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Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in Sarawak

Profile

Estimated population: 2,357,500 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2006)

Ethnicity: Iban, Bidayuh, Chinese, Malay

First language/s: Iban, Bidayuh, Malay, Hakka, Hokchiu, Cantonese, Hokkien

Religion/s: Christianity, Animism, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism

Sarawak has a population of almost 2.5 million, made up of some 26 different ethnic groups. The non-Muslim indigenous groups are collectively called Dayaks – most of whom are Christians or practise animist beliefs – and they account for about 40 per cent of Sarawak's inhabitants. The two biggest ethnic groups within the Dayak community are the Iban (also known as Sea Dayaks), who constitute just over 31 per cent of the population, and the Bidayuh; others include the Kenyah, Kayan, Kedayan, Murut, Punan, Bisayah, Kelabit, Berawan and Penan. Dayaks who live in the interior of Sarawak are sometimes referred to as Orang Ulu, or people from the interior. Members of this group typically live in longhouses and practise shifting cultivation; they engage in fishing to supplement their diet if they live near a river. Only a few hundred of the Eastern Penan continue to live as a nomadic people of the rainforest.

The Chinese, at around 30 per cent, make up the second largest ethnic group in Sarawak, though they themselves can be subdivided as including speakers of Hakka, Fu-chou (Hokchiu), Cantonese and Hokkien. Most live in urban areas and are Buddhists or Christians or practise Taoism.

The number of Malays has increased to about 25 per cent of Sarawak's population. They are in fact a heterogeneous group of people since many are probably the descendants of indigenous peoples who started to convert to Islam from the fifteenth century and become Malay through their adoption of the Malay language. Like the Chinese, they constitute a large percentage of the coastal and urban population.

Historical context

Sarawak was until relatively recently mainly inhabited by indigenous groups present on the island of Borneo for thousands of years. Others, such as the Melanau and Malays, are thought to have migrated much later, after the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Chinese arrived later still, mainly in two distinct waves, first in the mid-eighteenth century in the gold-rich areas of Bau and then in the early twentieth century.

Like Sabah, Sarawak was loosely under the control of the Sultan of Brunei until James Brooke became governor of Sarawak in 1841 and was then appointed Rajah by the Sultan in 1842. Members of the

Brooke family were to rule Sarawak – and become known as the White Rajahs – until 1946. For much of that century, the Brookes governed with local Malays and Melanau, though they also used Dayaks as the backbone of their army and encouraged Chinese immigration into urban areas.

After the end of Japanese occupation in 1945, the Rajah formally ceded sovereignty to the British Crown in 1946 and Sarawak became a British colony in 1946, though some members of the Brooke dynasty resisted its cession to Britain. Despite opposition by a significant proportion of its population, Sarawak became an autonomous state of the federation of Malaysia in 1963.

Because of the very large size of the Iban minority, between 1948 and 1963 its language was the lingua franca between the ethnic communities. It was also the language of government for official purposes, including in court, and was taught as a school subject.

As in Sabah, the integration of Sarawak into Malaysia in 1963 only occurred after a high level of autonomy for the state and a number of special laws secured the protection of the very large indigenous populations.

From the 1970s, much of these legal protections were to be increasingly eroded – despite occasional victories in court – as the exploitation of the region’s natural resources expanded, particularly logging, plantations, oil and gas. The last decades have also seen the incremental transfer of Dayak customary land by the government for logging and plantation activities through various means.

The lack of protection of the indigenous languages in the Malaysian Constitution also led to public schools operating increasingly and almost exclusively in Malay, and to an apparent decrease the use of indigenous languages in broadcasting in recent years.

In the 1990s, Dayak staged small-scale protests against excessive logging in their immediate surroundings. The government responded by detaining protesters and protecting the logging operations, which are covertly owned by leading Sarawak politicians. In 1994, a decision was made to build the Bakun Dam, South-East Asia’s largest, resulting in about 10,000 indigenous people being relocated to a longhouse settlement named Sungai Asap. Despite controversy about the impact on the environment and local indigenous populations, and the postponement of the project on two occasions, the dam project was re-launched in 2000 with an expected completion date of February 2008.

Political parties representing Dayak interests succeeded in gaining a substantial number of seats in the Sarawak Assembly in the 1980s, but have since then have weakened dramatically, partially as a result of their deregistration – under sometimes dubious grounds – and of internal divisions.

Current issues

The prominent role of Malay as the country’s national language has led it to almost completely supplant English and indigenous languages, particularly Iban, in schools and government. Though English is still taught widely, Iban is only taught as a subject in one school in Kuching, and in less than half of the state’s primary schools which have more than 50 per cent Iban students. This language preference, which appears discriminatory in the context of Sarawak, has contributed greatly to the increased marginalization of many indigenous peoples in terms of access to employment opportunities predicated on fluency in Malay, and may also be contributing to an extremely high level of school drop-outs: some 80 per cent of the 26,000 students leaving primary schools and 40,000 leaving secondary schools prematurely between 1992 and 1997 were Dayaks.

The continued use by the Malaysian government and private companies of large tracts of indigenous customary land for oil palm plantations and other development projects continues to be a highly charged area of controversy: despite theoretical legal protections and a few recent court victories, many current development practices of the government represent discriminatory moves to take away indigenous land. In July 2005, the Sarawak Court of Appeal overturned a 2001 court decision that had recognized the land rights of an Iban community that had lost hundreds of hectares to an acacia plantation. The Court of Appeal recognized that there must be clear and unambiguous legislation as well as compensation for the government to be able to quash native rights to customary lands (though not to 'foraging' areas), but rejected the use of uncorroborated oral history to prove an indigenous people's land rights. Under the constitution, native customary rights must be shown to have existed before the formation of Malaysia in 1958. Since the Iban, like most indigenous peoples in Malaysia, do not have access to colonial or government documents demarcating their areas before this date, or because such documents simply do not exist for some areas, the Sarawak Court of Appeal has created an almost insurmountable barrier to establishing title to native customary land in Sarawak.

Various indigenous groups continued to resist logging and other activities being carried out in 2006 through protests and legal actions in an attempt to prevent the loss of their traditional lands. These include the Penan community of Long Benali, the Iban longhouse of Rumah Nyawin and four Iban longhouses in Sungai Naman in Durin.

On a more positive note, in 2003 the government lifted a ban on the Iban-language translation of the Bible, though translations of a number of other Christian books remain illegal.

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