

**The Sarawak Museum Journal****Vol. XL No. 61****December 1989****ISSN: 0375-3050****E-ISSN: 3036-0188**

Citation: Fidler, R. C. (1989). Ethnic Identity in Multiethnic Societies. *The Sarawak Museum Journal*, XL (61): 21-26

ETHNIC IDENTITY IN MULTIETHNIC SOCIETIES**Richard C. Fidler**

Serious scientific concern with the structure and culture of multiethnic societies began in the 1940's with the publication by J.S. Furnivall (1939, 1948) of his studies of the Netherlands Indies (Indonesia). Because Furnivall was the pioneer and dominating force in the foundation of the science of "plural societies," many of his observations and assumptions regarding these societies are still considered fundamental and inherent characteristics of them. Because Furnivall studied Indonesia during its period of Dutch colonial rule and focused especially on "Colonial Policy and Practice" (the title of his 1948 book), multiethnic societies have become so strongly associated with colonialism that the linkage sometimes seems causative: multiethnic societies exist today because colonial governments created them and left them as a legacy of their imperialism. Our first step in understanding multiethnic societies is to recognize and acknowledge that this assumption is not true.

ETHNIC IDENTITY IN MULTIETHNIC SOCIETIES

by

Richard C. Fidler

Serious scientific concern with the structure and culture of multiethnic societies began in the 1940's with the publication by J.S. Furnivall (1939, 1948) of his studies of the Netherlands Indies (Indonesia). Because Furnivall was the pioneer and dominating force in the foundation of the science of "plural societies," many of his observations and assumptions regarding these societies are still considered fundamental and inherent characteristics of them. Because Furnivall studied Indonesia during its period of Dutch colonial rule and focused especially on "Colonial Policy and Practice" (the title of his 1948 book), multiethnic societies have become so strongly associated with colonialism that the linkage sometimes seems causative: multiethnic societies exist today because colonial governments created them and left them as a legacy of their imperialism. Our first step in understanding multiethnic societies is to recognize and acknowledge that this assumption is not true.

Multiethnic societies have existed as long as societies themselves, for any social grouping incorporates an infinite number of different individuals, each with his/her own set of identities, affiliations, and social distinctions. The more complex a society becomes, the more likely it is to differentiate segments of its population to facilitate the scheduling of tasks, division of labor, and organization of group behaviour (Cohen 1985: 109-112). Sex, kinship, rank, caste, and class are some frequent means of differentiation; ethnicity is just one more means, as old, as fundamental, as socially functional as the others. Societies have always incorporated plural identities; some of those identities have always been ethnic: there have always been multiethnic societies, and there always will be. Malays, Dayak groups, and even some Chinese all lived together and interacted with each other in the lands of Sarawak long before the Brookes and the British arrived on the scene. Sarawak has always been multiethnic.

The role of colonialism can not be ignored or dismissed. *Specific* policies and actions of *specific* colonial administrations historically caused or enhanced *specific* ethnic conditions in the lands under their control. Which groups, how many of them, and how they were ordered in the social system all contribute to the future composition and conduct of the society. It will never again be the same as it was before, but then it would not be any case, for societies are always in the process of change and re-formation. Specific historical events, such as colonialism, can affect the directions of that change,