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Book Review

Representation, Identity and Multiculturalism in Sarawak, by Zawawi Ibrahim (ed.), Kuching, Sarawak and Kajang, Selangor: Dayak Cultural Foundation and Malaysian Social Science Association, 2008, 311 pp.

The heterogeneity of people and cultures held by a single geo-political boundary is common around the world. Such a geo-political setting presents a rich and dynamic mix of cultural practices, religious beliefs and political interests, which shapes the representation and identity of ethnic societies. In the same vein, one cannot rule out the effects of external influence, which seemingly distorts and largely reconfigures ethnic representation and identity of multicultural societies. While all these factors could not go unnoticed, the editor of the book, Zawawi Ibrahim, rather sets in motion a critical discourse on Malaysian multiculturalism based on a multiplicity of legitimate cultural cores and centres of Sarawak. The book literally sets out to advance a series of discourses on Sarawak society and culture in the context of a broader Malaysian governance landscape, with its attendant cultural contestations of alternative representations and reconstructions of identities from the margins of society and the nation-state.

The book is organized in three parts, comprising fifteen chapters structured under three main themes. In his introduction, Zawawi Ibrahim highlights the book's main objective – to problematize multiculturalism in the context of Sarawak's experience – and provides a detailed summary of the book in the context of representation, identity and multiculturalism in Sarawak. Part 1 is themed "anthropological representations". It begins with Robert Winzeler's critical review of Tom Harrisson's archeological and ethnological efforts in light of a whole mass of controversies, debates, discrepancies and critiques on a wide range of issues that saturate Harrisson's anthropological credibility and contributions to multiculturalism in Sarawak. In chapter two the focus is on the remarkable contributions of William Geddes' iconic books, which are perceived to have captured a complete and well meaning picture of the social organization of the Bidayuh of Sarawak. In contrast here, Pamela Lindell like most academics chose to scar Gedde's contributions by highlighting the flaws inherent in some of his anthropological analyses. In chapter three, Fiona Harris examines gender representation in Sarawak and presents empirical arguments to show sharp gender asymmetries,

with women relegated in the different socio-cultural, religious, economic and political activities in Sarawak. Zawawi Ibrahim in chapter four, narrates the dilemmas of the Penans, who apparently have lost their sovereignty to external institutions due to modernization, and portrays their angst over increased marginalization and control of their lands.

Part 2 is themed 'problematising multiculturalism'. It proceeds with chapter five by Welyne Jeffrey Jehom, who described ethnic pluralism and relations in Sarawak in historical, contemporary and future contexts. Ethnic relations are significantly maligned in the historical, marked by tolerance and concessions in the contemporary, and viewed as benign and cohesive in the future contexts respectively. Chapter six reflects Yongjin Kim's analyses of Sarawak Cultural Village (SCV), which was conceived to represent the real traditional cultures of all ethnic groups in Sarawak. However, this objective was a far cry as the SCV inclines to economic gains from tourism and hence, merely integrates a façade of various cultural traits to serve as an emblem of harmonious national culture. In chapter seven, Voo Jan Chan moves on to explore how multiculturalism enhanced Chinese thinking and integration in Sarawak so much so that the cohesion between the Chinese, Malays and other indigenous populations laid the foundation for Sarawak's independence. Chapters eight and nine by Poline Bala and Ramy Bulan respectively, shed light on the Kelabit whose relatively small size and religion makes their influence within the Malaysian nation peripheral, but distinct and exemplary in light of their remarkable and modest approach to resolving conflicts. Lin How Kee in chapter ten explores the nature of research in a multicultural society like Sarawak, and submits that research in such context ought to reflect the diversity and multiplicity of the experiences of the people.

Part 3 presents the remaining five chapters of the book, with focus on 'ethnicity and identity'. In chapter eleven, John Postill explores how the Iban of Sarawak propagated and safeguarded their linguistic distinctiveness and ethnic literature to consolidate their national identity. Clare Boulanger in chapter twelve captures the dilemmas of the Ibans, caused by many decades of monstrous practices of headhunting. She further analyses the gains of repentance and the future of their traditional custom. In chapter thirteen, Kelvin Egay sheds light on the blurred identity of the Penan Belangan community, heralded by incessant migration, and further captures their renewed struggle towards retaining their identity. Finally, chapters fourteen and fifteen by Noboru Ishikawa and Faisal Hazis respectively, revisited the chemistry of the Sarawak Malays, depicting the disparities between the aristocratic Malays and coastal rural Malays with particular emphasis on the four dominant markers of Malay identity – Islam, loyalty to *parentah*, Sarawak Malay dialect and *adat*, all of which either makes

identity formation or definition of Malayness to be fluid and flexible or rigid and often abstract. The book also has a robust index, which is presented in the last-seven pages.

Overall, the book presents a rich description of Sarawak's diverse multi-cultural heritage, and the challenges of representation and identity that haunts many ethnic societies, particularly the minority ethnic groups that are caught within a larger dominant ethnic and religious group, or disadvantaged and influenced by external institutions. Such scenario eventually brings about the struggle for representation and preservation of identity. It could be adduced from the book that ethnic groups exercise a considerable degree of tolerance, which I strongly believe is essential for the continuity and peaceful co-existence of multicultural societies. This argument is in line with the increasing ethno-religious tensions and conflicts, which are most synonymous with many multicultural societies around the world, where tolerance is rather substituted for suspicion and antagonism.

The lucidity of the book, in addition to its coherent connection of chapters makes for interesting reading. Given the detailed combination of intellectual monographs, the book is indeed one that captures extensively the internal and external dynamics of Sarawak's multicultural society. However, there are some inconsistencies within the book. For instance, some chapters have introductory headings while others do not and importantly, there is a glaring error on page 193, where 'part three' was substituted for 'part four'. Similarly, chapter 12 was presented in a prose-like format, with no sub-level headings throughout the chapter. It should have been presented in two sub-level headings at least, for consistency and ease of comprehension. Also, it is obvious that very few examples of multicultural societies elsewhere were given to enhance synthesis. Using examples like the loss of identity and the dilemmas of the Native American Indians in the US, as well as the frequent ethno-religious contestations heralded by issues of representation common among many multicultural societies, particularly in Africa, would serve to aptly inform the reader of multicultural nuances in light of multiculturalism in Sarawak.

In spite of my comments, Zawawi Ibrahim deserves huge credit for a job well done in putting together a clear picture of multiculturalism in Sarawak and equipping readers with an arsenal of anthropological knowledge. In addition, his ability to unveil areas that require further research is highly commendable, notably on ethnic relations in urban settings, politics of identity in relation to tourism development and, on ethnic groups that have received scant anthropological research, like the Malays and the Bidayuhs. In doing so, Zawawi Ibrahim has made it relatively easy for anthropologists and researchers to extend the course of ethnological research even beyond Sarawak's borders.

Just as I have been massively enlightened by the book even as an outsider, the gains of reading the book are enormous, particularly for students of development studies, political, economic and social historians, anthropologists and all individuals who care to understand the trajectory of ethnic representation and identity.

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