

*Representation, Identity and Multiculturalism in Sarawak*. Edited by Zawawi Ibrahim. Malaysia: Dayak Cultural Foundation and Persatuan Sains Social Malaysia, 2008. 311 pp.

In Sarawak no one identifiable ethnic or religious group makes up more than a third of the population. I would even suggest that Sarawak is a true alchemy of multiculturalism by which paradoxical new identities and at times, irrational and interesting cultural realities are forged under the language of diversity. And all these are materializing under a meta-narrative that continues to politicize *bangsa* and religion, one that constitutes — to invoke Achille Mbembe (2001) insights on postcolonial societies — the violent *cultural imaginary* in Malaysia. Thus, for analytic purposes, what then compels the different ethnic and religious communities in Sarawak to construct their identities amidst their negotiations of living sanely within this violent *cultural imaginary*? How and in what ways are other communities conscripted by it? What power resides in the beholders of the state discourse given that it causes certain communities to identify themselves with the status quo? Equally important, how have their (multiple) identities changed and what possible analytic distinctions can we theorize to account for such transformation? I pose these questions in my attempt to review this book.

As one reads *Representation, Identity and Multiculturalism in Sarawak*, most of the chapters not only attempt to contextualize and conceptualize the three themes but the book is also a gift to Zawawi Ibrahim, although I am not entirely convinced that it is a product of a labour of love. The history and materials *Representation, Identity and Multiculturalism in Sarawak* track is remarkably ambitious, at least from the editor's vantage point, attempting as it does, to cast theories and post-modern critique on representation, identity politics, and a nuanced treatment of multiculturalism into one field of vision. As it turns out, the collection threatens to unravel into a set of topics bound by nothing more than the cover of the book. Even as some chapters appropriately deal with the themes suggested by the editor, others feel more like short reportages or encyclopedic entries. The

length of each chapter ranges from four to thirty-three pages, which begs the question: why are they included in such an ambitious book. A reader might wonder who benefits academically from this collection of chapters. If there are problems in the overall volume, I found the editing to be sloppy: the chapters were rife with awkward sentences, missing citations and endnotes, and not to mention, in more than one chapter, the creation of an entirely new ethnic group in Sarawak, the *Than*, which I suspect is a typo error.

There is an “introduction” whereby the editor spells out the ambition of the book: to offer on both theoretical and in concrete sites, an attempt at “pluralising and decentering discourses on Sarawak society and culture.” To exorcise the Orientalist legacy, this collection offers an alternative understanding of communities that “articulate fluidity, agency, alternative representations and reconstruction of identities from the margins of society and nation-state.” Viola! Herein lie the analytical distinctions of multiculturalism, representation, and identity. This is acceptable but somehow I am not entirely persuaded that most of the chapters are about the voices and representations from the margins. In many ways, the issues invoked by Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) “Can the Subaltern Speak?” could aptly be adapted to some of the chapters in this collection if one hopes to seriously interrogate whether the voices of the margins could speak for themselves and/or be represented? I ask this question because there is this common slippage and violence among those who seek to speak for the unrepresented but somehow inadvertently gloss over the heterogeneity of the subjects that they are supposed to represent.

The collection begins with the chapters by Robert Winzeler and Pamela Lindell, which focus on reconstructing a certain past. I do not think both authors would consider their chapters in this volume as an exercise in deconstruction, despite what the editor might want us to believe. Winzeler takes us into certain personalities and positionality of Borneo’s last wildman, Tom Harrison — his struggles with the anthropological establishment, his relationship with certain indigenous communities, his extra-mural activities, especially towards indigenous women, and so on. Winzeler does this through a critical reading of

Harrison's correspondence in the archives in order to interrogate not only Judith Heimann's perspectives of Borneo's Indiana Jones but also with the ghosts of Sarawak's past anthropologists. Pamela Lindell seeks to illuminate the politics behind Sarawak's authorial figure on the Bidayuh, William Geddes: the hidden agenda that undermined (of determined) Geddes's scholarships on the Bidayuh — how he opted for “remoteness” and “native exoticism” instead of focusing on changes affected by the colonial political order of the day. There is a lesson here in that this kind of conceit still persists within contemporary anthropology, even in this volume.

The volume also addresses the lack of emphasis on gender in Sarawak anthropology. Fiona Harris argues that this lack of attention to gender inequality has to do with the preoccupation of past scholarship on Sarawak with headhunting and *berjalai* which has resulted in the negation of the roles of women or at best treating them as complementary to men's. Since Harris cited Anna Tsing, I would argue that female “bodies that matters” could be rescued from past scholarship if we, like Tsing, deconstruct and trivialize assumptions of morality, prestige, status, social values, and so on — labels that were constructed to fit a male-centric universe. As to the author's proposition that women are often stigmatized when they travelled and stayed overnight away from home, my own experience working in Kampung Pueh disputes this point. I found that it was common to see Selako women from Kalimantan Barat selling their products across the side of the border, and the locals — as moral beings and who understood the harsh realities across the Indonesian border — would extend their hospitalities.

Moving from gender, the next chapter calls for an emphasis on indigenous narratives, which Ibrahim calls “a celebration of the birth of a new postmodernist ethnography.” In any case, he goes on to talk about the dispositions of the Penan and includes a lengthy lamentation by the *Penghulu* of *Long Lamai* about changes affecting his community.

Part Two, “Problematising Multiculturalism” starts off with the chapter by Welyne Jeffrey Jehom on ethnic relations and pluralism

in Sarawak. By resorting to past scholarship and her own research on pluralism in Sarawak on the level of ethnicity, she glosses over the differences and/or competition between and within each ethnic group, with the danger of reinforcing stereotypes. A more careful treatment is provided by Yongjin Kim's interpretation of ethnic representation at the Sarawak Cultural Village on the interplay between so-called cultural authenticity and the politics of tourist consumption. For a sino-centric take on multiculturalism in Sarawak, Voon Jan Cham argues that there are two stages in the development of Sarawakian multiculturalism: the first phase, an economic driven phase, involves the Chinese immigrants during the time of Brookes, and the second phase occurs with greater numbers of Chinese participating in politics. Pauline Bala's chapter calls for an understanding of a frontier province — the Kelabit Highlands — a site of unequal access to religion, economic, and political power, which has a separate history of involvement in local, regional, national, and global events. One might say that the Kelabit is a model minority of Sarawak. Ramy Bulan then touches on the plural legal system that reflects the multiculturalism in Sarawak. Her chapter focuses primarily on *adat* and its allegedly balance and harmonious properties that still pervade and regulate the lives of various native communities in Sarawak, especially the modern Kelabits. Lim How Kee's piece relates her experience of conducting research on developing multicultural social work practice in Sarawak. In her confrontation with the applicability of employing western social work theory to non-western settings, she opts for a dialogic approach that offers a space for genuine appreciation of differences, mutual understanding, and enrichment.

Part Four (actually part three) begins with John Postill's examination of the history of prominent Iban actors in the production and dissemination of the Iban language and folklore through media (Iban Radio) and print production (Borneo Literature Bureau). Postill argues that "without a political shell, an Iban state", they have lost out to a new national language from Peninsula Malaysia. Clare Boulanger's chapter deals with how certain native communities

imagine and represent themselves, and the dilemma of living in an urban environment when at times cultural heritage could become a liability. In a sense, the way they represent themselves *vis-à-vis* their folks in rural settings is caught in the mutual imbrications of “us” (moderns) and “them” (located in distant and frozen place). In refusing this impulse to exorcise the other, Kelvin Egay deals with the dilemma of “being Penan” among the Penan Belangan community in the Asap resettlement scheme. His emphasis is on the construction and negotiation of identity whereby Penan subjectivities is never a given but rather is couched in narratives of dislocation and renewal. Faisal Hazi’s chapter confronts the lack of research and scholarship on the Malay communities in Sarawak, which illuminates a serious paradox: despite the New Economic Policy and the New Development Policy which are supposedly programmed to uplift the Malays in Malaysia, many Malay communities in the rural areas in southwest Sarawak remain marginalized, lagging behind in economic and social capital.

In quoting Marx, Edward Said affirms that the central theme of orientalism is that: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” Almost thirty years later, most of the chapters in this volume, confront a rather different discourse: that “indigenous people should [and must] present *themselves*”.

## REFERENCES

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