

Ethnic Pluralism and Ethnic Relations in Sarawak

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membincangkan sejarah dan kedinamikan kontemporari pluralisme etnik dan hubungan etnik di Sarawak. Perbincangan ini adalah berdasarkan 'in-depth interview' yang telah dijalankan sepanjang tahun 1999-2001. Kajian menunjukkan bahawa kedinamikan pluralisme etnik dan hubungan etnik di Sarawak pada masa kini pada asasnya dibentuk oleh sejarah hubungan dan interaksi yang awal. Selain itu, sikap bertolak-ansur pluralis dalam pelbagai aspek telah menyumbang kepada pembentukan asas interaksi yang lebih kukuh. Kajian juga mendapati di antara unsur yang jelas menunjukkan pluralisme etnik di Sarawak pada masa kini adalah perkahwinan campur di antara individu dari pelbagai kebudayaan dan agama, tolak-ansur mengenai agama dan pusat keagamaan, penyertaan dan kerjasama penduduk pribumi, penyertaan bersama orang Melayu dan Cina dalam aktiviti perniagaan, serta sikap tolak-ansur dalam perayaan yang berteraskan budaya dan agama.

Kata kunci: pluralisme etnik, hubungan etnik, tolak-ansur pluralis

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the historical and contemporary dynamics of ethnic pluralism and ethnic relations in Sarawak. The discussion is based on numerous in-depth interviews that were conducted throughout 1999-2001. Results showed that the dynamics of ethnic pluralism and ethnic relations in contemporary Sarawak are basically molded by the history of the earlier patterns of interaction and relations. Additionally, pluralist tolerances in many respects contribute towards forging a stronger foundation for closer interactions. The study also found intermarriages of people with different cultural and religious backgrounds, tolerance of religions and religious places, the participation and cooperation of the native, Malay and Chinese in business activities and tolerance in cultural and religious festivities to be the most prominent features of ethnic pluralism in present-day Sarawak.

Keyword: ethnic pluralism, ethnic relations, pluralist tolerances

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the historical and contemporary dynamics of ethnic pluralism and ethnic relations in Sarawak. Sarawak is a multi-ethnic society in east Malaysia whose plural characteristics have been shaped and reshaped by ruling regimes and native society alike. To understand its present-day pluralism, this paper first attempts to analyze the significance of the historical patterns of ethnic relations, and then uses an analysis of interviews conducted during 1998-1999 for the project on Southeast Asian Pluralisms¹, and a numerous interviews throughout 2000-2001 to understand the contemporary dynamics of pluralism and ethnic relations in Sarawak.

THE PEOPLE AND PLURALISM: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sarawak is a multi-ethnic society that consists of more than thirty ethnic groups. The varied groups are today found scattered in almost every division of Sarawak as a result of recent migration for work, settlement, and education (Jeffrey 1999:7).

Early ethnic relations in Sarawak were influenced by headhunting and warfare, as well as by inter-ethnic contacts through trading and inter-marriages. The

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

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

* 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*² (Jeffrey 1999a:7).

great peace-making held in 1924 at Kapit, mid-way up the Rejang River in the most central part of Sarawak, brought together native chiefs from all over the region. Before this, however, warfare and headhunting were recognized as the central problems. Headhunting and head taking, which were carried out by most ethnic groups in Sarawak were associated with the traditional belief systems and practices. Several accounts reported that taking heads was associated with certain positive benefits that accrued to the whole group, in terms of status improvement, better health, or release from mourning (Freeman 1970, Rousseau 1975 quoted from Hoskins 1996:12-13). Thus, the situation in Sarawak during the pre-Brooke and Brooke era (1841-1941) was, in short, not one of social peace nor of ethnic harmony.

HEADHUNTING AND TRIBAL WARFARE

What evidence do we have of premodern relations among people in interior Sarawak other than raiding and headhunting? In his much-read analysis, Victor King asserts that "culture contact" occurred primarily as a result of Iban headhunting raids into other regions, particularly the Bukitan. In King's view, contact was a positive result of warfare, and he notes that "*if one takes Freeman's discussion of Iban penetration of the Rejang then it is obvious that warfare was by no means the only expression of culture contact*" (King 1976:321). According to King, Freeman's description of the relationships between the Iban and the Bukitan³ was *symbiotic in character*. However, a closer analysis reveals the alliance of Iban with the Malays and the Brooke government in which they served as the fighting force. This resulted in raiding by the Ibans that were manipulated to suit certain needs of both the Malay and Brooke Government (Jeffrey 1999b:34).

It is difficult to give a definitive explanation as to why the culture contact between ethnic groups only occurred as a result of warfare, and not through civil interactions. It seems that cultural attitudes had led to hostility, whilst at a later date, other factors sometimes brought about friendlier relations. However, this "friendship" actually resulted in the ownership of Bukitan by the Iban chiefs, who traded them like hunting dogs (Sandin 1967, quoted from Morgan 1968:150).

To a certain extent, the nature of Iban relations⁴ with other groups during the pre-Brooke rule was based on economics. If there was no potential to form trade relations, interactions were largely confined to raiding. It seemed that the Iban had trade relations with a limited number of groups (probably only with the Malays, and Chinese). Pringle (1970:51) saw Iban aggression largely in the context of prestige and status seeking. Undoubtedly, to raid other groups was an advantage to the Iban because it increased their individual prestige. This affected relations not only with other ethnic groups but among the Iban groups as well.

The pre-Brooke relationship between the Iban and the Malays developed into something quite different after the new government came into power. The involvement of the Iban with the coastal Malays was also partly developed through the important exchange of Malay salted fish and salt for Iban rice. Later, this trade gave rise to a political relationship between the Moslem Malay and the animist Iban. On each of the various rivers of the Iban country there was always at least one Moslem chief who conceived of himself as the ruler of the entire river (Pringle 1970:62). The Malays attempted to collect an annual rice tax from every Iban family, by acting in the name of the Sultan of Brunei⁵ (Pringle 1970:63). As salt was an important item among the Iban, they were willing to make "peace with one petty Malay chief for the purpose of obtaining salt" (Earl 1837:318, quoted from Pringle 1970:64). The Malays used this opportunity to exploit the salt trade for political ends. However, as the Iban moved down towards the lower waters of the rivers in the mid-eighteenth century, they came into contact with the Malays. Thus, the Iban and Malay were intermingled in the lower reaches of all the rivers in the Iban country. In terms of political power, the Malay chiefs in the Iban country depended largely on his ability to rally the Iban to fight on his behalf (Pringle 1970:62). The Malay chiefs regarded themselves as both rulers and traders, but in the absence of all political security, trade was threatened. The chiefs condoned headhunting raids and did their uncertain best to manipulate the headhunters to their own advantage. To the Iban, the raids were a novel manifestation of their love of war, heads and travel; while to the Malay, raids substituted for their previous income (Pringle 1970, Crisswell 1993). In this sense, it seemed that the Iban and the Malays depended upon each other. However, although the Malay chiefs and their Iban followers together raided other native groups, they actually formed an *uneasy alliance* (Crisswell 1993:9). The Iban were too independent to become the Malay chiefs' serfs and could only be persuaded to do what pleased them (Pringle 1970:65, Crisswell 1993:9). In fact, the Iban were independent enough to raid other groups without Malay assistance.

The Iban also took military advantage of their alliance with the Malays. Pringle commented that "it was the peculiar Iban *bejalai* which led the Iban into the habit of coastal raiding in the first place" (Pringle 1970:67), I suggest that the Iban also shared in whatever the Malay accumulated from the raiding. As Freeman (1955:74) described, Iban *bejalai* was "for material profit and social prestige". Prosperity, as Pringle (1970:24) reported, was always reckoned in terms of possession of heirlooms, either old ceramic jars of Chinese origin or Brunei brassware, the acquisition of which symbolized both wealth and good reputation. Accordingly, I assume that the Iban only agreed to cooperate with the Malays if the activities involved also resulted in material profit. Of course, it is probable that prior to the alliance with the Malays, the purpose of the Iban's warfare was not simply head-takings, but also the accumulation of wealth. The Iban did not foster 'friendly relationships' with other groups, such as the Land

Dayak, Kayan, Kenyah, and Melanau, nor with the nomadic groups, particularly the Bukitan, Seru and Kanowit. Thus, the alliance with the Malay may have driven the Iban to undertake much more serious raids towards these groups, and led to a worsening of relations.

The relations between the Iban and the other groups changed when the Brooke Government came into power.⁶ The Brooke regime brought immediate changes in the Malay-Iban relationship, particularly in the Second Division where they lived intermingled with each other, and formed alliances for raiding against other groups. The Malays gathered around the new forts, sometimes at the direct bidding of the government, and old style mixed settlements slowly vanished (Pringle 1970:285). Moreover, the Brooke Rajahs or rulers created a new kind of inter-group relation between the Iban, Malay and other groups, particularly the migrant Chinese. From the beginning of his rule, the Rajah welcomed the Chinese to Sarawak, realising that a Chinese population was the surest key to economic self-sufficiency⁷ (Pringle 1970:105).

ETHNIC RELATIONS AND TRADING CONTACTS

The Chinese were traders (even though some of them who arrived at the Second Division were predominantly farmers), and their arrival undermined the Malay's role as traders among the native people. The traditional Malay traders could not easily survive in competition with the Chinese who maintained permanent shops, and who understood and used cash. Furthermore, the kind of trading, which the Malays had traditionally carried on among the native people, did not seem to the Rajah to be worth encouraging. The Malays conducted their business through barter and peddled up and down river to the native settlements (Pringle 1970:286). Hence, the Iban and Melanau dealt with the Chinese traders, probably because the Chinese were more "sophisticated" and willing to give them credit. While the Malay trade waned slowly, it never entirely disappeared. Malay peddlers continued to serve as the middlemen between the bazaar Chinese and the people of the interior. The Chinese soon established a more effective trade relation with the Iban. In the Second Division, for instance, the Chinese conducted their trade in two ways: the Iban made periodic visits to the bazaars where the Chinese were located; while the Chinese traveled upriver in floating shops, stopping at longhouses.

The trade activities created a way to encourage inter-group relations in Sarawak. Although the Malay peddlers did not have well established businesses like the Chinese, they became important in the long distance relationship between the natives of the interior and the Chinese traders by acting as the middleman. The more the Chinese depended on jungle produce, the more anxious they were for a large and friendly native population. The Chinese-Iban relationship was not entirely harmonious, apparently because the Chinese sometimes cheated their customers by using rigged scales to weigh jungle produce.

Furthermore, the early outstation Chinese were often rough and boisterous, while the Iban were hot-tempered; thus communal quarrels inevitably occurred (Pringle 1970:289). The Chinese were more benevolent with the other native groups, for instance, the Kayan and Kenyah, probably because they seldom came into contact with them. For instance, this considerate attitude of the Chinese towards the non-Iban people was evident when several Kenyah chiefs in the Baram were fined \$3 000.00 for murdering a party of Second Division Iban in 1894. Most of the fines were immediately paid by the Chinese shopkeepers of Marudi, who undoubtedly extracted gradual repayment in jungle produce from the Kenyah (Pringle 1970:291). This could be viewed purely as a method of securing the source of jungle produce. But in actual fact, the Chinese also contributed to the establishment of friendly relations (Jeffrey 1999a:53).

ETHNIC RELATIONS THROUGH INTERMARRIAGES

Whilst the Brooke government attempted to encourage peaceful inter-group relations, the groups themselves remained separated. Even when intermarriage between Chinese traders and Iban women were quite common, the Brooke government opposed such marriages due to related legal and political issues, such as who should keep the children should the couple separated. Moreover, the Brooke government never at any period officially recognized mixed-blood status.⁸ The Rajah's refusal to recognize the indeterminate status was part of a broader inclination to define the distinctions between the cultural communities as clearly as possible. The Malay and Chinese traders were not permitted to live with the native people at the longhouse, nor to build shop huts in the native settlements (Pringle 1970:297). The prohibition first became a formal and finable offence in the late 1870s. Offenders could be jailed for up to six months (Pringle 1970:297). In these conditions, the people in Sarawak were unable to experience close social interaction, or even to live in close proximity to one another.

The involvement of the Brooke rulers in inter-group warfare changed the pattern of ethnic and inter-group hostile relations in Sarawak. Raiding and headhunting developed into "peaceful hostile relations" based upon mutual suspicion when Brooke came into power. Even though trade and social relations became more organized in Sarawak after the abolition of warfare, the inter-group relations in the area was still hostile. Trade relations based on mutual economic interests cannot be viewed as civil social interactions, and the interdependence between the traders and customers does not necessary lead to friendly relationships (Jeffrey 1999a:54). The Brooke Government's segregation settlement program resulted in a permanent "ethnic" separation, hindering civil social interaction. This was made worse when the Brooke government did not recognize mixed-blood children.

However, although mutual suspicions existed among the people in Sarawak, intermingling with each other continued in the trading center such as in shops in

small towns. This happened especially when there were Chinese traders who operated actively to buy the jungle products and agricultural products from the natives.

Apart from trading centers, the people in Sarawak also interacted in mission schools. The first education program that was seen as representing the first move towards a system of national education in Sarawak was the Malay Day school. It was an important attempt made by the missionaries to bring the Muslims and Christians into contact through their education program. The Anglican missionaries established the school for Malay men and boys in 1848. However, the school was short-lived partly due to lack of staff and also because it was not a priority among the missionaries after its pioneer, Reverend W.B. Right left Sarawak in 1849. In addition, the Malays refused to allow any religious teachings that exceeded the common ground between the Islam and Christianity and the Brooke government insisted on its policy of non-interference with Muslim subjects (Ooi 1991:290-1).

Christian missionaries focused on mission schools for the purpose of educating and at the same time christening the locals who attended the schools and lived in the boarding house. The mission schools functioned as useful institutions to spread Christian values and virtues, with the ultimate intention of converting their students to Christianity. As a result, the Muslims and Malays refused to attend and to send their children to the mission schools. In a way, the mission schools restricted interactions between people of different religious backgrounds. The restriction on the location of mission activities inhibited the interactions between individuals from different ethnic groups because each ethnic group came from a different denomination and church, with a different perception of each other's belief. Furthermore, as every settlement had its own mission school and church, the individuals did not interact with individuals from other ethnic groups.

Only the mission schools established in the state capital of Kuching, which were the main educational institutions for the missionaries, did the ethnic groups interact, and even then, they were only the Land Dayaks, Ibans and Chinese. The schools were such as St. Joseph School and St. Teresa School, set up by the Catholic Mission Society, St. Thomas and St. Mary School, set up by the Anglican Mission Society in Kuching during the Brooke regime. This pattern of interactions and intermingling continued throughout the British colonial rule (1942-1963).

ETHNIC PLURALISM AND RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY SARAWAK

Ethnic pluralism and ethnic relations in contemporary Sarawak have advanced to a new level where inter-ethnic interactions are more extensive. Mutual suspicions may still exist and there may also be some stereotyping of each other.

However, these aspects are not the determining features of inter-ethnic relations today. Based on the interviews as well as observations and the author's previous study of Sarawak multi-ethnicity and pluralism, inter-marriage and religious tolerance are important features of ethnic pluralism in Sarawak.

TOLERANCE IN INTER-MARRIAGE

In Sarawak, the society is not only multi-ethnic, but also consists of individuals of mixed parentage as a result of inter-marriages. While people of mixed blood extraction were not recognized as belonging to any specific ethnic group during the Brooke regime, this issue is solved by the present Sarawak government. Today, prior to the registration of the birth of a child, the offspring should follow the father's ethnic category. Therefore, in Sarawak, it is quite common to find individuals of mixed parentage but are identified as pure indigenous groups based on the ethnicity of the father.

In relations to inter-marriage, during the early formation of Malaysia and the introduction of the identity card system in Sarawak, the Chinese, particularly those in Kuching working as shopkeepers and farmers and who lived near the Bidayuh area had taken advantage of inter-marriage to obtain native status. Also, it had become very common for Chinese men to marry native women. This is so because the land title can be registered under their spouse's name. Many had also claimed themselves as Bidayuh and changed their names. For example, a Chinese name 'Bong Jun Kheng' became 'Junkhen'. Later, the name of the child of this particular individual would appear in the birth certificate for example, as 'Catherine anak Junkhen'. *Anak* means 'the child of' and 'Catherine anak Junkhen' is 'Catherine the child of Junken'. The reason for Chinese becoming Bidayuh by name at that time was to obtain native status to enable them to buy native land from the native for their economic purposes. This is because native land in Sarawak is not for sale to any non-native. However, since then the registration of births had been very strict since the Sarawak government has become aware of this status manipulation.

Inter-marriage between the Malays (Islam) and the non-Muslims is also very common in Sarawak even though currently it is becoming an important issue among the educated non-Muslim Sarawakians. However, it is not so much on the intermarriage between the non-Muslims native with the Muslims from Sarawak. University students⁹ in particular are against non-Muslim natives and Malay Muslim students from the Peninsular Malaysia forming relationships under the pretext of preserving 'native culture and values'. The non-Muslims have the tendency to remain in Peninsular Malaysia once they are married to the Muslims there because in many cases their spouses cannot adapt to the native culture and values in Sarawak. Many non-Muslims students from Sarawak at the university showed their concern on this issue based on the view that it is a loss for Sarawak because they are educated and have the potential to contribute to

Sarawak development and man power. The non-Muslims do not openly show their dislike towards the mixed relationships but it is discussed during their meetings. It is their objective to keep the non-Muslims students together so very often they organized social gatherings and outings such as sports, Christmas and harvest festival dinners so that they can get to know each other. The social gatherings are held with the Sarawak Students Association from other universities in Malaysia as well.

When the non-Muslims convert to Islam, they will change their names and practice Malay-Muslims culture and values. They would then be no longer recognized as what they were, either as Bidayuh, Iban, Kayan and so forth. To the older generations (those who grew up in the 1960's to 1980's), the issue of Islam is not significant. Thus, for example, among the Bidayuh who lived side by side with the Malays or lived in close proximity with each other, they have Malay cousins and relatives. They are not recognized or identified by their religion (Islam) or as Muslims, but according to their ethnic group 'Malay' or in the Bidayuh dialect, *Keriang*. There is tolerance and respect on both sides: the Muslims and non-Muslims. Based on my earlier study of two Malay villages (Kampung Landeh and Paya Mebi Baru in Kuching), there is no difference in the acceptance and treatment by the family towards native in-laws and non-native in-laws. The most common remarks made by the Muslim family towards inter-marriage is that they are grateful to have native in-laws because it is an opportunity for them to expand the family into a different community despite their cultural differences. The Bidayuh family normally treats inter-marriages with Muslims as something quite common. It is probably the fear of losing their children who are married to Muslims that the parents would just make positive remarks to the effect that as long as the children remember their root and responsibility to the parents, and come back home for *Gawai* (harvest festival) and the family get-together, the parents would be most happy and grateful.

Based on the interviews, inter-marriages are common. An informant who is of Bidayuh-Melanau-Malay extraction stated that "it is good to have inter-marriages because we really feel that we are together". According to this informant, there is no gap between the family members and his relatives who among them are the Bidayuh, Malay, Melanau and Chinese except for their religion, because everyone tolerate the differences. They celebrate Chinese New Year, Christmas, *Gawai*, and *Hari Raya* together.

Informant 1: Religious dakwah officer A Muslim religious *dakwah* (missionary) officer who identified himself as a Malay of Indian descent is married to a Bidayuh woman from Bau, Kuching. They were students of ITM (Institute Teknologi Mara) when they first met. They have seven children. Having different cultural backgrounds and languages, both speak the Sarawak local Malay and English to the children but at the same time, the children are also encouraged to speak Bidayuh language when the children visit their Bidayuh cousins

and relatives. As a religious *dakwah* officer, he sees the importance of learning Arabic. Therefore, he encourages his children to learn Arabic so that they can read and understand the Quran well.

Informant 2: Lawyer A Bidayuh lawyer who owns a law firm in Kuching married to a Chinese woman who is an accountant from Kuala Lumpur. Both of them are now working together in the law firm. They met in the University of Malaya, in Kuala Lumpur when they were students. They speak English at home with their two children but at the same time encouraged their children to speak Bidayuh and Cantonese. They do not speak Bahasa Malaysia to their children because it is a language they can learn in school or when speaking to their schoolmates. The children are registered as Bidayuh in the birth certificates.

Informant 3: Sales Manager An informant who is working as a Sales and Marketing manager of a center of ethnic tourism in Kuching married a Chinese-Iban woman. The wife is Iban by birth because her father is Iban but she speaks both languages and teaches at the International School in Kuching that uses English as the medium of instruction. The informant is an offspring of many inter-marriages in his family. His grandfather is an Indian from Singapore and married to a Melanau woman in the early 1930's and the informant's father who identified himself as Melanau married to a Malay woman. The informant is registered as a Melanau in the birth certificate but he prefers to identify himself as a Malay because he cannot speak Melanau. Both speak English and Sarawak local Malay to the children but the children are also encouraged to speak Iban and learn Chinese. His children (following the father's ethnicity) are registered as Melanau even though they cannot understand and speak Melanau dialect.

PLURALISTIC TOLERANCE IN PUBLIC SPACES

Pluralistic tolerance exists in various forms in Sarawak and flourishes among small business owners, particularly food outlet operators. Non-Muslims know that eating places are a sensitive issue among Muslims. There is some kind of arrangement indicating that pluralist mediation and tolerance have been worked out. Based on the author's earlier investigation in Kuching, a big food outlet is divided into two sections where Muslims and non-Muslims can open their food stalls without being suspicious of each other. There is no indication of the word *halal* or *non-halal* on the sections but customers know instantly when they walk in and look at what is available in the food stall. Sometimes if it is just for drinks, Muslims hang around with the non-Muslims at the Chinese food stalls.

Based on the interview, a Malay informant who is from Melaka (West Malaysia) compared the pluralistic tolerance between Sarawak and West Malaysia. He has been working for the Agriculture Department in Sarawak for 10 years before he decided to move to a non-governmental organization in Sarawak in

1996. He stated that in Sarawak everybody respects each other's religion and that in Sarawak Chinese coffee shops can exist side by side with Malay coffee shops. They can compromise on *halal* and *haram*. Also, in a coffee shop where a small food counter allocated by the shop owner, there is the Chinese selling *mee koloh* and chicken or pork rice, the Malay selling *mee Laksa* and the Javanese selling *mee Jawa*. The customers are also from various ethnic groups and religions.

According to this informant, in many places in Sarawak, the most unique atmosphere to see is the existence of religious tolerance. In Iris Garden, in Kuching for example, the mosque, the *Sidang Injil Borneo* churches, and the Buddhist temple are built side by side. There is a peaceful atmosphere where people can perform their respective religious obligations without being suspicious of or disturbed by each other.

Nevertheless, it is normal that people would not react if everyone keeps within the bounds of their own territory. Followers of different religions in that area may not know what is happening in the other religious buildings and they may not want to know what the others are doing. They probably take the easiest way to keep their own religious activity going smoothly without causing any problems to the others. This is a manifestation of pluralist respect and tolerance for others' religious beliefs and practices.

Another unique situation in Sarawak is during *Gawai* (harvest festival) held annually on June 1st. It is a festival that involves practically everyone in Sarawak. It is a traditional festival that all ethnic groups tolerate and participate. Normally the Iban and Bidayuh celebrate *Gawai* on a big scale where there is food and drink for the guests. From my earlier investigation, among the Bidayuh who lived in close proximity to the Muslims, they would normally invite their Muslim neighbours to come over and help them to slaughter the chickens or ducks in the Muslim/halal way. They prefer to have the halal meat as they do not want to offend their Muslim guests. However, the Muslim guests normally are not fussy about the way the chicken is slaughtered or cooked so long as it is not served with pork in a manner offensive to them. They respect the others' values and practice.

PLURALIST CONTESTATIONS

In Sarawak, there is pluralist tolerance in inter-marriages where the people have less limitation on mixed marriages despite differences in religion and culture. Also, tolerance in public places of the people in Sarawak is quite impressive despite the issue of halal and haram among the Muslims. Diverse cultural backgrounds and differences in religious values and practices do not appear to be a great barrier for the interaction and intermingling among the people in Sarawak. However, in certain ways, the Malays and the natives become more cautious

about their status as *Bumiputra*.¹⁰ In Sarawak, the term *Bumiputra* is used quite differently from the Peninsular Malaysia.

In Sarawak, when it involves the issue of *Bumiputra* status, the non-Muslim *Bumiputra*, and the Muslim *Bumiputra* would show their sentiment towards non-*Bumiputra* namely Chinese and Indians. Certain issues pertaining to land ownership and other privileges that they get as *Bumiputra* such as business financial and consultancy assistance from SEDC (Sarawak Economic Development Center), etc. are jealously guarded. In other words, the economic domain is an area of contestation between natives and non-natives.

Based on the interviews, most of the informants express the above sentiments when the issue of *Bumiputra* status was raised.

Informant 1: Managing Director of Food Industries This informant started his business by selling junk food by the road side. He stated that “China man” business style has influenced the way he was making to be in his current business position. He was impressed by many successful Chinese businessmen who were not educated, yet they managed to build their business empire in Sarawak. One of his idol is Datuk Lau Hui Kang, the Managing Director of K.T.S Holding in Sarawak.

However, he mentioned that if SEDC did not approve his application for financial and consultancy assistance, he would not have the opportunity to expand his business as it is today because he did not have enough capital to proceed with bigger investments for his business. He stated that as a *Bumiputra* there are many ways of getting assistance. This special treatment for the *Bumiputra* is important or else none of the *Bumiputra* would be able to compete with the Chinese in business. Therefore, he agreed that the *Bumiputra* should be given subsidy and apprenticeship programs in business. He sees the *Bumiputra* as “beginners and handicapped” business people while the Chinese are “professional players”, adding that the Chinese should not question the privileges the *Bumiputra* get from the government because the Chinese and *Bumiputra* can work together in business once the *Bumiputra* are secure and have improved themselves.

Informant 2: Sales and Marketing Manager of center of ethnic tourism This informant emphasized the importance of the *Bumiputra* status for development especially to secure land for any economic venture. He stated that for the Chinese, they will have to get married to the natives if they want to buy and own a piece of land. When he was asked about the possibility to standardize the status of the Chinese and the *Bumiputra* in Sarawak, meaning that the status of everyone in Sarawak is at par, he disagreed strongly. According to him, the Chinese are very intelligent in economic activities and that the Chinese will be able to occupy every business opportunity if everyone’s status in Sarawak is at par. This will disadvantage the economically weak *Bumiputra*.

Informant 3: Dakwah Officer This informant specifically emphasized the importance of being a Bumiputra, meaning that everyone who is native to Sarawak should confront any element that could cause disturbance to his/her position as the original inhabitant of the land. He argued that the Chinese form the second largest group in the population in Sarawak, and if they were given the Bumiputra status (for example, those who came over during the Brooke regime between 1841-1941 were treated such), and their in-migration was not controlled, the Chinese would be the majority in the population.

According to this informant, the Chinese have come over to Sarawak because of their economic deprivation and political turmoil in China, but their presence here could disadvantage the Sarawak people if the Bumiputera status is accorded to the Chinese. He also stated that the natives need the Bumiputra status because they do not have the network like the Chinese community. This informant also emphasized the importance of native land rules that the Iban and Bidayuh have hold for years because that will ensure that there would still be many land available for the next generation and that the native land rules is a guarantee to the people that the land would not be sold out to the non-natives of Sarawak.

THE FUTURE OF PLURALISM AND ETHNIC RELATIONS

Sarawak is focusing on developing its economic and many Bumiputras in Sarawak are working together with the Chinese in business. Nowadays, the Chinese are keen and willing to be partners to the Bumiputra in building their business. This is because the convenience of getting business license under the Bumiputras partners would give them more business opportunity to expand in a shorter time. In other words, the Bumiputras are the source of extra capital and projects while the Chinese offer skills in managing the business.

This is happening particularly in the timber industry. Based on the interview, an informant who is the Managing Director for a company in Sarawak – a company dealing mainly with exporting and importing timber and timber products – mentioned that in the timber industry, a company that plan to be listed in the stock market, would require a particular timber license. In Sarawak, timber license is issued by the government agency, i.e., the STIDC (Sarawak Timber Industrial Development Center). However, the participation of Bumiputras is the most important requirement for the Chinese company to obtain the timber license.

The participation of Bumiputras in the timber industry is mainly in the logging activities and only a few are offered a higher position such as directors or managers. The administrative and managerial posts are mainly occupied by the Chinese. The informant stated clearly that most of the shareholders in his company are Chinese. He argued that his company employ Chinese as adminis-

trators and managers because he perceived that the Bumiputra graduates have better opportunity to get jobs in government departments and Bumiputra companies as compared to Chinese graduates.

Basically, the above situations will continue to exist among the people in Sarawak, particularly among the Chinese businessmen because of certain policies that seem to restrict their opportunity to acquire many business opportunities. The Chinese will be more eager to try every opportunity that they can foresee even if they have to get the Bumiputras to participate. To a certain extent, the cooperation between the Chinese and the Bumiputras in business is bringing certain good values that not only enables closer ethnic interactions but also in fostering understanding and trust of each other.

Based on the interviews, the religious sphere in Sarawak show that people exercise tolerance of each other's beliefs, practices and values. Despite the differences the people in Sarawak are able to come to terms with one another. They respect and tolerate each other's religion and beliefs because they make themselves available to participate in the other's religious and cultural festivities. The Chinese New Year is celebrated by others because the Chinese have an open house on the first day inviting their neighbors and friends to celebrate together. The Malays do the same thing for their Hari Raya. Both the Chinese and the Malays hold open houses during their respective festivals because of the influence of the native culture particularly the Iban and Bidayuh. During *Gawai*, the longhouses have a great feast and everyone is welcomed without any discrimination. The Chinese and the Malays reciprocate the *Gawai* visits by having a similar practice when they celebrate their respective festivals.

This tolerance is even greater with the flexibility of inter-marriages among the people of different religions and ethnic groups. Even if initially they do not want to participate in the other's religious and cultural festivities, they would be curious when those events are discussed during family gatherings. Normally, family members would make an effort to visit the in-laws of different religions or ethnic group to show respect and courtesy. In that way, knowledge and respect of the other's religion and beliefs can be heightened. Religion would not be a big issue among the people in Sarawak when it comes to inter-marriages. Apart from Christianity, Islam is not seen as a religion that limits or creates a gap between non-Muslim family members and the potential Muslim converts among the family members. They are all regarded as one.

In general, the people in Sarawak feel comfortable and secure with each other. Many seem to accept their position in the developing state and let everyone play his/her role. Based on the interviews, one informant, the Managing Director of a company, clearly stated that in multi-ethnic Sarawak, there should not be any fight over power to rule the state. He emphasized that every ethnic group should know clearly what they are capable of doing. According to him, Sarawakians should let the Malay or Melanau govern and have political power because they have more experiences as they have been in that position since the

early formation of Malaysia. The Chinese on the other hand, should continue to do business and make profit because this would bring revenue to the state when they pay their taxes. He emphasized that it would be better for Sarawak if politicians concentrate on politics and leave business to businessmen who are not politicians, because their respective roles are then clearly defined.

The people in Sarawak are quite content with their status as Sarawakians but would feel offended when others mistook them for the people from Sabah. This happens particularly when Sarawakians introduce themselves to people from Peninsular Malaysia. Based on the interviews, most of the informants expressed their frustration when some individuals from Peninsular Malaysia lack basic knowledge about Sarawak, for example, by confusing Kuching, which is the capital of Sarawak, and assume it to be located in Sabah. Not only that, they are ignorant about the various ethnic groups in Sarawak and often mix them up with those in Sabah.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic relations in Sarawak have undergone tremendous changes throughout different historical periods. From the most hostile relations caused by the headhunting and warfare among the natives, they developed a more quiet but mutual suspicions kind of relations during the Brooke government. The actions of the Brooke regime (1841-1941) to reduce native warfare have certainly brought about important changes. However, such ethnic pluralism and ethnic relations initially did not contribute to closer interactions between the people in Sarawak because they were living in segregated settlements originally planned by the Brooke government to keep peace and prevent blood-letting among the various ethnic groups.

As the people seemed able to intermingle with each other without creating any havoc in public spaces such as trading centers, churches and schools, ethnic relations showed a high level of improvement. This pattern of interaction and intermingling continued and improved further during the British colonial period after 1941 until independence in 1963. During this period, many natives and Malay employees worked in government offices, schools and hospitals as well as participated in small trading activities alongside the Chinese.

The dynamics of ethnic pluralism and ethnic relations in contemporary Sarawak are basically molded by the history of the earlier patterns of interaction and relations. The "permanent ethnic separation" because of segregated settlements and the problem of not giving legal recognition to mixed blood offspring during the Brooke regime has been overcome by certain tolerant attitudes by the people and by government intervention. Based on the interviews, it could be seen that pluralist tolerance in many respects had contributed towards forging a stronger foundation for a closer interactions. Inter-marriages of people with dif-

ferent cultural and religious backgrounds, tolerance of religions and religious places, the participation and cooperation of the native, Malay and Chinese in business activities and tolerance in cultural and religious festivities are the most prominent features of ethnic pluralism in present-day Sarawak.

In intermarriages, the issue of religion among the non-Muslims is not significant. The Islamization through intermarriages does not become a big issue among the non-Muslims who lived in close proximity with the Muslims. The non-Muslims acknowledge the ethnic category 'Malay' rather than the religious category of the person (Islam), meaning that a Muslim could be anybody apart from Malays. Therefore, in Sarawak, there is tolerance in religious and cultural festivities such as Hari Raya, Chinese New Year, Christmas or Gawai where Sarawakians take a positive attitude by getting to know what is happening. Out of curiosity and neighbourliness, they participate in those events by visiting their neighbours who celebrate their respective festivals. They also show courtesy towards other religious activities by respecting and accepting other religious practices as they are. In short, intermarriages do contribute to this understanding and courteous attitudes because these attitudes are formed more easily in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious family.

Among the Chinese, such tolerance may have been formed due to the available options and opportunities particularly in business affairs. Based on the interviews, it is clear that the cooperation between the Chinese businessmen and the Bumiputra (native and Malay) is based on certain business requirements set by the government agencies. However, it seems that the Chinese have taken a more positive attitude, that is to work with the Bumiputras in order to expand their business opportunities. In other words, the Chinese are taking advantage of the available options in business while the Bumiputras are taking the opportunity to learn and to work together with the Chinese.

However, pluralism in Sarawak has its own contestations namely over the Bumiputera status. The Bumiputras are somewhat chauvinistic when it comes to defending their Bumiputra status. The chauvinistic attitude is rooted in their minds and make them feel that as the original people of Sarawak, they should enjoy the right to own land in Sarawak under the native land rules and enjoy the privileges as Bumiputras despite all the tolerance and respect they that show to the Chinese and other non-Bumiputera.

NOTES

1. This paper was written for the project *Southeast Asia Pluralisms: Social resources for civility and participation in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia*. Funded and organised by Ford Foundation, Jakarta, ISEC, Boston University, IKMAS, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
2. Detailed population is only recorded once in 10 years. The next census was carried out in the year 2000. However, up to this date 2003, the detail breakdown of ethnic groups is still inaccessible.

3. The Bukitan, whose ancestral territory was the Rejang, acted as guides and allies to the more technically numerous and more accomplished Iban warriors. Ultimately, the Bukitan lived in longhouses of their own making (Freeman 1970:134, quoted from King 1976:321). In fact, the Bukitan formed a “*nervous alliance with the Iban*” and used their expert familiarity with the lands they owned, to help the Iban fight other nomadic groups, such as the Seru, Punan and to combat other hindrances to Iban migration.
4. Moreover, it appears that there was no traditional Iban concept of tribal unity (King 1976:311). In Sandin’s (1967:81-9) ethno-historical account, some evidence was provided to demonstrate that in one river warring factions did appear.
5. Brooke later regarded this tax as traditional, and collected it throughout the Iban settlements themselves (Pringle 1970:63).
6. Headhunting, warfare, and feuding activities have been manipulated, and “*the enmity between these widely separated people was certainly a result, not of traditional feuds but of Raja Charles policy of using Ibans to kill Ibans*” (Crisswell 1994:52). To a certain extent, this statement is likely true, but Iban warfare with the Brooke alliance also united Iban groups who had previously experienced strained relations.
7. There was also a rebellion among the Chinese, particularly the Hakka gold-miners, who concentrated around Bau on the upper Sarawak river. They maintained close ties with the Chinese in Sambas at Kalimantan. The relations among both Chinese remained close even though the Dutch at Kalimantan defeated the Sambas Chinese in the ‘Kongsi Wars’ of 1853-4. The Chinese in Bau were the most reluctant to accept any directive from the Brooke government, thus there was a continual friction between them and James Brooke (Pringle 1970:105).
8. Therefore, it is impossible to estimate from written records the exact extent of intermarriage between the Chinese and Iban (Pringle 1970:296).
9. From previous interviews with the non-Muslim students at the Sarawak Students Association meetings at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor.
10. In Sarawak, the term *Bumiputera* is for the Malay and non-Malay (Muslims and non-Muslims) who are the native people of Sarawak. They are not Chinese and Indians. In Peninsular Malaysia, *Bumiputeras* status is owned by the Malays.

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