Ethnicity in Borneo: An Anthropological Problem*

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Introduction

One of the first and most important tasks for a field anthropologist is to define his units of analysis. It is clearly vital for comparative purposes to establish broad patterns of similarity and difference, and to try and determine how far our material, based usually on local village studies, has wider applicability. More exactly, as social anthropologists we should be concerned to examine, in Frederik Barth’s words, “social processes of exclusion and incorporation” (1969, p. 10). Yet in Borneo, with a few noticeable exceptions, the delimitation of ethnic categories and groupings and the examination of inter-ethnic relations have met with numerous difficulties.1

It is appropriate, by way of introduction, to discuss the concept of ethnicity since different anthropologists' differing perceptions of ethnicity have led to confusion in the literature. I think we can all agree that ethnicity has something to do with “identity” from the point of view of those who are the object of study, and “identification” from the perspective of those who are studying the people in question. In other words, one has to distinguish between what Tom Harrisson, in an appendix to a report on the 1947 Sarawak and Brunei population census (1950, p. 275), has called “subjective” (self-imposed) and “objective” (externally imposed) aspects of ethnic classification. Of course, the two modes of categorization may or may not coincide. A further useful distinction is that between an ethnic category—the conceptual dimension of ethnicity—and an ethnic group or grouping—which refers to the realm of social interaction (cf. Rousseau 1975, p. 37).

One of the main foci in investigations into ethnicity is the delimitation of appropriate criteria of ethnic identity and identification. From an outsider’s perspective, it is sometimes argued that ethnicity refers to the “basic givens” of identity of the population under study—these comprise the sharing or recognition of a common origin and certain elements of culture, particularly language (cf. Barth 1969, p. 10-11, 13). A population sharing a common origin and culture is also often considered to comprise “a field of communication and interaction” (ibid., p. 11). In other words, there is an assumed correspondence between what are usually broadly called “culture” and “society”. While this assumption might be appropriate for the analysis and identification of some ethnic units in Borneo, it is entirely
unsatisfactory for others. It is also clear that when we use a variety of criteria in combination in Borneo—political organization, economic activity, territorial propinquity, biological self-perpetuation, and various aspects of culture such as house-type, clothing, ritual, myth, language—the delimitation of ethnic categories and groupings becomes extremely problematical. As Moerman has stated in general terms:

Since language, culture, political organization, etc., do not correlate completely, the units delimited by one criterion do not coincide with the units delimited by another . . . [and] . . . [It is often difficult to discern discontinuities of language, culture, polity, society, or economy with sufficient clarity to draw boundaries (1965, p. 1215).

In the face of these difficulties, some social anthropologists have concentrated on self-identity, or "native" or "folk" models of ethnicity. This exercise recognizes that what might be considered criteria of crucial importance for a classification constructed by an anthropologist, might have very little relevance for the indigenous populations in question. This view does not deny the importance of cultural or other factors in ethnic identification; it merely assigns them different degrees of significance in terms of indigenous evaluation. Clearly, people can ignore, deny or play down features which an outsider sees as important, and emphasize those criteria which to a foreigner may seem trivial. Again Moerman puts it strongly in his discussion of the Lue of North Thailand when he says that...

... in situations of ethnolinguistic mosaics . . ., interpenetration, or continuous variation, it must be emphasized that self-identification and ethnic labels are frequently the least ambiguous, and sometimes the only ways of determining where one entity ends and another begins (1965, p. 1219-20).

For Borneo, even this approach is fraught with difficulties (see below). But self-ascription can overcome a number of problems which are met with in broad "objective", ahistorical ethnic classifications. An approach which uses self-identity also suggests other important dimensions in the study of ethnicity. If people identify themselves as belonging to unit A, they are making a statement that, in certain respects, they are different from unit B. One is a member of A by virtue of one's non-membership of B. In other words, units do not exist in isolation. Again, this view would require some qualification in a Borneo context, since some people would claim to belong to both A and B simultaneously, or A or B situationally. Yet it does highlight the fact that identity depends very much on a "sense of otherness" and also that identities can be created, reinforced, manipulated and changed. Ethnic identity is not necessarily a constant, but is instead a dependent variable (Nagata 1975, p. 2-3). Again, Moerman conveys this when he argues that...

Insofar as ethnic identification is conscious or its emblems intelligible, we can explore the principles which underlie how persons go about choosing, and influencing others to choose, and ethnic identity. We can also investigate decisions which have the consequence, although not necessarily the motive, of altering one's ethnic identity (1965, p. 1222-23).

In this statement there is also a clear view that we must try to be historical in our