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Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Sarawak

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Statement

The results presented in this thesis are my own original work, unless otherwise acknowledged.

WELYNE JEFFREY JEHOM
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Abstract

This study aims to address some of the issues relating to ethnic relations in Sarawak. It discusses the reasons behind the non-integration ethnic groups in the culturally plural society in Sarawak. There are three main reasons focused on in this study: the nonintegration due to the inter-tribal warfare and headhunting during the pre-colonial period, the artificial ethnic markers and segregation program imposed by the Brooke government and the significance of ethnic identification within the continuation of ethnic separateness. The analysis was conducted by comparing the situations of ethnic relations during the pre-colonial period, the Brooke rule (1841-1941), and the post-colonial.

During the pre-colonial period, the practices of headhunting and inter-tribal warfare between the native groups in Sarawak were the main reasons for the hostility and tensions between them. The dominant Iban group, which was the most notorious of all, raided other groups for heads to fulfill the requirement of their traditional ritual (Gawai). This situation was heightened with constant raids by the Iban alliance with the Malay for economic purposes. Thus, interaction was merely among dispersed minority groups. The antagonistic relation, separated the ethnic groups physically. The separateness was also due to identification based on geographical location. Even the people who were supposed to be in the same ethnic group were separated. For example, the Iban identified their groups on the basis of the river near which they lived.
The involvement of the Brooke rulers (1841-1941) in local affairs lessened the antagonistic relations among the people in Sarawak. Through the policy of abolishment of inter-tribal warfare and headhunting policy, the Brooke government managed to create a peaceful situation in Sarawak. The ethnic groups interacted through trade and a few interacted in mission elementary schools situated in the major towns in Sarawak. Nevertheless, the ethnic groups still remained separated due to the programs of territorial segregation and church affiliation imposed by the Brooke government on the local people. However, the Iban group benefited from the territorial segregation program, as they were all grouped together in order to control their migration to other settlements that belong to other ethnic groups.

The ethnic separateness in Sarawak during the Brooke rule as a result of the Brooke government programs was challenged in 1928 by the BEM (Borneo Evangelical Mission) which attempted to improve the interaction among the people by forming a community of Christian believers that shared common values and rituals. SIB (Sidang Injil Borneo), an indigenous church that BEM set up based on a Western pattern of organisation, took the responsibility to gather individuals from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds in its institution. SIB has cut across the ethnic barriers and boundaries to bring the people together in this community.

Ethnic relations improved especially with the spiritual revival at Bario in 1973. This affected the pattern of worship, evangelistic work and the perception of the believers towards the Christian teachings in SIB churches. The strength of the experience of the spiritual revival was that it redirected SIB members’ attention to the spiritual nature of Christianity that had drawn people together despite the differences in
ethnic and cultural background. SIB has established itself as a
denomination and the SIB identity as a social identity for its
members, but it has yet to fully integrate ethnic diversities within its
contemporary identity. The sense of status difference based on
subjective measurements has become the new barrier to interaction
and continues to be perpetuated through conscious social action by
many individuals in the church. The social differentiation is also
strongly connected to the ethnic group identity. Religious activities
are capable of integrating people at the spiritual level but not at the
non-spiritual level.

The study concludes that ethnic groups are non-integrated in Sarawak
due to the strong ethnic identification and awareness among its
people.
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<td>Borneo Evangelical Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRB</td>
<td>Borneo Research Bulletin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C&amp;MA</td>
<td>Christian and Missionary Alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISCF</td>
<td>Inter-school Christian Fellowship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JMBRAS</td>
<td>Journal Malayan Branch of Royal Asiatic Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KINGMI</td>
<td>Kemah Injil Gereja Masehi Indonesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIB</td>
<td>Sidang Injil Borneo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td>Sarawak Gazzette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMJ</td>
<td>Sarawak Museum Journal</td>
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Chapter One
Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Sarawak

1.1. Introduction

The study of ethnic relations, or race relations\(^1\) in Malaysia has become important since the outbreak of racial riots on the 13 May 1969\(^2\). Most studies concerning ethnic relations focus on the three major ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia: Malays, Chinese and Indians. The most commonly examined aspect of this issue concerns the impact of race relations on the formation of social and political relationships in Malaysia\(^3\). However, as the racial riots involved only Peninsular Malaysia, the problems that are usually discussed only relate to the ethnic groups in that region. East Malaysia has been neglected because of certain differences. As Wan Hashim notes (1983:xvi), “the states of Sabah and Sarawak have a population composition and history quite different from that of Peninsular Malaysia.” Therefore, although “the ethnic scene in East Malaysia is just as complex as, or even more so than that in Peninsular Malaysia, ethnicity and ethnic relations in East Malaysia have been explored only in a limited way” (Lee, 1986:viii).

I suggest that the neglect of the study of ethnic relations in East Malaysia is largely due to the fact that East Malaysia has simply not been perceived as having racial problems since the federation of Malaysia in 1963. As East Malaysia is much more complex and plural than Peninsular Malaysia, it is assumed that the possibility of

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\(^1\)‘Race relations’ is used by Wan Hashim in his book, *Race Relation in Malaysia* 1981. In anthropology, race relations refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive (Eriksen 1993:4). I prefer to use the term ‘ethnic relations’. It carries the similar reference but it is a more ‘polite term’ (see Eriksen 1993:4).

\(^2\)The period preceding the 13 May 1969 racial riots was a period of disintegration and of polarization of the three major racial groups in Malaysia: Malays, Chinese and Indians (Wan Hashim 1981:83).

\(^3\)For example, to examine race relations or communalism which hinders national integration in a new nation like Malaysia (see Wan Hashim, 1983); concerning the creation and maintenance (or erosion) of ethnic boundaries between and among the ‘races’ in Malaysia, and particularly on how this form of
racial conflicts erupting is almost nil. Pluralism, it is argued, does not lead to racial
conflicts because in a more plural the society, inter-ethnic contact becomes
minimal, thus lessening the chance of ethnic relations (Wan Hashim 1983:20).
However, the situation of minimal contact has less to do with plural societies, such
as those in East Malaysia, than with isolated mono-ethnic communities. Furnivall’s
use of plural society referred to a caste-like distinction, where Dutch, Chinese and
indigenes do not relate socially and culturally but only economically and
politically.

Along this line, it is inappropriate to describe plural societies in East Malaysia
along the lines of the minimal contact model because ethnic groups do relate
socially and culturally. Furthermore, although pluralism in East Malaysia has not
yet lead to racial problems similar to the racial riots of Peninsular Malaysia, it has
resulted in a situation where there is lack of integration and unity amongst the
various ethnic groups. Since the colonial period, ethnic groups of East Malaysia
have remained separate. At present, the situation may be described as cultural
pluralism, or a continuation of ethnic separateness under the umbrella of national
allegiance (see Enloe 1968; cf. Wan Hashim 1983).

Nevertheless, in certain respects, this picture alters when new religious values are
introduced. In such cases, there is actually an institution that is indirectly
concerned about social integration and unity between ethnic groups. Of course, the
main concern of ‘outside’ or ‘foreign’ religious groups is generally to convert
individuals and to increase memberships for the institution. However, through
religious conversion, individuals are actually brought together into a larger
community. In Sarawak, such an institution, the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) has

differentiation shapes social and political relationships in contemporary Malaysia (see Lee, 1986).
found the means to bring together individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. The approach is unique in the region and different from that of the colonial, and the present government, essentially because the intention is to unite individuals in a community to practise and to share one common belief system (Christianity).

The focus of this study is to analyse how the Sidang Injil Borneo composed individuals from various ethnic groups into a community that holds a common belief system, and why it is so successful in its membership.

In order to understand the present situation, the discussion begins by looking at the details of plural societies in Sarawak that have emphasised people relations and interaction from the early period before the Brooke rule (1841) in Sarawak until the period of the present government. This is followed by the discussion of the integration process under Sidang Injil Borneo.
1.2. The Distribution of Ethnic Groups in Sarawak

Sarawak\(^4\) is a multicultural state that consists of more than thirty ethnic groups.

Table 1.1: Population by detailed ethnic groups and stratum, Sarawak 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iban</td>
<td>85662</td>
<td>396021</td>
<td>481683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bidayuh</td>
<td>25676</td>
<td>109781</td>
<td>135457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanau</td>
<td>26606</td>
<td>66904</td>
<td>93510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kenyah</strong></td>
<td>2640</td>
<td>17749</td>
<td>20389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayan</td>
<td>2979</td>
<td>17111</td>
<td>20090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lun Bawang</td>
<td>1223</td>
<td>11671</td>
<td>12894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penan</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>9339</td>
<td>9434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kajang</strong></td>
<td>90</td>
<td>3616</td>
<td>3706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelabit</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>2553</td>
<td>4230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Other indigenous</em></td>
<td>889</td>
<td>7052</td>
<td>7941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>151696</td>
<td>658453</td>
<td>810149</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>149703</td>
<td>199685</td>
<td>349388</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>298073</td>
<td>146475</td>
<td>445548</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>599472</td>
<td>1005613</td>
<td>1605085</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\) Bisaya, Kedayan, Tagal, Tabun, Ukit, Buketan, Lisum, Saban, Sian.
** Including Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, Punan Ba, Tanjong and Kanowit
*** Including Sebop, Seping, Kiput, Badang and Berawan.

Source: *State Population Report, Sarawak 1991*\(^5\)

At present, the individuals of these ethnic groups are found almost in every division\(^6\) of Sarawak because of recent migration for work, settlement and education. In general, the original settlement (refer to Map 1.1) for these ethnic groups are as follows: the Malay mainly inhabited the coastal part of Sarawak in the First division; Iban settled at almost every division except the Fourth and Fifth divisions; the

\(^4\) See for example, Victor T. King (1990) *The Peoples of Borneo* for brief description of the population, and geographical aspects.
\(^5\) Detailed population is only recorded once in 10 years. The next census will be available in the year 2001.
\(^6\) Recently Sarawak is divided into eight division that recognised through a main town area: First division is Kuching area, Second division is Sri Aman area, Third division is Sibu area, Fourth division is Miri area, Fifth division is Limbang area, Sixth division is Sarakei area, Seventh division is Kapit area and newly established Eight division that consists the area of Kota Samarahan.
Bidayuh mostly found in the First division in the western areas of Sarawak inland from Kuching (see Geddes 1954); the Melanau are centered around at the coastal area (Mukah) of the Western part in the Fourth division; and the Orang Ulu inhabited the Fourth, Fifth and Seventh division in the northeast of Sarawak (see Rousseau 1978; 1988). The Chinese, whose ancestors are traders and before that goldminers in the eighteenth century (see Jackson 1970) are found mostly in the main trading towns. The Chinese has traded with the natives at Marudi, previously called Claudetown in the Fourth division since (see Furness 1902; Lee 1976).

1.3. Conceptual Orientations

In this study, *ethnicity* is seen as the central concept to analyse group relations in Sarawak. Ethnicity comes as a result of inter-ethnic interaction. However, before analysing the term ethnicity, the criteria of ethnic groups should be understood. The concept of ethnicity can often be applied to modern as well as non-modern contexts. The term ethnicity is now widely used in anthropological studies as an important anthropological research for ethnic organisation and identity (Eriksen 1993:12).

1.3.1. Ethnic Groups and Ethnicity

An *ethnic group* is a human group bound together by ties of cultural homogeneity (Tischler 1978:41). Ethnic groups are formed by virtue of sharing the combination of common descent (real or supposed), a socially relevant cultural or physical characteristic, and a set of attitudes and behaviours. A primary basis for the differentiation between ethnic groups can be either a cultural base such as folkways
and customs, language, a nationality and a religion, or physical characteristics such as skin pigmentation and body shape, or both. Above all, the crucial factor deciding membership of an ethnic group is that individuals within the ethnic group share certain feelings, ideas and behaviours. Or alternatively, in Tischler’s (1978:41) terms members may exhibit: a shared consciousness of kind and feeling of association. To form an ethnic group, as distinct from a mere ethnic collection of people, people must, at least to some degree, perceive themselves, as a distinct ethnic group (typified by ‘we’ and ‘they’ feelings). This is because ethnic groups are dynamic, and visible characteristics such as religion, folkways or custom may change. In short, ethnic groups differ in descent, in cultural or physical traits, and in collective identity.

**Ethnicity** crystallizes only in situations where people of different backgrounds come into contact or share the same institutions or political system. In *Fontana Dictionary of MODERN THOUGHT*, ethnicity is considered as a relatively new concept of group association (the term first appears in the 1972 *Supplementary of the Oxford English Dictionary*) which can refer to a whole range (and frequently a combination) of communal characteristics: lingual, ancestral, regional, and religious which are seen to be the basis of distinctive identity (1988:285). In an anthropological perspective, the distinction usually emphasized is culture. When cultural differences regularly make a difference in interaction between members of groups, the social relationships have an ethnic element. As such, *ethnicity* is an aspect of social relationships between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have minimum regular

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7 Ibid Pp.267
4 The word *ethnic* is much older, derived from the Greek *ethnos* (which in turn derived from the word *ethnikos*, which originally meant heathen or pagan (Williams 1976:119). It was used in this sense in English from the mid-fourteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, when it gradually began to refer to ‘racial’ characteristics. In the United States, ‘ethnic’ came to be used around the Second World War as a polite term referring to Jews, Italians, Irish and other people considered inferior to the