



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Malaysia : Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in Sarawak

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Profile

Ethnicity: Iban, Bidayuh, Chinese, Malay

First language/s: Iban, Bidayuh, Malay, Hakka, Hokchui, Cantonese, Hokkien

Religion/s: Christianity, Animism, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism

Sarawak has a population of more than 2.6 million, made up of some 26 different ethnic groups. The non-Muslim indigenous communities are collectively called Dayaks -- most of whom are Christians or practise animist beliefs -- and they account for about 40 per cent of Sarawak's inhabitants. The two biggest ethnic groups within the Dayak community are the Iban (also known as Sea Dayak), making up 30 per cent of the population, and the Bidayuh; others include the Kenyah, Kayan, Kedayan, Murut, Punan, Bisayah, Kelabit, Berawan and Penan. Dayaks who live in the interior of Sarawak are sometimes referred to as Orang Ulu, or people from the interior. Members of this group typically live in longhouses and practise shifting cultivation; they engage in fishing to supplement their diet if they live near a river. Only a few hundred of the Eastern Penan continue to live as a nomadic people of the rainforest.

The Chinese, at around 24 per cent, make up the second largest ethnic group in Sarawak, though they themselves can be subdivided as including speakers of Hakka, Fu-chou (Hokchui), Cantonese and Hokkien. Most live in urban areas and are Buddhists or Christians or practise Taoism.

The number of Malays has increased to about 24 per cent of Sarawak's population. They are in fact a heterogeneous group of people since many are probably the descendants of indigenous peoples who started to convert to Islam from the fifteenth century and became Malay through their

adoption of the Malay language. Like the Chinese, they constitute a large percentage of the coastal and urban population.

Historical context

Sarawak was until relatively recently mainly inhabited by indigenous peoples present on the island of Borneo for thousands of years. Others, such as the Melanau and Malays, are thought to have migrated much later, after the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Chinese arrived later still, mainly in two distinct waves, first in the mid-eighteenth century in the gold-rich areas of Bau and then in the early twentieth century.

Like Sabah, Sarawak was loosely under the control of the Sultan of Brunei until James Brooke became governor of Sarawak in 1841 and was then appointed Rajah by the Sultan in 1842. Members of the Brooke family were to rule Sarawak -- and become known as the White Rajahs -- until 1946. For much of that century, the Brookes governed with local Malays and Melanau, though they also used Dayaks as the backbone of their army and encouraged Chinese immigration into urban areas.

After the end of Japanese occupation in 1945, the Rajah formally ceded sovereignty to the British Crown in 1946 and Sarawak became a British colony in 1946, though some members of the Brooke dynasty resisted its cession to Britain. Despite opposition by a significant proportion of its population, Sarawak became an autonomous state of the federation of Malaysia in 1963.

Because of the very large size of the Iban indigenous people, between 1948 and 1963 its language was the lingua franca between the ethnic communities. It was also the language of government for official purposes, including in court, and was taught as a school subject.

As in Sabah, the integration of Sarawak into Malaysia in 1963 only occurred after a high level of autonomy for the state and a number of special laws secured the protection of the very large indigenous populations.

From the 1970s, much of these legal protections were to be increasingly eroded -- despite occasional victories in court -- as the exploitation of the region's natural resources expanded, particularly logging, plantations, oil and gas. The last decades have also seen the incremental transfer of Dayak customary land by the government for logging and plantation activities through various means.

The lack of protection of indigenous languages in the Malaysian Constitution also led to public schools operating increasingly and almost exclusively in Malay, and to an apparent decrease in the use of indigenous languages in broadcasting in recent years.

In the 1990s, Dayak staged small-scale protests against excessive logging in their immediate surroundings. The government responded by detaining protesters and protecting the logging operations, which are covertly owned by leading Sarawak politicians. In 1994, a decision was made to build the Bakun Dam, South-East Asia's largest, resulting in about 10,000 indigenous people being relocated to a longhouse settlement named Sungai Asap. Despite controversy about the impact on the environment and local indigenous populations, and the postponement of the project on two occasions, the dam project was re-launched in 2000 and came into operation in 2011. Its construction has left thousands of indigenous residents displaced, struggling with debt and cut off from their traditional sources of livelihood.

Political parties representing Dayak interests succeeded in gaining a substantial number of seats in the Sarawak Assembly in the 1980s, but have since then weakened dramatically, partially as a result of their deregistration -- under sometimes dubious grounds -- and of internal divisions.

Current issues

The prominent role of Malay as the country's national language has led it to almost completely supplant English and indigenous languages, particularly Iban, in schools and government. Though English is still taught widely, Iban is only taught as a subject in one school in Kuching, and in less than half of the state's primary schools which have more than 50 per cent Iban students. This language preference, which appears discriminatory in the context of Sarawak, has contributed greatly to the increased marginalization of many indigenous peoples in terms of access to employment opportunities predicated on fluency in Malay, and may also be contributing to an extremely high level of school drop-outs.

The continued use by the Malaysian government and private companies of large tracts of indigenous customary lands for oil palm plantations and other development projects continues to be a highly charged area of controversy, despite theoretical legal protections and a few recent court victories. In 2009, for instance, the Federal Court in Malaysia ruled that indigenous peoples in Sarawak have rights to their lands, used for hunting, gathering and crop production. It was a landmark case, as previously there was little legal precedent recognizing rights over traditional lands. Yet indigenous communities continue to struggle to secure their land rights in the face of aggressive development programmes, often pushed through with the support and patronage of state officials.

In particular Orang Ulu, also known as Dayaks, face growing threats to their traditional lands from the rapid spread of logging, palm oil companies and large-scale hydropower dams. Many thousands of Orang Ulu have been forcibly displaced over the past few years to make way for a series of controversial mega-dams in Borneo, forming the Sarawak Corridor for Renewable Energy (SCORE). Malaysia's various dam developments have been further tainted by widespread evidence of corruption involving state officials, including Sarawak's former Chief Minister Taib Mahmud. In 2013, an undercover investigation by UK-based NGO Global Witness exposed rampant nepotism and corruption involving Mahmud in the exploitation of Sarawak's rainforests and its inhabitants for personal profit. The film documents how the chief minister accepts multimillion-dollar 'kickbacks' for the distribution of plantation licences, while allocating cheap land concessions to a nexus of family members: these are subsequently sold off at enormous profits through murky transactions in Singapore, forcing indigenous populations from their traditional lands.

In Sarawak, a growing number of indigenous youths are migrating to urban centres in search of work and educational opportunities. This process has largely been driven by Malaysia's rapid rate of deforestation, which has eroded the traditional livelihoods and lands of indigenous forest dwellers. Nearly 70 per cent of the highland Kelabit tribe in Sarawak has migrated to urban areas and, according to a 2013 survey, the population of Baram dropped from 80,000 to 20,000 in a decade. Activists have warned that the proliferation of new dams will exacerbate this trend. Hunter-gatherer tribes such as the Penan are particularly vulnerable during resettlement as they often lack the occupational skills suited to life outside the forest. This has contributed to the urbanization of poverty among Sarawak's indigenous population, who already form a significant percentage of squatters in cities such as Miri. However, the Sarawak government maintains that new hydropower dams will boost rural development and discourages Orang Ulu from migrating to cities.

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