

Introduction to Integration of Indigenous Culture into Non-Formal Education Programmes in Sabah

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Summary

This paper outlines briefly the indigenous people and their cultures in Sabah and is a compilation of some of the way individuals and institutions have and continue to convey indigenous culture directly and indirectly through various programmes and activities. The integration of culture elements into the non-formal educational process can be viewed as a symbiosis between Government organizations and non-government organizations in Sabah. Generally, government organizations have been concerned with the provision of more formal education and training and have allocated resources accordingly. Direct involvement in non-formal education programmes has been largely centred around activities concerning material culture with general economic objectives. These have been mainly in the development and production of traditional handicrafts by rural people and they include training in which cultural content is an integral component. The task of carrying out non-formal education programmes incorporation various other indigenous cultural elements has been left largely to the NGOs. However, in these programmes Government has lent institutional support through various means by providing moral, materials as well as some funding assistance to these non-government organizations (NGOs) to implement these programmes. The NGOs have been largely cultural associations,

community-based organizations with cultural interests, and private research institutes. There have been some notable successes in these efforts.

1. Introduction

1.1 Indigenous character of Sabah's population

Sabah has a heterogeneous population and display wide cultural diversity. The state is home to some 50 ethnic groups, of whom about 30 are indigenous to the state, each with their own distinctive customs and practices. This complex ethnic character stems perhaps, fundamentally, from her physical terrain and geographical position. Surrounded by seas on three sides with a shared land border in the south with what is now known as Kalimantan or Indonesian Borneo, the coasts of Sabah had been since ancient times a transit point or staging post along a route for travellers and traders moving on land and by sea to and from across neighbouring territories in maritime Southeast Asia. However, because of its insular isolation lying in the northern extreme of the island of Borneo it appeared to be largely by-passed by the distinct cultural influences of the Hindu and Buddhist empires.

Hostile tribes had discouraged foreign colonialization of the interior. Pockets of settlements were established largely by sea-farming communities along coastal inlets and rivers estuaries. In the hinterland the mountains, valleys and rivers created natural boundaries which kept enclaves of inland communities relatively separate and intact from profound outside influences. When the European first arrived in the area they observed a distinct dichotomy of heterogeneous and predominantly Muslim mobile population along the coast, but who had little contact with the people of the interior who were largely animistic.

1.2 Language Complexity

The topographical boundaries nurtured development of distinct cultural groups of people, speaking various languages and dialects. Some 50 Western Austronesian languages with numerous dialects are spoken. These people referred to themselves by various ethnonyms and autonyms (the terms of identity by which the group consciously call themselves) according to their respective levels of perception. Some called themselves by the language they spoke (ethnonyms), the ethnic identity of the family they have married into, or by the place they inhabited or were associated with. Others change their ethnic identity on conversion to the Islamic religion, for instance the Tambanua became Orang Sungai when they became Muslims. Still others became known as the people described by others (exonym) based on some visible characteristics. For instance, the people who showed an inclination for planting and farming were called Dusun, a Malay term for farm or orchard, a referent which has endured. The ethnic boundaries are still fluid because of these arbitrary changes of ethnic identity, and which remains a continued problem for census enumerators since the first census was taken in 1891. In recent years with extensive linguistic research being conducted in Sabah, language appears to provide a more reliable means to identify and differentiate the different ethnic groups in Sabah.

1.3 General Ethnic Classification

Many people in Sabah can claim to being indigenous people. Many are fundamentally, culturally traditional in character and observe and practice customs and traditions, though largely of asocial nature, despite having universal outlook in appearance, manner and education. However, indigenous people are changing, evolving, discarding more cumbersome practices and adopting more pragmatic ones. One of the most profound impact on indigenous material culture and the transformation of cultural information and

knowledge has been brought by improved transportation and communications. The electronic broadcast media have been a powerful tool in bringing in information and change. The television and especially the transistor radio have brought far-reaching influences from the outside world even to the most distant household or village in the interior. Improved infrastructure has brought about better roads, and more efficient forms of transportation thus facilitating travel and movement as well as providing access to many goods which were previously unobtainable.

Sabah's indigenous people can be broadly classified into the following categories according to the latest 1991 census Report: the Kadazandusun, the Bajau, the Murut, other indigenous, and the Malays. (fig. Indigenous Classification, Census Report 1991)

1.3.1 The Kadazandusun

The large category, the Kadazandusun are a collection of several groups of predominantly agricultural people who cultivate wet and hill rice, and traditionally inhabit the northern and western coastal plains, and the areas around Mount Kinabalu. These people speak fundamentally similar languages which belong to the Dusunic language family, with great variations in dialects. They are a distinctive people who traditionally shared an animistic belief system which provides for a variety of religious customs and practices. This religious system centres largely around their staple food, rice, and rituals to maintain the balance and harmony between men and his environment to provide conditions for successful cultivation and harvest. Besides its role as a food source, rice also constitutes an important resource to create wealth and status in traditional society. The religious system is a source of many cultural practices many of which may have lost their religious meanings but are still observed and continued by Kadazandusun people in some way, as definitive features of their identity. However, many of these traditional practices are declining as people adopt and adapt to

more pragmatic styles of urbanized living. Many of these practices and values are manifest in their performing arts, crafts, costumes and language, with the more outstanding elements expressed and displayed in the annual harvest festival generally called the Kaamatan.

1.3.2 The Bajau

The Bajau and their kindred groups, though found in other parts of maritime Southeast-Asia, are coastal dwellers who have lived in Sabah for several hundred years. They comprise the sea-farming peoples who are predominantly Muslim, with fishing and related economic activities as their traditional forms of livelihood. They have evolved into two distinct groups because of their different geographical neighbours, into East Coast and West Coast, with variations in customs, practices language dialects which are collectively distinctive as they are different from the level of perception. In Sabah, six Bajau languages which belong to the Sama-Bajau language family are spoken. Speakers of these languages comprise also recent immigrants to Sabah. Those that traditionally inhabit the south-east coast have borrowed from Suluk, the trade language of the Sulu Sea where the East Coast Bajau fish and trade. Likewise, the West Coast Bajau have borrowed words from the Malayic languages further south on the west coast of Borneo. The Bajau show a preference for bright colours in their dress, furnishing, and the use of elaborate floral motifs in their arts and crafts which indicate the influence of Islam. They are known for their fine craftsmanship. Both men and women produce handicraft objects which are distinctive. The Bajau on the West Coast have coexisted with their Kadazandusun neighbours in symbiotic relationships in economic activities, trade, and various aspects of social and material culture which have been generally mutually beneficial. The Bajau exchanged fish with their rice-growing Kadazandusun neighbouring for rice, and rice-versa. A great deal of other objects, ideas and concepts have also been traded or exchanged with their neighbours in the vicinity. These are evident in their

material culture, and in certain customs and practices, and are also reflected in their oral tradition, music and performing arts.

1.3.3 Murut

The Murut constitute a smaller grouping of various tribes who are distinguished by lifestyles and their language which belong to the Murutic language family. Most of these people and their subgroups inhabit the more remote areas of Sabah – in the interior and the southern region which border Kalimantan and Sarawak. They traditionally constituted a remote and isolated people who observed a nomadic lifestyle, practising swidden agriculture and are known for their hunting skills. There are certain exceptions as is shown by the Beaufort Murut as well as the Timugon. Being closer to urban areas they have adapted to more urban lifestyles and practices. In certain areas they still live in long houses and practice the distribution of bride wealth which serves as a strong cohesion in community life and wider Murut society as a whole.

1.3.4 The Malays

The Malays are defined constitutionally as a group who are Muslims, speak Malay habitually, and conforms to Malays customs. In Sabah the traditional Malays were the Brunei who inhabit the south-west coast of Sabah. They speak Malay but in a dialect with terms that are distinctive of their language and identity. Apart from religion, kinship among these people is an important governing principal influencing their behaviour, customs, practice, and relationship. A preference to be called Malays by those who constitutionally qualify and who may have previously registered themselves as belonging to other indigenous groups have increased the numbers in this category. Included in this category are kindred groups such as the Malay-speaking Kedayans, and those that have moved from other parts of Malaysia to Sabah.

1.3.5 Other Indigenous

Sabah has a number smaller grouping of indigenous who prefer to remain as distinct entities described in 1.2. Their numbers may be small but they have been listed as distinct groups in various censuses. Amongst them they also display wide variation in customs, culture, practice, as well as language. Many of these groups are still inadequately documented.

2. Traditional Transmission of Culture

Many of Sabah's indigenous people are from ethnic groups with non-literate traditions. In these communities cultural information and knowledge are transmitted or passed on orally, through custom and practice, and the values internalized through the traditional socialization and cognitive processes. This usually begins in the home, with the family, nuclear and extended, attending to the initial education. The child also learns from the norms, value and patterns of behaviour taught by or copied from others at the village level, and beyond from those of wider society to which the person or the group belongs. Seeing and listening are integral part of the cognitive process. Sounds and various forms of visual assistance, thus would have greater impact among those who are non-literate. Cultural information is also conveyed orally, as in some Kadazandusun communities, through an elaborate oral tradition involving lengthy recitation of sacred texts based on their religious beliefs. Music, songs and dance also transmit cultural information and values. In the production of material culture, cultural knowledge is reflected in the form, art, use of materials, and technology utilized to create the objects.

Lifestyles and patterns of behaviour are also regulated by the respective group's traditional customs and outside the family. These are usually prescribed or sanctioned by a system of precepts based on moral and religious beliefs. In addition, a traditional legal system of customary laws called "adat" to govern the more material and tangible

aspects of life enforced through the traditional judicial process by village headman or elders or through the more institutionalized form called the Native Courts which are Sabah adat is still largely oral although there have been some attempts to codify it. In Sarawak adat is being codified by the Majlis Adat Istiadat.

2.1 Literacy Situation

Sabah has a total population of 1,863,659 of which 1,398,875 are Malaysian citizens (1991 Census Report). About 14.05 percent of the total Malaysian population representing 196,606 people between the ages of 10 and 75 and above have been recorded as never having attended school. The percentage is much lower than previous censuses, indicating that the literacy situation is improving. It can be assumed that illiteracy is more prevalent in rural areas where most indigenous people inhabit and it can be expected that a higher proportion of the number will constitute women. The lack of basic infrastructure such as road access, transportation and a scattered population especially in remote areas make provision of schools for basic education difficult. Sending children to the structured school system may be also outside the domestic priorities in these largely subsistence farming or fishing communities.

2.2 Gender Involvement

In such traditional societies there is a marked dichotomy between the labour and type of work undertaken by men and women. This is evident especially in domestic work and craft production. The various types of activities in the gathering and preparation of materials and in the creation of the final product are gender determined. The various types of economic activities at the village level tended to be seasonal in nature and are dependent on the agricultural and hunting or fishing cycles, with women doing specific tasks. Craft production takes place in between the planting and harvesting season and during the fallow period. Fishing communities usually wait until monsoon season to produce their artefacts.

In Borneo many traditional societies are largely egalitarian, with men and women also having equal social status. By virtue of their role in the domestic and religious realm, women are important custodians of and purveyors of indigenous information, knowledge and culture. Among sedentary groups with a structured traditional religious system, such as that of the Kadazandusun, women play a prominent role in the conduct of religious affairs, and related domestic activities. In many of these groups, the ritual specialists are mainly women who are custodians of the religious texts containing cultural information that prescribe conduct of spiritual and secular behaviour.

3. The Agencies and Involved Programmes

A number of agencies, Government and non-government, are involved in carrying out and implementing non-formal education programmes. The government agencies tend to focus on more tangible and material aspects that have perceivable economic benefits such as in the development of the handicraft industry among rural people. In these programmes the training, research and development take note and incorporate the indigenous cultural elements in the design, form and use of materials in the product. Traditional religious rituals as well as musical entertainment and dance have been modified and adapted for stage performances to cater to the needs of a different audiences and for a different function. The development of the tourism industry has accelerated the development of these performing arts which are based on elements of traditional culture. These performances have been commercialized and have also been made visibly more appealing to interest audience. However, in the process of adaptation many intrinsic cultural elements and values have become diminished.

Increasing awareness of the deficiencies in the documentation of indigenous cultures and the need to revive indigenous knowledge has led to the organization and

development programmes designed to address these needs. The efforts in this area have been spearheaded by NGOs or in partnership with Government agencies which may not have sufficient resources to carry out such programmes that are culturally specific in nature or require specialized skills. The focus of these activities tend to be the less tangible, and less visible aspects of indigenous culture, such as language, oral tradition, behaviour and traditional values, particularly those that are concerned with the indigenous community's relationship and co-existence with nature.

3.1 The Work of PACOS

PACOS is among the most active NGOs involved in integrating and promoting culture and indigenous knowledge through non-formal education. They have conducted a series of workshops among indigenous people in rural areas in the West Coast and the interior to raise awareness about indigenous culture, knowledge and information and also how to manage an use them. In many of these workshops women take active part and play a prominent role. PACOS recognizes the importance of women's participation in rural development in managing the domestic and community's resources, and conveying cultural information and knowledge. They have organized the following.

3.1.1 Traditional Resource Management Workshop

A number of such workshop have been organized in villages in the West Coast and Pitas with the fundamental aim of creating awareness and appreciation of the environment. In these workshops discussions are held and encouraged between young and older generation in order to revive indigenous knowledge and traditional systems which are no longer in use to manage their natural resources. These workshops have proved to be very successful.

3.1.2 Ancestral Land Rights Workshop

Several workshop have been organized in villages as venues to discuss and share their knowledge and thoughts on the value of their land and their problems regarding land tenure. They are also encouraged to comment on existing legislation which affects their traditional system of land ownership, claims and tenure.

3.1.3 Adat Forum

Elders in the community are involved to talk about **adat** with members of the community, young and old, taking part in the discussion on the origins and development of taboos and various sanctions to regulate social order in the community. Through this forum, villagers have the opportunity to learn about and understand native law.

3.1.4 Community Mappings

Villagers, especially the youths are taught how to put boundaries of their village on a map, using a compass and natural landmarks. The participants learn how to establish boundaries of their property or territory and to use and recognize landmarks or other elements as boundary markers. Several of these workshop have been held for villagers in the interior.

3.1.5 Cultural Camps

PACOS has also organized two camps to encourage performance of traditional dances and music by youths in the interior. Participants are also taught to play traditional musical instruments as well as perform traditional dances.

3.1.6 Traditional Medicine Workshop

In these workshops participants especially the younger people learn about traditional methods of healing and use of traditional medicine. The aim is to revive use and practice of traditional medicine using herbs and plants in the environment, and to conserve them so that the benefits would accrue to the community. At the same time,

participants are encouraged to develop a community traditional medicine garden in their respective villages or in their gardens to provide a ready supply of ingredients for herbal medicines. These gardens are aimed at providing another resource to teach young children about herbal plants, the environment, and their culture.

3.1.7 Community Pre-Schools

PACOS has established eight pre-schools in rural communities in the West Coast and the Interior to prepare young children for school. The children are taught by teachers from the village themselves. The system encourages villagers to promote positive indigenous values, local knowledge, culture, and vernacular language among young children.

3.2 The Kadazandusun Language Foundation (KLF)

KLF began operation in January 1996 and was set up in response to the concern expressed over the decline in the use of the Kadazandusun language among members of the community, and the declining use and erosion of their traditional indigenous knowledge. Among its major goals are to preserve, promote and develop the Kadazandusun language and other indigenous languages of Sabah and Labuan. These involves conducting linguistic research, preparing literature in the vernacular languages, training and assisting in literacy education and conducting language classes.

KLF has organized a writer's workshop to encourage local writers and illustrators to write in the indigenous languages and illustrate accordingly. After such a workshop a network of local writers and illustrators is set up and meets once a month with KLF for technical support.

KLF invites specialists and trainers to conduct local language literacy workshops and programmes for local participants for language maintenance. The development and frequent use of the oral indigenous language is encouraged among children as a foundation to develop literacy and proficiency in their own language as well as

others in later years.

The organization is also involved in preparing language materials for teaching the Kadazandusun language, based on the Bundu-Liwan dialect which has the largest number of speakers. Though the teaching of the language, culture is taught, promoted and the oral literature recorded, taught and becomes used and enhanced, thus reviving traditional knowledge, making it known and useful.

KLF through its staff is also involved in the Language and Literacy Agency, Malaysia (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, DPB) programme to enrich the national language through the incorporation of indigenous terms to better describe ideas, concepts, objects, or conditions through a series of regular workshop called **Projek Pengumpulan Kosa Kata Bahasa Sukuan**. The DPB, a government agency, is Malaysia's leading publisher of language books and materials, and cultural information in the national language.

3.3 The Sabah Museum and the Summer Institute of Linguistic (SIL)

An example of the cooperation between Government and private researchers is illustrated by the partnership between the Sabah Museum and the SIL, Malaysian Branch, Sabah. With a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1978 with the State Government, SIL carried out linguistic surveys and research in a partnership programme with the State Government through the Sabah Museum. The work of the SIL has been and continue the documentation of Sabah indigenous cultures.

Members of SIL have also assisted local agencies in organizing several literacy programmes, preparation of literacy materials and training. Two adult literacy programmes among Murut Tagal communities in the Interior are notable example. In Tenom they were specially invited by a local church organization to develop a literacy programme and materials

to teach adult Tagal members of its congregation in scattered villages to read. Called the Rundum project the local church used its existing network of indigenous church catechists as the infrastructure to operate the classes which were conducted in the Tagal Murut vernacular language.

Another programme which has had some measure of success is in the Nabawan-Pensiangan area where the Muruts also live. The Murut society in these areas are culturally cohesive and well-structured through the long house community system and reinforced through the payments of bridewealth. The two systems complementing each other provide a framework and structure to implement the literacy programmes more effectively. The Sabah Museum through its exhibition programmes and displays have made concerted effort to bring craft demonstration for live exhibitions. This exhibition policy provide an important channel for non-formal education programmes. The value of seeing objects appropriately displayed and presented with music and sound, can have a profound educational effect on both literate and illiterate audience. Museum exhibitions are usually designed for non-formal education. For indigenous people from rural areas seeing ordinary cultural objects being given special treatment in a museum or in its showcase adds to and places high value on their skills and the product. The ordinary objects of their material culture also become documents of their culture and knowledge.

3.4 The Sabah Foundation

The Sabah Foundation through its community development programmes emphasize the nurturing of intrinsic values and inter-relationships of people and their environment. One of the objectives of these programmes is to maintain and strengthen in-situ cultural values, relating to religion, culture, folklore, dance and various aspects of traditional life, especially among the rural poor line with current development. An important dimension of these programmes is focus on women, their

development and their economic contribution. Workshop are also organized to train rural youths on handicraft skills.

3.5 The Sabah State Library

As part of its services the Sabah State Library has organized story telling sessions which contain cultural elements at its Kota Kinabalu and Penampang branch libraries. The Department has organized competitions for story-telling and reading and essay writing in the vernacular language for students to encourage its use in oral and written form. A workshop on folk tales was also held recently to develop skills and organization for effective story telling and to encourage telling of local folk tales.

4. Oral Tradition and Material Culture

For non-literate people who rely on hearing and seeing, oral tradition and material culture become especially important transmitters of indigenous culture and values. For oral literature, the transistor radio with the cassette tape recording system become an extremely powerful tool for effective cultural transmission, reaching even the most distant villages. While few rural communities have the basic infrastructure to enjoy the general use of electrical goods, the transistor radio is likely to be within the financial reach and access of many people. Using local language in the broadcast media also increases the sense of self-worth among indigenous people. This is a strong elements in cultural and linguistic vitality. Providing enough air-time for cultural programmes on radio and perhaps also on television to serve these cultural needs continue to be a challenge.

In material culture the range of objects from costumes, domestic implements to construction materials also convey cultural messages containing information about the group, knowledge and its values. Indigenous materials culture has been translated into economic objects as resources of the handicraft industry and items for the tourist trade.

4.1 Handicraft Production

Federal Government agencies involved in handicraft and souvenir production are the Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia (Malaysian Craft Development Corporation, Sabah Branch) and KEMAS (Jabatan Pendidikan Masyarakat – Department of Community Education). KEMAS, which originated from Janatan Pelajaran Dewasa (Department of Adult Education), was initially established to provide basic tuition for rural adults who had received no formal education. As scope of its activities widened, KEMAS under the Ministry of Rural Development organized training programmes which include classes for production of handicrafts. These handicrafts programmes encourage the preservation and promotion of traditional Sabah materials culture at the national tourism level. The Malaysian Craft Development Corporation uses traditional materials and techniques to produce modern articles and souvenirs for export and the tourism industry.

The Rural Development Corporation, a government corporation under the State Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, has established a handicraft unit to encourage and develop traditional craft production as a source of additional income for rural communities. KPD holds briefings on awareness raising among the rural communities, in particular the Murut groups of the Interior to improve standards of living, family welfare, and the need to continue cultural practices and traditions. The training courses on craft production cover use and preparation of raw materials, colours and dyes, motifs, patterns and form, and technology in the creation of the object.

4.2 Cultural Association

A group called **Tuni Koubasanan** (Traditional Sound) was set up by the Tanjung Aru Branch of the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KC), Sabah. The members were graduated of a traditional music course organized in October 1993 to train young indigenous people to play

traditional musical instruments. Twenty-eight people were taught to read musical notations, play as well as make and care for these instruments by eight teachers and instructors over four weeks. At the end of the course they were able to form the small group to perform and play these instruments.

5. Needs and Problems of NFE Programmes in Sabah

Non-Formal education programmes incorporating cultural components are specialized fields which require understanding and knowledge of the culture of the specific indigenous group and their needs. Research is required and materials must be made available for the programmes to continue. Since most of the programmes are carried out by NGOs depend on outside funding to provide materials, support training and personnel.

Greater recognition should be given to the work of the NGOs in these fields since it is not possible for the Government to implement these programmes on its own, given the present constraints, particularly on its manpower resources. Thus the symbiosis between Government and NGOs need to be strengthened and encouraged.

Established institutional support to provide the necessary infrastructure to implement the programmes must also be in place. In societies whose members have strong sense of individualism and lack cultural or structural cohesion, implementation can be a problem. The formula for one group may not be the same for another. The programmes need to be adapted to the needs and characters of the society or group, with some flexibility and administrative freedom allowed for field workers to do so on the village level.

Since non-formal education requires the extensive use of the aural and visual faculties, the broadcast media, through radio and television, is a decidedly effective and important channel of cultural communication and can be used to support non-formal education. More air-time for

appropriate cultural programmes is needed. Besides, in a country like Malaysia with its multi-ethnic character and cultural diversity the broadcast media can also bolster national unity through the airing of programmes which reflect the linguistic and ethnic diversity.

6. Some Thoughts for the Future

Sabah can be fundamentally characterized by various aspects of its diversity – in its language, its cultures and traditions, its many government organizations and NGOs networking with each other in various strategies of rural development. The rich oral traditions of many indigenous groups in Sabah also need to be documented in some way. With the death of an elderly indigenous person it is likely that a whole body of traditional knowledge and wisdom disappears with her or him, unless the information is recorded in some form.

Rural development programmes, whether in the production of literacy materials, or in encouraging and developing traditional activities for economic objectives, may need to recognize the value of these oral traditions for the body of indigenous knowledge and information they contain. The learning style of this oral literature may need to be adapted and carried out in the traditional way, of “learning-by-doing” pedagogical method.

The maintenance of indigenous culture, knowledge and values is variably linked to the non-formal education process. For instance, the work of the NGOs such as the findings of the PCOS resources management workshops need to be published. The information could be produced in small booklets for use in schools. In this way with the use of non-formal materials in the formal school system indigenous culture is also taught and maintained.

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