

## Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity in Sarawak

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### ABSTRACT

*Ethnicity and ethnic identity are difficult subjects and highly problematic. This paper is a modest attempt to discuss the problem of ethnicity and ethnic identity of the diverse ethnic groups in Sarawak. It begins by discussing the approaches in the study of ethnic group, ethnicity and identity, followed by a detailed discussion of the problematic of ethnic classification and ethnic identities of Sarawakians. It suggests that authority-defined identity, i.e., ethnic identity imposed by those in authority (such as through population census) upon a particular group need not necessarily correspond with the everyday-defined identity members of the group have of themselves. It argues that it is important to examine the subjective aspects of identity formations among ethnic groups since it is through their interactions identities are constructed, reconstructed and reinforced.*

*Key words: Sarawak, ethnicity, ethnic identity, culture*

### ABSTRAK

*Etnisiti dan identiti etnik ialah perkara yang sukar dikaji dan amat bermasalah. Artikel ini ialah satu percubaan sederhana untuk membincangkan persoalan etnisiti dan identiti etnik di kalangan pelbagai kelompok etnik di Sarawak. Ia bermula dengan membincangkan pendekatan-pendekatan yang digunakan dalam kajian kelompok etnik, etnisiti dan identiti, disusuli oleh perbincangan terperinci mengenai permasalahan dalam klasifikasi dan identiti etnik di kalangan orang Sarawak. Penulis mengambil pendirian bahawa identiti takrifan penguasa, yakni identiti yang diberikan oleh pihak yang berkuasa (misalnya, melalui banci penduduk) kepada sesuatu kelompok etnik tidak semestinya selaras dengan identiti takrifan harian yang dibentuk sendiri oleh kelompok etnik berkenaan. Artikel ini menegaskan bahawa adalah penting untuk mengkaji aspek subjektif dalam pembentukan identiti di kalangan kelompok etnik kerana identiti mereka terbentuk, dibentuk semula dan diperteguhkan melalui interaksi sesama mereka.*

*Kata kunci: Sarawak, etnisiti, identiti etnik, budaya*

## INTRODUCTION

Race and ethnicity are two concepts often confused in Malaysian studies, thus making it necessary to differentiate them here. Race is a category composed of people who share biologically transmitted traits that members of a society deem socially significant (Marcionis 1998: 320). Physical characteristics such as skin colour, facial features, hair texture and body shape are important in determining the classification of people based on race. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is a shared cultural heritage (Marcionis 1998: 321). Thus, race and ethnicity are quite different, since one is biological and the other cultural.

Ethnicity – a term now widely used in anthropological studies as an important anthropological tool for ethnic organization and identity (Eriksen 1993: 12) becomes crucial as a result of inter-ethnic interaction. Ethnicity is a central concept when analyzing the pattern of ethnic categories and classification as well as inter-group relations in Sarawak. This paper regards ethnic relations rather than race relations as a more appropriate term to describe the relations between people of different cultural backgrounds in Sarawak. It discusses the complexity of ethnic identities where externally imposed identity labels do not necessarily correspond with everyday internally defined identity by the people themselves.

### APPROACHES IN THE STUDY OF ETHNIC GROUPS, ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY

An ethnic group is a human group bound together by ties of cultural homogeneity (Tischler 1978: 41), by virtue of sharing common descent (real or imagined), a set of attitudes and behaviour, 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 (Tischler 1978: 41). In short, an ethnic group differs in descent, in cultural traits, and in collective identity from other groups.

Ethnicity crystallizes only in situations where people of different backgrounds come into contact or share the same institutions or political system. It 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 interaction. Ethnicity is thus constituted through social contact. In this sense, ethnicity is an aspect of relationships, not the cultural property of a group. Therefore, only in so far as cultural differences are perceived as being important, and are made socially relevant, do social relationships have an ethnic element (Eriksen 1993: 12).

It is, nevertheless, difficult to determine the criteria that constitute ethnicity because they may vary. As Eriksen (1993: 34) has explained, it was previously common to equate 'ethnic groups' with 'cultural groups', thus any category of people who possess a 'shared culture' is defined as an ethnic group. As will be shown in the case of Sarawak below, this position has become difficult to justify because the sharing of cultural traits frequently crosses group boundaries. Moreover, people do not always share all their 'cultural traits' with the people in the same group. One may have the same language and share a common religion, yet at the same time, one may also share that religion with members of a different linguistic group. In other words, cultural boundaries are not clear-cut, nor do they necessarily correspond with ethnic boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

There are two fundamental approaches that can be used to conceive ethnic groups, namely the 'ascriptive' (or primordialist), and the 'situational' ('subjectivist' or 'instrumentalist') approaches. According to the 'ascriptive' approach, members of an ethnic group are bound together by their common descent. Primary blood ties are supposed to instil immutable emotional attachments and allegiances. Being 'given' and rigid, ethnicity transcends individual perceptions and changing circumstances (Adam & Kuper 1988: 268). However, giving primacy to primordial attachments in this way is problematic. Barth (1969) argues against those anthropologists who identify ethnic groups with cultural units. He stresses that such definitions of ethnic groups "allow us to assume that boundary maintenance is unproblematic and follows from the isolation which itemized characteristics imply: racial difference, cultural difference, social separation and language barriers, spontaneous and organized enmity" (Barth 1969: 11). He suggests that shared culture may be seen as an implication or result of a long-term social process, rather than as a primordial feature of groups. Therefore, Barth regards an ethnic group chiefly in terms of social organisation, and consequently ethnic groups must be defined from within, that is from the perspective of their members. Instead of listing traits of 'objective culture', which members often share with non-members anyway, Barth defines ethnicity as categorical ascriptions which classify individuals in terms of their basic most general identity (Eriksen 1993: 37). Barth argues that it is the boundary of the group, which defines the group rather than the cultural stuff within it. The invisible boundary or the dividing line between ethnic groups, and the relationship between the two, demarcate their identity and distinctiveness vis-a-vis the other. Barth argued that the identity of a group depends on the maintenance of its boundaries, though these boundaries can be crossed under certain conditions.

The opposing view, i.e., of the 'situational' approach posits that what really matters is the people's definition of themselves as culturally or physically distinct from others. Their shared descent is secondary and, if necessary, it may be manufactured and manipulated (Cohen 1974). Cohen (1974) accuses Barth of being a 'primordialist' because he defines ethnic ascription as categorical ascription, which classifies a person in terms of his basic general identity, pre-

sumptively determined by his origin and background. In Cohen's view, ethnic identities develop in response to functional organizational requirements. He defines ethnicity simply as a particular form of informal political organization where cultural boundaries are invoked so that the group's resources or 'symbolic capital' can be secured. In this way, Cohen goes even further than Barth in severing the tie between ethnicity and culture (Eriksen 1993: 55). Cohen's position as opposed to a primordialism he attributes to Barth, can be described as an instrumentalist view, where the sole *raison d'être* of ethnicity and ethnic organization lies in its political functioning. In this perspective, ethnicity needs no historical or cultural explanation: it rises entirely from contemporary social conditions (King 1982).

Some of these views have informed the study of Sarawak ethnic groups. In his study of ethnicity in Borneo including Sarawak, Rousseau (1990: 46) criticises Barth who sees ethnicity as the 'most general identity'. He disagrees with Barth that membership of distinct ethnic groups implies a recognition of limitations of shared understanding, differences in criteria for judgement of value and performance, and a restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest. Rousseau argues that when ethnicity is not the most general identity, it does not lead to restricted interaction or limited sharing. He concludes that Barth's framework is not applicable in Borneo because in a poly-ethnic situation, one cannot start with an a priori discussion of ethnic relations (Rousseau 1990: 46).

Rousseau also criticises the central importance that Barth has given to ethnic boundaries, and instead asserts that whilst boundaries are crucial in defining scientific concepts, everyday concepts often lack clear boundaries. Ethnic boundaries, therefore, may or may not be clearly specified. Thus, according to Rousseau (1990:46), in poly-ethnic systems, boundaries as well as patterns of ascription to ethnic categories are not necessarily rigid, and ascription patterns may indeed be flexible. Rousseau points to the fact that there may be ethnic categories, that do not form groups in a sociological sense, and consequently suggests that it is inappropriate to assume a priori that the existence of ethnic categories is linked in a specific way with ethnic identity. An example given by Rousseau is the Kenyah people. He shows that it does not follow that people who are called Kenyah necessarily have a feeling of identity or are seen as a unit by others (Rousseau 1990: 46).

It should be pointed out that the delimitation of ethnic categories and groupings becomes extremely problematic in an area such as Sarawak when a variety of criteria is used in combination, for example, political organization, economic activity, territorial proximity, and various aspects of culture such as clothing, ritual, myth and language (King 1982: 23-24). In this situation, it is obvious that although it is inappropriate to define ethnicity by such criteria, they can be used as an a posteriori *justification*: once people have been ascribed to an ethnic category, some traits can be adduced to justify this attribution (Needham 1975,

quoted in Rousseau 1990: 50). Therefore, ethnic identification should include self-ascription, which entails examining native perceptions of ethnicity in the context of interrelationship between ethnic groupings (King 1982: 30).

Nevertheless, it is also problematic to include the self-ascription when examining ethnicity because while people identify themselves as belonging to unit A (and obviously they are making a statement that, in certain respects, they are different from unit B), there are some people who would claim belonging to A and B simultaneously, or A or B situational.

This shows that "ethnic identity is not necessarily a constant, but instead a dependent variable" (Nagata 1975: 2-3). This is so, because "identity depends very much on a 'sense of otherness' and is subject to the fact that identities can be created, reinforced, manipulated and changed" (King 1982: 24). In fact, this statement is particularly relevant to the situation in Sarawak as a result of the administrative work under the Brooke government, the colonial regime and the present Sarawak government. Malaysian scholars acknowledge this situation. In recent contributions to the study of the formation of identity in Malaysia, the critical role of the state (colonial and post-colonial) in the emergence, consolidation and transformation of plurality of identities is emphasized. Shamsul (1998c: 27), for example, emphasizes the importance of colonial knowledge as the baseline knowledge in identity formation in Malaysia. All of the discussed approaches can be summed up in one module of concept formulated and used by Shamsul (1996a) who emphasizes that identity formation takes place within two rarely identical contexts that exist side by side at any given time: the "*authority defined*" social reality which is the authoritatively defined through observation and interpretation of social reality by people who are part of the dominant power structure, and the "*every day defined*" social reality, which is experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life (Shamsul 1996a: 9).

In this article, the author makes a modest attempt at explaining ethnicity and ethnic identity in Sarawak by adopting some of the approaches mentioned above, especially that of Shamsul's.

## THE COMPLEXITY OF ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN SARAWAK

Sarawak today is a multicultural society consisting of more than thirty ethnic groups (King 1990). These ethnic groups are found almost in every division of Sarawak because of recent migration for work, settlement and education. In general, the original settlement for these ethnic groups are as follows: the Malays mainly inhabit the coastal part of Sarawak in the First division; Ibans are found in almost every division except the Fourth and Fifth divisions; the Bidayus are mostly found in the First division in the Western part of Sarawak inland from Kuching; the Melanau are centred around the coastal area (Mukah) of the Western part in the Fourth division; and the Orang Ulu inhabited the Fourth,

TABLE 1. Population by detailed ethnic groups and stratum, Sarawak 1991

Ethnic Group	Urban	Rural	Total
Iban	85,662	396,021	481,683
Bidayuh	25,676	109,781	135,457
Melanau	26,606	66,904	93,510
Kenyah***	2640	17,749	20,389
Kayan	2979	17,111	20,090
Lun Bawang	1223	11,671	12,894
Penan	95	9339	9434
Kajang**	90	3616	3706
Kelabit	1677	2553	4230
Other indigenous*	889	7052	7941
Total	151,696	658,453	810,149
Malay	149,703	199,685	349,388
Chinese	298,073	146,475	445,548
Total	599,472	1,005,613	1,605,085

\* 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.

Fifth and Seventh divisions in the northeast of Sarawak, previously recognised as Central Borneo (Rousseau 1978; 1988). The Chinese, whose ancestors were traders and gold miners (Jackson 1970) are found mostly in the main trading towns. Ever since the pre-colonial period the Chinese traded with the natives at Marudi, previously called Claudetown in the Fourth division (Furness 1902; Lee 1976).

In Sarawak, as mentioned above, ethnic categories and identities have been created, reinforced, manipulated and changed and that colonial knowledge had been instrumental in creating these categories. Thus, it is important to examine the formation of these groups historically from the period of Brooke rule (1841-1941) until the period of the present government.

Sarawakians, particularly those in the interior, identify themselves by the name of a place or river or mountain, or by the name of a local chief. These people may have adopted a particular community name to distinguish themselves from others, yet they may be still conscious of kinship with other communities. Kinship, language, customs, physical characteristics, behavior, and so on, play a part in determining the degree of relationship that one community shares with another. Yet different ethnic groups may exhibit affinities with the other groups which the people themselves may or may not be conscious (Noakes 1947: 29). With ethnic mobilisation due to the inter-ethnic warfare and in some circum-

stances, swidden agriculture, identity based upon geographical location, became less relevant. These developments created confusion in the process of ethnic classification, especially when European foreigners gave ethnic labels.

Under the Brooke regime, ethnic labels were used extensively by administrators to identify and to contrast various ethnic groups in Sarawak. The identification was undertaken "merely by talking about the people in terms of broader ethnic categories, as well as by treating each category differently, [and] the new rules gradually communicated to the people themselves a growing awareness of such differences" (Pringle 1971: 62). The Brooke government in particular, "did their best to keep various people separate, to make neat and tidy categories that were more in keeping with their orderly British minds" (Babcock 1974: 197). Therefore, ethnic labels which were formerly vague and flexible references became precise and fixed (King 1982: 27). Nevertheless, the Iban, Kayan, and Kenyah have never described their origins; hence it is difficult to clarify how these groups got their ethnic labels. But in general, the earlier classifications formulated by Europeans were decided by one or more defined criteria, such as language, cultural traits, religion, economy, social organisation and presumed origin (Harrison 1950; Leach 1950). The construction and reinforcement of the ethnic categories by the Brooke government was later improved and used for the population censuses of 1947 and 1960.

Generally, during British colonialism, regional variations in ethnic names suggest that the river basin was still the primary framework for ethnic conceptualisation (Rousseau 1990: 62). In the general framework offered by Tom Harrison (1950: 271-80) in his attempt to classify the population of Sarawak and Brunei for census purposes, there is a useful distinction made between "the subjective (self-imposed) and objective (external imposed) classification". The subjective category is subdivided into local naming, and group naming, while the objective category consisted of general form and scientific grouping (Harrison 1950: 275). Another writer, King (1979), in his attempt to identify how the term 'Maloh' was obtained uses the relation between the subjectives and objectives frameworks. He shows that 'river-based groupings' are an important element in determining identity and difference and 'river-based groupings' are the strongest and most frequently invoked subjective method of classification used by the Maloh to determine their relationships with outsiders. Here the main criterion for the definition of Maloh 'river-based groupings' is that of geographical location. The 'river-based groupings' were equated with an ethnic identity as the residential locations were all situated along the river (King 1985). The habitation of a single river system also resulted in the sharing of certain cultural and linguistic traits, common folklore, closer ties of kinship and friendship, and more intense social interaction (King 1979: 4).

However, King (1979) concludes that despite the recognition of the Maloh as a socio-cultural unit, there is no generally agreed upon, internally derived name appropriate for them as a whole. The term 'Maloh' is, in fact, an externally



(objective) imposed term. Although it has been used to label them, it is not the term the people used to refer to themselves, and that they cannot agree on an internally derived name. Rather, they accept the label 'Maloh' from outsiders because it is a valid designation, indicative of a socio-cultural unity (for example, language, and customs) which distinguishes them from other Borneo peoples.

In Sarawak, as shown above, most ethnic labels were externally imposed terms. As a consequence, in some instances, different peoples have been categorised with the same ethnic label. Take, for example, the term 'Dayak' which in some ethnic languages (for example, the languages of the Bidayuh in Kuching, Sarawak) means 'person', assumed a more complex meaning under colonial classifications. In the latter, the term 'Dayak' referred to both the Iban (recognised as the Sea Dayaks), and the Selako and Bidayuh (recognised as the Land Dayaks). These three groups speak different languages and apparently share very few cultural traits, but they are categorised in an ethnic label called 'Dayak'. Since they dislike the externally imposed term (Harrisson 1950: 273), they have their own internal ethnic labels – Iban, Selako and Bidayuh – that were later used in the population censuses.

The complexity and complications in ethnic classification are also portrayed in the term 'Orang Ulu'. Geographical, socio-cultural and linguistic factors have also been taken into account in defining Orang Ulu. Geographically, they inhabit the interior of northeastern Sarawak in the interior of Kapit, Bintulu, Miri and Limbang Divisions. Except for the Penan, the various groups of the Orang Ulu share a system of social stratification in at least three ranks, and hereditary chiefs (Rousseau 1974: 1).

As shown by several researchers, 'Orang Ulu' is a Malay term which means 'people' (*orang*) of 'the upriver' (*ulu*); or 'people of the interior'. The Orang Ulu are a complex group, comprising several indigenous minorities. One way to define Orang Ulu is that they are non-Muslim indigenous groups who are not Iban, Bidayuh or Melanau. So, Rule 3 (11) of the Orang Ulu National Association (OUNA) Constitution mentions the term Orang Ulu thus, "The Orang Ulu shall mean the Kelabit, Kenyah (including Sebop, Seping, Kiput, Badang and Berawan), Bukitan, Bisaya, Kayan, Kajang (including Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, Punan, Tanjong and Kanowit), Lugat Lisum, Lun Bawang, Penan, Sian, Tabun, Ukit and Saban" (Jayl Langub & Ding Seling 1989: 35).

The definition even includes cultural affinities between various groups of the Orang Ulu, in their settlement patterns and housing, agricultural technology, arts and crafts, burial practices, etc. The Kayan and Kenyah form the largest groups in the Orang Ulu. Both groups claim to have originated from Batang Kayan in Kalimantan, Indonesia (Rousseau 1978, Whittier 1978). Although the two groups are quite distinct, especially in language, they are often found in association, or living in related areas, or in close proximity to each other. The Kayan and Kenyah are found side by side other in the Balui river basin and its



tributaries, the Baram. According to Southwell (1959), their arts and crafts have inspired and influenced the culture of all other people in Sarawak.

The linguistic affinities between groups are also taken into account, for instance, in classifying the Lun Bawang and Kelabit, the Penan and some Kenyah sub-groups. Harrisson (1959) mentions that Kelabit and Lun Bawang are often perceived by outsiders as one people. There are valid reasons for this: they speak the same language with minor dialectical variations; they consider Kelabit-Kerayan Highlands as their heartland (Schneeberger 1945); they practise wet rice irrigation system (Harrisson 1959); and perhaps, they are the only ethnic groups in the interior that make salt out of salt spring (Ding & Langub 1989: 22). Other groups such as the Lisum, Punan, Ukit, Bukat and Sihan have linguistic affinities. The most common cultural element practised by the majority of the ethnic groups under the Orang Ulu is the *ngajat* dance.

It is argued that such categorisation as the Orang Ulu has created more general identification of each different ethnic group under this category. This results in an overlapping of ethnic identity, or possibly the exclusion of identities which do not fall under the Orang Ulu. Ethnic identity only becomes important when the non-Orang Ulu people attempt to interact with the 'Orang Ulu'. In this sense, ethnic identity is situational. Of course, the people recognise each other as Orang Ulu, but they do need a more specific identification to acknowledge to which ethnic group they belong. Thus, each group may still attempt to establish an identity, which will distinguish them from other ethnic groups. For example, the Kelabit distinguish themselves by holding in common, a set of traditions which typically include 'folk' religious beliefs and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity, and common ancestry, or place of origin. The traditional values and rituals sometimes portray the myths and legends of the people. For example, the Kelabit myths and legends are told through their traditional folk songs and stories called *adih*. However, these practices have been prohibited by the Borneo Evangelical Mission (BEM) as early as the 1930s because the BEM missionaries claimed that folk songs and stories promoting traditional practices and values as against Christianity (Lees 1986). As a result, Christian Kelabit abandoned these practices, and are no longer in touch with their mythology. It is possible that these legends and myths will gradually be forgotten, unless they are recorded or documented.

However, sharing the same legends and mythology may not be the only deciding factor in creating a distinctive ethnic identity since different ethnic groups also claim the same myths and legends. For example, the Kelabit and Lun Bawang share a common sense of historical continuity in which both considered the Kelabit-Kerayan Highlands as their homeland. Yet, they do not claim to be members of the same ethnic group. While they accept that they are the Orang Ulu, they also claim to be two distinctive ethnic groups. This goes to show that claims of ethnic identity are often situational.

While notions of the past for the Kelabit exist only in songs, legendary epics, and myths the same can be said for the Bisaya group. Both the Kelabit and Bisaya groups claim to have blood relations with the Sultan of Brunei. While the Bisaya oral tradition suggests that the wife of the first Sultan of Brunei originated from the Bisaya stock, the Kelabit, on the other hand, claim that she was partly Kelabit. In this sense, I conclude that myths, legends and history do not make a distinctive ethnic identity, as these ethnic groups claim. In this situation, the language spoken by every ethnic group in the Orang Ulu to a certain extent, be appropriated to constitute a firm ground for an ethnic identity. Although certain ethnic groups speak almost a similar language, some minor dialectic differences may be used as a basis to show that the speakers are affiliated to particular ethnic groups, thus, distinguishing themselves from other ethnic groups.

A similar situation where language is claimed to be the only ethnic marker is found among the Semai group of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. Gomes (1994: 180) states that "there is no clear ethnic marker apart from language but even that is sometimes negotiated and contested given the existence of numerous dialects". In the Semai case, Gomes shows that the individual Semai constructed their Semai identity socially by maintaining a sense of membership with the group which is somewhat inclusive, as 'outsiders' are readily accepted if they show an interest in identifying themselves as Semai and are prepared to adopt a Semai 'lifestyle'.

However, in the case of the Kelabit or the Lun Bawang, 'outsiders' are not readily accepted as having the Kelabit or Lun Bawang identity. In certain circumstances, for example, even if a Bidayuh (or any other non-Kelabit) marry a Kelabit, and adopt the Kelabit lifestyle as well as showing an interest to be identified as a Kelabit, the Kelabit may not necessarily accept the membership of this 'outsider'. The 'outsider' may be accepted into the Kelabit community, but not as a Kelabit individual. In other words, a Bidayuh is still a Bidayuh even if he or she were to marry a Kelabit, speak Kelabit language and adopt the Kelabit way of life. This situation seems to apply not only among the Kelabit but also among most other ethnic groups in Sarawak. This shows that most ethnic groups in Sarawak, particularly members of the Orang Ulu, struggle to have a distinctive ethnicity, and attempt to set a boundary with outsiders who live within its community.

The current situation in Sarawak makes ethnic identification even more complicated. The emphasis on cultural similarities and differences may not be quite as applicable as it was because many ethnic groups have undergone some degree of assimilation. For example, embracing a new belief such as Christianity or Islam can also change people's values and practices. However, despite these changes, people still accept their ethnic identities. This is because as Barth (1969) points out, although ethnic markers (for example, dress, language, house form, lifestyle, and even basic value orientations) used by members of ethnic groups to signal belonging may change with time, the process of self-ascription

and identification need not necessarily undergo a similar change. Ethnic groups may thus become behaviourally assimilated yet they still maintain a strong sense of ethnic identity. In this light, ethnicity is not so much a product of common living, but of self-awareness of one's belonging to a particular group and differences with others (Hutnik 1991: 19).

To a certain extent, Barth's perspective can be applied to the situation of the members of the Orang Ulu, because it focuses on the ascriptive elements of ethnicity ('who conceive of themselves', and 'who are regarded by others'), rather than upon cultural content. The relevance of the term Orang Ulu for the various ethnic groups classified under it is that the term is recognised by the larger groups such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Chinese and Malay. In this sense, Orang Ulu has, become an ethnicity or an ethnic marker for all groups constituting the Orang Ulu. This ethnicity is institutionalised under the 'Orang Ulu National Association' (OUNA) which functions to represent the Orang Ulu. The assertion of the Orang Ulu category enables the groups' economic, social and political interests to be noticed. In this regard, ethnic identity is essentially less important than the identity of Orang Ulu. Fundamentally, the Orang Ulu identity to a certain extent developed in response to functional organisational requirements to achieve social, economic, and political needs of the marginalised groups. Thus, it can be said that the Orang Ulu ethnicity is intricately linked to the consequences of modernity. To borrow Eriksen's (1995: 55) expression, ethnicity needs no historical or cultural explanation: it rises from contemporary social conditions.

The ethnic identity, nevertheless, is important as self-identity and recognition of one's ethnic belonging. It becomes more meaningful particularly in inter-ethnic interactions, for example, the interactions between the Kelabit with the non-Kelabit such as the Lun Bawang, Kayan or Kenyah. All of these ethnic groups uphold the Orang Ulu ethnicity in the larger society but they also maintain a distinctive ethnic identity recognised by other ethnic groups within the Orang Ulu.

Today, ethnic identity is reinforced through ethnic gatherings that have become an annual event. For example, the Kelabit from all over Sarawak gathers in Miri, the Fourth Division, in June annually to participate in a meeting called the Highlanders Carnival. In this meeting, the Kelabit interact with each other through sports activities such as volleyball, tennis, soccer and badminton, and perform Kelabit cultural performances. Through such activities, the Kelabit identity becomes stronger.

How do members of an ethnic group conceptualise other people outside their boundaries? At the local level, a person identifies himself with his village – a territorial residential unit. But despite the apparent trivial nature of certain differences in linguistic and customary usage between villages, the person will emphasise them in their conceptualisation of 'us' and 'them' (King 1982: 31). The Maloh individuals, for example identify with 'river-based grouping', what

Freeman (1950) calls a 'tribe' among the Iban. The concepts of 'us' and 'them' are varied during different regimes be it the Brooke government or the colonial government. The term 'them' may refer to people who have the same cultural traits as 'us', but at the same time are conceptualised by 'us' as 'them' because they do not live in the same residential unit.

I would conceptualise the notion of 'us' and 'them' as 'otherness', because the relevant people perceive those who do not live in the same residential unit as 'other people' even though they may be in the same cultural group. For example, among the Bidayuh are the Bukar Sadong from Serian District, Biatah from Penrissen and Padawan area, Jagoi and Singgai from Bau area, and Selako from Lundu area. These groups are categorised as Bidayuh in the population census and government documents. Also, there is a Dayak Bidayuh National Association (DBNA) formed in 1986 to bring the Bidayuh together in education seminars, cultural events and social meetings. The Bidayuh do share some cultural traits and they speak the same language, which has different dialects. The Biatah, the Jagoi and the Singgai do not understand Bukar Sadong dialect unless they learn to speak it. They play similar traditional musical instruments but produce different rhythms and they dance different traditional dances that represent different messages. For example, the Bukar Sadong performed the *Belanggi* dance that represents the spirit visitation while the Biatah performed the *Rejang Bauh* dance, imitating the eagle movements.

The Bidayuh rarely identify themselves by using the term 'Bidayuh' to other ethnic groups unless in a situation where they are asked if they are Malay, Iban, Kayan or Bidayuh. Normally they would identify themselves as Dayak Jagoi or Dayak Singgai for those who are from Bau area, or Dayak Padawan for those who come from Padawan area or Dayak Penrissen for those who originate from Penrissen area, or Dayak Bukar for those who come from Serian. Among them, they rarely identify themselves as Bidayuh. The Biatah from Penrissen would be identified by the other Bidayuh as Bperoh, and those who come from Padawan as Bara Pedawan't and the Bukar Sadong from Serian are called Bsadung (?) while the Singgai from Bau are called Besengei. This fact shows that the everyday-defined identity, which exists because of the sense of 'otherness' is the most important among the 'Bidayuh'.

## CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the significance of the authority defined and the identity everyday defined identity of the diverse ethnic groups in Sarawak. It has shown that everyday defined identity is sustainable because of the 'self awareness' of members of the diverse ethnic groups and the 'sense of otherness' they developed towards others. Based on the everyday defined identity, an ethnic identity that is authority defined is created, reinforced, manipulated

and changed. Nevertheless, the authority defined identity is situational; it is accept and adopt as an ethnic marker only when it is assumed to be appropriate depending on situations. However, in the interaction within the ethnic groups, the externally imposed term, i.e., the authority defined identity is often ignored while the everyday defined identity is strengthened.

It has shown that in Sarawak, the construction of ethnic identity is based on colonial knowledge, which constructed the identities of the colonial subjects. The Brooke government and its successors used the locally based or the everyday defined identity and then they modified it to suit the colonial definition of ethnicity. These ethnic labels were extensively used to contrast various ethnic groups for administrative purposes. The colonial definition often took into account cultural traits, religion, social organization and presumed origin.

However, this article has shown that such ethnic construction is problematic because cultural traits frequently cross group boundaries. Cultural boundaries are not clear-cut, nor do they necessarily correspond with ethnic boundaries. In fact, this criterion is used as a justification after the people have been assigned into an ethnic category.

Ethnicity is not so much a product of a common living. It is a product of self-awareness of one's belonging to a particular group and one's distinctive differences with other groups. In the case of Sarawak, self-awareness of one's belonging to a particular group result in self-ascription and self-identification. The process of self-ascription and identification need not necessarily undergo a change similar to various ethnic markers such as material possession or heritage, architecture, lifestyle and language that can change with time.

The product of self-awareness, that is the concept of 'us' and 'them', among the indigenous people in Sarawak appears when they attempt to distinguish themselves from others. The 'other' refers to people who do not live in the same residential unit even though they may be in the same group or may have the same cultural background. This concept is continuously used by the Bidayuh and the Orang Ulu who focus on ascriptive elements of ethnicity.

The externally imposed term or the sometimes authority defined identity coincide with internally generated term or the everyday-defined identity. This happens when the people are recognised in a larger category, for example, as the Orang Ulu or the Dayak or the Bidayuh. However, the two identities would always be independent of each other because the externally imposed term is used for different purposes according to the needs of the ethnic group, while the everyday defined identity is used in everyday defined interactions.

#### NOTES

1. For example, Moerman (1965) in his work *Who are the Lue?* Tries to describe who the Lue were and in what ways they were distinctive from other ethnic groups. However, after listing a number of criteria commonly used by anthropologists to demarcate cultural groups such as language, political organization and territorial

contiguity, he states: "Since language, culture, political organization, etc., do not correlate completely, the units delimited by one criterion do not coincide with the units delimited by another" (Moerman 1965: 1215). The Lue mentioned cultural traits which they in fact shared with other neighboring groups when they were asked about their typical characteristics. Therefore, being unable to argue that this 'Lueness' can be defined with reference to objective cultural features or clear-cut boundaries, Moerman defines it as an *emic category of ascription* (the native's point of view) (Eriksen 1993: 11).

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