Ethnic Groups, Ethnogenesis and Ethnic Identities: Some Examples From Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper uses the examples of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia and the Chinese in Malaysia and elsewhere to illustrate the nature of ethnogenesis as well as the meanings and implications of ethnic identities. Ethnic identification is seen as primarily subjective, having to do with people's feeling and experience of belonging. Thus the study of ethnic identity must begin with how people classify themselves, and only then analyse how certain cultural features serve as symbols of that identity. The paper concludes that ethnic identities by themselves are not racial. It is the larger context of power relations and access to economic opportunities which give ethnic identities their particular meanings and implications.

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Introduction

The study of ethnicity has become a very important theme in anthropology and sociology, and in fact in all fields of social studies. Broadly this refers to the study of two inter-related phenomena, namely the study of identity and the study of ethnic relations. Ethnicity studies deal with these two areas and their implications.

Two main approaches have guided the study of ethnic identity, namely the positivistic approach and, for lack of a better label, the subjective approach. The positivistic approach views ethnic identity in terms of certain observable cultural or other characteristics which are often assumed to be unchanging. For example, if Chinese are defined as people who can read and write Chinese, then those who do not read and write Chinese are not Chinese or less Chinese. This is simplistic but many a scholar consciously or unconsciously adopts this positivistic approach, and so is able to say that certain groups of Chinese are less Chinese because they possess less certain pre-determined cultural characteristics.

But this is rather misleading and does not take into account the thinking of the people concerned. The subjective approach regards ethnic identity as a matter of people's subjective identification, and argues that it is misleading to say that one category of Chinese is less Chinese than others simply because it does not have certain cultural features. The Malay-speaking Chinese of the Malaysian State of Melaka (the Baba) identify themselves as Chinese (but also as Baba) and

are proud of being Chinese. Who are we to say that they are less Chinese simply because they speak Malay rather than a Chinese language? To my mind, ethnic identity is best seen as a matter of subjective experience, which has much to do with the feeling of belonging to a particular category of people. Having determined how the people identify themselves, we can proceed to examine the cultural features which are significant to that identification, and can examine the implications of a particular identification. We can, for example, analyze the meaning and implications of being Chinese but speaking Malay rather than Chinese. In other words, this approach can be both emic and etic at the same time.

In this paper, I shall highlight this approach, and at the same time illustrate that an ethnic identity is shaped by historical experience, and should be understood in the larger context of historical development and ethnic group formation. Elsewhere, I have discussed the three components of ethnic identity, namely the label, the objective aspects (such as language and customs) of the identity, and the subjective experiences of that identification (Tan 1988: 140). We should note this in our discussion. I shall use the examples of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia and the Chinese in Malaysia and elsewhere to illustrate the nature of ethnic identity formation as well as the meanings and implications of ethnic identities.

Population Of Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with a population of 17.6 million citizens (1991 census), of which the Malays form the largest ethnic category (50.0%), followed by the Chinese (28.1%), the Indians (7.9%), the Iban, the Kadazan, and many other ethnic groups. Malays, Chinese and Indians make up the largest ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia (formerly Malaya), while the

Iban and the Kadazan are the largest groups in Sarawak and Sabah (collectively called East Malaysia) respectively. The Malays and some other indigenous ethnic groups are Muslims, while the other ethnic groups have their own religions and many, especially the non-Muslim indigenous groups in Sarawak and Sabah, are Christians.

We shall use a number of examples from Sarawak, and so a bit more demographic information is necessary. According to the 1991 population census, the legally-recognized population of Sarawak is 1.7 million and the main ethnic groups are as follows: Iban (29.8%), Chinese (28.0%), Malays (21.2%), Bidayuh (8.3%) , Melanau (5.7%), Other Indigenous (6.1%), and Others (0.9%) (Dept. of Statistics 1995: 41). The Other Indigenous really comprise many ethnic groups such as Bisaya, Kedayan, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Lun Bawang, Penan and many others.

Ethnogenesis And Identities

People tend to assume that ethnic groups and ethnic identities are given from time immemorial. This is far from true. Ethnic groups and ethnic identities are categories which reflect the changing nature of group alignment and identification through time. An ethnic identity of a particular time period is really a historical category which carries its own particular identity. The meanings and implications of an ethnic identity may be different from one time period to another. Thus an ethnic identity should be seen in the context of an ethnic group's ethnogenesis, the process of ethnic group formation which reflects the group's internal dynamics and the economic, political and social forces in the larger society.

The significance of ethnic identity in group relations and discourse on

social relations in the twentieth century has very much to do with the major historical developments during the century and the several centuries preceding, especially the emergence and decline of colonialism, the formation of new nation-states, the development of capitalism, the persistence of imperialism both culturally and politically, and so on.

In Asia, as is true of many peoples in other parts of the world, most people originally lived either in "autonomous" communities or in feudal "states," and in the case of China, we may say that it was already an imperial state. In Southeast Asia, colonialism created colonial states, bringing diverse groups of people under a colonial administration. The previous separate groups of people who suffered the humiliation and injustice of Western colonialism were eventually able to "imagine" a community (cf. Anderson 1983) larger than their respective local communities and feudal "states." Nationalism emerged as a dynamic ideology to bring together the people of different regions and even of different cultural backgrounds to resist the colonial authorities.

However, nationalism carries with it a power dimension, for it is defined by the largest group or groups within a society. This becomes obvious after independence, when the ethnic dimension of nationalism becomes blatant in a new state, hence the term communal nationalism. All these developments -- colonial rule, the colonial divide and rule policy, the forced sharing of destiny in a common state both colonial and post-colonial, the rise of nationalism both as an ideology against colonialism and as an ideology of the dominant group against other groups, especially "immigrant" communities -- contributed to the alignment and realignment of groups within a colonial or a post-colonial independent state. The historical legacy and the competition for political power and socio-economic

opportunities as well as the very process of democracy based on majority rule make it inevitable that ethnic identities play a crucial part in social relations between groups and in political mobilization. The increase in tension between ethnic groups in post-independent new states is thus not surprising.

The Malays and Chinese

In Malaysia, although there was no revolution against the colonial power as occurred in Indonesia, the attempt by the British to further centralize and formalize their control over the Malay states under the Malayan Union scheme of 1946 was sufficient to cause the Malays of the different regions to unite -- they were until then divided by regions and by identification with their respective *sultan*. In the post-independence era (after 1957) the Malays were also united under Malay nationalism to ensure political dominance over the Chinese and the non-Malays in general. In fact, the Malay nationalism of the pre-independence era had already exhibited resentment of Chinese domination in business. The ethnic relations of the post-independence period have been very much shaped by the Malay nationalist policies of the government in all fields. Today, the Malays in Malaysia identify themselves as *Melayu* (Malays), as one people, and even those of Arabic descent or Javanese descent also identify themselves as Melayu, reducing their Arabic or Javanese identities to sub-ethnic identities. Melayu has become a meta-ethnic category (thus forming an autonomous ethnic group) versus, say, the Chinese, in Malaysia.

Similarly, Chinese Malaysians have also experienced their own ethnogenesis. Before the Second World War, most Chinese in Malaysia were still politically oriented towards China. The early Chinese immigrants were also separate ethnic groups, with, for example, the Hokkien competing with the

Cantonese for tin mines or other spheres of influence. Even intermarriages between the Hokkien and the Cantonese were frowned upon. Today in post-independence Malaysia, the Chinese have identified with the new state; their common destiny in Malaysia, in relation to the political dominance of the Malays, has united them into a common meta-ethnic category. The Chinese in Malaysia identify with the meta category "Chinese" or Huaren in Mandarin (*Huayu*), and the Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka and other such identities have become sub-ethnic identities. Thus, while one can talk about the ethnic relations between the Cantonese and the Min people (Hokkien) in Hong Kong (cf. Blake 1981) or between the Minnan people (Southern Min or Southern Hokkien) and the Hakka in Taiwan, it is not appropriate to talk of ethnic relations between, say, the Hokkien and the Cantonese in Malaysia, for the relations between them are internal relations between two sub-categories of Chinese who identify themselves as one people (not separate people) in relation to the other ethnic categories, especially the Malays.

The Iban, Bidayuh and Orang Ulu of Sarawak

Some examples from Sarawak can further highlight the relationship between ethnogenesis and identities. The Iban are the largest ethnic group in Sarawak today and yet in the past they did not identify themselves as one people belonging to one ethnic category. The Iban of different river basins fought against one another, so much so that these historical rivalries still express themselves today to some extent in voting during elections. Thus James Brooke, the first White Rajah of Sarawak (1841-1868), and his successor Charles Brooke (1868-1917), were able to use the Iban of one river basin to fight against the Iban of other river basins to bring all the Iban and eventually all of present-day Sarawak under

the control of the Rajah.

The centralization of political control and the imposition of order facilitated greater interaction among the Iban. This was especially the case with improved communication and the introduction of education. By the time of the Second World War, there was a group of Iban intelligentsia who were able to lead the Iban to call for unity to avoid being edged out economically and politically in an emerging new state. By 1941, the Iban of Paku and Rimbas of the Second Division formed the Dayaks Co-operative Society in response to the depression of the 1930s and the monopoly of Chinese traders. Events after the Second World War, especially the impending cession of Sarawak from the Rajah to the British Crown in 1946, made the Iban intelligentsia feel the urgent need to bring the Iban together. This was especially urgent in view of the fact that the Chinese and the Malays were already economically and politically more established and were able to play influential roles in the new colonial states. Thus the Sarawak Dayak Association (SDA), the first truly Dayak communal association, was established (cf. Tan 1994). The forming of Malaysia comprising Malaya, Sarawak, Sabah and Singapore in 1963 was another political event which caused all groups of people in Sarawak (and Sabah too) to be even more conscious of their ethnic status and their respective share within the political and economic arena. Ethnic identities could no longer be taken-for-granted. They would have new meanings and implications in state politics and economy. The formation of Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS) in 1983, an Iban-dominated Dayak party, marked another milestone in the development of Iban politics and ethnicity in Sarawak, but to date it has not been successful in bringing the Iban to the forefront of the state political leadership. Being the largest ethnic category, the Iban, who now all identify as

one ethnic group, aspire to be in the leading position in the politics of the state, and eventually to be economically on a par with the other ethnic groups as well.

Anderson (1983) has pointed out the important role of language and the printing press in forging nationalism. In Sarawak, education, mass media and especially improvement in physical communication (road and river communication) as well as the centralizing effects of political administration have contributed much to bringing people of different regions together politically and ethnically. We have seen this in the case of the Iban. Similarly, the Bidayuh, who unlike the Iban are linguistically very diverse among themselves, have today identified themselves as one ethnic category even though the Bidayuh of Bau, for example, may not quite understand the Bidayuh "dialect" of Padawan. The Dayak Bidayuh National Association has played a significant role in promoting common Bidayuh identification and in articulating Bidayuh interests in the modern nation-state.

We have seen the ethnogenesis of the Iban: how the Iban originally identified themselves as people of a river basin only, but eventually identified themselves as one ethnic group existing throughout the state of Sarawak. Indeed, most indigenous groups in Sarawak originally identified themselves only by their own particular village community. Each local community derived its name/identity from the name of the river or other local physical characteristics. Most Kenyah village groups, for example, derived their names from the river mouths, such as Long Bulan, Long Geng and Long Dungan, *long* being the word for river mouth.

The Badeng, a group of Kenyah, derived their name from Long Badeng in the present-day Kalimantan in Indonesia, Badeng being the name of a river. The

Badeng live in that part of Borneo island which may be described as Central Borneo (Rousseau 1990). The Badeng myths and oral history relate that their ancestral homeland was in Usun Apau in the present-day Sarawak side of the border. The Badeng are today found in both the Malaysian and Indonesian sides of the border, the people being divided by the modern nation-states. The Badeng myths and oral history show that the Kenyah were originally one people but as the population increased in each local community, or due to conflicts, the people split to form different villages. There were many migrations in Central Borneo. Eventually, there were many linguistically related people in different regions and they formed different *lepo'*, or village communities. There are today many groups of Kenyah such as the Lepo' Tau (mostly in Indonesia), the Badeng, Lepo' Kulit, and so on. The Lepo' Aga' Kenyah of Long Jeeh in Baram (Sarawak), for example, speak the same language as the Badeng in Belaga, with very minimal variation.[1]

In Sarawak, even the Badeng are separated by rivers and mountains between those in Belaga District (Batang Balui basin) and those in Baram, with little interaction between them even today except when individuals meet in the major towns. In Belaga, the Badeng of Long Busang, Long Menjawah, Long Dungan and Data Kakus (now in Bintulu Division) belong to the same group of people who migrated from the Kalimantan side and so are very close, while those in Long Geng had split from the original group in Kalimantan and migrated earlier to Sarawak. Nevertheless, all Badeng in Belaga today see themselves as one people. This is facilitated by greater interaction today with Belaga town as the meeting point of not only the Badeng but also of all Kenyah and diverse ethnic groups in the Belaga District. While in the past, the ethnic group formation of the

Kenyah was characterized by differentiation into different local communities, today the political economy of Malaysia is bringing the Badeng and all Kenyah group into common larger categories. The present Badeng of Belaga can be said to form an ethnic group. At the same time, the socio-cultural forces are encouraging all the Kenyah groups to identify at a higher level as Kenyah. In fact, to non-Kenyah, all the Kenyah groups are just Kenyah, although among the Kenyah groups, when they identify as Kenyah, they really mean Kenyah Badeng, Kenyah Uma Kulit, Kenyah Sambop and so on. In other words, the Kenyah groups have not reached the stage that the various Chinese groups in Malaysia have reached, who now identify themselves primarily as Chinese, i.e. at the meta level of identity, and only sub-ethnically see themselves as Hokkien, Hakka and so on.

However, various Kenyah and Kayan leaders in Sarawak found it necessarily to unite all the "Central Borneo" groups, who are all small minorities in the state, into a bigger category in relation to the Iban, the Bidayuh and the Muslim groups, in order to more effectively articulate the interests of the small ethnic groups in interior Sarawak. Thus a number of Kayan and Kenyah leaders from Baram formed the Orang Ulu National Association (OUNA) in 1966. The term "Orang Ulu" ("Upstream people") was adopted to cover all the interior groups such as Kayan, Kenyah, Sekapan, Berawan, Penan and many others. Nevertheless not all groups so classified identify strongly with the Orang Ulu category, and groups like the Kelabit, the Lun Bawang, and the Bisaya and even a group of Penan had in fact established their own communal associations to articulate their respective interests in the Malaysian state. To be sure, Orang Ulu covers very heterogeneous related and unrelated peoples; the Kenyah and Kayan,

as the largest categories among these minorities, are seen as dominating OUNA. Even the Berawan, who are considered officially and unofficially as Kenyah, have formed their own communal association, the Sarawak Berawan Association (Tan 1994).

What we have in the case of the "Orang Ulu" is a scenario in which diverse groups of people have or are in the process of forming ethnic groups (from "autonomous" village communities) and even larger categories such as "Kenyah" and "Orang Ulu." It is very likely that the different Kenyah groups will assume "Kenyah" as the meta-ethnic group identity with "Badeng," "Uma Kulit," etc. as sub-ethnic identities, just as the "Chinese" identify Hokkien and Hakka etc. as sub-ethnic identities.

Communal Associations

Nation-building brings about the alignment and realignment of groups as well as the redefinition and even creation of new identities. The political process in an independent state no doubt plays an important role in ethnogenesis. Indeed, the various ethnic groups in Sarawak find it useful and indeed necessary to form communal associations to more effectively articulate their respective interests. The nature of capitalist development in a state forces all groups to compete for socio-economic opportunities. For example, logging in Sarawak is a form of development in which the influential politicians (especially Muslim politicians) and Chinese capitalists benefit most; because of this, the minority indigenous groups feel the urgency to have organized bodies protect their economic interests, and to seek just compensation for the forests logged and resources lost. Indeed, the formation of many indigenous communal associations was partly a response to logging.

The point I am making is that the political process and the nature of economic development heighten ethnic consciousness. At the same time, the formation of communal associations helps to speed up ethnic group formation and to gain government and public acceptance of the groups. The Lun Bawang Association, Sarawak (formed in 1977), for example, has successfully persuaded all the Lun Bawang people in Sarawak to use the label "Lun Bawang." Externally it has successfully got the government and to some extent the larger Malaysian public to refer to them as "Lun Bawang" rather than "Murut," although many people in Sarawak still use the earlier term "Murut." As the people originally identified with only the local village communities, various labels like Lun Dayeh ("Upriver People"), Lun Lod ("downriver people"), Lun Ba' ("People who cultivate wet padi") etc. are used (cf. Jayl Langub 1987, Raki Sia 1989). With the formation of the people as a single ethnic group in Sarawak, the term Lun Bawang is chosen to be the label of the group (*lun* = people, *bawang* = village, town, district, country, place in general). The term "Murut" was used by the White administrators to refer to a number of interior groups, but is today regarded by the Lun Bawang as derogatory.

Ethnic Labels

The changing use and meaning of ethnic labels is another matter we need to pay attention to. The centralization of control often results in the administration grouping a number of related people into a broad category. Thus as far back as the eighteenth century, the Dutch called the interior groups of people in Borneo "Dajak" (cf. Ave' and King 1986: 10), i.e. "Dayak" as it is spelled in English. The term has remained to this day. In Sarawak the term "Dayak" was used to refer to the "Sea Dayak" and the "Land Dayak." These externally imposed terms are

today rejected by the people themselves, and the Sea Dayak are today known as "Iban" and the Land Dayak "Bidayuh." The formation of an ethnic group requires an internally acceptable label and so Iban, which literally means "people" in the Iban language, and Bidayuh, which means "people of the interior" in Bidayuh, have become accepted by their respective peoples. In fact "Bidayuh" was originally used by the people of the Sadong (Geddes 1954: 6), but today the people formerly called Sea Dayak identify themselves as Bidayuh.

The term *dayak* means inland or upriver direction/region, and is a common term for various peoples in Borneo. In Sarawak, we have noted that among the Lun Bawang there are people in the inland who refer to themselves as "Lun Dayeh" which means "upriver people." The similar people in Sabah still identify with the label Lun Dayeh rather than "Lun Bawang" as is used in Sarawak. Among the Badeng Kenyah, *daya* also means upriver although they do not use it as an ethnic label. Each local group is identified with the local landmark, especially the river. *Dayak* or its variants is *hulu* or *ulu'* in Malay, and we find that this has become a convenient term for various interior groups such as the Kenyah and the Kayan to refer to themselves to outsiders, i.e., "Orang Ulu" (the inland/upriver people).[2] As noted, it is now used by the Orang Ulu National Association as a convenient label to group the large number of interior minorities into one category.

While the Sea Dayak and the Land Dayak have rejected these labels as far as their own ethnic groups are concerned,[3] the term "Dayak" is now popularly used both by the people themselves and outsiders to refer to the largely non-Muslim indigenous people in Sarawak in contrast to the Muslim population. The term has become popular again with the formation of Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak

(PBDS), the Iban-led political party which uses "Dayak" to mobilize all non-Muslim indigenous peoples. As mentioned earlier, while "Dayak" has become a term of convenience, each particular "Dayak" ethnic group does not necessarily identify with the label as an ethnic label of their own group, and the non-Iban and non-Bidayuh see this term as more applied to the Iban and the Bidayuh, who were in the past called Sea Dayak and Land Dayak.

Thus an externally imposed label or one which was once popularly used by outsiders can in time become an accepted ethnic label for a people themselves, especially if the people did not at first form an ethnic group and now need a collective label. Not only has external rule brought about a particular type of group formation, the externally imposed label often persists. This is most obvious in the case of the aborigines in Peninsular Malaysia, who today identify with the externally imposed label "Orang Asli" ("Original People"). Before this, the Orang Asli were derogatorily called "Sakai" which means "slaves" at least to the Malays, and many unsympathetic people still refer to them as "Sakai," much to their annoyance. It was in the fifties when the government, in an attempt to win over the support of the aborigines against the communist insurgents, introduced the term "Orang Asli" to replace "Sakai." In fact it was the communists who introduced the term *asal* (this being another Malay word for "original") to refer to the aborigines at a time when everyone, including the government authorities, still called them "Sakai" (Tan 1975: 194). The Orang Asli actually comprise diverse ethnic groups. For example, the Semai is now the largest Orang Asli ethnic group, but traditionally the Semai referred to themselves by the name of a river such as Mai Bertak (*mai* = people) or other geographical locations such as Mai Tapah (Tapah is name of a town, i.e. the people are close to the town) (Gomes 1988:

102). The term "Semai" is an externally imposed term, but it has been so widely used by both the government authorities and other non-Semai that it is now accepted by the people themselves as an ethnic label, although they prefer to call themselves "Senoi," which means "human being." Interestingly the term "Senoi" is used officially as a category comprising Semai and another aboriginal ethnic group called Temiar.

The discussion of label shows that an ethnic label needs to be both internally and externally accepted. When a people have formed an ethnic group out of previously local communities, a collective label is necessary, and often an external label historically imposed may be retained to serve as a collective label, as in the case of the Semai and the other Orang Asli groups. In the case of the Iban and Bidayuh, new labels are used to replace the externally imposed label, which nevertheless is still retained for collective reference to all non-Muslim indigenous peoples in Sarawak. The case of the Lun Bawang shows the need for a self-selected ethnic label to be publicly recognized. At this, the Lun Bawang have been successful, especially through the mobilization of their communal association. The Semai, however, who do not yet have their own communal association (although there is an Orang Asli Association), find that the term "Semai" is so widely used that they are stuck with the label. Ethnic labels, like ethnic identities, do change through time according to changing political and socio-economic situations as well as the internal dynamics of group formation.

The Melanau and Double Identities

There are many examples from Sarawak which can illustrate the complex issues of ethnic identities, but we shall discuss one more only. The Melanau are an interesting case. They cannot be strictly classified as "Dayak," nor are all

Melanau Muslims, although most are. There are Melanau who are Christians and a small number still practise the traditional folk beliefs and rituals. As Muslims, the Melanau can identify themselves as Malays, and are so accepted. Thus politically the Muslim Melanau identify with the Malays who are Muslims. At the same time, the Muslim Melanau still identify themselves as Melanau among the Melanau. Thus Muslim Melanau have double identities -- this is a case, I argue, of double identities rather than different levels of identity.[4]

The Melanau case also illustrates another interesting aspect of ethnogenesis and identity, for the Melanau share much of their cultural heritage with the interior category of people called the Kajang, which comprise the Sekapan, the Kejaman, the Lahanan and the Punan Bah (Morris 1989, Aseng 1989). It is possible that the present-day Melanau were originally linguistically-related "Dayak" groups which had occupied the Rejang delta where many of them became Muslims. Like the other "Dayak" groups in the past, the Melanau were originally people who identified with their respective settlement only, such as the Oya people at the Oya river (Morris 1991: 2). Today the Melanau call themselves "A Likou" (Morris 1953: 2; 1991: 7), which means "the people of the river," and indeed their settlements are along rivers which they use for washing, processing sago, bathing, transportation and so on. Nevertheless, the term "Melanau," which was originally used by outsiders (such as the Malays), has become widely used and accepted by the people themselves. It has become a convenient general label for people who in the past identified themselves as separate village communities rather than as belonging to a common ethnic group.

Culture, Cultural Change And Identities: Ethnic Chinese Experiences

If subjective identification is the primary basis for identifying groups, then

what is the significance of culture to that identification? Barth's classic analysis of ethnic groups and boundaries emphasizes the ethnic group as a kind of organization. He does not consider cultural criteria as defining an ethnic group. For him, an ethnic group is a form of social organization in which "actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction" (Barth 1969: 13-14). Barth is of course primarily interested in analyzing how actors use ethnic identities for interaction. While it is useful not to treat any particular feature of culture as defining an ethnic group, culture as a way of life, including the type of language spoken, nevertheless influences the meaning and perception of an identity. This is because an ethnic identity is a public identity and is subject to public evaluation and recognition, and these in turn influence a people's self-perception of that identification.

The experience of the Malay-speaking Baba Chinese in Melaka serves to illustrate the relationship between culture and identity. They have been so acculturated in the dominant Malay environment due to their small number and early settlement in Melaka that they speak Malay rather than a Chinese language, and the women wear Malay-style dress. Nevertheless they continue to practise ancestor worship, worship Chinese deities, and observe Chinese customs. They identify themselves as Chinese although of the Baba type, and are proud of their Chinese identity. Here we note that the displacement of an ethnic language (Chinese) by another (Malay) has not led to a loss of a meta-ethnic identity (being Chinese). However, this displacement does transform the meaning and perception of that identity. The Malay-speaking Chinese are "Baba." Speaking Malay in an environment where the other Chinese do not normally speak Malay among themselves serves to distinguish the Malay-speaking Chinese from the

Chinese-speaking Chinese. However, the Baba identity did not develop out of this distinction alone. It was also very much the wish of the local-born Straits Chinese (Chinese in the British-ruled Straits Settlements comprising Penang, Melaka and Singapore) to stress their local-born status against the status of the new immigrants.[5]

The point is that forms of cultural life do influence the development of an identity and the perception of that identity. However, it is the overall political and socio-economic conditions which shape the formation of an identity or a sub-identity, not any particular form of culture. Having been established, an identity can be symbolized by a core of cultural features. In the case of the Baba, it is the synthesis of cultural loss and cultural persistence that distinguishes the Baba identity, as I have described elsewhere (Tan 1988). What cultural features are crucial for symbolizing an identity differ from one period of time to another, and whether an ethnic identity or sub-ethnic identity persists or changes depends on a number of forces in the larger society.

The existence of Chinese all over the world today, and their experiences of cultural change as well as their diverse versions of Chinese identity, serves to highlight the relationship between culture, cultural change and identity. Ethnic identity is a changing identity through time, always giving rise to new meanings and implications. Furthermore ethnic identity is to be understood not only historically but also in the larger economic, social and political context. It does not exist in a vacuum nor within the context of a particular group only. It exists and interacts in a social and political context with all the implications of power relations between groups.

Not all acculturated Chinese acquire a new sub-ethnic identity as the Baba

did, and historically there are Chinese who were assimilated (losing Chinese identity) by other groups. The Malay- and Thai-acculturated Chinese in Kelantan and Terengganu, for example, call themselves Teng-lang (Hokkien for "Chinese") without assuming any label of sub-ethnic identity. That the Malay-speaking Chinese in the Straits Settlements and Indonesia assumed a new sub-identity as Baba (also called "Peranakan") may have to do with the favourable status of local identity under the colonial regimes. In the case of the Mestizo, offspring and descendants of Chinese-Filipino marriages, they were actually legally defined by the Spanish authorities as "mestizo," and were allowed certain advantages and a higher status than the indigenous people and the Chinese immigrants (cf. Wickberg 1965).

The persistence of traditional identity, the development of sub-identities, and the adoption of new identities, mean that the Chinese in different parts of the world have multiple identities or multiple levels of identity which are not exclusive in nature.[6] Thus a Baba is a Hokkien (or another speech group), a Baba, and also a Chinese Malaysian (in contrast to, say, a Chinese Filipino). In Thailand, the situation is rather complicated, for there the Chinese (who differ among themselves according to their level of acculturation) actually have double identities: two separate meta-ethnic group identities. They are both Chinese and Thai, not just Thai in the sense of national identity but Thai in the ethnic sense too. Thus being Chinese and being Thai is not a matter of assuming different levels of identity, but a matter of assuming two meta-identities at the same time. The situation is complicated by Thai people who do not normally identify themselves as Chinese but who are nevertheless proud to say that one of their ancestors or ancestresses was a Chinese, making it even more difficult for outsiders and

researchers to comprehend who is and what is a Chinese in Thailand. This is also complicated by the high level of acculturation among the people of Chinese descent towards the Thai side.

Viewing identities as multiple identities or levels of identities help us to understand what has been described as situational ethnicity (Paden 1970, Nagata 1974, Okamura 1981). As I have pointed out elsewhere, situational ethnicity or situational stress of ethnicity is different from passing, and occurs in the context of multiple identities acceptable to the people concerned and to others (Tan 1983: 72). In a sense all identities are situational. However, it is useful to restrict situational ethnicity to the phenomenon of using or stressing different meta-ethnic identities (autonomous ethnic identities) as in the case of the Chinese in Thailand (Chinese and Thai) or in the case of the Muslim Melanau (Melanau and Malay) in Sarawak, rather than also referring to the use of different levels of identities within an autonomous ethnic category. When a Chinese identifies himself as a Hokkien, he is still identifying as a Chinese at the meta-level. It is not a situation of him choosing or stressing the lower identity over the meta one; rather, the context of interaction makes that level of identification relevant, as when a Chinese Malaysian wants to know what type of Chinese the other is. However, when a Muslim Melanau stresses his Malay identity, he may mean to "subdue" his Melanau identity in a particular context (as when a Melanau candidate is seeking to mobilize support among Malay voters who may or may not know he is Melanau but accept his Malay ethnic status and are pleased that he emphasizes that Malay status). This is different from passing, in that the Muslim Melanau still see themselves as Melanau and would identify themselves as so among the Melanau.

Viewed transnationally, the people of Chinese descent (outside China) also

experience the process of differentiation and unification. Nation-building and the Chinese identification with a new land had caused the originally diverse ethnic groups of Chinese to identify themselves as one ethnic category in relation to other ethnic groups. At the same time, Chinese whose ancestors originated from the same region in China (such as a particular district in Fujian) but who had migrated to different parts of the world, have adapted to different dominant cultural and political environments, such that the Hokkien in Malaysia, for example, do differ culturally from the Hokkien in the Philippines. Even within Malaysia, different levels and contexts of acculturation have caused the Hokkien of different regions to develop different Hokkien identities, such as the Penang Hokkien of Penang and the Malay-acculturated Hokkien of Kelantan, and these are different from the Hokkien of Johor who speak a "purer" (less acculturated) version of Hokkien.

Despite the differentiation into different models of Chineseness all over the world, the Chinese are also very exposed to many similar influences of modern science and technology as well as Western cultural influences. English as a world language, and as a language that many Chinese all over the world have acquired, plays an important role in bringing about a certain globalizing effect on Chinese cultures and identities. The increasing contact between the Chinese worldwide after the Cold War will no doubt have an effect on transnational Chinese interaction and attitudes towards identities. The greater use of the standard Chinese language (Mandarin) with the opening up of China and the economic achievements of both Taiwan and the Mainland will forge greater Chinese cultural contact, especially through the medium of the Chinese language and Chinese mass media. Nevertheless, given the present nation-state system, the Chinese will

still want to emphasize their national identities, at least to avoid being accused of not being loyal to their own country. At the same time, the increasing global contact, transnational living for well-off Chinese, and the seeking of employment beyond national boundaries (obviously facilitated by modern education, especially in English, and business opportunities) have rendered nationalism a rather meaningless concept to the Chinese outside China. Thus the people of Chinese descent are very much in the realm of globalization as far as rejecting the rhetoric of nationalism is concerned. However, it has never been easy to be Chinese (despite the economic achievements of the more established Chinese) and it will not become easy in the future, in that everywhere outside the Chinese land (mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) and Singapore (where Chinese are the majority people), Chinese are constantly being reminded of their minority status, and their achievements, especially in the fields of education and business, are jealously watched. Whether they like it or not, the people of Chinese descent are often construed as having links with China, as fifth-column and communist sympathizers during the Cold War, and as conspirators in building an economically-strong China now that China is opening up to the world in the post-Cold War period. The world does not permit the Chinese, and for that matter, many ethnic groups throughout the world, to be unconscious of their ethnic identities.

Conclusion

There has recently been considerable advance in the study of identities, and this paper attempts to contribute to this advance by clarifying some issues with regards to the study of ethnic identities. It stresses the need to see ethnic identification as primarily subjective, having to do with people's feeling and

experience of belonging. Nevertheless, the objective symbols of ethnic identity are not ignored. What is emphasized is that the study of an ethnic identity must begin with how people classify themselves rather than by choosing some "objective" criteria determining ethnic identity. Nevertheless, this paper also argues that culture is significant to the perception of an ethnic identity. At any period of time, certain cultural features serve as core symbols of an ethnic identity, and these features normally also serve as features of differentiation from other groups. I agree with Moerman (1965: 1222) that one can find "institutions (e.g. political, religious, ethical, aesthetic) which are nuclei for ethnic identification." However, change in ethnic identification is not just due to the loss or persistence of certain institutions within a given ethnic group, but also very much due to changes in economic, political, and social forces in the larger society. To be sure, the Baba identity has very much to do with the loss of a Chinese language (Hokkien) and the acquisition of a non-Chinese language (Malay) as the group's language. Nevertheless, not all situations of linguistic assimilation lead to the emergence of a sub-ethnic identity as was the case with the Baba. (The English-speaking Chinese, for example, do not form a sub-ethnic category, although "English-educated" as a category of differentiation does exist.) That the Baba formed a sub-ethnic identity was also related to their wish to differentiate from the new Chinese immigrants and to enjoy a certain status under the colonial administration.

Language of course has a special relevance to ethnic identification as it is such an obvious symbol of differentiation. Language is also a medium of communication, and the ability to communicate in the same language brings about amity. It is a common experience, especially for anthropologists, that when one

can speak another people's language, one is more welcome. Here lies an important implication of language use and identity. In Malaysia, one often points to Chinese tending to group among themselves and Malays among themselves and so on, as evidence of ethnic polarization, of ethnic identification hindering inter-ethnic interaction. Yet, this may be due to the nature of language use, rather than to being racial; unless the situation calls for inter-ethnic interaction, it is linguistically easier for most Chinese university students to sit together in the canteen with other Chinese, and the Malays with the Malays, and the Indians with the Indians. How can the Indians speak an Indian language (e.g. Tamil) if they have to interact with the Malays or Chinese? Of course, at other times, the same Indian students will mix with Chinese students and they all speak English, or with Malays and speak Malay. Thus what appear to be "racial" may not be necessarily racial differentiation after all but linguistic differentiation.

For most people, language, because of its distinctive public status, is a crucial symbol of an ethnic identity. But this is not necessarily so for all ethnic groups. What cultural feature or features serve as crucial symbols of an ethnic identity depend on the people's perception of themselves and others and how particular symbols can be used to differentiate groups and to stress a group's own status. For the Ahom, a lowland Assamese people, for example, beer-making and their drinking of rice beer are used to symbolize their ethnic identity (Terwiel 1992). For the Bidayuh, who speak a number of dialects which are not easily mutually intelligible, language does not serve to unify or symbolize the whole ethnic group, although it differentiates one local Bidayuh group from another. Instead other cultural features and especially myths of origin and oral history, which are no doubt reconstructed, serve to unify and symbolize the Bidayuh

identity. Of course, non-cultural aspects such as economic status and class and even physical features can also play a significant part in ethnic identification. Since ethnic identification is subjective, it must necessarily be influenced by the various experiences of social living, and so factors of economic status, region etc. do influence the perception of an identity even by different sections within a group. As for physical features, these are significant or appear to be significant in a situation where different ethnic groups are marked by distinct physical features. In Peninsular Malaysia, people are quite conscious of the physical features between the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians, the three main ethnic groups. But in Sarawak, where the Kenyah look like the Chinese and the Chinese also look like most Melanau, physical features are not significant for general group differentiation, although there are people who can make some fine distinction of physical features between people of the different ethnic groups when so requested.

The discussion also points to the need to see identities as either multiple autonomous identities or levels of identities which are not exclusive. Keyes (1976, 1979) has already pointed out that individuals may hold more than one ethnic identity concurrently. My own studies also point to the need to see identities in terms of multiple levels of identity (Tan 1983, 1988, 1993). In this I further make a distinction between having multiple autonomous identities and having multiple levels of ethnic identification. The Chinese in Malaysia carry different levels of identities all at the same time, such as being both Baba and Chinese, or Hokkien and Chinese Malaysian at the meta level. I also argue that it is not useful to see ethnicity as only situational, as if the people do not have definite categories of identity, and I suggest restricting the concept of situational

ethnicity to the expression of different autonomous identities in different social interactions. In time to come, people who carry such double identities may subsume one identity under another, such that one of the identities becomes a sub-ethnic identity. Thus the people of Javanese descent in Malaysia may be said to have become sub-ethnically Javanese but Malay at the meta level of identification, while increasing number of younger Javanese in Malaysia are assimilated to be *Melayu* without any sub-ethnic identification.

The examples from Sarawak shows that separate local communities can align to form an ethnic group, and various ethnic groups can also align to form a larger category in order to relate to other larger ethnic groups, or ethnic categories. Such an alignment may be necessary for relating to the state in order to articulate more effectively the interests of the groups so categorized and to get a wider political base. We have seen the use of the general category "Dayak" and "Orang Ulu."

Thus, using the example of the Badeng, we can identify the following levels of identification: local community (e.g. the Badeng of Long Geng); ethnic group (the Badeng); general ethnic category (Kenyah); collective inter-ethnic category (Orang Ulu); regional identity (state level, Sarawakian); larger regional identity (East Malaysian identification); national identity (Malaysian). There is differentiation and unification at every level. Thus the Badeng as an ethnic group can identify with other Kenyah groups as "Kenyah", and the Kenyah can identify with other non-Kenyah ethnic groups of the interior as "Orang Ulu," and all the Sarawak ethnic groups can emphasize the Sarawak identity (most evidenced in inter-state football games), and in relation to the more developed Peninsular Malaysia, the Sarawakians identify with the Sabahans as East Malaysians in

contrast to the *semenanjung* (peninsula) people. Today, the people in Sarawak also identify as Malaysians. This is the segmentary nature of identification.

The Sarawak examples of ethnic groups and ethnic group formation show that ethnic groups grow out of local communities. Van den Berghe (1978: 403) is of the opinion that both "ethnic and race sentiments are to be understood as an extended and attenuated form of kin selection." While each local community is generally made up of people who are kin related, it is more accurate to see an ethnic group as an extension of local communities forming a group in response to the changing economic, social and especially political conditions of the larger environment in order to articulate more effectively the interests of the people so grouped together; such a grouping may also be originally externally imposed. While kin sentiment plays an important role in holding a local community of related people together, the local community is more generally held together by the mutual concern for security and survival. Thus, the collective sentiment which holds a community together as a group is not just social (e.g. kin-based) but is also very much economically and politically based. The economic and political bases of collective sentiment are even more important for an ethnic group which comprises people who are unlikely to be all kin-related; and when the ethnic group is large in size, as is true of all the Chinese in Malaysia, an ethnic group is really an "imagined" group. Nevertheless it is real, in that the political and economic concerns as well as the communal processes of nation-building foster the Chinese in Malaysia to see themselves as an ethnic group, and they are identified by non-Chinese as such.

The idea of belonging to one people is important in ethnic group formation. An ethnic group is very much an extension of the idea of one people from one

local community becoming a larger group of one people who usually (although not necessarily) share a common language and cultural heritage. In this respect, we can agree with Keyes (1976) that the idea of "descent" is important in the definition of an ethnic group, but this is descent in the sense of belonging to one people, however defined or legitimized, whether by linguistic similarity, common cultural heritage or a reconstructed origin myth. An ethnic group is thus a category of people who believe they have a common origin and who see themselves as one people who are culturally distinct (even minimally) from other peoples. An ethnic identity, then, is the subjective and objective expression of identifying with an ethnic group. The meanings and implications of this identification can only be understood in the context of inter-group relations and in relation to the state or the source of power and centralization.

The paper emphasizes that ethnic identities are changing -- that ethnic group boundaries and identities are changing through time in response to changing economic, social and especially political situations. The meanings and implications of ethnic identities are shaped by the internal and external dynamics of change, as well as group formation and realignments. The state, through its centralization of rule and administration and policies on cultural and political rights and distribution of socio-economic resources, plays an important role in influencing group formation and realignment, and consequently the shifts and redefinition of identities. The meanings and implications of ethnic identities have to do with the larger situation of ethnic relations, and ultimately this has to do with the question of equality and justice between peoples. Within a state, the need to compete for resources along ethnic lines results in greater consciousness of ethnic identities and the need to manipulate identities for political and economic

purposes. Where government policies are made along ethnic lines, ethnic identities have implications concerning access and non-access to privileges and opportunities. The nature of economic development, especially laissez-faire capitalist development, has serious consequences for economically weaker groups, especially rural-based minorities. More and more, they have to align and realign themselves into larger groups, and link their minority status to mobilization for a fairer share of the nation's economy.

The modern nation-state system and the capitalist market force people everywhere to politicize identities and to compete for fairer access to power and economic opportunities. Transnationally, this is true also in the world as a whole, which is increasingly dominated by a few powerful states whose governments do not hesitate to play the divide and rule game of siding one people against another in order to perpetuate their own dominance. This is worsened by the free trade in arms, from the powerful and stable states to the less powerful and stable ones, thus worsening internal ethnic strife. This market in arms as contributing to greater regional conflicts and global tension has been well analyzed by Anderson (1992). The persistent and increasing economic gap between the north and the south also has implications for ethnic identities and politics at the international level.

Finally, diversity is the fact of social living. There have always been groups; human social life is characterized by group living. Ethnic diversity should be respected, and there is the need to build a world where people can meet without having to politicize and racialize ethnic identities for inter-group competition and for dignified survival. Every place in the world should be a meeting point of cultures, where ethnic diversity is accepted as natural and enriching and where

ethnic identities are a mere reflection and recognition of diversities without any ideological content. For that to occur, humankind will have to work towards realizing a world where there is equality of opportunity and social justice for all people. Only then will people find it unnecessary to turn an ethnic identity into an emblem for arousing group emotion (hence communalism, nationalism, etc.) to rally internal support against an external real or imagined rival or enemy or against the oppression of the state or an imperial power.

Ethnic identities by themselves are not racial. It is the larger context of power relations and access to economic opportunities which give ethnic identities their particular meanings and implications. It is not the presence of ethnic identities which bring about ethnic polarization and conflict. It is unequal power relations and unjust distribution of socio-economic opportunities which force people to compete along ethnic lines, and therefore create the need to redefine identities for inter-ethnic relations and competition. Thus to my mind, the study of ethnic identities and ethnic relations is in the final analysis the study of equality and justice.

Notes

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1.I am grateful to Doris Ann Sigau, who is from Long Jeeh, for the discussion on the language of the Lepo' Aga'. She is the *gembala* (Christian preacher) at Uma Daro in Belaga District. I met her in Data Kakus in early June 1992.

2.The term *dayak* and its variants (*daya, dayeh* etc.,) are indigenous terms in Borneo. While the Malays who are mainly coastal people must have for long used *orang ulu* to refer to people from the interior, its adoption by the "interior people" themselves is recent. Nevertheless the British government had already used the label in the 1950s, as in the reference to "The Orang Ulu Customary Code of Fines (Belaga sub-district) Order, 1957" (see *The Sarawak Government Gazette* XIV(19) 1959, item No.S32). There is a need for more research on the nature of group relations in pre-colonial Southeast Asia, including the roles of the coastal people (and not just the colonial authorities) in labelling neighbouring groups. The Malays of Sarawak, for example, distinguished themselves as coastal people from those who were from the interior or the hills (the *ulu* people, the Dayak, the Murut etc.). It is also important to study the roles of the pre-colonial states (such as Brunei) in establishing ethnic categories.

3.In the past the Iban of Saribas and Kalaka districts actually preferred to be called "Sea Dayak" to distinguish themselves from the Iban of the Rejang and elsewhere, whom they considered as less advanced economically and in education. Personal communication with Dr. Clifford Sather, December 1993.

4.Another example is the Meirek in Miri, Sarawak, who also identify themselves situationally as Malays, but they are "Meirek" among their own people. See Zainah (1982) and Tan (1994).

5.For a description of Baba identities from the past to the present, see Tan (1991).

6.Wang (1988) has written about the Chinese in Southeast Asia having multiple identities, but note that his description of identities refer to ethnic, national, class and national identities, not just ethnic identities.

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