

CHRISTIANIZATION IN SABAH AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES: A HISTORICAL STUDY¹

by
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Background

Islam and Christianity arrived in Sabah in the 1380s and in 1880s respectively.² Sabah before and during this time was covered with dense forest. As late as the mid-1960s, as many as 85 per cent of the people of Sabah lived in the interior.³ In the years prior to the introduction of Islam and Christianity, the majority of indigenous Sabahan were pagans⁴ who practised animism; they believed in spirits and invisible beings, including both good and evil spirits. They believed that these invisible beings were everywhere: in their

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² This has been proven with the discovery of a document written in Jawi, in the Idahan language in the late 1380s at the Kinabatangan River. Among others, the document narrates that an Idahan by the name of Abdullah embraced Islam. See Tom Harrisson and Barbara Harrisson, *The Prehistory of Sabah*, Kota Kinabalu: Sabah Society, 1971, p. 229. On the other hand, Christianity gained a foothold with the arrival of Westerners in Sabah in the nineteenth century. Education for the Muslim indigenous people and the Malay Muslims predated Christian missionary education with the appointment of Sheik Abdul Dalunan as chaplain and school teacher at Elopura (now Sandakan) by William Treacher, the first governor of North Borneo (now Sabah). His appointment was formalized upon the endorsement of the dignitaries around Sandakan Bay. Treacher insisted that Imam Sheik Abdul Dalunan start his lessons to youngsters and speed up the building of a mosque. To fulfil Treacher's request, the North Borneo Chartered Company (NBCC) awarded a piece of land and some financial aid. Treacher himself donated money for the construction of the mosque. However, this effort did not bear fruit and finally came to an end as the Muslims lost their fervour to propagate Islam and as Sandakan was too far from Mecca. In 1886, William Pryer, said to be the founder of Sandakan, requested the Chinese and the Muslims to establish a school but his wish was also in vain. Education in Sandakan only got off the ground when Father Byron, a Catholic missionary, opened a small school in August 1887. This effort was complemented when the Revd W. H. Elton, the first Anglican Protestant missionary to have reached Sandakan, in 1888, opened a school two months later with the enrolment of a Chinese student. See K. G. Tregonning, *A History of Modern Sabah, 1881–1963*, 2nd edn, Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967, pp. 173–4.

³ Lee Yong Leng, *Sabah: Satu Kajian Geografi Petempatan*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1982, p. 128.

⁴ The term 'pagan' refers to those who do not profess the Islamic faith, Christianity, or any other religion. The term has been used since the beginnings of the Greeco-Roman Church to refer to people who did not adhere to the teachings of Christianity and those who did not worship the true God. It was also used to refer to Muslims during the Crusades. Nowadays, the term refers to anyone who does not worship God as practised by Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others (*Ensiklopedi Indonesia*, Jilid 5, Jakarta: Penerbitan An Buku, 1984, p. 2504). From an anthropological perspective, the term 'pagan' was normally used by the Roman army to insult the public. At the beginning of Christianity, the church used the term *miles christi* for 'the army of Christ' to those who followed Christianity and the term *paganus* to those who had not yet converted. However, in North Borneo, the word pagan does not carry any degrading connotation, but refers to those without any religion, especially those who do not adhere to Islam and Christianity. See Owen Rutter, *The Pagans of North Borneo*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 30.

houses, in their place of work (such as farms), near rivers, and along pathways.⁵

Such environmental conditions naturally gave rise to communal living in long-houses and to dependence on forest resources, as well as to occupations such as hunting-gathering and subsistence and nomadic farming. Because of the nature of their life style, the health of these indigenous people was generally poor. They were often afflicted with skin ailments, malaria, beri-beri, chickenpox, tuberculosis, leprosy, pneumonia, dysentery, fever, and ankylostomiasis.⁶ According to Shirley Lees, before the coming of Christianity (which she calls the Sidang Injil Borneo, SIB), the indigenous people of Sabah (and also Sarawak) spent much of their time drinking the intoxicating *tapai*, a type of rice wine.⁷ No educational opportunities were open to them, and the literacy rate was very low: 6.9 per cent in 1921, 9.0 per cent in 1931, and 11.7 per cent in 1951.⁸ This situation provided a fertile ground for the introduction and spread of Islam and Christianity among a people who had no formal religion,⁹ as well as a way of helping them improve their health and living conditions. This paper thus attempts to discuss the role and contribution of Christian missionaries to the beliefs, daily life, land ownership, health, and education of the indigenous people of Sabah, in particular those who lived in the interior.¹⁰

While few in-depth studies have been carried out on the subject, passing references to the role of missionaries in Sabah occur in the writings of Shirley Lees and her husband Bill,¹¹ Sabihah Osman,¹² Mohd Nor bin Long,¹³ K. M. George,¹⁴ and John

⁵ Interview with Jimmy Ojilim Assam, Vice President of PCS at the PCS Headquarters, Kudat, 29 April 2002.

⁶ Medical Report by James H. Walker, Chief Medical Officer of North Borneo (now Sabah), that had its headquarters in Sandakan. See *The British North Borneo Herald and Official Gazette* (hereafter *BNBH*), 1 March 1883, p. 15. See also Tregonning, *A History of Modern Sabah*, p. 155; Ivon Polunin, 'The Murut of North Borneo and Their Declining Population', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 53(3), 1959, pp. 312–21, and 'Depopulation Among the Murut of North Borneo', *Proceedings of the 5th International Congress of Plant Molecular Biology*, Singapore, 1985, pp. 240–52; J. B. Crain, 'Murut Depopulation and the Sipitang Lun Dayeh', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 45 (2), 1975, pp. 110–19.

⁷ Shirley P. Lees, *Drunk Before Dawn*, Sevenoaks, Kent: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1979, back cover.

⁸ L. W. Jones, *North Borneo: Report on the Census of Population* (taken on 10 August 1960), Kuching: Government Printing Office, p. 80.

⁹ In this paper, the writer shall refer to several Christian denominations in Sabah, such as Catholic, Anglican, Borneo Evangelical Mission, Seventh Day Adventist, and others. This research was carried out selectively (not in the whole of Sabah) because of the constraints of time and geography. The writer also uses the word missionary and evangelist interchangeably.

¹⁰ However, due to the amount of information and space constraints, the writer attempts to focus on indigenous societies in particular areas, such as the Rungus of Kudat and other ethnic groups found in the interior of Sandakan and Beaufort. The study is based upon church sources, interviews with selected individuals, pink files in the Sabah Archive, and secondary resources accepted as academic studies written by historians and Christian missionaries.

¹¹ Lees, *Drunk Before Dawn*. Other than this, she wrote *Jungle Fire*, London: Oliphants, 1964, and, with her husband Bill, *Is it Sacrifice? Experiencing Mission Revival in Borneo*, Singapore: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1987. These books are about the Sidang Injil Borneo church.

¹² Sabihah Osman, 'Kegiatan Mubaligh Kristian dalam Pendidikan Bumiputera Sabah sehingga 1941', *Sumber*, 9, 1995, pp. 25–34.

¹³ Mohd Nor bin Long, *Perkembangan Pelajaran di Sabah*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1978.

¹⁴ K. M. George, 'Historical Development of Education', in Anwar Sullivan and Cecelia Leong (eds.), *Commemorative History of Sabah, 1881–1981*, Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nan Yang Sdn Bhd, 1981, pp. 467–541.

Rooney.¹⁵ Lees' writings are narrations of her experiences with her husband during their stay in Sabah, especially about the SIB. According to Lees, the arrival of the SIB in Sabah and Sarawak, introduced by Frank Davidson,¹⁶ was linked to the dawn that lit up the life of the indigenous societies of Sabah and Sarawak. For fourteen years, she and her husband, who was also a medical doctor, lived among the Tagal people in Sabah.¹⁷ Lees maintains that the establishment of the SIB Church in Kota Kinabalu in November 1974,¹⁸ the first SIB in Sabah,¹⁹ drastically changed the lives of the people. She also notes that this denomination received support from the state government.

Sabihah Osman discusses the involvement of Christian missionaries in the education of indigenous Sabahans up until 1941, especially the role of Christian missionaries in the development of education at the time of the North Borneo Chartered Company (NBCC). He deals specifically with the role of Catholic missionaries in the creation of an indigenous Christian society, and the development of an indigenous intelligentsia by the time of Sabah's independence as a state of Malaysia. Sabihah also briefly discusses church lands.

Mohd Nor bin Long gives a brief overview of the development of education in Sabah in three periods of governance: at the time of the NBCC, when Sabah was a British Colony, and at the point of entry of Sabah into the Federation of Malaysia. Based on the *North Borneo Annual Report on the Education Department in 1950*, he explains that not only were missionaries given a great deal of power in managing the educational system in Sabah, they were also involved in the administration of that system, including the provision of financial resources, physical development, and the introduction of the

¹⁵ John Rooney, *Khabar Gembira: A History of the Catholic Church in East Malaysia and Brunei, 1880–1976*, London: Burns and Oates Ltd. and Kill Hill Missionaries, 1981.

¹⁶ Davidson was an Anglican priest from England. Together with two Australians, Hudson Southwell, a Brethren, and Carey Tolley, a Baptist, he started his evangelical work in Sarawak in May 1928. In September, the three men formed the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB). All had received training at the Bible Training Institute in Melbourne (which by 1926 was to become one of the largest Bible institutes in Australia) sometime in 1922. Prior to setting up the SIB in 1928, they had pioneered the Borneo Evangelical Mission (BEM) in Australia in 1927. This mission was expressly for the evangelization of the two states of Sabah and Sarawak, at that time known as Borneo. See Hudson Southwell, *Uncharted Waters*, Calgary, Canada: Astana Publishing, pp. 23, 39, 1999; Lees, *Drunk Before Dawn*, pp. 14, 24–9; and Raphael Buin, 'Gereja Sidang Injil Borneo di Sabah ke Arah Pertumbuhan Jemaat', *Kertas Kajian Seminari Teologi Sabah, Kota Kinabalu*, 1993, p. 10.

¹⁷ Lees, *Drunk Before Dawn*, p. 9.

¹⁸ However, notes in Fail PPP/SB 57/50, Sabah Evangelical Mission, Jilid II, state that the SIB church was registered on 2 August 1950 under the name The Borneo Christian Independent Evangelist Association, which had its headquarters on 4.5 acres of land in Tuaran. This land was registered under the name of three women trustees: Chin Nyen Yin of Jesselton, and Kong Fu Ying and Khong Sheung Ching of Tuaran. Its committee comprised Kong Sheung Ching as chairman, Kong Fu Ying, a trader, as secretary, Meu Chin Fatt, the land owner, as treasurer, and Chung Yun Tshoi, a goldsmith, as auditor. Prior to this, the Sabah SIB and Sarawak SIB were both administered from their headquarters in Lawas, Sarawak. The administration of the SIB was moved from Tuaran to Kota Kinabalu, at the former BCCM church on Bukit Bendera, until 1974 to facilitate administration as well as to attract more urban followers. In early 1978, the administrative centre moved to the SIB building at Kepyayan. Later, in 1992, it moved to Wisma SIB at Jalan Saga, Likas, Kota Kinabalu, which is the headquarters of the SIB church in Sabah. See Lees, *Drunk Before Dawn*, p. 209 and Fail PPP/SB 57/50, Sabah Evangelical Mission, Jilid II. Information obtained from Fail PPP/SB 57/50 would seem to be more accurate since the earliest SIB evangelical works were carried out among the Kampung Parad community of Ulu Tuaran.

¹⁹ The SIB church was established somewhat late even though the spread of the SIB in Sabah had begun in 1937 by the Revd Stanford Young among the Dusun community of Kampung Parad, Ulu Tuaran.; Lees, *Drunk Before Dawn*, p. 27, and Buin, 'Gereja Sidang Injil Borneo di Sabah', p. 14.

curriculum.²⁰ According to Mohd Nor, the churches 'always made the effort to propagate their faith through their missionaries and other Christian missionary institutions'.²¹

The missionaries were fully aware that a knowledge of the mother tongue—Dusun—was a key factor in the propagation of Christianity. The Dusun language was thus taught at Christian mission schools and the missionaries also translated Christian books into this language.²² The NBCC also encouraged Christian missionary bodies to train local children to read, count and write, thus enabling them to acquire basic literacy. Undoubtedly, without the activities of missionaries, the development of education in Sabah, especially before the Second World War, would have developed even more slowly than it did.²³

The development of education in Sabah has also been discussed by K. M. George, who divides it into eight phases; before 1881, 1881–1900, 1900–20, 1920–40, during the Japanese Occupation (1942–5), during the British Military Administration (1945–6), during the colonial period (1946–63), and in the years between 1963 and 1981. His discussion reveals the major roles played by the Christian missionaries in the progress of education through the Catholic and Anglican mission schools, the pioneers of educational development in Sabah.²⁴

John Rooney's writings focus specifically on the role of the Catholic Church in Sabah, Sarawak, and Brunei in the period 1880–1976, especially its role in educating indigenous communities. As a former Catholic missionary in Sabah (1959–69),²⁵ Rooney was able to utilize primary sources related to the Catholic Church, as well as the personal records of his colleagues. However, his study concentrates more on Sarawak than on Sabah and Brunei.

The Establishment of Christianity in Sabah

There are no fewer than 30 Christian denominations²⁶ in Sabah and these can be divided into three categories: major, medium, and minor.²⁷ Established between 1850 and 1937, the major denominations are Catholic, Anglican, Basel Christian Church of Malaysia (BCCM), Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), Protestant Church in Sabah, and Church of the True Jesus of Sabah. Each denomination has a number of churches spread throughout Sabah, extending from the capital city of Kota Kinabalu to remote villages such as Tomani, Nabawan, and on Banggi Island. Widespread distribution of these churches, as well as ongoing church activities, strengthened by missionary work, are the main reasons why these denominations continue to be attractive and are able to maintain the loyalty of their congregations.

²⁰ Mohd Nor, *Perkembangan Pelajaran di Sabah*, p. 25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²⁴ George, 'Historical Development of Education', pp. 467–541.

²⁵ Rooney, *Khabar Gembira*, p. xiii. He was also Headmaster of St. Xavier Secondary School, Keningau, from 1 January to 31 December 1963.

²⁶ In this paper, the terms 'denomination', 'church', and 'mission' are used interchangeably.

²⁷ Mat Zin bin Mat Kib, *Kristian di Sabah, 1881–1994*, Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan, 2003, p. 54.

Each of these denominations has its own history in Sabah.²⁸ The Anglican Church was the pioneer. In 1850, the Anglican Cathedral of St Saviour was built in Labuan, with Francis McDougall, also a medical doctor, as its first bishop.²⁹ According to Reverend William Poilis (1981),³⁰ the Catholics then tried to establish a church in Labuan in 1855 under the auspices of a Monsignor Jackson, but when it did not get enough support, he and Farther Kilti moved to Papar where Jackson was appointed head of the mission there.

The BCCM started its mission in Sabah with the arrival of a group of Chinese Basel Christians in Kudat in 1882, brought in by the Reverend Rudolph Leschler, who recruited labourers from Southern China to meet the demand for agricultural labour.³¹ This marked the beginning of Chinese immigration in Sabah. Similarly, the PCS was started in Kudat in 1886 by a group of Hakka Chinese. When they arrived at Lausan in Kudat, their missionary activities were facilitated by the Basel Protestant priest Leschler who resided in China.³² His work was continued by the Revd Hanz Bienz from Zurich, Switzerland,³³ who arrived at Kudat at the end of 1949. The name Protestant Church in Sabah was also used by Beinz to register the Basel Church of Borneo in 1952.

The SDA had its roots in Sandakan in the year 1920, propagated by an American, Gus Youngburg. Sandakan was also the site of the beginning of the True Jesus Church in 1920, founded by a Chinese by the name of Lee Siak Lin. Stanford Young, a priest,³⁴ introduced the SIB in Sabah in 1937 and chose the Dusun ethnic group of Kampung Parad (now Nabalu) in Ulu Tuaran as his target community. At that time, almost all Dusuns were pagans. Initially, Young faced difficulties in spreading the gospel to the community because most of them were illiterate and because he was not himself fluent in the Dusun language. However, these problems were overcome when he was able to attract and appoint some youths (for example, Gilingan dan Rantian) to interpret the Bible from Malay to Dusun.³⁵

These major denominations, especially the BCCM, the Church of the True Jesus, and the PCS, had their roots in China, where a Jesuit Christian missionary focus had developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries after China was defeated in the Opium Wars of 1839–42 and 1856–60.³⁶

²⁸ For further information and discussion, see *Ibid.*, pp. 54–70.

²⁹ He was from Kuching Sarawak. See Graham Saunders, *Bishops and Brookes: The Anglican Mission and the Brooke Raj in Sarawak 1848–1941*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 11–12.

³⁰ William Poilis, *A Popular History of the Catholic Church in Sabah*, Kota Kinabalu: Diocese of Kota Kinabalu, 1981.

³¹ *BNBH*, 1 March 1883. See also Revd Hanz Bienz, 'The Early History of the Protestant Church of Sabah', unpublished paper, Switzerland, 1990, p. 1. The Hanz Beinz articles were his daily notes and personal documents that confirmed his first arrival in Sabah and the Christian mission.

³² Sermon during silver jubilee thanksgiving given by the Revd Tong Fat Dung, Chairman of the Publications Committee and Silver Jubilee Thanksgiving Service, on 28 November 1977, as recorded in *P. C. S. Silver Jubilee Souvenir 1952–1977*, Kudat: Protestant Church in Sabah, 1978, p. 6.

³³ *P. C. S. Silver Jubilee Souvenir*, p. 96.

³⁴ He arrived in Sarawak in 1935 and in Sabah in 1938. He was more popularly known as Pendeta (Revd) Tuan Yang among the indigenous people. He was also known for his generosity; he donated funds during the early days of the SIB. See Lees, *Drunk Before Dawn*, p. 63, and Biun, 'Gereja Sidang Injil Borneo di Sabah', p. 14.

³⁵ Biun, 'Gereja Sidang Injil Borneo di Sabah', p. 15.

³⁶ Josef L. Altholz, *The Churches in the Nineteenth Century*, Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company: 1967, pp. 217–18.

Because of the difficulty of penetrating the interior terrain, Christianity in Sabah was initially concentrated in coastal centres such as Labuan, Papar, Kudat, and Sandakan; the latter was also the earliest NBCC administrative centre. From these centres, missionaries from each denomination then started carrying out their activities in the interior, targeting the indigenous people. At that time, as mentioned above, the people of Sabah, especially those living in the interior, were almost all pagans who practised animism. Their standard of living was very low while their settlements were haphazard. With the coming of Christianity, the lives of these people were to improve.

The Christian Missions and Community Development in Sabah

The task of propagating Christianity was entrusted to the church management as well as its missionaries who held various ranks and titles: monsignor, bishop, reverend, father, pastor, sister, padre, catechist, shepherd, elder and deacon/deaconess.³⁷ They carried out their work according to an established hierarchy, from head offices that were mostly situated in Kota Kinabalu (except the main office of PCS and the Catholic Bishop of Keningau), to parochial, chapel, and outstation posts situated deep in the interior so that the locals could utilize the churches and practise Christianity as a way of life.

Typical of missionaries in other parts of the world, the Christian missionaries in Sabah were prepared to live among the local people and to assimilate with them. They practised the norms of the local communities: they ate and drank as did the locals, they adopted local dress, and they learned the local language.³⁸ Some even changed their names to local ones, for example, Pastor Trevor White who became Pendeta Asang.³⁹ Even though these missionaries came from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and other countries, the locals, especially the Rungus, did not view them as outsiders,⁴⁰ because they were able to assimilate into their new environment with ease. Their very presence, coupled with a shepherdly and caring attitude, facilitated the teaching of the Bible, which has among its basic tenets a belief that Jesus is the loving protector/saviour.⁴¹ The indigenous people eventually came to accept these missionaries as their 'protectors' and 'saviours' in respect not only to their faith but also their culture, daily life, education, health, and hygiene.

The primary role and contribution of Christian missionaries in the development of local communities in Sabah was education, facilitated both through churches⁴² as well as

³⁷ The term 'monsignor' is only used by the Catholic denomination, whereas 'bishop' and 'father' are used by both Catholics and Anglicans. The term 'Reverend' is used by the Catholics and the BCCM; 'Pastor' by the SDA, Catholics and the BCCM; while 'brother' and 'sister' are only used by the Catholics and the BCCM. 'Catechist' is used by the Catholics; 'shepherd' by the Catholics, Anglicans, SIB, and PCS, and 'elder' by the BCCM. The term 'pastor' and 'padre' are used by all denominations, while 'deacon' and 'deaconess' are used only by the True Jesus Church.

³⁸ Interview with Jimmy Ojilim Assam.

³⁹ Asang means 'man of light'. See Peter Elliott, *Asang: The Story of Trevor White and the Dusuns of Sabah*, Sarawak: Leong's Instant Print Service, 1997, p. i.

⁴⁰ Interview with Jimmy Ojilim Assam.

⁴¹ Nathaniel Micklem, *The Creed of a Christian*, London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1940, Ch. XIV 'The Gospel Related to Life', pp. 122–8.

⁴² For example, Theological College, Lay Training School, Kota Kinabalu Bible Centre, and the Sabah Theological Seminary. See Mat Zin, *Kristian di Sabah 1881–1994*, pp. 148–54. Other examples include the Sabbath School by the SDA Church and the Sunday School by the True Jesus Church. These schools teach bible knowledge to children.

formal educational institutions, especially schools.⁴³ Education thus formed the basis of change. The duty to educate fell on the shoulders of the missionaries, especially those who were willing to live with their followers in the interior. Even though the curriculum of the mission schools followed the guidelines laid down by the Ministry of Education, the appointment of administrative staff, especially the principal or headmaster, was usually endorsed by a board of trustees.

The mission schools in Sabah have contributed greatly towards the development of the state. During a speech to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the All Saints Secondary School in Kota Kinabalu, Joseph Pairin Kitingan, then Chief Minister of Sabah, stated that the school had produced many leaders of a high calibre who have contributed towards the social, economic, and political development of Sabah. Many well-known political figures, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and government officers were products of the school.⁴⁴ The Department of Education in Sabah has also acknowledged the contribution of these mission schools.⁴⁵ In 1973, Omar Mohd Hashim, then Director of the Department of Education, said that he was impressed with the efforts of missionary bodies in taking the initiative to spread education in Sabah. The success of the mission schools reflected their dedication, diligence, and faith in the concept of knowledge dispersal to society.⁴⁶

The Christian mission schools were highly successful in attracting the children of the local people whose families could see the benefits of literacy. As a result, the mission schools were able to provide not only a solid educational foundation but to produce the first generation of indigenous Christians, paving the way for the formation of a progressive Christian intelligentsia in the early years of Sabah's independence.⁴⁷ Among the prominent leaders who benefited from a missionary education at that time were James Peter Ongkili (Sekolah Menengah St. Francis Xavier, Keningau and Sekolah Menengah La Salle), Fred Sinidol (Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan Sacred Heart, Kota Kinabalu), Clarence Mansul (Sekolah Menengah La Salle, Kota Kinabalu), Conrad Mojuntin (Sekolah Menengah La Salle, Kota Kinabalu), Herman Luping, Peter Mojuntin, G. S. Sundang, and Jintol Mogunting.⁴⁸

At least two former Heads of State and five former Chief Ministers have studied in Christian mission schools. The late Tun Datu Haji Mustapha Harun (former Chief Minister and Head of State) and the late Tun Ahmad Koroh (former Head of State) had stints at mission schools (St. James School at Kudat and the All Saints Secondary School in Kota Kinabalu respectively). The five Chief Ministers were/are the late Tun Datu Haji Mustapha Harun, the late Donald Stephens (Sacred Heart School), Joseph Pairin

⁴³ Denominations, especially Catholic, Anglican, BCCM, The True Jesus Church, and SDA have preschools and primary and secondary schools almost all over Sabah. See also Mohd Nor, *Perkembangan Pelajaran di Sabah*, pp. 14, 24–5.

⁴⁴ *The Saint '93, Anniversary 1903–1993*, Kota Kinabalu: Capital Associates (S) Sdn Bhd, p. 7.

⁴⁵ School Visitors' Report in G. S. O No. 1023–30, North Borneo Central Archive (NBCA), 66.

⁴⁶ Speech by Omar Mohd Hashim, Director of the Sabah Education Department, during the Golden Jubilee Ceremony at St. Francis Convent Secondary School, Kota Kinabalu, on 1 October 1973, in Omar Mohd Hashim, *Pendidikan: Persoalan, Penyelesaian dan Harapan*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka: 1993, p. 25.

⁴⁷ In 1925, the School Visitors' Committee also reported that the missionary schools were educational assets because these schools were able to provide quality education to the indigenous people. G. S. O. No. 04093, p. 51 in NBCA 66. See also Sabihah, 'Kegiatan Mubaligh Kristian', p. 32.

⁴⁸ Interview with Ben Stephens and Datuk Harris Mohd Salleh, the former Chief Minister of Sabah. See also Sabihah, 'Kegiatan Mubaligh Kristian', p. 32.

Kitingan,⁴⁹ Peter Lo Su Yin (Sekolah Menengah St. Mary, Sandakan), Bernard G. Dompok (La Salle Secondary School), and Chong Kah Kiat (St. James School, Kudat and All Saints Secondary School, Kota Kinabalu).

Other than those mentioned above, the Sabah Primary Training School and the Sabah Adventist Secondary School (both in Tamparuli), which were founded in 1939 by the SDA, also produced political figures as well as high-ranking government officers in Sabah. Among these people are George Sangkim, Bugie Galadam, Buja Gumbilai, Payar Juman, Louis Rampas, Ariffin Gadait, Libin Kutup, and Charles Gaban.⁵⁰ The PCS denomination, which had its head office in Kudat, also played a significant educational role as it built hostels for pupils from the interior of Sabah to enable them to attend schools in and around Kudat. These PCS hostels produced political leaders and high-ranking government officers, such as Matius Majihi, Markos Majihi, Atong Mangabis, Joe Ojihi, and James Tahanji Sumbing.⁵¹

The political leaders and government officers mentioned above all came from poor families. After they were educated by these mission schools and once they became successful, they were able to escape from the shackles of poverty and move into the ranks of the middle-class. Some even became millionaires.

All this happened because the NBCC concentrated on the establishment of the Christian missionary schools. In contrast, vernacular and Islamic schools were never given the same attention. The first government school in Labuan, Sekolah Kebangsaan Karupang, was built in 1936. This school produced one of the former Chief Ministers of Sabah, Harris Mohd. Salleh.⁵²

The missionaries, by assimilating with the local peoples, were able to contribute more than just religion. Indeed, in their initial contacts with the indigenous peoples, they did not project themselves as missionaries. They were aware that the indigenous communities could not accept Christianity if they were burdened with all the teachings of the Bible. Instead, they spread their message by other means. A case in point was the Rungus of Kudat.⁵³ Before the arrival of the Christian missionaries, the Rungus were small-time nomadic farmers who planted maize and hill paddy using the *tugal* method, a method whereby holes were made in the ground with sharp wooden spikes before rice or corn seeds were placed in them to be germinated. They were afraid to dig holes to plant paddy because they believed that digging holes was only for the burial of the dead. They were also afraid to farm in extensive or swampy areas because they believed these places were haunted.

When the German, Austrian, and Swiss Christian missionaries came and lived among them, these missionaries planted paddy on wide expanses of land and also dug holes to plant rubber trees (in Lajong) and coconuts (in Kudat). They 'trained' the Runus to limit their drinking to certain times so that any drunkenness would not affect their health as well as farm productivity.

⁴⁹ He was an alumni of the Holy Trinity School, Tawau, and the St. Mary Sandakan Secondary School. *Personalities of Sabah*, n. p., n. d., p. 15.

⁵⁰ Interview with Madam Jupitah Gaban, Director of the Women and Children's Ministry, Sabah SDA Church, 6 May 2002, at the SDA headquarters in Tamparuli.

⁵¹ Interview with Jimmy Ojilim Assam.

⁵² Paul Raffaele, *Harris Salleh of Sabah*, Hong Kong: Condor Publishing, 1986, p. 24.

⁵³ Interview with Jimmy Ojilim Assam.

Eventually, these missionary efforts were successful in eroding the animistic beliefs of the Rungus. The missionaries introduced a new way of life and changed their faith to teachings based on the Bible. The padres brought medicine and treated the local people who were sick with malaria, and bandaged those who were wounded, especially those injured doing farm work. This was a revelation and, naturally enough, the padres came to be viewed as protectors and saviours. The padres did not only change their beliefs, but also reorganized the Rungus in aspects of land ownership and settlement.

When the Hakka Chinese arrived in Kudat in 1882,⁵⁴ they became involved in agriculture since large areas of plantation had been opened up for the economic benefit of the NBCC. The Hakka Chinese opened up plantations in areas where the indigenous people lived and these people were forced to migrate further into the interior. For instance, the Rungus were the original settlers at Tomborongus but they moved out when the Hakka Chinese moved in. When the padres came to live with the Rungus and got involved in their agriculture, the padres introduced the use of wooden pegs to mark boundaries. This was the beginning of land ownership among the Rungus, a system which has survived to this day.

The padres caused a chain of reaction in the development of the Rungus people. Once they owned a piece of agriculture land, they were asked to fence it against damage by animals. Thus begun the dismantling of the Rungus longhouse tradition. The padres then asked them to build their own house on their own land. Once these houses were erected separately, the Rungus were further inculcated with hygienic practices, such as the proper construction of lavatories.

With the help and cooperation of a number of supporting bodies, the Catholic church was able to contribute effective health services to the indigenous people in the interiors in the mid-nineteenth century, at a time when most of the indigenous people in the interiors of Sabah suffered from either beri-beri, tuberculosis, dengue, dysentery, or malaria. Medical services were managed by the White Sisters, Blue Sisters, Daughters of St. Paul, the Franciscan Sisters, and the Woman's League. These bodies sponsored social, welfare, educational, health, and economic activities.

The presence of medical officers, who also functioned as missionaries, indirectly helped the spread and acceptance of Christianity among the people of the interior, especially the Muruts and Dusun-Kadazan of Beaufort and Murok. In addition, many of the missionaries sent to those places had some knowledge of modern medicine. In 1916, Dr Campbell, together with his wife and three children served as the medical officer in the Beaufort Group of Estates.⁵⁵ At the same time, he succeeded in converting the Muruts in that region to Christianity. In 1967, a doctor-cum-Christian missionary, Dr G. Christopher Willis, opened up a clinic at Murok, a village situated 86 miles from Sandakan via the Labuk Road.⁵⁶ In January 1967, Dr Paul Swagemakers from Holland volunteered his services to the people of Tambunan and Penampang who were mostly Christians. In the interior, dispensaries set up by the Catholic and the PCS further improved medical facilities.

⁵⁴ For further information, see *BNBH*, 1 September 1884 and 1 October 1887.

⁵⁵ *BNBH*, 1 February 1932; *Sunday Daily Express*, 12 September 1999.

⁵⁶ *BCCM Information*, 7(3), 1988, p. 9, and Chong Fui Yung, 'History of Christian Missions of the Basel Christian Church of Malaysia', unpublished paper, Singapore Bible College, 1978, p. 16.

People in the interior who chose to come to the dispensaries for medical services were attended to by the Catholic nuns. In 1939, the sisters were in the areas of Toboh-Tambunan and Penampang to provide treatment to the sick. Later, in 1966, a dispensary was set up at Bundu Tuhan. The sisters did not limit themselves to providing health services. They also visited the sick in villages and taught hygiene, child care, and house-keeping, including good nutrition.⁵⁷

The BCCM contributed to an improvement in health by supplying clean piped water. Water from the mountains was channelled to Murut villages in the Pensiangan district, replacing the earlier silted water. The BCCM believed that the hardships faced by the Murut were due to traditions before the arrival of Christianity.⁵⁸ The Basel church also used the longhouses to conduct services. Besides the setting up of churches, the Basel church also focused its attention on uplifting the standard of living of the people in the interior.⁵⁹

The PCS also developed the Rungus community with the setting up of its mission schools in 1965. Three schools were built, one each in Lajong, Tinangol, and Ludong. Each had two teachers. In 1966, the PCS church also set up the Home Science School at Tinangol. The number of students in this school, however, was limited to twenty at a time.⁶⁰ They were given lessons in sewing, cookery, handicrafts, arithmetic, farming, and hygiene. They were able to take what they had learnt back to their communities, thus helping to uplift the standard of living of the people in the interior.⁶¹

Economic development was also conspicuous in church activities. In 1959, the Catholic church, through the Catholic Welfare Society of Sabah, with funding from international bodies, organized the Bundu Tuhan Agricultural Project.⁶² Plants suited to high altitudes, such as tobacco and cabbage, were cultivated. The poor who participated were later given training in animal husbandry, drainage, irrigation, and terracing. This project was aided by the construction of the Ranau-Kota Kinabalu Highway which facilitated the marketing of their agriculture products. Later this project came to be known as the Kota Kinabalu Development Project.⁶³

In addition to the Catholic church, the BCCM also got involved in agricultural planning. In 1963, the Reverend Herman Holmeister helped to set up an agriculture scheme in Sapong, an area in the district on Keningau.⁶⁴ This area had six villages—Melalap, Mailo, Angalor, Akar Hidup, and Mansansor—that became the focus of the missionaries. The inhabitants comprised Chinese, Rungus and Muruts. Besides helping to set up the agricultural scheme, Holmeister also founded the first Christian missionary centre at Kampung Akar Hidup and started evangelical work among the local people.⁶⁵

⁵⁷ Letter dated 14 September 1936, from the Resident's Office, Jesselton to the State Secretary, in NBCA 1307. Daily Notes of Mgr Wachter in Poilis, *A Popular History of the Catholic Church in Sabah*, pp. 29 and 30. See also *Catholic Sabah*, October 1981 and May 1982.

⁵⁸ *BCCM Information*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Reported by Pendeta Danial Taie, Koordinator Penginjilan Pedalaman, *BCCM Information*, p. 12.

⁶⁰ *P. C. S. Silver Jubilee*, p. 78.

⁶¹ Letter dated 14 September 1936, from the Resident's Office, Jesselton to the State Secretary, in NBCA 1307.

⁶² Poilis, *A Popular History of the Catholic Church in Sabah*, pp. 27–9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *BCCM Information*, p. 9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

With these efforts, through the economic welfare discussed, it was not surprising that the initially paganistic indigenous people of Sabah chose to embrace Christianity. Once these people embraced Christianity, either as mission workers or members of the congregation, they were exposed to employment opportunities, their standard of living improved, and their spiritual health was taken care of by the church. This welfare-oriented service gave the indigenous people a sense of security.

Conclusion

There is no question that the presence of Christian missionaries played an important role in the development of the indigenous peoples of Sabah, especially those living in the interior, through church education or formal (school) education. Several leaders and important government officers at state and federal level have publically acknowledged this contribution. Tan Sri Peter Lo Su Yin (Chief Minister of Sabah, 1964–7), in his speech at the 100th anniversary of the Mill Hill Fathers on 17 March 1966, expressed his appreciation for their contribution, saying that since the arrival of the Mill Hill Fathers in Sabah, the role and contribution of the Catholic church had been recognized as bringing change to the state and its people. The church missionaries not only dedicated themselves to providing education to the children of the indigenous people, but also gave them the motivation to adopt change. When the Catholic missionaries arrived, Sabah was still covered with forest and many suffered from a variety of illnesses relating to poor hygiene. The objectives of the missionaries were two-pronged: to spread Christianity, and simultaneously, project themselves as the first group to give attention to the education of the indigenous people. Many Sabahans who went on to become doctors, engineers, lawyers, educators, government officers, as well as cabinet ministers and political leaders were products of the church schools, especially Catholic mission schools.⁶⁶ The approach used by these local and foreign Christian missionaries succeeded in replacing the paganistic beliefs of the indigenous people with Christianity. Most remain Christians to this day.⁶⁷

Even though Islam came to Sabah earlier than Christianity, especially among the Dusun-Kadazan and Murut communities, the numbers of Christians have always been greater. *Siaran Perangkaan Tahunan Sabah 1981* revealed that there were 84,042 Dusun-Kadazan Christians as opposed to 16,890 Muslims, and 14,734 Christian Muruts compared with only 1,510 Muslims.⁶⁸ Clearly Christianization of the indigenous people of Sabah in the interior was more successful than any attempt at spreading Islam. How did this come about? Basically, it was the Christian missionaries' approach to the indigenous people. They were more serious and more committed in their work and they combined religious conversion with social services.

⁶⁶ *Sabah Times*, 17 March 1966.

⁶⁷ A study of a similar theme involving the Muslim missionaries in the propagation of Islam in Sabah among the indigenous people could also be undertaken in order to make comparison.

⁶⁸ Ismail Mat, 'Permasalahan Dakwah Islamiah di Sabah', in Ismail Mat (ed.), *Islam di Brunei, Sarawak dan Sabah*, Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Asiana, 1989, p. 80.

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