

CHARACTER, IDENTITY FORMATION IN NORTH BORNEO (SABAH), MALAYSIA: STUDY AND INVESTIGATION INTO IDENTITIES IN TERMS OF LANGUAGE USE

(KARAKTER, FORMASI IDENTITI DI UTARA BORNEO (SABAH), MALAYSIA: KAJIAN DAN PENYIASATAN KE ATAS IDENTITI DALAM TERMA PENGGUNAAN BAHASA)

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Abstract

During the years after initial Malaysian independence in 1957, the North Borneo (Sabah) region became part of the Malaysian Federation, forming the provinces of Sabah and Sarawak. Unlike Peninsular Malaysia, though, Malaysian Borneo had a highly diverse indigenous and migrant population that far outweighed the population of Muslim Malays. Today, Malaysian Borneo still consists of a highly diverse population of indigenous peoples and migrants with a minority of people who identify as Malay. Over 85% of people in Sabah are non-Malay. This article pursues ethnographic and historical background of Malay and Bornean identities is discussed to set a foundation for the analysis of identity formulation in Sabah, Malaysia. Additionally, this includes a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that will be used for the analytic discussion of identity formulation. The methods I carried out, including library research and fieldwork, are discussed in the present the data collected from library research and fieldwork on identities in Sabah. The fieldwork demonstrated that Sabahans have embraced the Malay language and the type of Malay spoken in Sabah is unique to their region.

Keywords: North Borneo, Sabah, Malay language, Field work, Malayness.

Abstrak

Selepas beberapa tahun kemerdekaan Malaysia pada 1957, kawasan Borneo Utara (Sabah) menjadi sebahagian daripada Persekutuan Malaysia, membentuk kawasan yang dikenali sebagai Sabah dan Sarawak. Tidak seperti Semenanjung Malaysia, kawasan Borneo mempunyai kepadatan kepelbagaian kaum yang tinggi dan populasi pendatang yang jauh lebih tinggi berbanding kaum Melayu Islam. Hari ini Borneo Malaysia masih mempunyai populasi masyarakat asal yang tinggi termasuk kaum pendatang dengan sedikit sabaja yang mengakui dirinya Melayu. Lebih 85% masyarakat di Sabah adalah bukan Melayu. Makalah ini akan menyorot perbincangan mengenai latar belakang secara etnografi dan sejarah identiti masyarakat Melayu dan Borneo untuk menetapkan asas bagi menganalisis formulasi identiti di Sabah, Malaysia. Di samping itu, makalah ini akan menunjukkan perbincangan mengenai kerangka teori yang akan digunakan bagi menganalisis perbincangan mengenai formulasi identiti. Kaedah yang digunakan dalam kajian ini termasuk kajian kepustakaan dan kerja lapangan terhadap identiti di Sabah. Kerja lapangan menunjukkan bahawa masyarakat Sabah telah mengambil bahasa Melayu dan bahasa Melayu yang digunakan oleh masyarakat Sabah unik bagi kawasan mereka.

Kata kunci: *Borneo Utara, Sabah, Bahasa Melayu, kerja lapangan, kemelayaan.*

Introduction.

Today, in the North Bornean province of Sabah, Malaysia, this pattern endures and is metaphorically disciplined through the vehicle of the dominant narrative of a Malay identity in Malaysia. The formation of the nation-states of Malaysia and the Philippines in the mid-20th century added a cultural element to the complex characterisation of identity formulation in this region. In Malaysia, this element is the dominant state narrative of the Malay identity as the primary discourses that “other” identities resist and negotiate against.

During the years after initial Malaysian independence in 1957, the North Borneo region became part of the Malaysian Federation, forming the provinces of Sabah and Sarawak (Luping 1994). Unlike peninsular Malaysia, though, Malaysian Borneo had a highly diverse indigenous and migrant population that far outweighed the population of Muslim Malays. Since the formation of the Malaysian state in 1957, and an addition of Sarawak and Sabah, the negotiations of local identities have occurred in opposition to the dominant Malay political party and cultural identity (Luping 1994). Today, Malaysian Borneo still consists of a highly diverse population of indigenous peoples and migrants with a minority of people who identify as Malay. Over 85% of people in Sabah are non-Malay. Malaysia is still governed by the nationalist Malay majority political party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) (Luping 1994 & Statistics Department, Sabah government website 2009). Despite a democratic government, there are cultural and political regulations that empower and privilege Muslim Malays over other citizens. This article analyses this dominant Malay state discourse and features the specific formulation of the identity of indigenous and migrant peoples in Sabah, Malaysia, that the dominant identity of Malay or “Malayness” underpins (Kaur 2016; Chin and Daud 2017).

“Malayness” is based on three essential features as defined in the Malaysian Constitution. As defined by the Malaysian Constitution, “Malay means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay custom.” The formation of the Malaysian nation-state has yielded a nation-building process that empowers “Malays,” establishing the Malay language, Malay traditions and Islam as essential features of “Malayness.” The Malay identity is, of course, highly ambiguous and situational, but still, one that leaves citizens other than Malays out (Barnard 2004). The situation of “otherness” in opposition to Malay is best illustrated by their omission from programs like Malaysia Vision 2020, which supports an idea of a polity of homogeneous people in culture, language, and law (Kheng 2005; Low 2018). Therefore, this study explores minority citizen resistance and negotiation against dominant state narratives that attempt to “civilise” and “marginalise” others as defined by Renato Rosaldo (2003) and Chris Duncan (2004). This process has encouraged non-Malays to negotiate their own identities within (or in opposition to) the ideal model citizen. (Müller 2014; Sahiddan and Johar 2016).

In the case of indigenous and migrant peoples from other countries in Malaysia, this positions them as second-class citizens, creating a plural, majority-minority society. The research on identity formation in plural societies is significant in Malaysia and in anthropology broadly because of the behaviours that agents must practice creating their own sense of self and distinctiveness. This study also will present the ethnohistorical background of this region, which is enmeshed within contemporary ethnic signifiers and behaviour in the region of North Borneo. Historical sources will explore the complex narrative of identity in Malaysia and the role that the non-Malay peoples of Sabah have within it. This study uses fieldwork and discussing the formulation of identity through language perspectives among migrant workers and indigenous peoples and argues that Sabahans are constantly engaging in identity formation through many subtle forms of resistance and negotiation. In this research, I argue migrants and indigenous people effectively practice their agency by examples such as:

1. Proactively trying to preserve their native language.

2. Using and recognising a unique Sabah Malay dialect, embracing it as the primary medium of communication.
3. The Policymaking of indigenous political parties and support for such parties.
4. Gaining status through migrant behaviours that institute belonging and negotiation of identity, such as: being successful economic actors, intermarrying, and ensuring their security with the locals.

Literature review.

The focus of a concise literature review to research and analyse how identity is formulated in Sabah, Malaysia through confrontation and co-operation against the main story of “Malayness.” I first review the ethnographic construction of Malay and then Bornean identities.

Ethnographic Background-Malay.

Malaysia is a diverse ethnic society. It consists mostly of Malays, Chinese and Indians. The rest of Malaysia’s population is made up of indigenous and migrant populations. In the Malaysian Borneo province of Sabah, the demographic spread of ethnic groups is quite diverse with Malay, Chinese and Indian populations, but mostly it is saturated with indigenous and migrant populations. The proportion of ethnic groups in Malaysia overall is quite different than in the province of Sabah:

Population of Malaysia (2010)

Population Total Malaysia: about 28,334,000

- Malay 60.3%
- Chinese 22.9%
- Indian 7.1 %
- Other (indigenous and migrant) 9.7 %

Calculated from Department of Statistics Malaysia website: <http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/> July 2010)

Population of the Malaysian Province of Sabah (2009)

Population Total Sabah, Malaysia: about 3,201,000

- Kadazan- Dusun 20.34%
- Bajau 13.56%
- Malay 11.45 %
- Murut 3.34 %
- Other Bumiputra 14.51 % (Bumiputra= all other than Malay groups)
- Chinese 9.37 %
- Other Non-Bumiputra 4.783
- Non-Malaysian citizens 25.43 %

(Above calculated from the Statistic Department, Sabah government website: <http://www.sabah.gov.my>).

Mohd Othman’s *The Dynamics of Malay Identity* discusses Malay identity in terms of its opposition to other identities and its definitive role as the dominant identity in the Malay world. Malay ethnicity is distinctive from others in Malaysian society (Othman 1983). In his study, Othman shows that ethnic identity in Malaysian society is based on rigid ethnic groups. Since Malaysian independence in 1957, the separation in Malay society is quite clear between the major ethnic groups of Malay, Chinese, Indian and indigenous. This is especially reflected in the dominant political party of the Malays since Malaysian independence in 1957, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). UMNO sees itself as the protector and personification of Malay nationalism and empowers Malays over others as the owners of Malay society. They formed the dominant coalition, Barisan Nasional, that has been in power in government since 1974 (Means 1991).

Holistic studies of what it is to be Malay by Timothy Barnard (2004) in *Challenging Malayness: Malay Uniqueness Across Boundaries and A History of an Identity*, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered demonstrate the modern behaviours and ambiguity of Malay identity. Barnard's collection explores the changing aspects of Malay identity before and after Malaysian Independence in 1957. The Malay world is a loose term that is used for Malays across insular Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, Indonesia (Sumatra) and Borneo. I am primarily concerned with how the Malay identity is defined in Malaysia. The Malays are the dominant political and cultural identity in Malaysia which has led to their role, however ambiguous, as the dominant cultural power brokers across the country, including among the minority Malay population of Sabah (Barnard 2004; Schulz 2017).

As mentioned in the definition of Malay in the Malaysian Constitution, the Malay language is a primary identifier of the Malay identity and as such has a standard dialect and a range of scholarly-accepted dialects. The standard form of Malay is considered by Malays as the most prestigious (Othman 2006). Everyone in Malaysia speaks a specific Malay dialect. They are Pulau Pinang, Kedah, Perlis, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, Kelantan, and Sarawak. These dialects of Malay are regionally and scholarly recognised as pieces of unique identity markers in the provinces of Malaysia (Collins 1989; Pugh-Kitingan 2017; Schulz 2017).

The existence of a unique Sabah Malay dialect is still arguable. Wong (2000) believes that there are enough unique markers to constitute Sabah Malay, but it has yet to be officially recognised by scholars. Most scholars consider Sabah Malay as a bazaar, pidginized version of the Brunei Malay dialect (Collins 1989). Considering the demographic makeup of Sabah and the data collected in this study, the lack of scholarly recognition may also be due to a dominant Malay cultural opposition to recognising a version of Malay that would be special to the generally non-Malay Sabahans.

Ethnographic Background-Borneo.

Borneo has historically consisted of an enormous range of indigenous groups that are still present today. The demographic statistics of Sabah above show that indigenous groups are more than 50% of the current population. Add the non-Malaysian citizens (many migrants, some illegal) who come from fluid borders with surrounding Indonesia and the Philippines and there is an overwhelming majority presence of indigenous and migrant populations.

The prehistory of Borneo is difficult to piece together. The first written history of North Borneo isn't present until about 1521 with the Brunei Sultanate and the advent of Islam (Harrison and Harrison 1971). The lack of historical record before this can probably be attributed to some main factors. Physically, the geologic history reveals that Borneo was part of a larger land shelf called Sundaland that connected many of the landmasses that are now the large islands of Southeast Asia to the mainland (Indonesia, Borneo, and the Philippines to present-day Indochina and Malaysia). It is estimated that this land shelf last existed 12,500 years ago (Harrison and Harrison 1971). Also, Borneo experienced geologic change (even to the present day by mud volcanoes) from volcanoes and erosion. The coastal areas of North Borneo are often swampy inlets. Many of the villages would have been situated on the coast but built of temporary materials that lacked larger political organisations until just before the historical record begins (Harrison and Harrison 1971). The history of this area before the advent of Islam and the Brunei Sultanate was probably similar in the organisation to Srivijaya in Sumatra, of which there is also limited evidence. Trading villages likely dotted the coast with indigenous groups in the interior. "Like Srivijaya, the Bornean coastal states were in areas with no ready access to building stone. Their cities were of wood and once abandoned were soon destroyed by the climate and the encroachment of the jungle" (Saunders 1994). It is up for dispute how far people may have permeated into the interior and what type of subsistence they pursued (King 2017; Schulz 2017).

Peter Bellwood's research outlines the spread and formation of Austronesian societies, which came out of Taiwan and spread south through insular Southeast Asia. Bellwood characterises Austronesian societies as having rich seafaring traditions and interest in founding new societies (Fox, Bellwood, Tyron and Darell 1995). Bellwood espouses that one of the first landfalls of the Austronesians would have been Borneo, then the Malay Archipelago. In *Borneo As a Cross-Roads for Comparative Austronesian Linguistics*, Adelaar argues that Borneo, despite some shallow appearances to the contrary, represents an amalgamation of ethnic groups with often very different origins. There are 10 major language groups in Borneo. Every one of these languages demonstrates the Malay and Indonesian influence on Bornean language groups (Smith 2017).

Victor King's *Essays in Borneo Society* discuss the modern cultural patterns of peoples in Borneo. Dayak is the traditional term that was used for the inland indigenous people of Borneo (King 2017). Their languages are Malayo-Polynesian. Fission and fusion are historically common, especially through trade. For subsistence, Bornean societies relied on water sources, swidden agriculture and resource gathering (King 2017). The kinship patterns in Borneo are described by King as being generally cognatic with a focus on immediate and collateral kin on both sides.

The Iban of Sarawak by Sutlive is an example of ethnography of a quintessential indigenous group in Malaysian Borneo. The history of the Iban is long and proud, with many stories of conflicts, some including headhunting. They, like many indigenous Bornean groups lived in traditional longhouses. The core of each longhouse is the spatial zone of a group of descendants of the ancestor founders, another characteristic of Austronesian societies (Sutlive 1998). The Iban see themselves as the centre of their universe. But in a world of modernity, this is challenged (Sutlive 1998). The Iban, the largest indigenous community in Malaysian Borneo has been able to effectively manage and negotiate their identity against the discourse of modernity and the dominant identity of "Malayness." The Iban currently form a cultural force that has a mix of people who still live in traditional villages in Malaysian Borneo and those who are educated and part of the "modern" system. Like many indigenous groups in Malaysian Borneo, this mixture of traditional and modern identities has helped many Iban to become an indigenous political force, especially in the Malaysian province of Sarawak (Padoch 2016; Hoe et al. 2017).

Methodology.

A Methodology of this study was fieldwork for analysis of identity formulation in Sabah, Malaysia. Research includes a study analysis of migrants in Sabah, which is used in conjunction with this qualitative fieldwork on language perspectives to discuss modern identity formation in Sabah, Malaysia. The qualitative fieldwork data gathered in Sabah, Malaysia through formal and informal interviews and observation.

Fieldwork: Language Perspectives in Sabah, Malaysia.

This fieldwork took shape from my interest in Malaysian Borneo after a trip in 2016. Following the trip, this fieldwork took place in the Malaysian province of Sabah in its capital city Kota Kinabalu from (July 2017 to August 2017). I chose two fieldwork sites, local markets and university campus because of their inherent features of high socialisation and diversity. The interviews were based on a small set of interlocutors to research Malay language perspectives in Sabah.

Informant Recruitment and Sample.

As a research fellow in USM, I have Access to professional scholars who have worked in Sabah to helped me to quickly identify informants and locations where I could carry out this research. My working knowledge of the Malay language was also very helpful in introductions and understanding the complexity of its use in Sabah. My colleagues and friends suggest that the Malay language is the cultural inter-medium of communication amongst all ethnic groups, an assumption that helped me converse with almost every informant in and around Kota Kinabalu. To attain a diverse sample of informants, this research was primarily carried out in the local Pasar (Bazaar/Market) in Kota

Kinabalu along the coastline. This included the central market, fish market, fruit market, handicraft market, and a dry sea product market. Additionally, I was given permission by the University of Malaysia-Sabah (UMS) to interview employees on their campus. This included administrative office workers, janitors and security personnel. The sample consisted of seven individual interviews and ten focus group interviews with self-identified informants with ethnic backgrounds as shown in a table.

	5 individual interviews 4 focus group Interviews 23 individuals	2 individual interviews 6 focus group interviews 22 individuals
Ethnic Background	Kota Kinabalu Markets	University Malaysia- Sabah
Dusun	4	7
Kadazan-Dusun	4	5
Bajau	3	3
Rungus	0	1
Sungai	0	1
Filipino	7	2
Chinese	3	0
Malay	0	3
Malay-Chinese	2	0

Observation.

The observations took place in the Kota Kinabalu markets. Most of the observations lasted about an hour and included sitting in a region of the market at a participant's sales stall. The idea behind the observation was to see if the ideal answers given in the interview matched up with the real behaviours at the market field site.

At the market, most people speak Malay in their social transactions. In some cases, the customer or seller might start the conversation in Chinese or Filipino if they knew or recognised the customer to be of similar ethnic background. The observations in the market led me to confirm that most people do use Malay in the public market setting. Also, there are some select people who will speak another language if they know that person speaks it. The fieldwork gleaned these key factors:

1. Some people will speak their ethnic language, but Malay is the agreed intercultural medium of communication in Sabah.
2. There is a unique type of Malay spoken in Sabah, therefore it is a unique identity marker for Sabahans as a whole.
3. The type of Malay spoken in Sabah, although possibly a pidginised or different dialect, is mutually intelligible across the region and among the Malay speaking nation-states surrounding it.
4. The type of Malay that Sabahans speak is "good enough" in their opinion.
5. Although there is a standard and prestigious form of Malay the ordinary discourse among Malaysians of different dialects may not be as judgmental.

Conclusion and Analysis.

The type of Malay spoken in Sabah is part of a historical and fluid identity that lends to modern historical studies. The Malay language was a widespread language of trade in the area that had a multi-ethnic character and was constantly reformulating the definition of cultural identity from multiple factors. This included the external influence of politics and trade that saw the fluid movement of people as a staple during the 16th to 19th century, owing to trading, raiding, slave markets and evacuations caused by natural disasters. The terms are similar in modern Sabah, wherein there is a multi-ethnic presence of peoples, constantly formulating their identity within fluid regional politics.

The type of Malay used in Sabah is embraced instead of resisted against by most people. The fieldwork identified that the type of Malay used in Sabah is uniquely Sabahan. The fieldwork also showed that some Sabahans practice native language use in their everyday life, but don't recognise this practice as an active form of resistance. Given this and the literature presented in section 1, the data on resistance through language use is ambiguous. The widespread usage of the Malay language by informants in the field site suggests that Malay is embraced due to globalising factors of upward social mobility, despite the dominant narrative of Malay identity that marginalises non-Malay peoples. Non-Malay people in Sabah use language to strategically position themselves in different contexts and use it advantageously for social mobility.

This argument support that there are forms of resistance against the dominant Malay state discourse of identity and these include political and cultural organisations interested in preserving indigenous ethnic characteristics. Although the Malay nation-state and the dominant discourse of "Malayness" have defined the Malay language as a part of their identity, it is only politically involved and elite Sabahans who view it as a form of discipline against their identity, in day-to-day communication.

The formulation of identity in the multi-ethnic province of Sabah, Malaysia is one grounded in historical processes and influenced by modern politics. The ethnohistory of the Sabah region shows that its inherent characteristics were that of fluid cultural identities experienced through multiple and contesting factors of influences of trade and transnationalism. This article seeks to understand how the identity of non-Malay peoples is formulated in Sabah with this unique background and considering the contemporary issues.

The fieldwork demonstrated that Sabahans have embraced the Malay language and the type of Malay spoken in Sabah is unique to their region. The interviews identified that the discourse of "Malayness" is less of a factor in language choice. Instead, Malay is used as an intercultural medium of communication for upward mobility and socialization. There is less judgment about the type of dialect that Malaysians use than hypothesized. Sabahans do not imagine the Malay language as an expression of the Malay majority's hegemony. However, the Malay language is recognised by some indigenous cultural and political organisations as a cause of language shift that impedes the preservation of their ethnolinguistic background. Indigenous peoples can formulate their identities effectively through political and cultural action preserving their distinctiveness through projects, associations, and political parties.

There are numerous opportunities for further study and investigation into identities in Sabah, Malaysia. In terms of language use, the fieldwork portion of this research may have benefitted from talking to more Malays in Sabah, who may have a distinct perspective towards the use of their language regionally. Perhaps they see the type of Malay in Sabah to not be "good enough." Further, Malay informants would elucidate the basis of the Malay identity in Sabah in the context of being a minority. The fieldwork also would benefit from a more exhaustive fieldwork process that included more market sites and rural localities, outside of the capital of Kota Kinabalu. A study of language shift or subtle forms of language resistance or negative views of someone's dialect would require a much longer period of fieldwork and probably should focus on some rural inhabitants with strong ties to a local community of place.

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