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**WHAT'S IN A NAME? ETHNICITY AND THE PROBLEMS IT POSES
FOR ANTHROPOLOGISTS****Victor T. King**

Anthropologists have frequently experienced substantial difficulties in delimiting ethnic units for description and analysis. These problems have surfaced in the long debates in scholarly journals about such concepts as ethnicity, race, tribe, culture unit and so on. South-East Asia has provided a fertile arena for these disputes, and within the region, Borneo has been a particular focus for some of the more acrimonious scholarly exchanges, and also for some of the more enlightening and lively developments in the study of ethnicity. In my view, what the study of Borneo peoples has demonstrated above all else is the futility of attempts to establish an a priori, generally applicable concept of ethnicity.

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by

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Studies of ethnicity depend crucially on investigations of what ethnic categories and labels mean to indigenous peoples — what they comprise and to what they refer — and how they relate to one another in ethnic taxonomies. Therefore, in this paper I am specifically concerned to examine the various dimensions of the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic category, and to illustrate some of them with selected examples from Borneo. However, I do not intend to deal with the concept of race. In my terms 'race' is to do with categories of humans, or sub-species of the human species, distinguished on the basis of physical characteristics thought to be hereditary; the sorts of features which one would have in mind would be skin colour, hair type and colour, facial characteristics, general bodily form, skull shape, genotype and so on. The categories involved would be, for example, Caucasoid, Negroid, Mongoloid. By concentrating on ethnicity and dismissing considerations of race, what I wish to do is avoid discussion of the popular and often misleading connotations to which the concept of race frequently gives rise. The term race produces powerful images and emotions; it is used, for example, in national ideologies in the concept of 'multi-racialism' — usually to stress the existence or desire for harmonious relations between different peoples within a nation-state; or it transforms easily into the concept 'racism' or 'racist ideology', with its references to antagonism, prejudice and discrimination.

When I refer to ethnicity, I have in mind social and cultural categorisation. I tend to think of it as a more neutral term than race and less contaminated by political ideology and popular usage, though even ethnicity/ethnic group is not entirely free from these popular accretions (cf. Dentan, 1976). What is more, even the distinction between ethnicity and race is not clear-cut, because physical differences and other distinctions of a social and cultural kind intertwine in complex ways. Nevertheless, for analytical purposes I consider ethnicity as concerned with social roles and cultural traits which individuals and collectivities of individuals use in specific historical, political and economic contexts to establish similarity and difference. I am therefore focussing on the whole problem of the ways in which a given population establishes and maintains identities for such purposes as interaction and avoidance, and the ways in which anthropologists have tried to delimit or identify units for the scholarly purposes of description and analysis. Of course, the two modes of categorisation may or may not coincide. Even various related folk taxonomies are frequently not coincident. For example, in Sarawak 'folk' classifications of the Kayan, Kenyah, Iban and Bidayuh partly overlap and interrelate, but they are by no means identical. Usually a given taxonomy and its constituent ethnic categories and labels are concerned with comprehending a local situation and immediate neighbours, and are then extended outwards from there in a very piecemeal and arbitrary way. Look, for example, at the connotations of the highly misleading terms 'Punan/Penan' in a variety of native taxonomies. Furthermore, the boundaries between categories may not be that precisely defined. Ethnicity can involve not sharply contrasting types but degrees of similarity and difference, and the factors and traits used to establish ethnic identity in a given context often do not cohere in any logical or systematic fashion.

From an anthropological point of view ethnicity can clearly be an important principle of social organisation. It can be used or can serve to unite and divide social beings; it can orient various kinds of behaviour and pattern certain social relations, or it can be used to justify and explain social differences. Jérôme Rousseau, for example, has said that 'people use an idiom of ethnic categories to explain political realities' (1975: 35), and F.K. Lehman has written that 'in reality, ethnic categories are formally like roles' and that '[a] role is defined, not in absolute terms, but relative to a whole system of other roles' (1967: 106-7). Fredrik Barth too has stated that ethnic groupings can be conceptualised as an organizational type; they involve 'social processes of exclusion and incorporation'; he adds 'ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people' (1969: 10). One can agree with Barth up to a point, but a further important distinction has to be made. It is one referred to early on by such writers as Lehman when he notes that one should not 'confuse persons with roles, or groups with models of organization' (1967: 106), and one which Rousseau has pointed to explicitly in his distinction between ethnic category — or the conceptual dimension of ethnicity — and ethnic group — which is to do with the realm of social interaction (1975: 37). The two dimensions may not be coincident, and this is especially so in Rousseau's investigation of 'why some Punan are Kajang and others not, why the Lepo' Pu'un are not Kajang, and why the Kajang distinguish themselves from the Melanau' (p. 37).

What then are the main aspects of ethnicity? What do we look at? Well, various anthropologists have argued that it is something to do with the