

**The Sarawak Museum Journal****Vol. XL No. 61****December 1989****ISSN: 0375-3050****E-ISSN: 3036-0188**

Citation: Sutlive, V. H. (1989). Ethnic Identity and Aspiration. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XL (61): 35-50

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ASPIRATION**Vinson H. Sutlive, Jr.**

I am grateful to the Symposium Committee for inviting me to speak on the occasion of your celebration 25 Years of Independence within Malaysia and the Year of Cultural Heritage. The invitation is a high honor and great personal pleasure. Thirty-three years ago, my wife and I were asked to choose our place of work between Hong Kong, of which we had heard, Malaya of which we had heard, and Sarawak of which we had not heard. After extensive research, we learned that Sarawak was a state with a rich history and considerable ethnic diversity. These facts strongly influenced our decision to come to this land of good and great people, and to spend most of the next 15 years of our lives here.

I have been asked to speak on the topic "Ethnic Identity and Aspiration" with special reference to the urban identity of the Iban. The implications of "ethnic identity" are of such importance that I want to consider them first, then examine the social identity of the Iban, and finally, state what I perceive them aspiring to.

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ASPIRATION

by

Vinson H. Sutlive, Jr.

I am grateful to the Symposium Committee for inviting me to speak on the occasion of your celebration 25 Years of Independence within Malaysia and the Year of Cultural Heritage. The invitation is a high honor and great personal pleasure. Thirty-three years ago, my wife and I were asked to choose our place of work between Hong Kong, of which we had heard, Malaya of which we had heard, and Sarawak of which we had not heard. After extensive research, we learned that Sarawak was a state with a rich history and considerable ethnic diversity. These facts strongly influenced our decision to come to this land of good and great people, and to spend most of the next 15 years of our lives here.

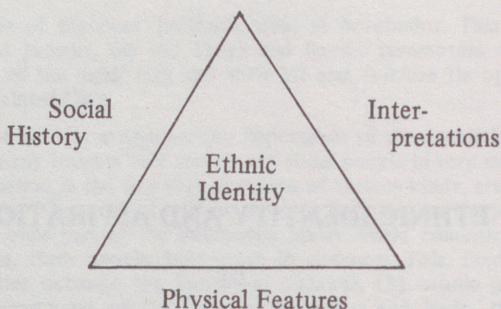
I have been asked to speak on the topic "Ethnic Identity and Aspiration" with special reference to the urban identity of the Iban. The implications of "ethnic identity" are of such importance that I want to consider them first, then examine the social identity of the Iban, and finally, state what I perceive them aspiring to.

ETHNIC IDENTITY: ELUSIVE CATEGORIES

Gregory Bateson has written that

(t)he human individual is endlessly simplifying, organising, and generalising his own view of his environment; he constantly imposes on this environment his own constructions and meanings; these constructions and meanings (are) characteristic of one culture, as over against another (1944: 723).

Ethnic identities are such constructions. They are products within the "anthropology" of each society in which are combined attitudes and values towards one's own group and member of other groups. (Given the universal penchant for ethnocentrism, one's own group usually comes out better.) Ethnic identities are simplified versions of complex realities. We can think of them as triangulations of (1) broad-ranging physical features shared by members of a society, (2) the social histories of related societies, and (3) the interpretations of one's own group and confirmations, corrections, and challenges from members of other groups.



In other words, ethnic identities are products of the give-and-take of members of related societies. As some of you are aware, I am writing the biography of the late Tun Jugah, respectfully and affectionately known as *Apai* or "Father". In soliciting information about Apai, I was told by one eminent scholar, "I rather regard Jugah as having been the 'creation' . . . of the colonial government." But of course he was, just as each of us – and every ethnic group is – the creation or product of a series of interactions. Ayn Rand exaggerates only slightly in *The Fountainhead* when she writes of one of the characters, "He existed only in the reflection of others."

Ethnic identities are descriptive and economic, often leading us to assume that we know more about particular groups than we do. They are analytic and modelic, selecting some features for emphasis, even exaggeration, while ignoring others. The nature of bias, which afflicts everyone of us, is that if our models or sets of another individual or group are favourable, we cannot do enough *for* them. If they are negative, we cannot do enough *to* them.

The caution we must take lies in the fact that like all models or constructions, "ethnic identities" disregard variation. This point is one of great sensitivity of anthropologists, whose discipline has had as its central issue for the past century-and-a-half the explanation of human variation. In the 19th century, variation was explained in terms of our physical differences. In the 20th century, variation is explained in terms of our social and cultural differences. In fact, variation exists because of both physical and sociocultural differences.

Prior to the use of "ethnic identity", and consistent with efforts to explain human variation by physical differences, the most commonly used classification scheme was "race". Both race and ethnic identity are cultural constructs, common techniques for grouping people into mentally manageable lots. It should be clear that neither "race" nor "ethnicity" is part of some ontological scheme created by God. Each is a cultural product commonly contrived for socio-logical purposes.

Both racial and ethnic thinking are meaningless biologically. We belong to one species, and are all together a remarkable species at that. One of the pan-human features we all share is the capacity for evaluation, grading, ranking. We also are distinguished by the capacity for moral choice. We may choose to distance ourselves from others, especially those who are different from us, or to participate with them. While many people are impressed with differences which divide us as members of different ethnic groups, many of us also are fascinated with the similarities which we share.