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**SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TRENDS IN SARAWAK****Daniel Chew****INTRODUCTION**

The year 1993 marks the 30th anniversary of Sarawak in Malaysia. As such it is appropriate to review what this means for the State and people. I will do so by delineating some major social and cultural trends in Sarawak over the last 30 years for it is only by reviewing the past that we can analyse the present and confront the future. It is not possible to demarcate social and cultural trends by separating them from the political and economic context of which they are part of. Hence social and cultural trends will be discussed within the framework of political and economic development.

First of all, we need to define what is meant by social and cultural trends. Social trends refers to the way society, communities, institutions, groups and individuals function and organise themselves. Culture is an encompassing whole which embraces the following elements: material things, behavioural aspects and normative values and identities. Like social trends, cultural trends are the corner stone of individual, group, community, state, national, and one may even add, international development.

# SOCIAL AND CULTURAL TRENDS IN SARAWAK

by

Daniel Chew

## INTRODUCTION

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## POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Thirty years ago, Sarawak was on the threshold of a new era, that of attaining its independence within the Federation of Malaysia. There was much initial opposition and uncertainty towards the State becoming part of a new entity (Leigh 1974) and safeguards for Sarawak (and Sabah) were sought to protect the State's interests and fears such as control over immigration and the use of English as an official language for a period of time.

Economically, Sarawak then was an underdeveloped State. Brooke policy had resulted in a smallholding economy (Reece 1988: 33) a different kind of colonial policy when compared to the rest of Southeast Asia which encouraged plantation agriculture. In the 1960s agriculture remained the mainstay of the economy and the main livelihood of most of the population (see table 4). Although smallholding and subsistence agriculture still looms large in the lives of the people, dramatic shifts in economic emphasis have taken place.

Firstly is the rising dominance of the natural resource economy, in timber, petroleum and natural gas extraction. Secondly is the change in emphasis towards industrialisation and the trend towards urban development, working

towards the goals of Vision 2020 as enunciated by Prime Minister YAB Dato' Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Politically the rather fluid political situation (Leigh 1974) against the backdrop of Sarawak's multi-ethnic population has been quite stable despite past crises, the 1966 expulsion of Sarawak's Chief Minister Datuk Stephen Kalong Ningkan, Confrontation, the communist insurrection and the mid-1980s dispute between Chief Minister, Tan Sri Haji Abdul Taib Mahmud and his uncle, Tun Datuk Patinggi Haji Abdul Rahman Ya'akub. The relative political stability helped to shape the direction the State was going, balancing between the needs and peculiarities of Sarawak, and the objectives of a nation-building Malaysia. It is against this background of economic change and political stability that we can now situate social and cultural trends in Sarawak.

## SOCIAL TRENDS

Among one of the most discernible changes which have taken place is the identity of the people, in being Malaysian citizens for the last 30 years despite the initial misgivings. Of course this is the national identity and as Kedit (1989: 2) pointed out, situational and contextual identities also exist. People call themselves Sarawakians and as members of particular ethnic groups, as Malays, Iban, Bidayuh, Chinese and so on. Depending on the context and with whom one is talking to, all three identities of being Malaysian, Sarawakian and members of specific ethnic groups can be assumed at the same time, or just one or two of the three sets of identities. There is no conflict or contradiction between these three sets of identities. Besides being Malaysian and Sarawakian, the reinforcement of ethnic identity can be positive, acting as a cultural ballast. However it could degenerate into chauvinism. So while ethnic identities should be encouraged, there ought to be tolerance of other ethnic groups.

The past 30 years have seen a lot of economic changes in Sarawak. As a corollary to economic change, the question is whether the social indicators show an improvement in the lives of the people. To illustrate with some examples, tangible improvements can be seen in the provision of health welfare and educational facilities in the past 30 years. There have been improvements in the standards of living although the level of poverty is still high, estimated at 30 per cent of the population (Hamid Bugo and Hatta Solhee 1990: 27). The population has more than doubled from 745,000 in 1960 to 1,670,000 in 1990 (see table 1). Within the same period, public health facilities have been increased. The number of hospital beds for example, increased from 1,888 in 1963 to 4,154 in 1991, more than a two-fold jump (see table 2) keeping pace with the population increase ratio. The ratio of increase in the number of hospitals, clinics and health centres between 1963 and 1991 is much higher (see table 2). However, in reviewing the public health picture, due to communication