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SARAWAK'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SINCE THE FORMATION OF MALAYSIA: A Case Study of 1966-1968 Students at Lawas Government Secondary School¹

Richard E. Schatz

INTRODUCTION

This is a case study focused on the evolution of the economy of the Malaysian state of Sarawak since the formation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963. It was carried out by examining the life experiences of a small group of students who first entered the new government secondary school in Lawas, Sarawak in January of 1966. Thirty-three of the 38 former students², from three distinct ethnic groups, were interviewed, with a focus on i) their parents' occupations and social and economic circumstances; ii) the students' backgrounds, their career paths, their locations, the role of their faith communities in their education and their careers, and their experiences in and with the public and private sectors in Sarawak; and iii) the educational, occupational and locational choices of the adult children of the original students.³

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I. Introduction

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The central hypothesis of this research is that secondary education played a key role in the structural transformation of the Sarawak economy and in the drastic social and economic transformation of the lives of all major ethnic groups in the state. Further, the government played a critically important role in i) promoting the state's social and economic development through the provision of this secondary education; ii) offering post secondary education opportunities; and iii) providing productive employment opportunities to secondary

school graduates in a largely merit-based environment. The latter is particularly significant in modern Malaysia as the country has moved more recently away from merit-based systems of i) university admissions and scholarships, and ii) hiring and promotion within the government sectors toward a system that overtly favours some ethnic groups (Othman *et al.*, 2008). The study also attempts to show that rural-urban migration over the past four decades in Sarawak was sizeable, but unusually balanced in that it involved relatively little flow of educated people to Kuala Lumpur, the national capital, or even to Kuching, the state capital. Finally, the case study shows how educational and employment opportunities for women have improved dramatically since independence in 1963.

At the time of the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the State of Sarawak on the Island of Borneo was an overwhelmingly rural, agricultural, low-income, poorly connected set of distinct ethnic and religious communities, with a small population (less than one million) thinly spread over the state's 124,000 sq. km. In the early 1960s, about 80 per cent of its labour force was in agriculture and per capita annual income averaged about \$200 (Schatz, 2007). And Lawas District, lying 800 km to the north of the state capital of Kuching, was an unusually isolated, sparsely populated, and overwhelmingly agricultural region in the 1960s.

By 2010, Sarawak had become a largely urban, service and manufacturing-oriented economy with an average annual real economic growth rate over the past four decades of nearly six per cent and per capita average income of about \$7,000 (*Yearbook of Statistics, Sarawak 2010*). Access to primary and secondary education had become universal, and there was a wide variety of public and private institutions of tertiary education. Infrastructure throughout the state improved dramatically, and Lawas District is now well connected by paved roads to Sabah, Brunei and neighbouring areas of Sarawak.

II. Methodology

This is a case study based on interviews with former students of Lawas Government Secondary School who entered the first Form I class (approximately equivalent to the 7th or 8th grade in the US system) of this school that was newly opened in January of 1966. This was the first secondary school in the Lawas District, and this first class had 38 students. During the months of May and June of 2008, the author visited Sarawak and interviewed 33 of these former students. The other five had either passed away or could not be contacted. Of the 33 respondents, 27 were interviewed in person and five were interviewed by telephone.⁴ In all cases, a questionnaire was employed as the basis of the interview. The interviews were conducted largely in English with some clarifications in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, where necessary.

III. The Lawas District and the Lawas School, 1966-1968

Lawas is the most northerly district in the state of Sarawak, bordering the Malaysian state of Sabah to the northeast, Brunei to the west, Limbang District to the southwest, and Indonesian Kalimantan at the extreme southeast end of the district. The district has a land area of just over 4,000 km² and stretches from Brunei Bay on the South China Sea to the highland border with Indonesian Kalimantan some 150 km from the coast. It is a rugged, mountainous area with two major rivers, the Lawas and the Trusan, running from the highlands to the district's coastline.

Lawas Town in the mid 1960s was accessible from adjacent Limbang District and Brunei only by boat, and to reach Sabah from Lawas Town required an hour's boat ride followed by a two km walk from the Sarawak village of Merapok to the Sabah village of Sindumin. Indonesian Kalimantan was (and still is) only accessible by footpath. The town of Lawas was a trading centre and district headquarters for

government offices, located on the banks of the Lawas River about 20 km from the South China Sea. It was populated in the 1960s mostly by ethnic Chinese and had about 40 shops as well as a number of government offices. Other towns in the district were much smaller with just a few commercial shops in Trusan, Sundar and Merapok.

When the new Lawas School opened in early 1966, Lawas District had a population of 14,000 of whom about 6,000 were Malays, under 2,000 were Chinese and about 6,000 were Lun Bawang. Ethnic Malays were congregated in coastal villages where the principal occupations were fishing, rubber tapping, and paddy farming. The Lun Bawang lived almost exclusively in up-river or highland longhouse communities stretching all the way up to the highland villages of Long Semado and Ba' Kelalan, well over 100 km by foot from Lawas Town. The Chinese were concentrated in the towns and small trading centres, though there were a significant number of Chinese gardeners outside the towns.

In the year the school opened, Lawas Town had just six hours of electricity service a day, less than 10 cars, a few trucks, no television and very limited telephone service. There was no doctor or dentist resident in the district. There was less than 40 km of roads, none paved, and none reached outside the district. However, by the mid 1960s, most children in the district, even in the most remote villages, had access to government primary schools.

The Lawas and Trusan rivers were the main transportation links to the outside world. Timber extraction was the only significant industry in the district other than agriculture. The main exports from the district were rubber, logs, buffaloes and some other forest products. Most farmers were largely subsistence cultivators, many practising slash and burn techniques.

The opening of the Lawas School in 1966 was part of a broad, state-wide extension of junior secondary (Forms I-III, equivalent to grades 7-9 in the US) schools to district towns across the state, with the Lawas