

Cultural and Religious Diversity in Sabah and Relationships with Surrounding Areas

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Abstract

Sabah, the east Malaysian state of northern Borneo, is home to around fifty major Austronesian ethnic groups, as well as Chinese and others. This article sketches the cultural diversity of Sabah, placing it in its environmental, social, historical, and religious contexts, and briefly discusses linkages with surrounding areas. It also shows how Sabah's cultural and religious diversity is a strength that has enhanced ethnic and religious tolerance in Malaysia.

Key words: cultural diversity, religion, North Borneo, Sabah, Malaysia

1. Introduction—the Land and Peoples of Sabah

Sabah, the east Malaysian state on northern Borneo, is renowned for its rich cultural and environmental diversity. With an area of 72,500 square kilometers, it is the second largest state in Malaysia after Sarawak. Its mountainous backbone features Mt. Kinabalu (4,095 meters), the highest mountain in Southeast Asia, with Mt. Trusmadi (2,642 meters) of Tambunan District and Mt. Tombuyukon (2,579 meters) of Kota Marudu as Malaysia's second and third highest mountains respectively. Banggi Island off the tip of the Kudat Peninsula (Borneo's northernmost point) is Malaysia's largest island, while the Kinabatangan River flowing from the interior to the east coast is Malaysia's second longest after the Rajang in Sarawak. Having a mainly humid tropical climate, Sabah was formerly covered by lower mountain forests and rainforests, with fertile alluvial planes supporting sedentary societies practicing rice agriculture (Sabah Museum 1992: 1–6, Boutin 1991: 91, Hutton 2004: 1, Tongkul 2004: 32, Singh & Tongkul 2004: 34).

Sabah has over fifty main isoglots or ethnic groups with their own languages of which thirty-two comprise the indigenous Dusunic, Murutic and Paitanic

Families of Austronesian Languages. The Dusunic Family consists of thirteen languages including Kadazan Dusun, Rungus, Kuijau, Lotud, Labuk Dusun (also called Eastern Kadazan, Labuk Kadazan, Labuk-Kinabatangan Kadazan, and Kadajan), Kimaragang, Tobilung, Sonsogon, Tatana, Bisaya and others. Of these, the Kadazan Dusun are the largest language in Sabah at around twenty-five percent of the traditional population (Regis 1989: 409–410). Dusunic peoples mostly inhabit northern, western and interior portions of Sabah, although the Labuk Dusun also live along the Labuk and parts of the Kinabatangan rivers in the east. The Murutic Family has twelve languages including Tahol (Tagal), Timugon, Paluan, Keningau, Kalabakan, Bookan, Gana and others. Murutic peoples are distributed across southern areas of Sabah and parts of northern Kalimantan, but they are a different family from the Sarawak Muruts (Kelabitic Family). The Tidong, whose language was once thought to be a linguistic isolate, are now believed to be related to Sabah's Muruts. Speakers of Paitanic languages include the Tombonuo, the Upper Kinabatangan peoples, the Lobu and the Abai Sungai. These peoples, often collectively called *Orang Sungai* ("river people"), are distributed along the eastern rivers of Sabah. The Ida'an and Bega'ak of the Lahad Datu area and the Subpan (also called "Dusun" Segama) of Lahad Datu are descended from the Paitanic peoples of the Upper Kinabatangan (King & King 1984 [1997]; Pugh-Kitingan 2004: 3–6).

Apart from these, Sabah has other Austronesian communities who are from language families found in other parts of Borneo and surrounding areas. These include the west coast and east coast Bajau (Sama Family), the Brunei and Kadayan (Malayic Family), the Iranun (Danau Family), the Bonggi of Banggi and Balambangan Islands (related to the Balabak), as well as the Lundayeh (Kelabit Family), the Suluk (Taosug) originally from the Philippines and others. During the early twentieth century, small numbers of Javanese were brought in by the North Borneo (Chartered) Company administration to work on plantations. Later in the 1950s, some Cocos Islanders settled near Tawau, while some Iban families migrated to Merotai in Tawau District, searching for fertile land. Since

the formation of Malaysia in 1963, large numbers of immigrants (many illegal) from the southern Philippines (including Suluk and members of various Sama groups) and Indonesia have flooded into Sabah (Sadiq 2009: 4, 46–51, 64–68, 85–88, 94–99, 123–130, 139, 155–161).

Some linguistic and archaeological research suggests that the Austronesian ancestors of today's indigenous Dusunic, Murutic and Paitanic peoples were present in the area from 6,000 to 10,000 years ago, having slowly dispersed from Taiwan via the Philippines (Bellwood 1983, 1984: 85–87; Harrison & Harrison 1970: 12–32). Genetic studies, however, indicate an insular Southeast Asian origin for the Austronesians and suggest that they may have been present in the Borneo region for over 20,000 years, with very complex migratory patterns within and outside of Borneo (Oppenheimer *et.al.* 2000).

Non-Austronesian peoples in Sabah include the Chinese (mainly Hakka, but also Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, and Shantung) and a small number of Indians. Apart from the Shantung, most of Sabah's Chinese are descended from immigrants from 1882 and the early 20th century who were brought into North Borneo by Christian missions and tobacco companies to open up the land under the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company administration. Sabah's tiny Indian community includes descendants from Pathans, Sikhs and Ceylonese who came to work under the Company in its early days, and Malayali teachers who came after World War II. Apart from these, a small Arab community descended from traders lives in Tawau (Tregonning 1958: 192, 206, Jones 1966: 39–42, Wong 1998).

Given Sabah's diverse multicultural social patterns that have developed over generations, several questions arise. What are the distinguishing characteristics of Sabah's cultures? What are the cultural relationships of Sabah with surrounding areas? What are the historical factors that have impacted Sabah's cultures? How has Sabah's multicultural and religious diversity produced inter-ethnic tolerance and harmony among its peoples?

2. General Characteristics of Sabah's Austronesian Cultures

Indigenous peoples of the interior are agriculturalists who traditionally lived in sedentary villages composed of longhouses of various styles according to culture, in which each domestic family occupied a private apartment. They cultivate wet rice on the inland upland and west coastal plains and dry rice in hilly or mountainous areas, and are also skilled orchardists. They rear water buffaloes and poultry, and occasionally supplement their diets with hunted game and river fishing. Today, few longhouses remain except among the Rungus and also in most Murutic areas. Decline of longhouses is largely due to the major smallpox epidemic of 1904 to 1905, World War II devastation, and recent land acquisitions.

The Ida'an, who also plant rice, have traditional birds' nests harvesting rights over the limestone caves in eastern Sabah that can be traced back more than twenty generations (Harrisson & Harrisson 1971: 229–235; Moody & Moody 1991: 133–158). The Bonggi of Banggi and Balambangan Islands differ from other indigenous Sabahan societies in that they do not live in villages but in scattered family settlements and plant cassava as a staple (Boutin 1991: 92, Boutin *et.al.* 2006).

Sama-Bajau communities, the Iranun and also the Brunei were traditionally maritime societies, and the harvesting of sea resources continues to be an important socioeconomic activity for many Bajau people. There are differences in languages and cultures between the west coast Bajau and the east coast Bajau, with Iranun cultural influence among west coast Bajau and Suluk (Taosug) culture influencing aspects of east coast Bajau cultures, especially in terms of music and costume. One group of east coast Bajau, the *Sama Dilaut* or Sea Bajau (also known as *A'a Dilaut* and *Mandelaut*) were traditionally sea nomads and today lead a semi-nomadic lifestyle, periodically traversing the seas between Semporna, Tawi-Tawi in southern Philippines and Sulawesi (Sather 1997, 2000; Bottignolo 1995).

Most Sabahan societies are acephalous or egalitarian and classless in which leadership is determined by personal attributes not by heredity. The

Brunei, Iranun and Suluk, however, are hierarchical societies with traditional aristocracies.

Austronesian societies in Sabah are non-segmented, without clans or tribes and do not have lineal descent groups. Rather, they are based on bilateral kinship systems, in which kin relationships through one's mother are as equally important as relations through one's father (Appell 1976).

Marriage is usually exogamous so that close relatives are forbidden from marrying. This rule of exogamy usually extends to at least third cousins and in some communities, such as the Kadazan Dusun of Tambunan and most Murutic societies, goes beyond fifth cousins. Among Dusunic peoples any potential union violating these rules is considered spiritually dangerous or "hot" (*alasu* or *ahasu*), and must be atoned for by a specific animal sacrifice or *sogit* ("cooling compensation") to make the relationship "cool" (*osogit*). First cousin marriage is nearly always prohibited, except among the Bonggi due to their historical isolation, and among the Sama Dilaut and other east coast Bajau where children of sisters can marry due to the strong matrilineal pull in those societies (Sather 1976, Pugh-Kitingan 2012a: 47–69).

Marriage is legalised by bridewealth (not dowry) consisting of items of value according to culture from the family of the bridegroom to that of the bride. Postnuptial residence can be virilocal in the husband's village, as among Murutic societies and the Kadazan Dusun, uxorilocal in the wife's village as among most other Dusunic peoples, in Paitanic communities and among the Sama Dilaut, or bilocal in the village of either husband or wife as among the Lotud Dusun, most Bajau, Iranun and Brunei.

Traditional Austronesian societies in Sabah have gender balance or sexual symmetry whereby husbands and wives cooperate in child rearing and socioeconomic activities. Among interior communities, husbands normally assist their wives during childbirth, and children regardless of gender are dearly loved (Appell & Appell 1993; Laura Appell 1988, 1991). Women are respected and certain senior women are usually the ritual specialists and priestesses of the

traditional religions among Dusunic, Murutic and Paitanic peoples. Generally known as *bobolian* among the Kadazan Dusun (or *bobohian* in one Tambunan dialect and *bobohizan* in the coastal Kadazan dialect), *tantagas* among the Lotud, *bobolizan* among the Rungus, *babalian* in Murutic languages, and *balian* or *mininiow* in Paitanic languages, these women memorize and recite the *rinait* or long sacred ritual poetry of their particular community and are experts in traditional knowledge and customary law.

Sabah has rich varieties of intangible cultural heritage. Apart from various types of ritual chanting by priestesses, there are many other genres of traditional vocal music including secular songs, epic chants and legends, classical poetic genres, story-telling and extemporaneous verse debates. Traditional instrumental music is as varied as vocal music, and instruments include various aerophones (mouth flutes, noseflutes, palmwood jew's harps, and mouthorgans including the noteworthy Kadazan Dusun *sompoton*), chordophones (idiochordal bamboo tube zithers, long-necked strummed or plucked lutes and, occasionally the bowed lute and plucked *gambus* lute of Arab origins in some coastal locations), idiophones (brass or bronze hanging gong ensembles, the *kulintangan* kettle gong set, bamboo idiophone ensembles, wooden or metal xylophones), and membranophones played with gong ensembles (Pugh-Kitingan 2003, 2004, 2012a: 145–185).

Sabah's aerophones and chordophones are essentially solo secular instruments for personal entertainment. The gong ensembles, however, are played on important social ceremonial occasions and in major traditional ritual contexts. Every community has its own kind of gong ensemble, which often includes a drum or two according to culture, and distinctive gong music. Dancing on major social occasions or in ritual events is accompanied by gong ensemble music (Pugh-Kitingan 2011, 2012b).

Gongs are important, not only as musical instruments, but as items of wealth and are often part of bridewealth. Historically, there were several regional metalwork centers from where gongs were traded into indigenous communities:

Brunei, which formerly included the west coastal Iranun of Tempasuk, Tugaya in Mindanao, and Sulu. While hanging gongs are used in every community, the *kulintangan* is only found where there is river access to the coast. Today, the Sabah Iranun no longer produce gongs. Gongs are still traded in from Mindanao and Sulu, but cheap copies made from spray-painted zinc sheeting are now produced locally by the Rungus (Pugh-Kitingan 2010, Pugh-Kitingan & John Baptist 2005).

Change and globalization have affected Sabah's intangible cultural heritage. While gongs and gong ensemble music continue to be important in special social and church celebrations, solo secular instruments are declining due to inroads by new media. Traditional vocal music has declined, except for singing which is now accompanied by diatonic electric bands and has spawned a burgeoning indigenous pop music industry.

Today, most Sabahans are Christians or Muslims. Many have tertiary education and work in the civil service, business or academia in the towns, yet they maintain contacts with their home villages and continue many of their traditions and follow their customary laws (*adat*). Indigenous customary law systems form the basis of today's Native Courts (*Mahkamah Anak Negeri*) in every District. Various Native Law systems were codified and Native Courts were established during the days of the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company. Headed by Native Judges, the Native Courts constitute one of Malaysia's three judicial systems, the other two being the High Court for civil cases and the *Syariah* Court for Muslims (Miyamoto 2008).

Like Native customary law, the *tamu* or weekly market is another traditional institution going back countless generations that was officially recognized under the Chartered Company and the post-War colonial government. *Tamu* were set up on open land between areas occupied by different ethnic or dialectal groups, and were places for barter trade. Often marked by an oath stone that had been erected in a peace-making ceremony and dedicated in sacrificial blood, *tamu* land was neutral ground governed by the behavioural prescriptions of *adat*—no weapons,

fighting or arguments were permitted, and feuding groups had to set aside their differences while on that land (Burrough 1972, Pugh-Kitingan 2012a: 138–139, Regis 1999, Regis & John Baptist 2012: 86–87). Today, weekly *tamu* continue in thousands of locations throughout Sabah and some, such as the annual Kota Belud *Tamu Besar* (big market), have developed into major tourism attractions.

3. Traditional Worldviews and Religious Practices in Sabah

Traditional Dusunic, Murutic and Paitanic religions acknowledge the Creator (or the *Minamangun* in most Dusunic languages), and recognize benevolent celestial beings, demons, and, according to culture, the seven spirits of a human being. The growth principle or spirit of rice, is also part of Dusunic and Murutic worldviews. Among east coast Bajau communities and the Tatana Dusun of Kuala Penyu (who have acculturated Chinese practices), ancestral spirits are venerated, but this is not a feature of most indigenous religions.

Rinait or long ritual verses of Dusunic peoples record the creation of the world, the creation of rice, the activities of spirits, customary laws for moral living (*adat*), and prescriptions for rituals. Verses are structured in pairs of lines, the first in the common language of the community concerned to address the human world, the second in the ritual language addressing the spiritual realms. Among the Kadazan Dusun of Tambunan, for example, the personal name of the Creator is Kinorohingan (“God most high”) or in the ritual language Kumoinsan (“the First”) and his wife in the *rinait* is called Suminundu (“Powerful one”) or Huminodun (“the one who did the sacrifice”) in the ritual language (Pugh-Kitingan 2012a: 110–111). By contrast among the Lotud, the Creator is named Kinohoringan (“God most high”) or Hajin Mansasal Awan (“Creator of the clouds”) and his wife is called Umunsumundu (“Powerful one”) or Sumandak Panamba’an (“powerful spirit maiden”) in the Lotud *rinait* (Pugh-Kitingan & John Baptist 2009: 251–252).

Locations in the physical world are said to have their parallels in the spiritual world. Although traditional cosmologies vary, the universe is generally

said to consist of an upper world seven spiritual levels above the earth where good spirits dwell, and an underworld below the earth where demons reside and from where they enter to earth to cause trouble and suffering. Among the Kadazan Dusun, for example, the upper world is sometimes called Hibabou, while the underworld is Karaganan the abode of *rogon* or demons. Nabalun (the eighth realm) is the resting place of spirits of the departed, and is the spiritual counterpart of Mt. Kinabalu (Pugh-Kitingan 2012a: 108–115, Pugh-Kitingan *et.al.* 2011: 126–128). By contrast among the Lotud, the highest realms or Diwato to the “north” above the earth are the habitation of the supreme deities Kinohoringan and Umunsumundu and their seventeen spiritual offspring; Pongoluan to the “east” associated with Mt. Kinabalu is the abode of the departed spirits of good people; Kolungkud under the Tuaran River to the “south” is a dark place, the habitation of a sleeping dragon serpent and the departed spirits of bad people; Rondon below the sea far across the ocean to the “west” is the abode of *rogon* and the spirits of very evil humans. The coast (*sisron*) marks the boundary between physical and spiritual realms across which *rogon* enter the human world (Pugh-Kitingan & John Baptist 2009: 251–252).

The ideal universe, from indigenous perspectives, is that in which the physical human world and the spiritual realms are in a state of balance or are “cool.” This relationship becomes “hot” or imbalanced if humans violate the *adat* or moral customary laws of their various communities. Demons then attack the guilty, their families, crops and livestock, causing illness and trouble. In extreme cases, the entire community and the environment may be affected resulting in epidemics, droughts, floods, wars and other catastrophes (John Baptist 2008).

Restoration of balance to the universe requires intervention of ritual specialists to mediate between the human and spiritual worlds. Major traditional rituals occur at the family level, sometimes at the village level, and also at the level of the entire community. The *Mamahui Pogun* (“Cleansing the Universe”), for example, is organized for the entire Lotud Dusun community by the *tantagas* every five to ten years to cleanse and restore balance to the universe in times of



Plate 1 Lotud *tantagas* chanting during *Mamahui Pogun* ceremonies at Kg. Bantayan, Tamparuli (Photograph: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, 2003)

major catastrophes [Plate 1]. It proceeds over several weeks, moving from inland to the coast, features special gong ensemble music, ritual dancing and sacrifices by the *tantagas*, and involves the participation of all families in every Lotud village (Pugh-Kitingan & John Baptist 2009; Pugh-Kitingan *et.al.* 2009a, 2009b).

The *Moginum* of the Rungus, on the other hand, occurs at the level of the conjugal family to resolve a lingering dissatisfaction or minor recurring illness [Plate 2]. It features ritual dancing and sacrifices by *bobolizan* on a platform above the roof of the public gallery and includes feasting and celebration with other families in the longhouse. In traditional Rungus cosmology, the rooftop marks a boundary between the highest realms of evil spirits and the lowest level of good spirits. Through chanting *rinait* and ritual dance, the *bobolizan* try to reach up through the upper realms of the good spirits to the Creator on behalf of the family. They sacrifice a pig on the platform to appease the unseen world of both good and evil spirits (Pugh-Kitingan 2011: 173–176, Pugh-Kitingan & Porodong 2008).

The *Magduwata Kabusungan* of the Bajau Kubang of Semporna also occurs at the family-level, but is held to appease the anger of an ancestor that has

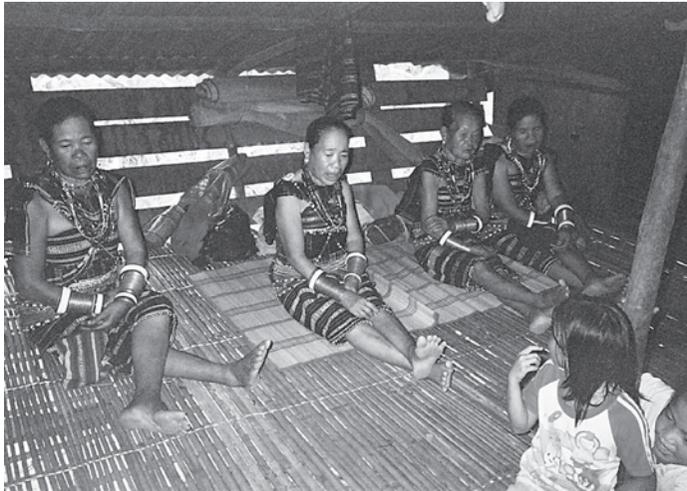


Plate 2 Rungus *bobolizan* chanting inside the family's apartment during *Moginum* ceremonies at Kg. Ontolob, Kota Marudu (Photograph: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, 2007)

caused illness in a family member due to demonic attack. It requires various rituals and dancing (*igal*) by a spirit medium accompanied by the family's heirloom *tagunggu'* gong ensemble, but its performance is not seen to violate Islamic prayers and beliefs [Plate 3]. This is similar to Sama-Bajau rituals of the southern Philippines (Pugh-Kitingan *et.al.* 2009c, 2012).

Some ritual events are essentially celebratory in nature and have become important social institutions. The *Moginakan* of the Kadazan Dusun of Tambunan is organized by a conjugal family after months of preparations in times of peace to share the blessings of the Creator when the family has excess rice from a bountiful harvest and healthy livestock. It occurs over four days and includes the participation of all immediate relatives, then their wider bilateral kin, other villagers, and finally distant relatives and unrelated friends from afar. Festivities are characterized by gong ensemble music (*tinondot*) and dancing (*magarang*). Traditionally presided over by *bobolian* (or *bobohian*) who performed various rituals during its process, it is organized by Christian families without the services of priestesses and is the most important feasting



Plate 3 *Igal* by Bajau Kubang family spirit medium during *Magduwata Kabusungan* ceremonies at Kg. Kabimbangan, Bumbum Island (Photograph: Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, 2005)

event among Kadazan Dusun of Tambunan (Pugh-Kitingan 2011: 168–171, 2012a: 119–130).

An annual post-harvest celebration or *kaamatan* (from *mongomot* “to harvest”) is traditionally held by every rice-growing family. When families finish harvesting and feast at the same time, this becomes a village event. Over the past sixty years, the Kadazan Dusun harvest festival has developed into the *Pesta Kaamatan*, a major state celebration with participants from all societies (Chong & Pugh-Kitingan 1996; Pugh-Kitingan 2012a: 239–242).

As will be shown below, conversion to Christianity among most indigenous peoples over the past 150 years has reinforced wholesome traditional values and encouraged harmonious relationships between different communities. Christian missions also brought developments through education and medical work. As with the official recognition of *adat* or customary law through the Native Courts, the continuity of the *tamu* system and the transformation of social events such as the Kadazan Dusun *Moginakan* and the *Kaamatan* has also strengthened traditional social relationships and cultural identity down to this day.

4. A Brief History of Governance and Religious Conversion

There is not room here to give a full picture of Sabah's history. An historical overview, however, can be briefly sketched by outlining recorded events in maritime trade, exploration and governance, as well as missionary contacts and religious developments.

4.1. Historical Trade and Governance

Historically, northern Borneo was largely bypassed by the Hindu-Buddhist Sri Vijaya and Majapahit empires that influenced other parts of Southeast Asia. Chinese records show that Kublai Khan led a trading expedition to the Lower Kinabatangan River in 1292, seeking birds' nests. Trade in birds' nests and other local products drew others over the centuries, including some Arabs and the Suluk (Taosug) from Sulu who also engaged in slaving (Harrisson & Harrisson 1971: 25, 233–234; Sabah Museum 1992: 4).

The Muslim Chinese admiral Zheng He visited the lower Kinabatangan River in 1409 and 1414, also on trading expeditions seeking birds' nests. Around 1440, Ong Sum P'ing who married either the sister or daughter of the Sultan of Brunei, set up a trading outpost at Sukau on the Kinabatangan. In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan's remaining ships moored off Simpang Mangayau at the northernmost tip of Borneo for repair, after his death in the Philippines, and crew undoubtedly contacted local coastal dwellers (Harrisson & Harrisson 1971: 21–26, 29–30; Sabah Museum 1992: 8).

Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, the regionally powerful Islamic Sultanate of Brunei controlled most coastal areas of Borneo, and its influence extended into the Philippines as far as Manila (Bala 2005). In 1658 as the Sultanate's power waned, the Brunei Sultan permitted the Sultan of Sulu, a powerful vassal state, to establish trading outposts along the east coast of north Borneo after Sulu helped him to settle a civil war. Later in 1761, the Sultan of Sulu allowed Alexander Dalrymple of the British East India Company to establish a trading post on Balambangan Island, but it later failed (Sabah Museum 1992: 7–11, Warren 1981: 17–37, 75–84).

In those times, as in earlier centuries, outside trade was largely confined to littoral areas. Outsiders did not venture far upstream, and the powers of sultanates further inland were essentially nominal or non-existent. Not only was the terrain difficult to traverse, but many interior indigenous communities often practiced headhunting during warfare. This was said to appease evil spirits, who were believed to protect families from other demons if provided with “houses” (human skulls), and was also a reaction against slave raiders from the coasts.

In 1865, the Sultan of Brunei leased North Borneo to the American Consul of Brunei, who then sold it to J.W. Torrey of the American Trading Company in Hong Kong. Following Torrey’s failure to develop a trade settlement at Kimanis on the west coast, the lease was sold in 1877 to Baron Von Overbeck, Austrian Consul of Hong Kong who was financially backed by the Dent brothers. After renewal for another ten years, it was sold to Alfred Dent. In 1878, the Sultan of Sulu transferred all claims over the east coast to Dent, and agreed never to surrender this area to foreign nations without the British Crown’s permission. Dent agreed to pay the Sulu Sultan or his heirs the annual sum of 5,000 dollars. In 1881, Dent formed the North Borneo Provisional Association Ltd., and in the same year, obtained a charter forming the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company. The Company attracted commercial shareholders, but was not involved in trade. In 1888, North Borneo became a British Protectorate, meaning that it remained autonomous but would be militarily protected by Britain if attacked. Labuan was administered under North Borneo from 1890 (Ongkili 1981, Warren 1981: 134–143, Sabah Museum 1992: 7–11).

North Borneo’s autonomy was recognized under the Madrid Protocol (1885), agreements between Spain and America (1898 and 1900), the Carpenter Agreement (1915), and the Border Convention (1930) when outside claims to its territory were completely relinquished (Sabihah Osman 2013). The Sulu Sultanate ended in 1936 with the death of the Sultan who left no heirs. In 1939, Chief Justice Mackaskie of the North Borneo High Court awarded the cession payment to the Sultan’s nieces in the interim, because the Company did not

want to be seen as breaking the cession agreement. But in his judgment, he stated that “the successors in sovereignty of the Sultan are the Government of the Philippine Islands” (Mackaskie in Reece 2011: 16–18, 108–109). Despite recent outside claims to Sabah, North Sabah’s autonomy and place in the eventual formation of Malaysia have been confirmed through the Cobboldt Commission (1962), the United Nations Mission (1963), and the verdict of the International Court of Justice (2002) concerning Ligitan and Sipadan Islands (Sabihah Osman 2013).

The era under the Chartered Company was comparatively stable, apart from some incidents, especially the Rundum Revolt in 1915 among the Tahol Murut. The Company officially respected local cultures and customs. Its presence led to a decline in piracy on the seas and the end of slaving (Ongkili 1981: xxix-xxx).

The Company’s administration of North Borneo ended on 1 January 1942 with the invasion of the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces during World War II. Although it was a British Protectorate, North Borneo was left unprotected, because Britain itself was under attack by Germany. Following its liberation by the Ninth Division of Australian Infantry in 1945, North Borneo was briefly administered by a British Military Administration. Civil government was restored in 1946, but since the Chartered Company lacked funds after the War’s devastation, North Borneo (with Labuan) became a British Crown Colony so that the British Crown could directly finance restoration.

Since many nations were undergoing revolutions, Britain wanted its colonies to move quickly towards peaceful self-governance. On 31 August 1957, the Federation of Malaya became independent. Singapore gained internal self-governance in 1959. Sarawak and Sabah each attained self-governance on 31 August 1963. The nation of Malaysia was then formed by Sabah, Sarawak, Singapore and Malaya on 16 September 1963 (Singapore later left in 1965). Prior to Malaysia’s formation, Sabah had stipulated twenty points (Sarawak had eighteen) to safeguard their rights in the proposed nation. One of these was that while Islam could be the official religion for national functions, there would be

no official religions in Sabah and Sarawak. The Natives (*Anak Negeri*) of Sabah and Sarawak were guaranteed equal rights as *bumiputera* (“sons of the soil”) with the Malays of Malaya (Luping 1989).

4.2. Religious Developments

Concerning religious conversion, early extant records suggest that Oderic of Perdonone brought Christianity to coastal areas of Borneo in 1321 or 1322 (George 1981: 468; Rooney 1981: 3–5). In 1408, the Ida’an community of Kampung Sapugaya (in today’s Lahad Datu District) converted to Islam through contact with Arab and Suluk traders who came seeking birds’ nests. The rise of the Brunei Sultanate as a major trading center in the following centuries saw the gradual spread of Islam through its coastal trading centers and some maritime communities (Bala 2005).

Over the centuries, coastal areas were visited by various other Roman Catholic missionaries, including seventeenth century Portuguese Fr. Antonino Ventimiglia who allegedly crossed overland from south Borneo to Kudat. Don Carlos Cuarteron, former millionaire mariner, worked from Labuan along the west coast from 1857. He was followed by priests of St. Joseph’s Missionary Society of Mill Hill (“Mill Hill Fathers”), who began work among the Kadazan of Papar in 1881, then among the Kadazan Dusun of Penampang and Tambunan before the end of the 19th century, and among other indigenous communities in the twentieth century (Tregonning 1966, Rooney 1981: 6–23, 31–33, 44, 47–58, 62–64).

In 1847, the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) began missionary work among the Chinese of Labuan, later expanding to other towns in North Borneo, and later after World War II among indigenous peoples along the eastern rivers (Hooker & Johnston 2007). The Basel Mission from China, which founded the Basel Church, began work among the Chinese in Kudat in 1882. In 1925, the church was renamed Borneo Basel Self-Established Church, then Basel Christian Church of Malaysia (BCCM) following Malaysia’s formation in 1963 (Tregonning 1966).

By 1915, the Seventh Day Adventist Mission was already among the Dusun of Menggatal on the west coast, and by the 1920s spread to other areas. The True Jesus Mission, from the True Jesus Church in Nanking, China, came to Sandakan in 1927 and spread among some Chinese in Jesselton and Kudat from 1928. In 1939, the Borneo Evangelical Mission (B.E.M.) that started the *Sidang Injil Borneo* (S.I.B.) began work among the interior Dusun of Ranau District, later spreading to Kota Belud then among Murutic communities after the War. Earlier in 1927, B.E.M. missionaries from Sarawak had tried to make contact with the Tahol (Tagal) Murut of Sabah's remote interior, but were rebuffed (Pugh-Kitingan 1989; Lees 1967, 2006; Elliot 1997).

Not all Christian conversion occurred as a result of foreign missionary activity. In 1950 after decades of resisting outside contact, a group of fifty Tahol Murut came over the mountains to attend a large Easter *tamu* (market) gathering at Sipitang on the west coast, and asked Alan Belcher of B.E.M. to send teachers to their people. The first missionaries among the Tahol were Lun Bawang of S.I.B. As with the Kelabit and Lun Bawang in Sarawak, Tahol conversion stemmed from dissatisfaction with the demands and taboos of the spirits. These malevolent spirits had proved useless in protecting the warriors against British weapons during the Rundum revolt when hundreds of men died. Decades later, the people were seeking a new way (Abd Hakim Mohad 2012: 157, Lees 2006: 104, Bala 2009).

Many new churches developed in the post-War years. In 1952, missionaries from Basel, Switzerland, founded the Protestant Church in Sabah among the Rungus (a sister denomination to BCCM). The Brethren Mission started Grace Chapel in Jesselton after the War (Bull 1967). Since 1963, newer denominations have grown in the cities, including the Baptist Church, Calvary Charismatic Church, and many smaller fellowships. With the expulsion of foreign missionaries from Sabah in 1970 under Sabah's USNO government headed by Tun Mustapha bin Datu Harun, churches became fully "indigenized" with local clergy (Rooney 1981: 70).

Religion is not always culture-specific and families often have members of differing religious affiliations. Today, in general, most Dusun, Murut and many Paitanic peoples of the interior are Christians of various denominations, while some are Muslim (especially *Orang Sungai* near the coast), and a few still follow their traditional indigenous religions. Most local Chinese in Sabah are also Christians, although a few are Taoist and since 1963 some Buddhists have arrived from Peninsular Malaysia. The Brunei, the Iranun and most Bajau are Muslim. The semi-nomadic Sama Dilaut largely adhere to their traditional religion which is similar to those of the Sama of the southern Philippines. Since 1408, the Ida'an have been Muslim, but the Bega'ak (who speak a sister dialect) continued practicing their traditional religion and today are mostly Anglican Christians. Sabah's tiny Indian population includes mainly Sikhs and Christians. Some Hindus have come from Peninsular Malaysia in recent years to work in the army and as professionals.

5. Factors influencing Christian Conversion and Religious Tolerance in Sabah

There are various cultural reasons why indigenous people became Christians in the past. Protection from malevolent spirits was a major factor. Christ was believed to protect people from demonic attacks and becoming Christian meant an end to warfare and vengeance. As mentioned earlier, many indigenous groups practiced headhunting in olden days, especially in the interior. Among the Kadazan Dusun, for example, the skulls of enemies slain in battle provided "houses" for *rogon* that would otherwise attack families and communities. Warfare and headhunting fed on fear, hostility and vengeance. When people became Christians they chose forgiveness and peace-making, and no longer feared the *rogon* (Pugh-Kitingan 2012a: 130–138).

Traditional belief systems and Christianity share similar concepts and values. The belief in a benevolent Creator is present in all traditional religions and is fundamental to Christianity. The belief in the existence of malevolent and

benevolent spirits in the universe is also similar to Biblical concepts of demons and angels. Although they are not the same, traditional cosmological ideas about the afterworld are somewhat similar to Christian teachings on Heaven and Hell. Indigenous concepts of good and evil and of personal sin affecting families, communities and the environment are also similar to Biblical teachings. Similarly, the need for blood sacrifice to atone for sin is fundamental to both traditional religions and Christianity, with Christians claiming that Jesus Christ provided the ultimate once-for-all sacrifice instead of animal sacrifice. The importance of honoring the Creator for his providence by sharing excesses of rice and meat with kin and friends, as seen in the *Moginakan* and *Kaamatan*, is akin to Christian concepts of sharing and supporting those in need. Traditional moral values enshrined in the *adat* are essentially the same as Christian morals, and customary law is a restorative (not punitive) system of justice as was the Old Testament laws in the Bible. These similarities have enabled indigenous peoples to embrace Christianity. Islam also shares many of these concepts and values.

The legends of some communities foretold the coming of Christianity. One old Kadazan Dusun legend recounts how the people once had a writing system and a “letter” or book containing the words of the Creator. When they lost the “letter” and asked the Creator to give another, he told them that one day fair-skinned people would bring back his words. Over time, they forgot how to read. The *rinait* and the priestess system is said to have developed as women tried to remember and recite the words of the Creator. Customary law developed as men tried to remember the laws of the Creator and referred to the *rinait*. When European missionaries brought the Bible in the nineteenth century, people said that they had brought back the words of the Creator as in the legend (Pugh-Kitingan 2012a: 150–152).

Traditional beliefs and social practices also contributed to today’s tolerant relationships between people of different cultures and religions in Sabah. The importance of the *tamu* as an intercultural institution of peace in northern Borneo has already been mentioned. Interpersonal trade in former times and

alliance systems of “blood brothers” also contributed to this. Despite former conditions of periodic slaving and warfare, “blood brother” relations became common in the north and on the west coast of Sabah especially between the Iranun, and the Lotud, the Rungus and the coastal Kadazan. The Iranun were renowned for their brassware and woven headcloths, while Dusunic peoples grew rice, reared buffaloes and had access to jungle produce. Personal friendships developed as individual Iranun men maintained dyadic barter trade relationships with certain men from Dusunic communities. Close friends swore allegiance to each other by cutting their fingers, placing one or two blood drops in coconut juice and sharing the drink. Despite cultural and religious differences, they would then be regarded as brothers and their children and descendants as close relatives. Today, several generations later, *adat* prohibits the descendants of “blood brothers” from marrying because they are considered close relatives (pers. comm. David Ubing, Sh. Ramlis Sh. Baba & Tan Sri Pandikar Amin Hj. Mulia January 1995; Regis & John Baptist 2012: 135–137).

Similar relationships sometimes developed between Bajau trading sea fish for rice with the Lotud of Tuaran. Even in the mid-twentieth century, Bajau men sometimes helped Lotud families harvest their rice through traditional labour exchanges (Regis *et. al.* 2003: 27). These kinds of symbiotic relationships between peoples of different cultures and religions have influenced ethnic relations in contemporary times.

6. Conclusions

Both Sabah’s wide cultural diversity and its unique historical development have encouraged inter-ethnic tolerance and coexistence among its peoples. Although the Kadazan Dusun were the largest ethnic group before the influx of illegal immigrants, they were not a majority. There is no dominant ethnicity, and people respect each other’s culture and religion.

Sabah’s cultures embody wholesome values, including respect for the environment (both physical and spiritual), esteem for elders, and love for

children. They practice gender balance, and women are respected. In current times of change, communities still have access to their traditional cultures and value systems through kinship and ties to home villages, continuing traditions, the Native Courts, markets, museums, and contemporary festivals.

North Borneo's experiences under the Chartered Company and later under the post-War colonial government were relatively stable when compared to the colonial experiences of neighbouring regions. When it attained self-governance before forming Malaysia, Sabah had a functioning civil service and basic infrastructure. The Native Court was established as a proper judicial system of the same standing as the High Court and *Syariah* Court.

The long historical presence of Christianity directly led to the end of feuding and headhunting. Missions established schools, clinics, and viable indigenous churches. Moreover, traditional religions share some similar concepts with Christianity that have enabled mutual understanding and acceptance. Historically, Christians and Muslims in North Borneo have often had complementary rather than conflicting relationships based on alliances of friendship mutual support. Religion is not necessarily ethnically based in Sabah, and families often have members of diverse religious affiliations.

Today, despite problems such as Native land loss, illegal immigration and intrusions from outside, Sabah's cultural diversity and inter-ethnic and religious tolerance continue as strengths that ensure stability. This stability has enhanced Malaysia as a nation in Southeast Asia.

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