Ethnicity and nationalism: ideological struggles in Sarawak after the Second World War

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**ABSTRACT**
This paper studies how ethnicity has influenced the construction of nationalism in two political movements that took place in Sarawak, a former British colony in North Borneo. It analyzes the discourse of colonialism, freedom and independence that revolved around two movements, namely the anti-cession movement and the underground communist movement, controlled respectively by the ethnic Malay and Chinese in Sarawak. A comparison of these two movements is made by looking at the fundamental differences between two movements and the way the British responded to them. In the analysis, local political developments as well as transnational links are taken into consideration as this paper assumes that transnational exposure was instrumental in shaping local nationalism. In doing so, the paper intends to explain the domination of ethnic nationalism in political discourse and institutions of Sarawak.

**Introduction**

The modern notions of ethnicity and nationalism were proliferated to most parts of Southeast Asia towards the end of the Second World War. Among those first exposed to these ideas were school teachers, the middle class and local elites, who were instrumental in communicating such revolutionary ideas to grassroots communities made up mainly of peasants and laborers. In the process of communication, diverse interpretations of these ideas such as nationhood and associated practices emerged, shaped not only by local social and political contexts, but also by transnational social and cultural links. This paper examines how local and transnational factors played out in constructing ethnicity and nationalism in two political movements that took place in Sarawak, a British colony in North Borneo. First, it analyzes the discourse of colonialism, freedom and independence that revolved around the Malay predominant anti-cession movement that arose immediately after the Second World War. It then investigates how ethnicity as an “ideological work” (Milner 1998) and nationalism as a “modern construction” (Brown 1998) were at play in forming ethnic nationalism that characterizes the fundamental political features of today’s Sarawak. The next incident to be discussed is Chinese-led communist movements that peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, but were cracked down successfully by the British and then the new Malaysian government in the 1970s. A comparison of the anti-cession movement and communist movements will be made by looking at the way the British responded to the movements and particularly the racialization of both movements.
Meanwhile, it also looks into the fundamental differences of both movements in their understanding of nationalism. In the analysis, local political developments as well as transnational links will be taken into consideration as this paper assumes that transnational exposure was instrumental in shaping local nationalism. In doing so, it aims to understand the imaginations of Sarawakians about a modern and progressive nation, which this paper contends resulted in the subsequent decline of class-based discourse and institutions and the domination of ethnic nationalism in political discourse and institution.

**Ethnicity and ideological struggles in the 1940s and 1950s**

**The Malay-led anti-cession movement**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Third Rajah of Sarawak, Vyner Brooke, decided to relinquish his rule of Sarawak and he handed it over to the British government. The British government did not hesitate in taking over Sarawak swiftly in view of the beginning of the Cold War between the United States-led western bloc and the Soviet Union-led eastern bloc. Brooke's decision, however, was received with strong resentment among Malay civil servants who at one point collectively resigned to protest against the takeover. Demonstrations and rallies were also called to express their disapproval against the cession move, but no violent act was taken until the assassination of British Governor took place in Sibu.

As primary sources on the views of anti-cession leaders are limited, the analysis on their motivations draws largely on commentaries made by researchers. Based on the available literature, the anti-cession movement led by the Persatuan Melayu Kebangsaan Sarawak (PKMS), in English Malay National Union of Sarawak (MNUS) insisted on reviving the personal rule of the White Rajah, which was accepted as the "equivalent of independence" (Nordi Achie 2003, 179; Bradley 1968, 127). At a spirited demonstration in Kuching, protesters held placards expressing their wholehearted support for Brooke such as "We want our independence under Brooke's rule to be restored" and "We will receive Rajah Muda Anthony Brooke joyfully and peacefully." Such movement was in parallel to the support for Malay Sultanate in Malaya when the British government announced abolishing the traditional sultanate system to form the Malayan Union in 1946. Nevertheless, local renowned scholars offer a different analysis on the anti-cession movement's appeal to restore the rule of Brooke. Sanib Said (1985, 48) believes that it was in fact a strategy of a larger plan of seeking independence as the activists believed it would be easier to obtain independence from the weak Rajah than the British colonial government. Other local scholars (Nordi Achie 2003; Ooi 2013) generally concur with Sanib Said's view on the ground that PKMS and the assassinators of British Governor's rejection of Anthony Brooke's plea to abandon the struggle is a sign of fighting Independence as an ultimate goal.

No doubt, ethnic survival was also an underlying motivation in opposing cession, as the cession was viewed "as an encroachment of British bureaucratic imperialism and [a resistance to] the Chinese predominance in economic life" (Sahibah Osman 1990, 152). The threats posed by these two "alien" groups had dominated the ethnic survival discourse in a local Malay newspaper *Utusan ASAS*. *Utusan ASAS*, the mouthpiece of anti-cessionists, attributed the protection policy of British colonial government as the main cause of Malays' economic backwardness as it deprived the Malays' opportunity from participating in modern economy. Meanwhile, the Malay intellectuals and leaders were also alarmed by the presence of Chinese who were labeled as "bangsa asing" and "non-bumiputra," and stereotyped as successful businessmen in *Utusan ASAS*. However, it is important to note
that Utusan ASAS was not hostile towards Chinese and had never called for any violent act against Chinese. In fact, Nordi Achie (2003, 26) points out that the Malay intellectuals of Utusan ASAS had been more critical against the Malay aristocracy for failing to protect the interests of their people.

As noted by most literature, the Chinese community had either expressed support or been silent on the question of cession. This may explain the expression of “Natives of Five Divisions do not want colonial administration,” implying a lack of active Chinese involvement in the movement. However, the appearance of the Iban language section in the first edition of Utusan ASAS indicates educated Iban constituted a component of anti-cession activists. According to Ooi (2013, 91), a small group of mission-educated Iban from the First and Second Division supported the movement due to their fear of Chinese domination in the economy under the British colonial government and the condition to increase Iban representation in all levels of government. However, as with the Malay community, the Iban intellectuals were split and the rural folks were generally clueless with respect to the cession of Sarawak.

The anti-cession movement was not an isolated political movement taking place after the Second World War, but reflected an awareness or a construction of civilizational-based ethnicity. Political development as such provided inspiration to many nationalistic movements in Southeast Asia. In his account of anti-cession movements, Reece (1983) traces the social and cultural connections of Sarawak Malays to the larger Malay community in the Malay Archipelago (Nusantara). In his view, Sarawak Malays were a participant of extensive discussions of forming a "Malay political federation” encompassing the Malay states in Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo in the 1940s. The available literature notes a number of anti-cession Malay leaders attended the second annual congress of Malay Persatuan at the Malay Teachers’ Union Headquarters in Singapore. One of them was Abang Haji Zaini, the president of Persatuan Kebangsaan Melayu Sarawak (PKMS). He was also a major spokesperson for the anti-cession forces (Sabihah Osman 1990). In the congress, the proposal of formalization of the link of all Malay associations (persatuan) was accepted, indicating an awakening of a culture-based identity and the necessity to enhance the identity with social institution.

The awareness of “Alam Melayu” (the Malay world) is also a modern construction of nationalism (Anderson 1991; Brown 1998). First, the imagination of being a community was fostered through publication of Malay newspapers, namely Fajar Sarawak and Utusan ASAS in Kuching. The term “Alam Melayu” was used by the Fajar Sarawak’s editor, indicating an awareness of a Malay world that comprised mainly of “Tanah Melayu” (Malaya) and Indonesia (Nordie Achie 2003, 70–71), and Sarawak was at the receiving end of the flowing ideas and cultures. Records also show that the Malay shops in Kuching were selling Malay magazines and newspapers, such as Warta Malaya, Warta Ahad, Warta Jenaka and Majalah Chenderamata from Malaya as early as in the 1930s (Nordie Achie 2003, 16). Besides, trading activities and regional migration drove cross-border mobility (Nordie Achie 2003, 26–27), which facilitated the circulation of news, the maintenance of common language and customs.

In addressing the anti-cessionists’ protests, British government officers employed an isolation strategy by depicting the anti-cessionists as a minority of Malays who pursued selfish ethnic domination in a multiracial society. The Far Eastern Survey (Seitelman 1948, 37) reported the British High Commissioner and Governor-General MacDonald’s comment that only a segment of Malays opposed to cession, but a great majority of Malays were indifferent to the issue. He further assured the public that the Dayak people were compliant to government’s decision and the Chinese were in favor of cession. As previously mentioned, available literature mostly notes the positive response of Chinese representatives in the government to the proposal of cession due to better business
opportunity and desire for equitable treatment, but memoirs and books written by former Chinese communists indicated otherwise. Former communists' memoirs consistently praised the anti-cession movement as an awakening sign of Sarawak people who stood courageously against British colonization (Lin 2012; Qiu 2003). According to a source, no meaningful cooperation between anti-cessionists and leftists had taken place mainly due to a disagreement between both forces on the return of Brooke's rule. A source recalled that the Kuching-based Overseas Chinese Youth Association initially supported the cause of anti-cession but began to distance itself from the movement due to resistance to the restoration of Brooke's rule. Nevertheless, this group organized an anti-British rally every year on the anniversary day of cession.\textsuperscript{7}

Anti-cessionists were isolated and cast in a racialized light by government officers and English news agencies including their semi-official newsletter The Sarawak Gazette. The editor of The Sarawak Gazette attributed the desire of Malay domination as the "root and foundation" of the anti-cession struggle. The editor urged anti-cessionists to discard the idea that Sarawak was a "Malay country" as was said for Johor, and to treat other indigenous races of Sarawak equally. He warned anti-cessionists not to invoke the sentiment of "bangsa" as a way to keep them in power. The author claimed that the Malay agitation would not impair the unity of various races in the Colony ("Issue number 1074" 1947). The perception that anti-cessionists consisted of those who wanted to retain Malay privileges ("Sarawak cession" 1947) at the expense of other native groups prevailed through the 18 years of British rule in Sarawak.

The view mentioned above only started to be challenged in the 1970s. Prominent scholars began to cast a positive light on the movement and dubbed it as a Malay nationalist movement.\textsuperscript{8} Reece contended that the anti-cession movement was a nationalist movement in terms of its vision and geographical extensiveness. He lauded the movement taking a pan-Sarawak dimension and contributing towards Sarawak's emergence as a political entity. According to Robert Reece, for the first time, there was an issue which transcended localized interests and suggested a national awareness (Reece 1983). A local scholar went further to praise the activists as a nationalist group that fought independence for Sarawak. Within such a context, it is not surprising that the assassinator of former British Governor, who was sentenced to death under the British law, was exalted as an anti-colonialist nationalist and "pejuang Melayu Sarawak" (Sarawak Malay Fighter) under the present government ("Kekalkan nilai" 2016). Although it is hard to prove the link between the change of view and the domination of Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB) over the Sarawak government, it is safe to say that the new interpretation has obviously been approved by the ruling elites and radiated to the lower-ranked public officers.

The anti-cession movement was diminished after the crackdown of the British government together with Anthony Brooke's expression of his will to cease any anti-cession activities in 1951 ("Cession of Sarawak" 1951). A major consequence of the movement was a two-decade division of the Malay community into two major political camps during the colonial years: young and radical Malays were sidelined whereas the traditional abang leadership was reinforced (Porritt 1997, 58). The colonial period also witnessed a shift from the Brooke's pro-Malay stance to a pro-Iban position (Ooi 2013, 99). Nevertheless, a reverse trend took place after the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Despite the ill-feelings between pro and anti-cessionists, both groups were strong proponents of Sarawak's inclusion in the Malaysian Federation.\textsuperscript{9} The pro-cession group, who founded the party of PANAS (Parti Negara Sarawak), and the anti-cession groups, who founded the party of BERJASA (Barisan Rakyat Jati Sarawak),\textsuperscript{10} eventually agreed to merge through the instrumentality of Abdul Rahman Ya'kub, who assumed the Chief Minister position of Sarawak in 1970. Both PANAS and BARJASA jointly formed Parti Bumiputra in 1968 under the leadership of Abdul Rahman Ya'kub. Their merger was acclaimed by Robert Reece as "a major step towards the rationalization
and strengthening of Sarawak’s political system and its effective participation in the wider political entity of Malaysia” (Reece 1983, 34). Although no further explanation of what Reece meant by rationalization and strengthening of political system was given, it is clear that a unifying Malay force was fostered since the year of 1970.

**The Chinese-led communist movement**

Organized communism first appeared in Sarawak as a “Sarawak Anti-Fascist League” during the Japanese Occupation years (van der Kroef 1964). Nevertheless, informal groups led by Chinese educators had already been active in the First Division of Sarawak before the war. They set up study groups to inculcate anti-fascism among local Chinese school teachers and students, which in turn formed the basis of leftist organizations that emerged after the war. Chinese leftist forces began to solidify in the early 1950s, exemplified in the founding of “Sarawak Overseas Chinese Democratic League” in 1951. van der Kroef (1966, 569) noted that this organization retained connections with the radical left in Singapore, and was subsequently replaced by “Sarawak Advanced Youths Associations” (SAYA) in 1954.

In reviewing the communist movements before the formation of Malaysia, former guerrillas invariably agree that towards the beginning of the 1960s, two social forces formed the core leadership of communist political organizations in Sarawak, namely the Sarawak Liberation League (SLL) and the Borneo Communist Party (BCP). The two organizations shared similar objectives but their members differed in social backgrounds. The main leaders of SLL,11 which was formed in 1954, were mainly Hakka people from the South of Kuching whereas the key leaders of the BCP12 were mainly Sibu-based Foochow. BCP was allegedly dismissed in 1964 and its leader Huang Zeng An joined the North Kalimantan National Liberation League (NKNLL) (Chen 2012, 75). SLL in turn formed the core component party of the North Kalimantan National Liberation League (NKNLL).

Comparable to the anti-cession movement, cultural affinity had influences on political activism, in this case, the Chinese communists’ independence struggles. The Chinese of Sarawak had always retained cultural and social ties with China via historical migrations and trading relations. When Communists took control of the Chinese government and China rose as the regional center for Asian communism, the Chinese in Southeast Asia were in a better position to access information, propaganda and reading materials of communism as they were mainly available in the Chinese language. However, the cultural and social connections with China have been somewhat exaggerated by some scholars as the foremost factor of communism in Sarawak (Porritt 2004).

Local experiences of Chinese in Sarawak including their political status and living experiences under Brooke and Japanese Occupation, had not been adequately recognized as a significant cause for political uprising. For instance, many note that the Chinese generally felt being discriminated against by the government of the day and fought for equal treatment as given to their counterpart natives in Sarawak. Apparently, such aspiration received little empathy from both the authority and pro-establishment researchers, partly due to their immigrant status and relative economic prominence. Although some Chinese were affluent and prominent business figures, a large majority actually resided in rural areas as hand-to-mouth farmers whereas a sizeable number of urban Chinese worked as laborers. Slow economic development in Sarawak in the period after the Second World War exacerbated hardship in the life of working class Chinese, who were looking for an answer to their plights. Ideologies of socialism and communism thus filled this intellectual vacuum. The ideologies attributed western capitalism as the root of all evils, expounding that imperialism caused the exploitation and impoverishment of working class people. Places that became fertile grounds for underground communism were Hakka villages in the First Division (Yong 2006) and
Foochow settlements in the Third Division. Both communities were mainly involved in agriculture but suffered the government’s rigid restriction on “non-native” land ownership and could not legally obtain suitable land sufficient for their expanding needs (Leigh 1964).

Meanwhile, the majority of Chinese children went to community-run and sponsored Chinese language schools, which were unfortunately looked upon with suspicion by the British government. Chinese youth who enjoyed higher Chinese education found it difficult to apply for jobs in the government as the latter preferred graduates from Christian mission schools which largely used English as the medium of instruction. All these cultural and communal-based predicaments contributed to fostering a shared fate and identity among the rural Chinese in Sarawak. Hence, political awakening among the Chinese after the war had fueled their resentment against British colonialism. As many Third World societies, their aim for liberation from colonialism translated into political plans including armed insurgency.

In an account of a former guerrilla (LHG), he describes the communist movement led by SSL and subsequently NKNLL as a relentless effort of Sarawak people standing against feudalism and colonialism. Cases of resistance cited by him include the uprisings of people from the Ulu Rejang; the Iban battle in the First Division; the Malay’s resistance in the First and Second Divisions and the rebellion of Chinese workers from Bau. His view was shared by many others who also saw communism in Sarawak as part of a global justice movement that centered on anti-colonialism and imperialism led by western capitalists (Chen 2012). Although being accused as dangerous and subversive, former guerrillas had firmly held to the view that they were nationalists who fought for independence of Sarawak against western colonialism. For them, communism inspired people to embrace progressiveness as opposed to feudalism, colonialism and tribalism, and the progressive power would then inspire and encourage people to initiate revolutions, armed insurgency and independence movements (Chen 2012, xxxii). However, such interpretation has yet to be accepted by the Malaysian government as well as the mainstream scholars of the present day.

The reactions of the British government and the subsequent Malaysian government towards the communists of Sarawak were in some ways comparable to the anti-cession movement but different in scale and intensiveness. First, the British officers adopted a racial isolation approach by identifying the communist movements as “the problem of the Chinese” (van der Kroef 1966, 568) and claimed that the Clandestine Communist Organization (CCO) was “100 per cent Chinese in make-up” (Hardy 1963). Among the various factors that drove Chinese youth to communism, in the official view, Chinese schools were often singled out as the culprit for the proliferation of communism. Chinese schools that rejected conversion to English language schools were purported to uphold Chinese chauvinism and were made responsible for racial segregation (Morrison 1993, 122; Seng n.d., 82). The comment below is a typical example of associating Chinese communalism with communism:

Sarawak has become divided on racial lines, and communal feelings are being whipped up by well organised Communist cells. Feelings were running high in Sarawak at the time of our visit, and but for the obvious presence of strong police and field force detachments, there might well have been incidents at several places. (Jones 2001, 87)

There was no doubt that Chinese education was the foremost avenue for the spread of communism in Sarawak, but the communists’ resistance to the conversion proposal were largely motivated by what they saw as colonial education and tactics to oppress communism. In fact, colonial officers as well as scholars noticed that (Hardy 1963, 38), the CCO worked diligently to attract non-Chinese members by personal contact and political education as they were aware that Communism would fail without non-Chinese support. British officers actually became anxious when communism
made inroads into Dayak communities. Several efforts were made by British officers to ensure the Dayak communities were not swayed by communism.

During the communist insurgency period, the Sarawak government, both British and new local officers, harshly cracked down on the movements. Thousands were imprisoned without going through proper legal procedures. The view of communists as terrorists who threatened the independence of Sarawak was passed on from British to the new independent government. In the reminiscence of countering communism, a former Sarawak’s Director of Information (Haji Ba’Ali Munir 1983) labeled the communists as terrorists who aimed to seize the political power of Sarawak and his main duty was to preserve the independence and democracy of Sarawak.

**Communist movement and the Sarawak United People’s Party**

Arguably, underground communists were instrumental in forming the first political party in Sarawak. Although scholars such as Leigh (1974) and Chin (1997) attribute the origins of the Sarawak United People’s Party (SUPP) to the initiation of British officials and the cooperation of the Kuching business elites, they do hold the view that the birth and the leadership of SUPP was the outcome of the desires of the three forces. The top echelon was Kuching merchants who retained amicable ties with British officials whereas the leftists and communists predominated among the rank and file.

Regarding the origins of the SUPP, former communists had a different account from the above analysis. From the reminiscence of some former communists, the underground communists from the Rejang basin were the first to propose the establishment of a legal political party. After meeting with Chan Siew See (one of the SUPP founders) in Kuching, Chan then had discussions with Ong Kee Hui and Stephen Yong, and separately with Wen Ming Chuyan, a leader of the SLL. The idea was accepted by all parties. This account argues that when the SUPP was launched, the communists not only played the role of rank and file, but also commanded considerable influence in the Central Committee. For example, the significant position as the Executive Secretary was held by either leftists or underground communists. For the underground communists, prominent leaders of the SUPP were cover-up figures instead of leaders with authority.

**Suppression of class discourse and domination of ethnic politics**

In the battle against communism, the government’s co-option of SUPP into the Sarawak Barisan Nasional (SBN) coalition in 1970 was indeed a milestone. By doing so, a link between the leftist wing and underground communists was severed, effectively barring SUPP from acting as a channel of communism. After the cession of Sarawak in 1946, the next major political change in Sarawak was the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. Interestingly, the main force of the anticolonial movement supported the Malaysia Plan whereas it faced strong protests from SUPP as well as Malay leftist forces. Both groups established collaboration links with the Sultan of Brunei and pro-left forces from Indonesia. In a move to crush the statewide protest over the formation of Malaysia, the British conducted mass arrests in 1962, which saw many prominent SUPP leftists either arrested or deported. Harsh measures, including military action and imprisonment without trial, were taken against SUPP leftists and underground communists. As for the masses, preventative measures, including regular curfew, inducement policies for rural people and the taking over of Chinese schools, were applied, to ensure compliance to the state’s ideology and rule.

The oppression of communism persisted after 1963. In 1971, Rahman Ya’kub’s government enforced another round of mass arrests (code-named “Operation Judas”) on communists and
suspected collaborators, of whom some were SUPP members. The communist movement was eventually crushed after enduring a series of military and oppressive actions. In 1974, the government announced the Sri Aman agreement and some 482 communist members were persuaded to end the military insurgency following the announcement. Several months later, another 585 communists left the forest; 64 came from the lower Rejang region while the rest came from the First and Second Divisions (Teng et al. 1989, 342–343).

Toward the end of 1970s, the sharp decline of leftist cadres within SUPP was matched by the rise of pro-establishment professional and capitalist leadership within the SUPP. This shift in leadership effected a major change in the party’s character. Whereas previously the SUPP stood for an ideologically-motivated mass-based party, its new leaders did not believe in socialism and were no longer interested in socialist-oriented mobilization methods (Teng et al. 1989, 74–77). Organizational methods such as urban labor unionization and rural mobilization, although once used to build and expand membership numbers, were now abandoned in favor of distributing developmental funds and projects, and managing local governance in major cities. As a result, patron-clientism penetrated all levels of relationships within the party, both between the upper and middle echelons as well as between the middle and lower echelons (Chin 1997, 4–6).

Discourse on ethnic differences was further enhanced after the 1969 outbreak of racial riots in Kuala Lumpur. The federal government of Malaysia had justified a major socio-economic policy with the discourse on ethnicity, which emphasized Malay and Muslim interests. These policy changes at the federal government also affected the configuration and distribution of power in Sarawak. After joining the ruling coalition of Sarawak, the SUPP leaders collaborated with government in suppressing the leftists within SUPP and more importantly they were tasked to deliver Chinese votes for the ruling government in elections. Hence, during the 1970s and 1980s, SUPP leaders were occupied by efforts in maintaining and creating Chinese support for Sarawak Barisan Nasional (SBN). The discourse over class divide was shelved and gave way to the ethnic patronage rhetoric which had nourished ethnic nationalism.

Conclusion

The anti-cession and communist movements both shared the characteristic of modern nationalism as proposed by Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1991; Brown 1998). Malay intellectuals who were imagining a shared cultural and historical origin rooted in the “Alam Melayu” communicated their stories and goals of Sarawak via Malay printing press, regional meetings and personal contact. Although Sarawak was imagined as a Malay-dominant indigenous state, they were struggling with the reality of plural society where Malays were a minority native group among the Dayak. Hence, anti-cessionists might be carrying a Malay agenda but it turned out to be a Malay plus native nation. On the other hand, the communist movement, which attempted to recruit members from all ethnic backgrounds, had not been quite successful in doing so. The movement suffered from the lack of cross-ethnic social means to entice non-Chinese supporters. The channels of communism such as the Chinese schools and newspapers were almost exclusively serving the Chinese. Although the community engagement projects initiated by SUPP made inroads into some Dayak areas, they faced formidable resistance in Malay villages. The social division gave chances to both the colonial and the Barisan Nasional governments to racialize anti-government activism by manipulating the distrust between different ethnic groups.

By analyzing the rise and fall of the two ideological struggles, this article intends to understand the domination of ethnic nationalism discourse in contemporary Malaysia, where Sarawak is a
component of it. It is noteworthy that, despite being dominated respectively by Malays and Chinese, both the anti-cession and communism movements took genuine efforts to foster cross-ethnic collaborations. In the case of the anti-cession movement, the Malays formed an alliance with the Kuching-based Iban, and the Chinese fought for the support of non-Chinese in the struggle of communism. Nevertheless, any inroads on this effort were closely guarded by the colonial government. Very often their anti-colonialism intention was twisted or ridiculed by the British government in public as a conspiracy to pursue merely self-interests at the expense of other ethnic groups. British propaganda had actually intensified feelings of distrust and mutual suspicion among different ethnic groups. This further entrenched ethnic division in Sarawak society, which subsequently allowed ethnic nationalism to gain prominence. The suppression of leftist ideological movements in particular led to the demise of ideological oriented parties and unpopularity of class discourse.\(^{22}\) After the 1960s, the political party system in Sarawak has very much resembled the national political system, where the main ruling parties blatantly restricted their membership to particular ethnic groups. Political mobilization in general is organized along an ethnic patronage system.

The change in the interpretation of the anti-cession movement is partly due to the change of state elites and ideology. The formation of Malaysia in 1963 has ushered in ethno-cultural nationalism in Sarawak politics, which also practices majoritarian democracy. According to Brown (2002, 562–563), majoritarian democracy that embraces ethno-cultural nationalism places emphasis on the construction of primordial ties based on the majority ethnic group. The state institutions should thus manifest the cultural values and interests of majority ethnic. Hence, the new politics after independence has yet to give due attention and fairer interpretation to the underground communist struggles during the Cold War period. However, it is important for official history to address bias in historical writing and to recognize diverse paths and aspirations to achieve self-determination. A step in this direction may reduce animosity among different ethnic groups and nurture the spirit of tolerance among citizens.

Notes

1. When the First Rajah of Sarawak James Brooke occupied Sarawak in the mid-nineteenth century, he had urged the British government to make Sarawak as one of its colonies in Borneo but his proposal had not been well received.
2. *Utusan ASAS* (Angkatan Semangat Anaknegri Sarawak) was an initiative of the former supporters of anti-cession. It started in 1947 but closed in the following year.
3. Although Nordi Achie (2003, 208–211) and Ho (2001) mentioned briefly the criticism by some Chinese against the cession plan, their writings indicate that the number was insignificantly small.
4. The subsequent editions of *Utusan ASAS* did not provide the Iban edition.
5. *Fajar Sarawak* was published by a few young Malays in the 1930s, but closed in less than two years due to financial woes.
6. The only two Chinese representatives sitting on the Council Negri voted in favor of the cession bill.
7. A series reporting on the communist movement during the post-war period was published by a local Chinese newspaper, which can be accessed online. The response of former communist groups on the anti-cession issue can be accessed via URL: http://intimes.com.my/write-html/06padungan03.htm.
9. A strand of former anti-cessionists headed by Ahmad Zaidi bin Adruce, the president of Kuching-based Barisan Pemuda Sarawak, opposed the Malaysia plan. Instead, they shared the preference of A. H. Azahari, the President of the Partai Rakyat Brunei, for a federation of Brunei, North Borneo, and Sarawak (Porritt 1997, 54–55). The political uprising was inspired by the left from Singapore and Indonesia, and supported by communists from Sarawak.
10. BARJASA was formed in 1961. The major source of party leadership and membership came from the Malay and Melanau communities of the Second and Third Divisions.
11. Wen Min Chyuan, Lim Wah Kwai (aka Lim Ho Kui), Bong Kee Chok and Teo Eng Jin were based in Kuching.
12. Borneo Communist Party was said to be formed in the very beginning of the 1960s. Leaders such as Huang Zeng An, Stanley Wong Cheng Ting and Huang Sheng Zi were Foochows.
13. Seng’s (n.d.) thesis attributes the radicalization of the Chinese youth in Sarawak to local social changes after the Second World War, such as the emergence of a more homogeneous Chinese community through unified "Chung Hwa Schools," the spread of Chinese education across Sarawak that increased the literacy rate, and the wide distribution of left-wing literature and print media in the region.
14. In Reece’s (1983) article of "Political Pioneers," he wrote about a range of the Iban and Malay's uprisings but omitted the one by Chinese gold miners from Bau, who came to Sarawak before the arrival of James Brooke.
15. A large volume of writings on the underground communist movements during the post-War period has been published in the last ten years. Some individuals and groups have even set up websites and post their accounts online. For instance, the websites www.chornbill.com and www.intimes.com contain detailed accounts of underground communist activities in Sarawak.
16. It has been said that Stanley Wong Cheng Ting, the first executive secretary of SUPP, went to meet Chan Siew Hee in Kuching. Stanley Wong was born in Sibu and went to China for a university education before the War. Allegedly, the leaders from the Rejang basin were the chief founders of the Borneo Communist Party.
17. Ong Kee Hui, the then Chinese Kapitan in Kuching, was the founding chairman of SUPP and Stephen Yong, a trained lawyer, was the first Secretary-General.
18. Stanley Wong was the first executive secretary who drafted the party constitution and structure. Another member of Sarawak Liberation League, Yap Choon Ho, was the editor of the SUPP newsletter, Tuan Jie Bao (Seng n.d., 65–66).
19. The arbitrary decision to join the SBN and national BN was made by the Chairman, the Secretary-General and their close allies without referring to full Central Working Committee, the leftist wing and the Dayak members, prompting the left-wing's plan to protest and to overturn the decision to "cross-over to BN" in the Seventh Delegates Conference of SUPP. At this juncture, the coalition government reacted by withholding SUPP's permit to hold its Seventh Delegates Conference. A year later, when the conference was finally held, incumbent leaders had already taken over control of the conference, leaving little room for the left wing to protest.
20. The work of SUPP in engaging the grassroots during the early years differs greatly from present day practice. For instance, SUPP branches then had easily mobilized over a hundred members to help clear bushes for a Malay school in Kuching, and to build roads connecting Iban longhouses to main roads. It is a certainty that the works were mostly carried out by the leftists instead of their top leaders.
21. The Federal Constitution grants all native groups in Sarawak the bumiputera status as the Malays in the Peninsula.
22. The account of Donald Nonini (2015) on the everyday politics of working class Chinese in Bukit Mertajam, a secondary town in Penang, indicates a similar political trend was taking place in the Peninsular Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s.

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Notes on contributor

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**Special terms**

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