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Chapter Three: Ethnic Distribution of Population

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SUMMARY

This chapter starts by exploring the different sources of population data from 1939 to 1980, the limitations and problems of inter-temporal comparisons, and changing patterns of population distribution. These are then followed by a socio-economic study of three ethnic groups in Sarawak, i.e. Iban, Minor Indigenous groups, and Chinese dialectic groups.

14 to 1990. The 1990 Census of Sarawak, 1990, published by the Sarawak Government, is the most recent and comprehensive source of population data for Sarawak. It provides a detailed breakdown of the population by ethnic group, sex, age, and educational attainment. The 1990 Census also provides information on the population distribution by district and by sub-district. The 1990 Census is the most comprehensive source of population data for Sarawak.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the availability of various figures, their different sources will vary. Concepts, definitions, planners and administrators alike face the varying task of partially, analyzing and comparing planning or emerging patterns and trends for policy and decision making. Social and economic analysis

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and projections to be made in ways to come. This paper reports on the statistical features into the Sarawak past, aiming to highlight patterns and trends of population distribution for a ten-decade period between 1939 and 1980. In particular, it attempts to show the changes in population distribution over the period 1939-1980, and to highlight the patterns and trends of population distribution in Sarawak.

(a) Explore the ethnic distribution from which the figures are available. (b) Research and analyze the limitations of the data sources. (c) Compare the ethnic distribution in Sarawak with other states in Malaysia.

SUMMARY

This chapter starts by exploring the different sources of population data from 1939 to 1980, the limitations and problems of inter-temporal comparisons, and changing patterns of population distribution. These are then followed by a socio-economic study of three ethnic groups in Sarawak, i.e. Iban, Minor Indigenous groups, and Chinese dialectic groups.

The main uncertainty and problem facing any research analyst in Sarawak is the availability of reliable statistics and estimates. In the case of population data, availability for Sarawak population is limited by administrative changes and ethnic groups. The most reliable data available to the 1990 Census. The 1990 Census was published together with figures from the 1971 Population Census in 1978. Although there was an estimate of Sarawak population in 1961 at 418,000 persons, the first official population census was taken on 10-day's geographical area. In 1952, when population of 400,000 persons was reported for implementing the emergency war-time food rationing scheme. The accuracy of these two figures, especially the 1952 estimate, is not clear. The 1954 Population Census Report

3.1 Changing Patterns of Sub-national Ethnic Distribution in Sarawak, 1939-1980

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the availability of various figures from different sources with varying concepts/definitions, planners and administrators alike face the varying task of quantitatively analyzing and comparing prevailing or emerging patterns and trends for policy and decision-making purposes. Social and economic analysts have, therefore, often ventured into the statistical past to have a peep of what might have happened in bygone years in the hope of being able to deduce and project patterns of trends in days to come. This paper represents one such statistical ventures into the Sarawak past, aiming to highlight patterns and trends of population distribution for a four decade period between 1939 and 1980. In particular, it attempts to

- (a) Explore the sources from which historical figures are available,
- (b) Research and analyze problems, and hence limitations of making inter-temporal comparisons,
- (c) Highlight changing patterns of population distribution for major ethnic groups in each of the administrative districts in Sarawak,
- (d) Study how each ethnic group has (or has not) shifted its population distribution or concentration from one district to another over the past four decades.

DATA SOURCE

The initial uncertainty and problem facing any research analyst in Sarawak is knowing what, and where, relevant usable statistics are available. In the case of exploring data availability for Sarawak population tabulated by administrative districts and ethnic groups, the most historical data dates back to the 1939 estimate. The 1939 figures were published together with figures from the 1947 Population Census in 1950. Although there was an estimate of Sarawak population in 1909 at 416,000 persons, the first official was, however, not taken on to-day's geographical size until 1939 when a population of 490,585 persons was counted for implementing the emergency war-time food rationing scheme. The accuracy of these two figures, especially the 1909 estimate, was never ascertained. Besides the 1947 Population Census Report,

census reports are also available for censuses taken in 1960, 1970 and 1980¹. Based on the five population census year figures, a historical series of 41 years, could, therefore, be tabulated and established to study the pattern and trend of population distribution during the past four decades.

PROBLEMS AND LIMITATIONS

But figures from censuses conducted at different times are of uneven (sometimes unknown) quality², varying concepts/definitions, and diverse geographical coverages. Although most of these divergences have been summarized as footnotes in the attached Table 1, it is important not only to clarify these problems, but also to emphasize the limitations arising therefrom.

For a start, the number of published administrative districts varies from 19 in 1939 and 1947 to 20 in 1960 and 1970, and finally to 25 in 1980. For comparability purposes, figures in the accompanying two tables have been tabulated according to 20 districts. But because of the heavy concentration of Melanaus in Mukah and Oya/Dalat districts and because separate figures were available in 1939 and 1947, separate figures have been calculated for these two districts in 1980.

Secondly, while 1947, 1960, 1970 and 1980 urban figures were available for Kuching, Sibul and Miri districts, the 1939 urban figures by ethnic groups for Kuching were grouped together with Kuching Rural. At the ethnic group level, therefore, intercensal comparisons can only be made between 1947 and 1980 for the three urban centres. Here, it is important also to note that the above concept of urban follows the officially gazetted townland boundary and does not really reflect the total area with urban characteristics. In fact, the urban fringe or suburban of Kuching urban i.e. Kuching Municipal Council or K.M.C. and all other district towns currently clarified as rural have all the normal characteristics internationally accepted as being urbans³. Studies based on an alternative but wider definition of "urban" inclusive of these areas will throw a different light on urban/rural analysis in Sarawak⁴. This is important especially in view of the rapid development and growth of small towns or growth centres in rural areas. The above limitations on analysis in the following paragraphs should be noted.

Related to the above mentioned problems of changing number of districts in different census years, the geographical boundary or coverage for various

districts have also changed from one census to another. The following examples are indicative of such changes:

- (a) Kuching and Sibul towns were extended and Miri town adjusted by the time of the 1960 Census.
- (b) Serian District of 1939 and 1947 was divided into Serian and Sadong Districts in the 1960 census, renamed as Simunjan District in 1970, and divided again to become Upper and Lower Sadong Districts in the 1980 Census.
- (c) Lower Rejang District of 1947 became Binatang and Sarikei Districts in the 1960 Census.
- (d) Compared with the 1947 boundary, Kanowit District was expanded because of a transfer of some 6,000 persons in 1957 from Pakan in Sarikei District to Kanowit District.
- (e) Oya/Dalat and Mukah in 1947 become Mukah District in 1960, but was divided again to become Oya/Dalat and Mukah Districts in the 1980 Census.
- (f) Between the 1947 and 1960 censuses, the K.M.C boundary was adjusted to include Pending and exclude a number of villages (about 10,000 persons, mainly Malays) across river.

The above changes, often in response to changing socioeconomic and administrative developments, make intercensal comparisons difficult, if not impossible, especially in the absence of affected small-area figures required for making the boundary adjustments⁵.

Furthermore the uneven quality of data from different censuses requires analyst to be critical and cautious of making intercensal comparison and analysis. For example, no Malays were published for Bintulu District in the 1939 Population Census; this is possible due to the fact that there were enumerated together with the Melanaus, thus explaining why Melanaus (and Malays) make up a high 27.3 percent of the District's population in 1939 as compared with only 17.6 and 17.1 percent (for Melanaus only) in 1960 and 1970 respectively. While this is a classification problem, difficulties could also be due to certain historical events or statistical undercounts for specific ethnic group; the relatively lower percentage of Malays in Serian District during the 1939 and 1947 censuses could possibly be due to undercounts and effects of the Second World War.

Undercounts or underenumerations, however, are common in most census-takings, even in developed countries. What is important is to ascertain the extent and nature of such undercounts. The most recent of 1980 Population Census, for example, concluded that the undercounts in Sarawak is 5.5% which, if adjusted for, will return a Sarawak population of 1.307 million. Such statistical adjustments were also made for all ethnic groups so that the final distribution of population by ethnic group varies with the unadjusted distribution (see Footnote K of Table 1). It could, therefore, be expected that, with lessons of mistakes and problems from earlier censuses and with improvements in concepts and organisations through time, the quality of recent census data is more acceptable and usable, be it in terms of coverage or content.

ETHNIC CONCENTRATION/DISTRIBUTION IN EACH DISTRICT

Figures in Table 1 show the concentration and distribution of major ethnic groups in each of the administrative districts in Sarawak. These major ethnic groups include the Malays, Melanaus, Ibans, Bidayuhs, Other Indigenous, Chinese and Others. The figures, all in percentages, were calculated on the basis of figures from the 1939, 1947, 1960, 1970 and 1980 population censuses in Sarawak.

In the three major urban source of Kuching Municipal Council (K.M.C), Sibul Urban District Council (S.U.D.C.) and Miri Urban, Chinese continues to be the predominant ethnic group. This is especially so in the case of SUDC where nearly 72 percent of the residents in 1980 were Chinese, the next populous ethnic group being the Malays making up 13 percent of the urbanites. An interesting pattern to be noted in SUDC is the decreasing, although very slowly, predominance of the Chinese and Malays in the area; there is a corresponding but gradual emergence of other bumiputeras, especially the Ibans⁶ and Melanaus, in this metropolitan area.

In fact, migration statistics show that the majority of migrants from Kanowit⁷ and Kapit (inclusive of Song and Belaga) districts find their destinations in SUDC. Kanowit and Kapit are the two most Iban districts in the current Third, Sixth and Seventh Divisions. Also, the majority of out-migrants from the mainly Melanau districts of Oya/Dalat and Binatang were SUDC bound⁸.

Like SUDC, KMC is also a predominantly, although declining, Chinese urban

area. In the past two decades, however, indigenous ethnic groups, especially the Malays, began to form an increasing proportion of KMC population. These redistributive patterns also prevail in the Miri Urban area. The only notable difference in Miri relates to the decreasing proportion of Malays and Others (mainly Shell's foreign workers), while emerging ethnic groups in the composition of Miri Urban include the Ibans, Other Indigenous and Melanaus.

The increasing compositional contribution of indigenous ethnic groups is not only limited to the urban population of Sarawak, it also continues with increasing importance into the urban fringes and "rural" areas of the three main districts i.e. Kuching Rural (or KRDC), Sibul Rural (or SRDC) and Miri Rural. In the case of KRDC, Malays contributed to 39.2 percent of the population in 1980, an increase from only 33.1 percent in 1947. Increases for the other indigenous groups are marginal; in fact, the relative importance of Bidayus in KRDC decreased from 20.2 percent in 1947 to only 13.3 percent in 1980. For SRDC and Miri Rural, however, it was the Iban ethnic group that had been making significant increases in compositional importance in the past four decades.

The above trends appear to be consistent with governmental efforts to integrate Bumiputras into the 'modern' economic sectors and, in the popular phrase⁹, "to eliminate the identification of race with economic functions". But the actual extent to which social integration and economic participation have been achieved during the past planning periods is a research area requiring further studies.

Besides Kuching, Sibul and Miri Districts, the next district of importance is Bintulu. It is predominantly Iban district; slightly more than half (50.6 percent) of the district population in 1980 are Ibans. It is interesting to note that like the other indigenous ethnic groups (except Malays which had been marginally increasing) the relative importance of Ibans had been declining since 1947 when it made up 58.2 percent of the district total population. The Chinese, however, had been doubling its compositional importance in Bintulu from less than ten per cent in 1947 to 20.3 per cent in 1980.

An analysis will now be made of the relatively less urbanized or industrialized districts in Sarawak. Bau and Lundu districts continue to be predominantly Bidayuh districts; in fact, the relative importance of Bidayus in these two districts has been increasing rapidly in the past four decades. Bidayus also form the major ethnic group in Serian with 59.8 percent of the district