distinct ethnic groups lived and worked alongside each other but rarely interrelated socially.[9] In Fiji, for example, Indians and Fijians rarely, if ever, intermarried without being socially ostracized by both communities. In sport, Indians played soccer and hockey whereas most Fijians played rugby. Whether in Kenya, Uganda, Singapore, Malaya, Palestine or Fiji, rival ethnic communities kept their distance from one another and many made separate provision for the education of their children. There was, however, one notable exception to this rule. A knowledge of English was highly prized not only because it was the language of the colonial government but also because it was the most obvious means to upward social mobility for all non-Europeans. For this reason, ethnic differences were often set aside if parents could enrol their children in English schools. The term widely used for schools that taught through the medium of English and which followed the curriculum prescribed for English public examinations like the Cambridge Oversea School Certificate. English schools were generally run by Colonial Governments or the Christian Missions and many were the leading schools in the territory. Access to them was determined mainly by parental ability to pay the relatively high fees. English schools frequently bridged ethnic differences even if only at a superficial level but they also helped to perpetuate social class divisions.

For diehard critics of British colonialism who persist in their belief that education policy was motivated primarily by political considerations based on the divide and rule thesis, it is pertinent to ask what type of schooling would have proved an acceptable and viable alternative? Prior to 1945 the British were not intent on fostering future nation states - the reality of imminent Independence was essentially a postwar phenomenon - while multiracialism, in the sense in which the term is used in the contemprary world, was nonexistent. English medium schools were outwardly multiracial but parents sent their children to such schools not to promote racial harmony but to give them a sound English based education to enhance their socio-economic prospects in life. In general, people of different races and cultures lived apart as in Furnivall's concept of a plural society, and it would have been next to impossible and counter to British values and tradition, to have

attempted to force all children, regardless of their race or culture, into common schools. Moreover, deciding on a suitable language of instruction would have been an unresolvable problem. To have imposed English as a universal medium of instruction, as French was imposed on French colonial schools, would have proved impossible. Not only would it have been a practical impossibility because of the acute shortage of English-speaking teachers but such a directive would also have been contrary to traditional British educational thought and practice. No doubt today's critics would also have been quick to accuse the British of a gross act of cultural imperialism. To have arbitrarily selected any language other than English would also have offended a variety of ethnic minorities. In the circumstances the most sensible pragmatic solution both politically and from a practical standpoint was to allow for a wide diversity of schools employing a variety of languages as media of instruction.

To a large extent communal or ethnic schooling was a practical solution to the problem of providing adequate schooling from limited means. If the British had sought to establish multi-racial school systems they would have lacked the necessary staff and financial resources and doubtless also have encountered much public hostility. Moreover, throughout the interwar years it is most unlikely that they would have been able to persuade or force local school management committees to accept pupils into their schools against their will when the committees bore the brunt of administering and physically maintaining the schools. The maintenance of some schools, for example, those specifically for Malays and Fijians,was also prompted by British treaty obligations to promote and protect Malay and Fijian culture respectively.

Given the acute shortage of trained teachers and government financial resources, deep cultural differences, the geographical spread of the population, and the widely differing educational traditions of different racial groups, it made sound practical sense for the British to encourage all forms of voluntary effort provided it conformed to broadly based principles and ultimately to overall government control. In no sense is it historically accurate to claim that the British foisted a particular form of schooling on colonial peoples although it is true that the image of the English 'public school' was always considered the epitome of the highest of educational ideals and the most desirable type of school, especially for the sons of the indigenous ruling classes. It is likewise true that the Christian missions consolidated their hold on many indigenous peoples by means of bush and village schools in which

the religious message took precedence over secular instruction but the close link between religion and education had been an integral feature of English education for centuries and was, therefore, not unique to colonial schooling.

At the time of Independence in the early to mid 1960s, many of Britain's former colonies contained a wide variety of schools many of which owed their origins to ethnic considerations. Schools segregated along ethnic lines were clearly not conducive to promoting a strong sense of national unity and cultural identity - Malaya and Fiji were classic examples - and their integration into a unified or national system of schools often proved difficult, especially in Malaya. Indeed, in Fiji, after Independence, the Government chose to retain the local committee structure of schools which was essentially ethnically based largely because it was cheaper to maintain. As the Rt Hon Semesa Sikivou, the Fiji Minister of Education remarked, the voluntary element encouraged the people to look after their schools far more than if they were government property.[10] The often colourful variety of schools existing in many colonies at the time of Independence may have had numerous shortcomings including poor management, unnecessary duplication, poor treatment of teachers, wide variation in costs and the quality of instuction offered, a constant preoccupation with fund-raising, and the encouragement of sectarian and ethnic rivalry but their existence was certainly not the result of some predetermined and sinister political strategy. A far more plausible explanation for their existence lay in the fact that they were the logical outcome of allowing free rein to local initiative and market forces, and the gradual development of a widespread popular concern for education. Modern critics may interpret this as a euphemism for benign neglect but it must also be appreciated that provision for education was not the highest of priorities for most colonial governments in the interwar years. Moreover, the popular clamour for education in Africa and Asia arose after rather than before the Second World War.

Schooling in Britain's former colonies, like British colonial rule in general, undoubtedly reflected the social class divisions inherent in British culture but there is no evidence to suggest that the British consciously sought to generate multi-cultural societies with a strong sense of nationalist identity or, conversely, that they sought to use schooling as a means to divide and rule. Beyond the maintenance of basic law and order most ethnic communities were free to determine their own educational arrangements. Colonial resources were severely

limited and local administrations did not consider it was their responsibility to provide universal schooling. In a contemporary world preoccupied with ethnic rivalries this approach may seem short-sighted and leave the British open to the charge of benign neglect but British colonial education policy must be judged by the norms, values and expectations of society as it was and not as it is half a century or more later.

To argue that education policy in Britain's former colonies was deliberately geared to political ends is to imply that the British had a clear understanding of the role that education played in national life but this idea was strongly rejected by Sir Fred Clarke, a prominent comparative educationist of the interwar years and later Director of the University of London's Institute of Education, who claimed that the British had never thought through a coherent national educational philosophy.[11] The essentially pragmatic approach to education and national life in general traditionally associated with the British was encapsulated by Lord Hailey when he wrote in 1938 of British colonial policy as being a series of improvisations which depended for success not on a logical outlook, but on the exercise of a traditional skill in accommodating principles to circumstances.[12] The development of colonial schooling was a clear case in point. To understand the rationale for education policy in any one of Britain's former colonies it is necessary to examine in detail the social, economic and political conditions as they were perceived by men-on-the-spot.[13] That there was a strong element of expediency in their deliberations is not disputed but equally no tangible evidence has yet come to light to indicate that schooling was deliberately segregated on the basis of ethnicity for ulterior political ends. To suggest otherwise is to credit British officials with far more foresight than they would have claimed or the facts support.

NOTES

1. Chai Hon-Chan, *The Development of British Malaya, 1896-1909*, Kuala Lumper, OUP, 1972, p.278.
2. *Revised Report* p.24
3. S.Gopinathan,Towads a National Educational System, chap.IV in Riaz Hassan (ed.), *Singapore A Society in Transition*, Kuala Lumper, OUP, 1976, p.67
4. *Memorandum on the Education of African Communities*, Colonial Office, Colonial No.103, 1935.

5. For details of Mayhew's life and career in education see the author's article The Nestor of British Colonial Education: A portrait of Arthur Mayhew CIE, CMG (1878-1948) in the *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 29, 1 (1987), pp.51-76
6. *Memorandum on Educational Grants in Aid*, Colonial Office, Colonial No.84, 1933.
7. *Education in the Colonial Empire*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1938, p. 44
8. Personal communication to the author from Gordon Rodger, Director of Education, Fiji, Suva 1973.
9. For further detail on language policy in British colonial education see the author's article The medium of instruction in British Colonial education: a case of cultural imperialism or enlightened paternalism?, *History of Education*, Vol.24, No.1, (1995) pp. 1-15
10. J.S.Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, New York University Press, 1956
11. *Fiji Paliamentary Debates*, 8 December 1981
12. For a detailed exposition of this argument see F.Clarke,*Education and Social Change*, Sheldon Press, London, 1940, esp. Chap.1
13. Lord Hailey,*An African Survey*, O.U.P., London, 1938, p.143
14. The truth of this statement was impressed upon the author when listening to a paper delivered at a conference held at the University of Reading in September 1979 . The paper, presented by J.F.Callander of the Commonwealth Institute, London, was about 'The Colonial Heritage in Education in Nairobi, Kenya'. It highlighted the varied array of factors which had contributed to the complex mix of ethnic schools in the city of Nairobi on the eve of Independence. There was no unified administrative, financial or legal framework for education and there were many inequalities between schools but the percentage of untrained teachers in primary schools was negligible; the stock of school buildings although insufficient, was nevertheless considerable, and much of it was of high quality and well-maintained. There were also many amenities which parents had provided over the years like school halls, swimming pools, audio-visual equipment etc. Perhaps most important was the well-established tradition of active participation by a variety of associations in the work of the schools. Nowhere in Callendar's detailed account was there any suggestion that the racial basis of schooling was other than a pragmatic response to a complex array of local circumstances.