



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XL No. 61

December 1989



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Chong, J. (1989). Issues in The Identification and Classification of Indigenous Ethnic Groups in Sabah and Sarawak. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XL (61): 209-218

ISSUES IN THE IDENTIFICATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF INDIGENOUS ETHNIC GROUPS IN SABAH AND SARAWAK

Mohd. Yaakub Haji Johari

INTRODUCTION

Problems in the identification and classification of indigenous ethnic groups in Borneo are matters of serious concern not only to students of Borneo societies or colonial administrators, they are of concern also to current politicians, administrators, planners and laymen alike. Early students of Borneo societies and colonial administrators in Sabah and Sarawak have been bewildered by the names of countless peoples — the names of some of which are no longer found in the post-independent censuses. Numerous attempts to refine the classification system have met with little success, for the problems are still haunting us today.

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Harrison (1958) has even gone to the extent of describing the traditional concepts of identity as, “a thoroughly Bornean process of thought” and that “they do not and cannot think of themselves as named, tabbed, static, classified groups” (1958: 295).

Whatever the case may be, we are now thrust into a situation where even the indigenous concept of group identity itself has been changing. This has added another dimension to the problems yet to be resolved.

In this paper I will attempt to analyse the issues in the identification and classification of indigenous ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak from the vantage point of government policy-makers and planners. The approach is essentially pragmatic. A system of classification is considered meaningful and useful to the extent that it enables the policy-makers and development planners to obtain better insight of ‘relevant socio-cultural variables’ internal to the relevant ethnic groups which may affect the achievement of national

development objective. Such variables may include, kinship profile, residential pattern, concept of property ownership, system of obligation and sanction, taboos, aspiration, etc.

This approach however, appears to be too parochial. It may mean that, the authorities may put any label to the various ethnic groups as long as the above requirement is satisfied. Were this to be the case we may be going back in full circle. What is equally important is that, the labels or names of the various groups must be meaningful to and well accepted by the various communities themselves.

Harrisson more or less made the same point when he cautioned an anthropologist who proposed that the label Penans should apply to all Borneo nomads. Referring to the anthropologist, Harrisson stated that:

"He is not exactly wrong in this; he just can't be right. For he is talking about something that doesn't exist in the people. The method is only valid if you regard humans as beetles. It is useful to use such terms, of course, for convenience. But to argue their ethnics or present them with pedantry borders on the infantile and is emphatically effort misplaced" (1958: 295).

At this point it is useful to distinguish the concept of race from ethnicity. The term 'race' normally refers to differences between peoples based upon inherited physical features, such as the colour of skin, height, hair, etc. 'Ethnicity', refers to differences in socially acquired characteristics, such as culture, belief system, language, etc. The concept of race appears to be not quite useful for our present purpose. This is primarily due to the constant mixing of the various groups through inter-marriages. In addition, communities who perceive themselves as belonging to different groupings may apparently share similar physical characteristics such as skin colour, hair, height, etc. This obviously will undermine the usefulness of the classification system.

In what follows, I will discuss pertinent considerations in the identification and classification of Bornean ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak, within the historical context.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN THE IDENTIFICATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF BORNEAN ETHNIC GROUPS

In the discussion in this section, I shall draw heavily from the works of Harrisson (1958), Babcock (1974), Brown (1970) and Pringle (1970). One of the distinct feature in the indigenous system of classification is the role of locality.

Role of Locality

In his discussion on the problem in the identification and classification of Bornean ethnic groups, Brown (1970) observed that:

"(T)wo peoples of virtually identical language, social organisation, culture and appearance might receive differing names because they are or were named after their separate dwelling locations. Typically, any locality name they receive is the name of a river, a branch thereof, on which they lived. By