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CHANGING PATTERNS OF SUB-NATIONAL ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION IN SARAWAK, 1939-1980

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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 by gone 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.

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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 1980.¹ 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.