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## **Mapping the formation of English media literacy and knowledge dissemination in Local Community: The Cathedral of the Assumption Church as a case study in Penang Island.**

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### **Abstract**

English media literacy enjoys a common myth in the representation of middle class and intellectual discourses in Malaysia. Media literacy have a tied on an interconnection with the knowledge production institute particularity link with the state. But, state actors are part of the important discourse of knowledge production institute. The subset cultural production institutes can also take association or religion institution in the society as label on the progressiveness on knowledge production. A bottom-up effort as an endower on the reading movement of a local community such as Penang Island. The research is an early effort in mapping Cathedral of the Assumption Church as a progressive encouragement to introduced the reading habit particularly in a post-colonial urban area. The experience on colonialization and an entry port maritime environment of the Penang Island shown a conducive environment for English media literacy compared to other state in peninsular Malaysia. The Church as a early pushing force as the pinioning the English news reading reminds in the collective response of the interview on the old generation. The church private museum also displays the narratives of the memories in encouraging the local community in pushing for a absorption of English media literacy on its surrounding environment.

**Keyword:** *Literacy, Culture Production Institute, The Cathedral of the Assumption Church. Penang Island.*

## Introduction

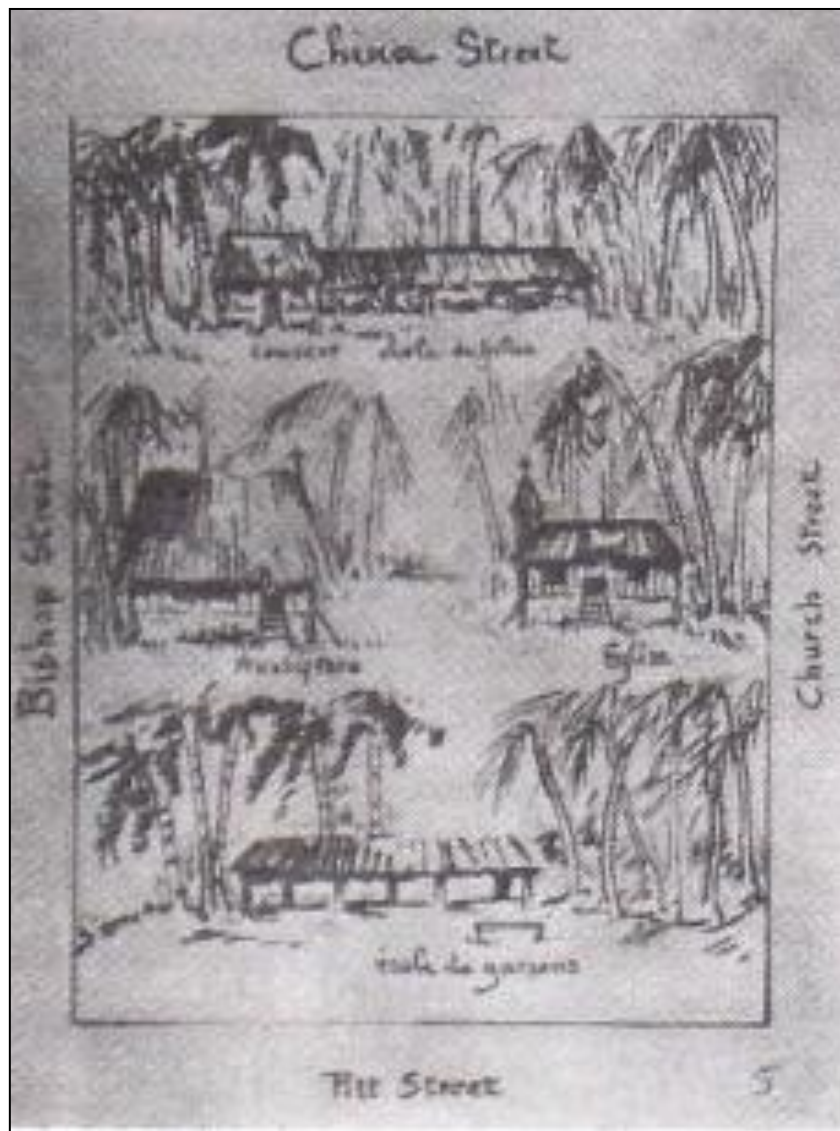
Knowledge production and education in Malaya was primitive, informal, transferable from generation to generation and focused on community needs before colonialism or in the early stage of British colonial. The ultimate purpose was to preserve the history, culture and heritage of the community and values inherited from the past. Since the arrival of Catholicism and Catholic churches, the mode and method of knowledge production have changed.

Catholic Churches and Catholic community had significant role on education and English newspaper in Malaya especially in Penang. Although British government funded or half-funded, the schools were managed by Catholic churches, with bishops and nuns serving in most teaching and administrative responsibilities and roles. The Catholic missionary process along with the religion, education and newspapers' inspiration was well-recognized and accepted by many people. In addition, the development of education and literacy boosted with the ideas of progress derived from modernity.

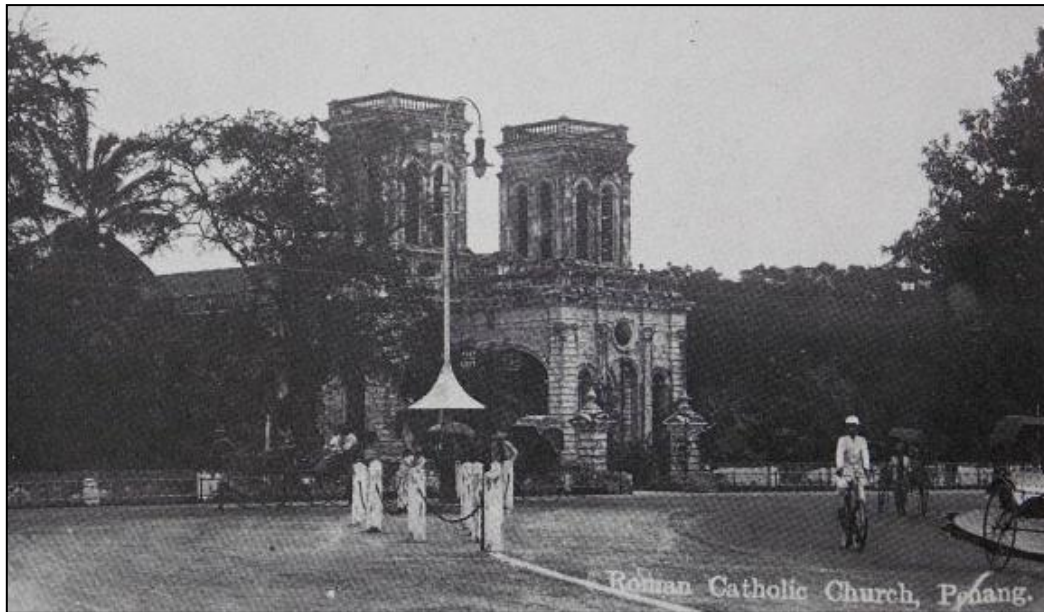
## Background

In 1786, *Bishop Arnold Garnault* who had settled in Kedah, arrived in Penang with *Francis Light*. *Bishop Arnold* and *Bishop Coude* built a chapel on *Church Street*, named *Church of the Assumption*. *Church of the Assumption* was the first Centre of Evangelisation to be established in Penang. The church was moved to a new location at *Farquhar Street* in 1860. *St George's Church* was built in 1816 on the initiative of Rev S. Hutchings, is the oldest Anglican church in South-East Asia, located on Farquhar Street. *St Paul's Church* was founded by *Rev Louis Coutier Biggs* and located at *Macalister Road*.

The Malayan Catholics were being groomed under a 'foreign' French Catholic Mission. By 1788, about 200 Malayan Portuguese community lived in 'Kampung Serani'. The word 'serani' is the colloquial form of the Malay word 'nasrani' which means Christian. Kampung Serani in Penang was located in present Argus Lane, Love Lane and Muntri Street. The Hokkien people in the early days referred to these three streets as 'Sek-lan-ni hang' and the Catholic church as 'sek-lan-ni Le-pai-tng au hang-a' (Christian Sunday Praying place)



Sketch showing the location of the *Church of the Assumption*, Penang. The original location was at *Church Street*, somewhere near to *Bishop Street*, *Pitt Street* and *China Street*, the four major streets in George Town laid out by *Francis Light*. (Photo courtesy of the Cathedral of the Assumption Church)



The church was moved to a new location at *Farquhar Street* in 1860. (Photo courtesy of the Cathedral of the Assumption Church)



New look of the Cathedral of the Assumption Church Penang. (Photo taken in May 25, 2018)

## Catholic Churches and English education

Over the hundred years from the mid-nineteenth century, primary and secondary schools started by these Brothers and Sisters mushroomed in Penang. Early English schools can be found on *Bishop Street*, *Church Street*, *Pitt Street* and *China Street*. For example, *St Francis Xavier's Free School* (Bishop Street) established by *The Church of the Assumption*, and *Penang Free School* was set up by *Rev Robert Hutchings* at *Love Lane*.

For example, the explore of the *La Salle Brothers* in Malaya started with a request of *Bishop Boucho* who respected and recognized the services of the French religious congregations “LaSallian Mission” and “LaSallian Education” in France who had the experience and competence to set up and administer schools, included the creation of ‘the Rules of the brothers of the Christian schools’, ‘The conduct of the Christian schools’ and ‘Twelve qualities of a good teacher’. Thus, the La Salle Brothers took charge of *St. Francis Xavier's Free School* and transferred the school and named as *St. Xavier's Institution* at Farquhar Street. *Sister of the Holy Infant Jesus* arrived in Penang in 1852 and took over *Pulau Tikus Convent Primary School* and *Pulau Tikus Convent*.

For these Brothers and Sisters, the primary task of the Catholic churches would be the education of the local community. They brought in the concept “little schools” with concerned with helping the school to bring the students to the virtues such as love, kind, goodness, compassion, mercy and etc. The school calendar is determined primarily by the Christian celebrations and festivals; Christmas, Good Friday and Easter Day. The medium of instruction in both the Brother Schools and Convent Schools was English that gradually replaced the vernacular, boarding and religious schools.

Here are some important milestones in the development of English education:

- In 1820s, *Bishop Boucho* from the *Church of the Assumption* opened a church school known as *St Francis Xavier's Free School* at *Bishop Street*.
- In Kampung Serani, *Father Pasqual* and his Catholic community built two Malay type premises to serve as church schools. The boy-school, beside the church, was popularly named ‘Noah’s Ark’

- The *La Salle Brothers* took charge of *St. Francis Xavier's Free School* and transferred the school from *Bishop Street* to *Farquhar Street* and name it as *St. Xavier's Institution*.
- *Rev Louis Coutier Biggs* and his wife *Katherine Biggs* established *St George's Girls' School* in 1885.
- *Hutchings Primary School* at Farquhar Street is named after *Rev Hutchings*. The school is for all, regardless of race, religion and background, aim was to provide education, food and shelter for the orphans and poor children.
- *The Penang Free School* was set up by *Rev. Hutchings* at Love Lane in 1816. The school is open to all children regardless of race or religion. Hence, it is named the *Penang Free School*.
- *Sister of the Holy Infant Jesus* came to Penang in 1852. They took in orphans, borders and day scholars in an attap house on Church Street. They took over *Pulau Tikus Convent Primary School* and *Pulau Tikus Convent*.

### **Social work and welfare**

The Catholic churches have brought ideas, knowledge and inspiration about social work, including the founding of orphanage and old folks home, providing scholarship and free and equal education for all, engaged in community building project in rural and urban poor. Example, under the *Religious Congregations Fostering Education*, *The Infant Jesus Sisters'* mission is to bring love through education and instruction to less privileged and neglected. Most of the social services provided by Catholic church have fully integrated into the local community. These ideas and knowledge provide a framework on how people should serve humanity and advocate for equality both individually and collectively.

### **Seminary College**

Seminary College was established in 1808, after the *French Mission Etrangeres de Paris* (MEP) received instruction from the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. It is known as *College General*, Penang because of the international make-up of its students. In

2008, College General celebrated its 200th year in Penang. Since its inception, it has produced about 1000 priests.

### **Malay Grammar and Malay Bible translation**

Malay grammar and Malay bible translation efforts was led by Rev S. Hutchings. Hutchings was also a Malay scholar and he has compiled and wrote the first book on Malay grammar, in addition to several elementary text-books and a dictionary mainly for school use. He founded the Auxiliary Bible Society and translated the New Testament into Malay language.

### **English Newspapers**

Penang was the birthplace for many English newspapers, since colonialism and witnessed the ups and downs of many newspapers. The purpose of English language newspapers as improving communication and providing news. The importance of nationalism, nation building and ethnicity are still invisible and yet to be explored.

*The Prince of Wales Island Gazette (PWIG)* was first published somewhere along *Argus Lane* in 1807. Penang first independent English language newspaper, *The Pinang Argus* was published in 1867, named after *Argus Lane*. *Argus Lane*, a short and little lane behind the *Church of the Assumption* (Farquhar Street). *Argus Lane* was built when the Eurasian community moved their Catholic Church from *Church Street* to *Argus Lane*. One of the houses in *Argus Lane* was named Argus House, was where *The Pinang Argus* was published. The earliest English newspapers were established and started in Pitt Street, Argus Lane and Weld Quay.

Some people believe that the *Cathedral of the Assumption Church Penang* and the Catholic community in *Argus Lane* has profoundly influence the establishment of English language newspapers in Penang, particularly *The Pinang Argus*, *Pinang Register and Miscellany*, *The Pinang Gazette*, *Straits Echo* and *The Star*.

### **Heritage and value**

In Penang, the most significant historic buildings in towns in *Pitt Street*, *Bishop Street* and *Church Street* and *China Street* are predominantly churches, cathedrals and Catholic schools. The Catholic churches had vital influence in developing the sense of community to the Catholic community. Standards, guidelines and norms of society were set by the Catholic churches which had a major role in Catholic family. Values based on the belief that God and

religion is involved in the affairs of humankind. Although this influence is fading it is still an important element for the Catholic community.

### **Modernity, English Literacy and the Concept of Progress**

In the nineteenth century, the theory of progress reached its high point in the West. It was, however, reformulated in a different climate, marked by industrial modernization, scientific positivism, evolutionism, and the appearance of the great historicist theories (Benoist, 2008, p13). Public schooling was slowly introduced not by colonial ruler, but the religious on the concept of mass schooling and later mass literacy.

In the colonialism and the late imperialism period, schooling system attached the ideas of modernity. Modernity promotes the ideas that have been influence by the industrial revolution. The education system structured for the public who need to know about reading and writing to serve as a need of colonial economy.

The colonizers also imposed an image of their own patterns of producing knowledge and meaning. At first, they placed these patterns far out of reach of the dominated. Later, they taught them in a partial and selective ways, to co-opt some of the dominated into their own power institutions. The European culture was made seductive: it gave access to power. After all, beyond repression, the main instrument of all power is its. Cultural Europeanisation was transformed into an aspiration (Quijano, 2007, p169).

Francis Light is an important figure in the discourse of colonial history of northern Malaya. Initially, Light's plans centered in the southern Thai region of Thalang but the turbulent geo-politics that forced him to reconsider in looking for a strategic naval and trade base, Light approached the Kedah Sultanate and finally decided on Penang. (Simmonds, 1963).

This marked the beginning of British colonization of Penang which created a conducive environment for English literacy and English media literacy. The adoption of the language grew with the efforts of the missionary church and officers like Light. With Penang's advantageous geographical location of being the central port of entry, the convergence of trade and finance also meant the entry of knowledge and expertise from different countries to Penang.



Through this development, the church became part of the initiative in the establishment of Penang to provide secular education to the locals. This schooling system promoted not only literacy improvement, but also the culture of the British colonial to the locals. The church and missionary schools like the Penang Free School served as a cultural production institute, developing the literacy level. Ooi (2015) also pointed out that, other than literacy, there are more pragmatic developments from these entities:

Beneficiaries of English-medium education possessed far greater career opportunities. The academically inclined could, through scholarships or wealthy backgrounds, pursue tertiary education to qualify as professionals (doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects). Others served as clerks in the colonial bureaucracy, Western businesses, banks, agency houses, trading companies, shipping lines, insurance and legal firms. English school graduates even in clerical positions could live reasonably comfortably and enjoy respectability within their own community as well as the wider colonial society. Their educational background transformed English school graduates into Anglophiles.

Language, education and cultural institution have integrated as players in an encouragement of the local community to mapping them self together. The encouragement of the cultural institution on education system would have an indirect buster for the use of language. Eventually, it will encourage the literacy rate. These efforts can be seen as a prerequisite of an imagined community. As every member in the society might not know their counterpart but, with the same language they use would formulated a sense of community (Anderson, 1991). In the effort of these cultural institution, with intact of the western context, it creates a common ground of significant communities that can nurture with English media literacy.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to conclude that Catholic Church had a vital contribution to knowledge production and dissemination in local community. They had successfully transferred of Catholic concept of knowledge and inspiration, including the founding of orphanage and old folks' home, providing scholarship and free and equal education for all, engaged in

community building project in rural and urban poor. They also practiced a holistic education that embracing equality of opportunity and promoting mutual understanding and respect.

As an institution of cultural and knowledge production, it is always crucial to conceptualize the ideas and meanings of the English education and literacy dissemination in the colonial society. The ideas of progress remained intact in British colonial modernism and imaginary community and emerged as significant regional identity in peninsular Malaya.

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