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**MAKING MODERN MALAYSIANS IN SARAWAK****Clare L. Boulanger****ABSTRACT**

To say that in recent years, Malaysia has been pursuing an aggressive program of socioeconomic change is to put the matter mildly. In 1991, Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir publicized his vision of a "fully developed" Malaysia by the year 2020. Manufacturing and the industrial production of agricultural commodities were to become the dominant economic activities; moreover, Malaysia would invest heavily in computer technology so as to be well positioned to prosper in the widely-anticipated information-based economy of the future. In short, Malaysia epitomizes the situation described by Friedman, where "modernity moves [E]ast, leaving post-modernity in its wake" (1992: 360). Indeed, the banner of modernity is currently hoisted higher in Malaysia than in most of the nations of the West.

## MAKING MODERN MALAYSIANS IN SARAWAK

by

Clare L. Boulanger

To say that in recent years, Malaysia has been pursuing an aggressive program of socioeconomic change is to put the matter mildly. In 1991, Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir publicized his vision of a "fully developed" Malaysia by the year 2020. Manufacturing and the industrial production of agricultural commodities were to become the dominant economic activities; moreover, Malaysia would invest heavily in computer technology so as to be well positioned to prosper in the widely-anticipated information-based economy of the future. In short, Malaysia epitomizes the situation described by Friedman, where "modernity moves [E]ast, leaving post-modernity in its wake" (1992: 360). Indeed, the banner of modernity is currently hoisted higher in Malaysia than in most of the nations of the West.

Furthermore, Malaysia, again in accord with Friedman (1992: 330-366), has recognized that modernity, beyond industrialization and the adoption of complex material technology, entails the production, as it were, of a particular kind of person. This person is identified in terms of, for instance, his ambition and business savvy, qualities not coincidentally long associated with Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir (see, e.g., Morais 1982). He is also frequently negatively identified; that is, in terms of what he is not. He is not, for example, a subsistence agriculturalist, in that, according to the Prime Minister, "subsistence farming should not be around when Malaysia [becomes] a developed nation" (*Sarawak Tribune* 7/5/96: 3). He is, in fact, not in any respect "tribal," if that term is taken to refer to a hinterland way of life supported by localized attitudes. The following passage from *Towards a New Asia*, the final report from an all-Asian commission drawn up and hosted by Malaysia, illustrates this contrast between tribal and modern: "minority groups ... left behind in the modernisation process have to be brought fully into the mainstream of modern life. The only 'noble savage' is the 'noble savage' who is fully modernised and who can ... contribute fully to [society]" (Commission for a New Asia 1994: 56). The implication is that truly modern human beings should be encouraged to abandon any idea that may impede their incorporation into large-scale economic and social institutions.

Sarawak, of course, has been mindful of its part in promoting these national objectives, with reference both to modernity and the modern person.

For example, Peter Minos, a commentary writer for the *Sarawak Tribune*, nicely confirms the reflexivity of modernity (see Giddens 1990: 36-45) when he describes it as “self-explanatory – something to do with acquiring modern education, being involved in the modern economy of science and technology and of new methods, applications and ideas” (*Sarawak Tribune* 6/30/96: 4). This passage implies that modernity is a natural and inevitable process, not open to question. Regarding the modern person, the doings of a number of prominent individuals from business and government are featured daily in the press, their activities a model for the up-to-date Sarawakian. The non-modern Sarawakian also figures frequently in press accounts. Countless articles have appeared exhorting hinterlanders to modernize; they should, for example, “be more committed to improving their quality of life” (*Sarawak Tribune* 5/19/99: online), “contribute positively to nation building” (*Sarawak Tribune* 5/22/99: online), “adapt their cultural practices to the changing times” (*Sarawak Tribune* 5/25/99: online), “be prepared to give up traditional practices standing in the way of progress” (*Sarawak Tribune* 5/25/99: online), and, by far the most common catchphrase, “change their mindset” (e.g., *Sarawak Tribune* 5/25/99: online). The astute reader might note that all of these articles were taken from the May, 1999, issues of the *Tribune*; there was no need to expand the search to illustrate the point.

By tradition, the indigenous peoples of Sarawak, referred to under the rubric of Dayak, were hinterlanders. While urban Dayaks have existed for many years, they have not been seen as typical. Typical Dayaks were upriver longhouse dwellers, subsistence agriculturalists, bound to their land, living by customs that reinforced and maintained their hinterland existence. Clearly, however, given the physical and psychological changes taking place in Malaysia, fewer and fewer Dayaks live according to such traditions. Many are now city dwellers, filling all the economic niches that a modern society has to offer. In 1966, I came to Sarawak with a simple research question: what is an urban Dayak? That is, what does it mean to be Dayak once one has left his longhouse and established himself permanently in an urban area? To explore this question, I interviewed, over the course of three summers, 112 Dayaks living in or near Kuching. I found that to some extent, I was asking a question Dayaks themselves were struggling to answer.

Dayaks are hardly homogeneous; indeed, they are divided into a plethora of “ethnic groups” (the English word, “tribe,” is not considered especially appropriate, though I have heard the Malay word *puak* used in news accounts). The term “Dayak” has been used in recent years to subsume those ethnic groups known as Bidayuh (who are, in turn, divided by dialect), the Iban, and the various Orang Ulu, though many Orang Ulu continue to feel as though “Dayak” does not include them (some, in fact, object to “Orang Ulu”). Melanau are also indigenous to Sarawak, though they do not