KELABIT TRADITIONS IN TRANSITION: A BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHY AND SOCIO-LEGAL STUDY

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Introduction

The Kelabit constitute a distinct ethnic community with their own language, culture, social structure, adat and mechanism for resolving conflicts. As they are integrated into the mainstream of Malaysian economy and state, despite rapid change in their environment, they maintain their customs that form the ‘core’ of activities that preserve their identity as Kelabit. Their social and legal system adapts to change, demonstrating that their customs and traditions are not static. The strength of the community lies in their ability to survive through changing generations, and to renew themselves by incorporating new elements into their customs, without sacrificing their continuity as a community. I argue that changes in some traditional practices do not disqualify their claim as natives. This paper looks first at the historical origins of the Kelabit, the social structure and leadership hierarchy within which Kelabit customary practices thrive. It outlines the impact of Christianity on the community, the result of education and the related phenomenon of out-migration and how these have compelled their responses to preserve and reconstruct their identity. It looks at the label ‘Kelabit’, language and identity, kinship and social organisation, traditional and contemporary marriage practices, leadership structure, dispute resolution and inheritance systems. Some past practices are considered in the light of their continued impact on a dynamic and living community. Examination of these different aspects reveal the Kelabit family and, in consequence, the community to be in a state of flux.

The earliest changes in the community were brought through their conversion to Christianity and the Japanese Occupation. The former introduced a Christian ideology into their belief system and values, while the latter catapulted them into the ‘outside world’. The introduction of formal education that followed was accelerated by the New Economic Policy in 1971–1990 so that about thirty per cent of the Kelabit students had tertiary education by 2001. Pursuit of higher education and employment led to out-migration from their agricultural setting into towns. As they mingle with the cosmopolitan society, many intermarry with others from within and outside Sarawak, thus introducing a