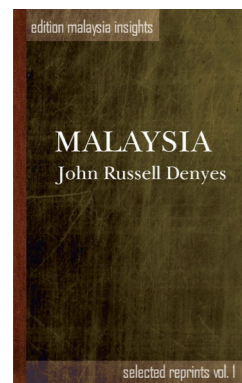


One Century ago: Missionary Work in Malaysia

by Uwe Fischer



A century ago, the American Methodist missionary John Russell Denyes had been working in Malaysia. Upon his return to the USA in 1919, he published a little book simply entitled "Malaysia". His account describes the country, its inhabitants, culture and life, and, most importantly, the missionary work that had been done so far. The complete text is now available as an e-book published by MALAYSIA INSIGHTS.

In 1919, Malaysia was a blank sheet to most Western people. Thus, it is no wonder that Mr Denyes started his report with presenting some basic facts about Malaysia. It is noteworthy, that the term "Malaysia" back then denoted a much broader region: "It includes the Malay Peninsula and the islands of Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Celebes, Timor, The Moluccas, New Guinea, and a thousand smaller islands."

The author also illustrates the trade relations by giving an account of every-day-products Western people might consume, all coming from Malaysia: "When you washed your face this morning, the soap was probably made from coconut oil from Malaysia. Malaysia probably furnished the rattan for the cane-bottomed chair in which you sat and the tinware in the kitchen where your breakfast was cooked. You put Java sugar in your Java coffee, or your Java tea, or your Java cocoa. You put Borneo pepper on your eggs. Your coffee cake was seasoned with Malaysia spices, and your pudding was made of Malaysia tapioca and seasoned with Malaysia nutmeg. Your peanut butter was made of Malaysia peanuts. Your laundryman uses Malaysia bluing, and the tires on your car are from Malaysia rubber. You wear a Java straw hat in your garden, and your neighbor smokes a Sumatra cigar. Your dentist uses Malaysia cocaine, and your doctor gives you Malaysia quinine for your malaria and Malaysia capsicum for your indigestion."

Malaysia
John Russell Denyes



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Insights like these make the book a pleasure to read, not only because of the vivid language but also by revealing how much the country has changed since then.

It was at the beginning of the 20th century, when Malaysia's multi-ethnic society that today characterises the country, took shape: "Just as a few years ago the people of the Eastern States poured out over the Western territories of America in search of wealth,

moving here and there as the hope of greater profits beckoned them on, so the people of China and India are pouring into Malaysia in search of gain." Especially for the Indians, there was another advantage, as the author points out: "In Malaysia, caste is largely a dead letter. The Brahmin and the low-caste man rub elbows on the street, ride in the same trolley cars, and sit together in the same offices, as often as not the Brahmin taking orders from the low-caste chief clerk. [...] The low-caste man who dared not allow his shadow to fall upon the pathway of a high-caste man in India walks the streets of Malaysia with his head erect."

However, during those days it was mostly the Tamils that took the Malaysian opportunity, as the book explains: "The immigrants are mostly Tamils, because the Government of British India permits recruiting agents seeking labor for the estates in Malaysia to pay the passages of Tamils, but of no other class."

After having set the framework by describing the country, its peoples, religions and customs, the second and major part of the book concentrates on the missionary work. The basic procedure of setting up one was quite simple: "The opening of a new station in a village or a neighborhood is usually preceded by street preaching. A missionary, with a native helper or two, finds his way into a village, selects a convenient street corner, and begins to sing. The unusual noise attracts a crowd. The missionary mounts a doorstep or box, and explains the nature of his message and calls upon his helpers to testify to the power of the Gospel. Portions of the Bible, tracts and Christian calendars are offered for sale. Sometimes these visits are made at night, and magic-lantern pictures are thrown upon a screen while the missionary tells the stories of the Bible. Sooner or later some man will be found who is ready to offer the use of a room in his home for a small rental or free for the services. As soon as the prejudice has disappeared sufficiently for the people to sit quietly and listen the crowd is divided into smaller groups, where more direct and personal work can be done. This is the beginning of the Sunday school."

Not only adults were educated by the preachers but also children. In Singapore, Penang, Taipeng, Ipoh, and Kuala Lumpur the Methodists built large Anglo-Chinese schools for boys and for girls, with branches in many smaller towns. On top, there were home schools: bible women going from home to home, stopping for an hour or so at each place, teaching the girls and mothers to read and sing.

There were many obstacles, though, the preachers had to overcome. Such as the language barriers: "The language of commerce is Malay, but although the people of every land soon pick up enough of this language to

transact ordinary business, very few of them ever learn enough of it to receive religious instruction in it. There is no other way but to seek each group in its own language. This means that every missionary who survives long enough must learn from one to five languages."

Another problem was the implacable climate: "The monotony of intense, moist heat every day in the year so wears upon the nervous system that five years is the limit of time that a missionary can remain in Malaysia without serious risk of permanently injuring his health."

The missionaries proceeded nevertheless tirelessly to reach out to all kind of peoples with growing success. However, one group proved unattainable: "The problem of dealing with Mohammedans is to get a sympathetic hearing. The evangelist finds the people either hostile or indifferent. Moreover the missionary is finding it increasingly difficult to reach the people on account of the rapidly increasing number of Hadjis, or religious teachers. Ten thousand pilgrims from Malaysia find their way annually to the sacred shrine at Mecca. These return to Malaysia with greatly increased social prestige which they use to tighten the grip of Islam upon their fellows. Wherever there is a Hadji there is a home or perhaps a whole village closed to all mission work."

The language of the book is clear and simple, so the short text of some 55 printed pages is easy to read, although some of the expressions are outdated and would be regarded disrespectful when used today. For example, more often than not, the author denotes Islam as "Mohammedanism".

Although John Russell Denyes signs as the author, many passages are quotations and more often than not he does not clearly state the sources. Other passages are not even marked as quotations but we can assume that Denyes did not write them personally, as he himself is being described in third person. Nevertheless, the book is a recommended read for those interested in Malaysia's history.

British Malaysia
William Eleroy Curtis



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You can find this e-book and another one edited by MALAYSIA INSIGHTS called "British Malaysia" from 1905 on Amazon:

John Russell Denyes:
Malaysia
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