

HAKKA IN ENKKILILI, SARAWAK: COMMUNITY & IDENTITY*

Daniel Chew
Visiting Research Fellow
Institute of East Asian Studies
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak
Malaysia

2012

*This research was supported by a grant from the Chiang Ching Kuo Foundation, Taiwan, awarded in 2010, and fieldwork was undertaken when the author was with the Institute of East Asian Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in Kota Samarahan, Sarawak. A draft of the paper was written when the author was a Visiting Research Fellow with the Research Centre for Humanities and the Social Sciences, National Tsing Hua University (NTHU), Taiwan from April to June 2011. I thank Chang Wei An of NTHU for arranging this visiting fellowship.

Map of Engkilili



Source: Google Maps

Abstract

The objective of this research is to examine the social and cultural characteristics of the Hakka as a Chinese dialect group living in Engkilili, in the Malaysian state of Sarawak.¹ In Engkilili the Hakka are a minority living among the Iban majority community. The Hakka have a strong primordial sense of self identity, and have retained their Chinese cultural characteristics in speaking the Hakka dialect and Mandarin, and following Chinese religious practices. Chinese religious practices are kept, and help convey a sense of identity and belonging to Engkilili. A major cultural celebration for the Hakka and other Chinese, the 10th day of the lunar new year observance for inviting deity blessings, illustrated this sense of identification, an adherence to Chinese cultural values, and to the place of belonging, Engkilili.

The Hakka adapt to the wider environment around them as a minority living together with their numerically stronger Iban neighbours, showing a willingness to learn and speak Iban, and inter-marry with Iban spouses. While adapting to the Iban, the Hakka have not lost their facility with the Hakka dialect and the mastery of Mandarin. It can then be said that the Hakka in Engkilili represent an example of Chinese settlement and adaptation in Malaysia where the Hakka dialect is retained, and other languages, Mandarin and Iban are acquired.

The Hakka acculturation to the Iban is a two way process. There is Iban acceptance of the Hakka as their neighbours, a high incidence of inter-marriages, and an interest in taking part in and observing Chinese cultural practices such as the 10th day of the lunar new year observance for deity blessings. There are no ethnic rigid boundaries which separate the Hakka from the Iban.

As a case study, this research has highlighted the social and cultural experiences of a Chinese Hakka dialect group in Engkilili, Sarawak, where Chinese adaptations have taken place, and by the same token, their majority Iban neighbours have also adapted to them.

¹ The valuable comments of Lim Khai Thiong and Danny Wong on this paper at a workshop “Multiculturalism in Monsoon Asia: Chinese in Southeast Asia and Beyond” held at the National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan on 16 to 17 June 2012, are acknowledged. I have also benefited from comments on a draft of this paper presented at seminars held at the National Tsing Hua University, National Chiao Tung University and National Chi Nan University, Taiwan in June 2011, and at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in Kota Samarahan, Sarawak in November 2011. I am thankful too, to Abdul Rashid Abdullah, Jayl Langub, Sanid Said and Lam Chee Kheung, from the Institute of East Asian Studies, UNIMAS for their friendships and assistance, and for the many discussions I had with them. The comments of Richard Shatz who read a draft of the paper are appreciated. Thanks are due too to Goh Kaw Sze, Cynthia Chin and Yeoh Cheng Huat for fieldwork assistance, and to Pauline Yeo for translation work. Many people in Engkilili, notably Kapitan Bong Jin Choon and Kapitan Liew Ah Ban gave their generous assistance. The usual disclaimer applies.