

TRADITION, MODERNITY AND ISLAM

Revisiting History Across the Regions
in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Edited by

A Rahman Tang Abdullah



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CHAPTER 6

MALAYS' EDUCATION UNDER THE BRITISH: REALITY AND PERSPECTIVES

*Wan Suhana Wan Sulong*¹

Introduction

In 1923, Za'ba,² a celebrated Malay literary genius, wrote:

The salvation of the Malays, economically as well as morally, is to be found only in one way, and that is remedying their intellectual poverty - the poverty of knowledge - by means of the right sort of education... The reading of literature, the imbibing of new ideas, knowledge of the world acquired from geography and history, etc., will do much to expand one's mental horizon and transform one's character; and as it is for the individual, so it is for the nation.³

Za'ba's words echoed the sentiment shared by many Malay scholars and frequently debated in newspapers and journals in Malaya especially in the twentieth century regarding the importance of knowledge and education among the Malays. Most of them saw education as the possible cure for the problems of the Malays and a means to awaken them from the state of backwardness and stagnation.

Za'ba went further to argue that the lack of necessary knowledge among the Malays had left them unequipped to deal with the dynamic working environment created by foreigners around them. Thus, Za'ba called on all Malays to cooperate in order to provide education for their children. The intellectuals, he argued, ought to come forward to teach others with the knowledge that they possessed, while the rich ought to contribute their wealth and money for the benefit of