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Salience of Language as an Ethnic Marker: A Snapshot of the Bidayuh of Sarawak, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Whether language is viewed as a necessity or an optional symbol of ethnic identity has profound influence on the retention of the language in the linguistic repertoire of future generations. The value attributed to language as an ethnic marker also has implications on whether language can function as an instrument of solidarity in the speech community. The study examined the salience of language as a marker of ethnicity for the indigenous Bidayuh community in Sarawak, Malaysia. The specific aspects studied were primary markers of ethnic identity and variations in perceptions across age groups. Questionnaires were distributed to 151 Bidayuhs from different age groups (secondary school students, university students, working adults). The participants ranked the importance of identity markers including parentage, language and other cultural elements. The results showed that Bidayuh parentage surfaced as an important ethnic marker only later in life but language is a salient ethnic symbol for all age groups. Another important ethnic symbol is the Gawai celebration, a harvest festival which has both religious and social significance. Interestingly the value placed on markers of ethnic membership increased with age, in spite of lessened use of Bidayuh in daily interactions. The findings are discussed in the context of ethnic identity categorisations.

Keywords: ethnic identity, identity markers, ethnic identity development, Bidayuh, Malaysia

1 INTRODUCTION

People belong to different social groups, thereby deriving various social identities from their membership in these groups. The pertinent social identities which are relevant depend on the situation. Examples of social identities are occupational identities (e.g., engineer, social worker), gender (male, female, other), ethnic identities (e.g., Bidayuh), national identities (e.g., Malaysian, Australian) and status (e.g., middle class). Among these social identities, ethnic identity is one of the most pertinent social identities in multi-ethnic plural societies because ethnic identity encompasses a conglomeration of differences, among which are religious affiliation, regional attachments, language and values (see Mitchell, 2005 on Northern Ireland). Ethnic identity is symbolised by cultural artefacts, language and other cultural emblems. Of these, the language and ethnic identity link has been extensively studied from sociolinguistic and social psychology of language perspectives (Gudykunst & Schmidt, 1987).

The issue of whether language and ethnic identity is inherent linked has been debated. "Language and ethnic identity are related reciprocally, i.e. language usage influences the formation of ethnic identity, but ethnic identity also influences language attitudes and language usage" (Gudykunst & Schmidt, 1987, p. 157). The interrelationship between language and ethnic identity has since been accepted but researchers have gone on to investigate the salience of language to the construction of ethnic identity. Some assert that language is essential for ethnic identification. Language is the core of the identity for Arabs, for example, an Arab is a person whose mother tongue is Arabic (Fishman, 1972). Thus, speaking Arabic is tantamount to having an Arab identity. In Malaysia too, a Malay is defined in the Malaysian constitution as one who speaks Malay and is a Muslim. In contrast, language is not such an important expression of ethnic identity for communities which view ethnic group membership as an inherited attribute. The Chinese and Afrikaners who view group membership in terms of descent or physical characteristics have not been open to large-scale assimilation regardless of the linguistic usage of subordinate populations (Verdery, 1978). For the Chinese and Indians, the primordial language does not give label to the ethnic group (Omar, n.d.). The younger generation of the Sindhi of Malaysia largely do not speak their ethnic language but they still identify themselves as Sindhi, in which case the Sindhi language is no longer an ethnic marker (Naji & David, 2003). Zentella (2002, as cited in Achugar, 2008) states that language and Latino heritage cultural identity are not linked for the working class but are linked for middle class and those with higher education. The working class use English for social mobility and do not see their ethnic languages as having the same usefulness. This has implications on the maintenance of the ethnic language.

Cultural maintenance need language maintenance (Barth, 1969) and linguistic assimilation precedes overall ethnic assimilation (Stevens & Swicegood, 1987). In light of this, the interrelationship between language and ethnic identity for minority groups need to be studied because the perceptions of the speech community on this has implications on the maintenance of their ethnic language, and by virtue of this, their culture. In the context of Sarawak, the Bidayuh is a relatively small indigenous speech community which accounts for 8.03% of the Sarawak population. Kuching and its hinterland have the heaviest concentration of Bidayuh. Out of 198,473 Bidayuh in Sarawak, 38.49% is in Kuching, 27.31% in Serian (56 km or 1 hour's drive from Kuching) and 18.8% in Bau (29 km or half an hour's drive from Kuching) and 6.06% in Lundu (84 km or 1½ hour's drive from Kuching) (DistancesFrom.com, n.d.). The remaining 10% of the Bidayuh population are spread throughout the state of Sarawak. These population statistics are based on the 2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak, 2012). In the past, the Bidayuh were involved in subsistence farming and lived in longhouses in the Bidayuh areas but many have since moved to urban areas where they are involved in professional and technical jobs. For those who continue to live in rural areas, the communal life of the Bidayuh revolves around rice cultivation ("Crafts of the Bidayuh", n.d.), and the harvest festival *Gawai* is a major event for the community.

The use of the term "Bidayuh" follows that of Collins (2001) who referred to the communities of western Sarawak who speak closely related languages such as Jagoi, Biatah and others. The five isolects of Bidayuh are Salako and Rara (Lundu District), Bau-Jagoi (Bau District), Biatah (Kuching area, for example, Siburan and Penrissen) and Bukar-Sadung (Serian District) (see Figure 1, from Rensch, Rensch, Noeb, & Ridu, 2006, p. 6). Lexicostatistic analysis shows that the overlap between the isolects is not sufficient for one standard Bidayuh to be developed (Joyik, Siam, Tan, Vega, & Simpson, n.d.), which is partly why the standardisation of Bidayuh language and the development of orthography and a spelling system has not been easy.

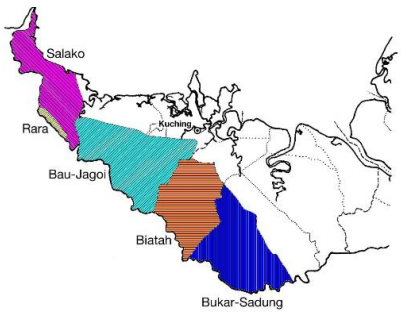

Figure 1: Map showing concentration of Bidayuh groups in Sarawak

(source: Joyik, Siam, Tan, Vega, & Simpson, n.d.)

The differences between the Bidayuh isolects make intergenerational transmission of the Bidayuh language difficult in the context of intermarriages, even among Bidayuhs from different regions. The parents may choose to speak English, Sarawak Malay Dialect or Bahasa Malaysia alongside Bidayuh for family communication. For example, Dealwis' (2008) study on Bidayuh undergraduates revealed that Bidayuh was used minimally in interactions with Bidayuhs across isolect boundaries. With some evidence of lessened use of Bidayuh among the Bidayuhs living in urban areas, how salient is the language as an ethnic marker?

The study examined the salience of language as a marker of ethnicity for Bidayuh in Sarawak, Malaysia. The specific aspects studied were primary markers of ethnic identity and variations in perceptions across age groups.

2 METHOD OF STUDY

2.1 Participants

The study was conducted in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak located on Borneo Island, situated on the north of Kalimantan, Indonesia. The 151 participants of this study were Bidayuh from different age groups living in the Kuching and Kota Samarahan Divisions. The first group comprised 73 Bidayuh students in two urban and two rural schools in Kuching. They were in Form 2 at the time of the study and their average age was 14. The number of Bidayuh students from the Bukar-Sadong, Biatah and Singai-Jagoi sub-groups is similar. The second group consisted of 32 students from two Malaysian public universities in Kota Samarahan. Their age ranged from 18 to 23 as some of them were diploma students and others were degree students. The third group was made up of 46 working adults in their 30s to 50s in Kuching. They were in the middle income category with occupations such as police officer, teacher, lecturer, librarian, executives in the private sector as well as contractors and supervisors in the construction industry. The participant selection did not take account of the Bidayuh isolects spoken as the study was a preliminary study of the role of language in the identity construction of the Bidayuh group in general.

As the focus is on language as an ethnic marker, the language background of the participants is relevant. The students in their teens spoke mainly Bidayuh and Bahasa Melayu with their family. Bidayuh is the main language used with other Bidayuh speakers in the *kampong* but the usage dropped with Bidayuh friends, neighbours and teachers (in descending order). For the university students, Bidayuh is the main language used with family and *kampong* people; two-thirds spoke Bidayuh with Bidayuh friends and about half spoke Bidayuh with neighbours. The working adults

also spoke mainly Bidayuh with their family but Bahasa Melayu and Sarawak Malay Dialect were used rather often too. About two-thirds of the Bidayuh participants in the working adults group spoke Bidayuh with their friends and *kampong* people but only one-third did so with their Bidayuh neighbours and colleagues. Although Bidayuh was the mainstay of their communication within the Bidayuh community, the language repertoire and usage of the Bidayuh participants showed diversity and mixing of languages.

2.2 Instrument

The questionnaire used for the study was designed to capture ethnic markers for the Bidayuh. Symbols of ethnic membership examined include language, cuisine, customs, dress and other artefacts. To gather a list of ethnic markers, a few Bidayuhs were asked the question "What makes you a Bidayuh?" Based on their responses, a list of 12 Bidayuh identity markers were identified and put in the questionnaire with the same question. This was a preliminary list and the responses from Bidayuh participants in the study would indicate the feasibility of the list for further studies. In the questionnaire, the Bidayuh participants were asked to rank the importance of the ethnic markers: 1 for the most important; 2 for second important; and 3 for third important.

Another part of the questionnaire elicited demographic information on the participants. This included the ethnic group of their father and mother because intermarriages are common in Sarawak. The participants were also asked to indicate the *kampong* their parents originated from because this indicates the Bidayuh isolect spoken, if the parents were Bidayuh. Besides this, the participants were asked to indicate the main language used with different groups of people so that the salience of language as an ethnic marker can be understood in context. Because of the likelihood of intermarriages, the language use with maternal and paternal relatives was sought (grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, cousins and spouse, if any). The participants were asked to indicate the main language spoken with Bidayuh and non-Bidayuh friends, neighbours and *kampong* people. In addition, the secondary student questionnaire contained a question on languages used with Bidayuh and non-Bidayuh teachers. The word "teacher" was changed to "lecturer" in the questionnaire for the university students but for the working adults, the question was on their language use with Bidayuh and non-Bidayuh bosses. The intention was to profile their language use within the ethnic group and with members of other ethnic group to provide a background for understanding the importance of language as a marker of ethnic group membership.

2.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

The questionnaire was distributed to three groups of participants. For the first group of secondary school students, the questionnaires were given to Form Two students in two urban and two rural schools in Kuching, Bau and Serian with the help of their teachers who explained the purpose of the study. The second group of university students were from two public universities in Kota Samarahan. The assistance of the lecturers was sought for the distribution of the questionnaire. After the lecturers explained the scope of the study, the lecturers asked Bidayuh students to indicate their willingness to participate in the study by a show of hands. The questionnaires were then given to them. For these two groups, the questionnaires were collected as soon as they were completed to ensure better response. For the third group of working adults, the researchers used their social and work contacts to identify Bidayuh participants in their thirties to fifties who were working in both the public and private sectors in Kuching and Kota Samarahan. The participants were also asked to help pass on questionnaires to other Bidayuhs. For this group, sometimes the questionnaires were returned after one to two weeks.

The questionnaire responses were keyed into Excel sheets. For the analysis, the importance of the 12 ethnic markers was coded as follows: 3 for the most important, 2 for important, 1 for third in importance, and 0 for not important. The means were calculated and used for ranking the importance of the ethnic markers. We had expected only three ethnic markers to be selected since the instruction had asked the participants to rank the top three in importance. However, some participants marked a few ethnic markers as very important, second or third in importance. Their responses were taken as they were and the average was calculated. The results did not seem to be affected by the variations in responses but for future use, it may be easier to use Likert-type scale for each of the ethnic markers rather than using ranking.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Primary ethnic markers for Bidayuh participants

The questionnaire results showed that the three primary ethnic markers for Bidayuh participants are speaking the Bidayuh language, celebrating Gawai and having Bidayuh parentage (Table 1). Besides the Gawai celebration, other ethnic markers related to the Bidayuh culture such as cuisine and oral traditions were not considered salient.

Table 1 Salience of ethnic markers according to age group of Bidayuh participants

Ethnic markers	Secondary school students (n=73)		University students (n=32)		Working adults (n=46)		Overall (N=151)	
	Means	Rank	Means	Rank	Means	Rank	Means	Rank
Speak Bidayuh	2.54	1	2.46	3	2.69	1	2.56	1
Live in Bidayuh area	1.58	6	2.09	5	2.10	4	1.92	5
Go back to kampong every month	1.32	7	1.93	7	1.84	7	1.69	7
Celebrate Gawai	2.17	2	2.50	2	2.58	3	2.41	2
Eat Bidayuh food	1.61	4	2.09	5	2.00	6	1.90	6
Listen to Bidayuh songs	0.91	11	1.40	11	1.21	11	1.17	11
Listen to and tell Bidayuh stories or folktales	1.04	9	1.40	11	1.41	9	1.28	9
Listen to Bidayuh radio station	0.61	12	1.53	10	1.30	10	1.14	12
Look like a Bidayuh	1.30	8	1.62	8	1.71	8	1.54	8
Have parent(s) who are Bidayuh	1.82	3	2.62	1	2.73	2	2.39	3
Wear Bidayuh costume	1.01	10	1.56	9	1.19	12	1.25	10
Live among Bidayuh family	1.61	4	2.21	4	2.08	5	1.96	4

The most important ethnic marker for the 151 Bidayuh participants in this study was Bidayuh language (Table 1, last column). When analysed by age group, the secondary school students and working adults were similar in attributing the greatest salience to the Bidayuh language as a marker of ethnic group membership but the university students ranked it third in importance, after Gawai celebration and Bidayuh parentage. The university students have less opportunity to speak Bidayuh in the university setting because of the small number of Bidayuh students, and in this situation, the Bidayuh parentage becomes a more important ethnic marker. In comparison, the secondary school students have more opportunities to use the Bidayuh language because they either lived at home with their parents or in boarding schools where there were many Bidayuh students. The 73 Bidayuh secondary school students who are part of the present study were involved in another study on their receptivity to learning the Bidayuh language and folktales through online media. Campbell, Chuah, and Ting (2012) reported that the 81 Bidayuh secondary school students were divided in their views as to whether it is necessary for a Bidayuh to speak the language to be considered a Bidayuh: 37.50% felt that a Bidayuh who cannot speak the language is still a Bidayuh but 41.25% felt that a Bidayuh who cannot speak the language is not fully a Bidayuh; and the remaining 21.25% felt that a Bidayuh who cannot speak the language is not a Bidayuh. Taken together, 62.5% of the secondary school students asserted the salience of the ability to speak Bidayuh in order to be

considered a Bidayuh. On the surface, the results of Campbell et al.'s (2012) study are consistent with the present study.

The theoretical question on the salience of language as an ethnic marker can be taken further: does ability to speak Bidayuh make someone a Bidayuh or does it signify the Bidayuh identity? Some researchers (e.g., Mohamed Ali, 2010) assert a strong connection between culture maintenance and language maintenance. In Fishman's (1977) dimensions of ethnicity, patrimony is the dimension that deals with language as a learned behaviour used to express ethnic group membership. Using Fishman's (1977) conceptualisation, one who speaks Bidayuh shows that he/she is Bidayuh by doing so. In reality, using other markers of ethnicity such as parentage, this person may not be of Bidayuh descent. For example, a child born of Chinese parents may be adopted by a Bidayuh family and grow up speaking Bidayuh, and the Bidayuh language is an external expression of his/her Bidayuh identity. Collins (2001) introduced more complexity into an already complex issue. Collins (2001) stated that "language can serve as an emblem of identity, but it cannot serve as a yardstick to establish identity" (p. 394). Collins (2001) cited the examples of the Landak and Sekadau in Kalimantan who have close language affinity, "probably subdialectal", but maintain separate identities (p. 393). The mere ability to speak the language does not grant one membership in the ethnic community but when one is already a member of the community – by some other yardsticks – then speaking the language strengthens the identity. To Collins (2001), "identity is a matter of choice; it is dynamic, invented and imagined" (p. 394), which is why it is important to investigate symbols used to assert ethnic identity.

The second important ethnic marker is the Gawai celebration, based on the responses of the whole group of Bidayuh participants (Table 1). Both the secondary school and university students ranked Gawai celebration as second in importance in marking Bidayuh identity but the working adults ranked it third in importance. The harvest festival allows a community-wide gathering of Bidayuhs. Bidayuhs working elsewhere such as in other parts of Sarawak and Malaysia, and even other countries return for the Gawai celebration. It was originally and is still celebrated by the Iban and Bidayuh as Gawai Padi for marking rice harvest seasons (Latrell, 2012). Gawai has its religious significance in that the Bidayuh priestess collects the paddy seeds from the river given by the Paddy spirit, *Ieng Podi* and seeks the blessing of the spirits for the next planting season (Campbell, Ting, McLellan, & Yeo, 2012). Although many Bidayuhs are now Christians, the Gawai celebration has its social significance in bringing the family and wider Bidayuh community together. Gawai Padi was gazetted as Gawai Dayak in 1964 by the new Malaysian government as an ethnic holiday on the first of June every year and has evolved from a ritual holiday to a homecoming and feasting (Latrell, 2012) but Latrell sees it as an Iban harvest festival. Because of

the reference to Iban as Sea Dayaks and the Bidayuh as Land Dayaks (Collins, 2001), Gawai Dayak is a harvest celebration of both ethnic groups in Sarawak. In fact, Mason and Jawan (2003) emphasised the term Dayak as "a collective reference for the Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu and other non-Muslim indigenous groups" (p. 178) and by this definition, Gawai Dayak is a festival for the indigenous groups of Sarawak (see also Sarawak Tourism, n.d.). Although it is a harvest festival shared by the indigenous groups of Sarawak, to the participants of this study, the Gawai Dayak celebration plays an important role in marking Bidayuh identity.

The significance of festivals to ethnic identification cannot be underestimated. For the Cajuns in Louisiana, Bankston and Henry (2010) identified festival as the key to the revival of the Cajun ethnic identity. Bankston and Henry (2010) acknowledged that although the Cajun ethnic identity has been marketed as an ethnic commodity for mass consumption, it still serves to link the people with a sense of tradition and descent from a mythic past. Gazetting of festivals as ethnic holidays by the government gives recognition to the existence of the ethnic group in the diverse ethnic make-up of the nation. When members of the ethnic group participate in the festivity, this serves to delineate ethnic boundaries more clearly. The significance of various cultural elements related to the festival is brought into the consciousness of the younger members of the ethnic group. For the Chinese in Canada who migrated from Taiwan, the Lunar New Year is a cultural statement that highlights their cultural identity and underscores their existence in multicultural Canada (Lin, 2000). For the Bidayuh in Sarawak, it is a sign that the younger generation remembers their roots. Jehom (2002), in writing about the compromises made in intermarriages between Bidayuh and Malay, states that "as long as the children remember their root and responsibility to the parents, and come back home for *Gawai* (harvest festival) and the family get together, the parents would be most happy and grateful" (p. 61).

The third important ethnic marker is Bidayuh parentage (mean of 2.39). In this study, the secondary school students and working adults see Bidayuh parentage as less important than speaking the Bidayuh language, but the university students ranked Bidayuh parentage as the top defining criterion for Bidayuh identity. This pattern could not be explained in the context of the data obtained in the present study and needs to be investigated further. Inherited ethnicity is the paternity dimension of ethnicity described by Fishman (1977), where even language is seen as "not even merely an ethnic symbol in and of itself. It is the flesh of the flesh and blood of the blood" (p. 19). Ethnic descent is inherited and can usually be seen from the name but this is not as straightforward as it seems because of the regulations pertaining to the registration of the birth of a child in Sarawak. The offspring follows the father's ethnic category, and because of this, individuals of mixed parentage are identified as pure indigenous groups based on the father's

ethnicity (Jehom, 2002). Jehom (2002) also pointed out that in the past the native status was manipulated because only the natives could purchase Native Customary Rights land but the stricter regulations on ethnic categorisation in birth certificates and identification cards have curbed this. This is why it is crucial to trace the ethnic identity of individuals at least to the generation of their parents and grandparents in sociolinguistic research.

Related to Bidayuh parentage is having the typical physical attributes of a Bidayuh which is ranked eighth by Bidayuh participants in all the three age groups (average mean of 1.54, Table 1). Some are of the view that there are distinctive features but others feel that it is quite difficult to distinguish who is Bidayuh and who is not based on the physical attributes, particularly for offsprings of intermarriages. Although the distinctiveness may be vague, these two can be seen as related because Bidayuh parentage is inherited and this may be accompanied by a physical expression of inherited traits. "Racial stratification is associated with birth-ascribed status based on physical and cultural characteristics defined by outside groups" (Berreman, 1972, 1981, as cited in Baumann, 2004, p. 12). By this argument, offsprings of Bidayuh parents would have certain physical attributes which distinguish them from others, and the commonly described traits are skin colour, facial features and stature. However, the counter argument is that ethnicity is a matter of cultural and historical construct, as exemplified in this quote from Ocampo, Bernal and Knight (1993):

> If one states that people are of the same race, this statement implies that they are descendants of a common ancestor who have an inherited physical appearance. That is, there is a genetic transmission of race that is apparent through physical cues. On the other hand, people of the same ethnic group have a set of characteristics, including cultural values, traditions, and behaviours in common, and may be of pure or mixed race. These characteristics are transmitted through socialization processes, as well as heredity; therefore, one may recognise another's ethnicity through both physical cues and more subtle behavioral cues. (p. 15)

This clearly presents race as inherited and ethnicity as learnt behaviours, attitudes and values. Since the Bidayuh participants ranked speaking the Bidayuh language, celebrating Gawai and having Bidayuh parentage as the primary ethnic markers, this shows that there are elements of ethnicity which are inherited (parentage) and learnt (language and festival). Together, these three constitutes the nature of the ethnic boundaries for Bidayuh ethnicity.

3.2 Unimportant ethnic markers for Bidayuh participants

To identify ethnic markers which are not important in defining Bidayuh ethnicity, the markers ranked nine to 12 were taken as these were at the bottom of the list for importance. The four ethnic markers ranked last were listening to Bidayuh radio station (mean of 1.14), listening to Bidayuh songs (mean of 1.17), wearing Bidayuh costume (mean of 1.25) and listening to and telling Bidayuh folktales (mean of 1.28) (see Table 1). These come under the category of cultural markers of ethnicity traditionally thought as important for marking ethnic group membership and often marketed in ethnic tourism through cultural shows and rendition of oral traditions via CDs, websites and on air space. Communal associations often headed by older members of the speech community often aim to preserve and promote their cultural heritage by encouraging traditional music, dance and handicraft (Tan, 1997). Tan (1997) noted that the need to promote cultural traditions becomes more pertinent when autonomous or semi-autonomous communities are integrated into the multi-ethnic state. Nevertheless, for the Bidayuh participants from their teens to their fifties, the oral traditions are not crucial for their identification as Bidayuh. These are social constructions of Bidayuh identity which members of the community may not necessarily reject as representations of the culture but are links to the past cultural heritage which are no longer part of cultural life in today's era.

Literary works, folk songs, rituals and customs as collective cultural reproductions or symbols of the community and represent subjective characteristics of an ethnic group (Ngeow, 2011). This is in contrast to structural ascriptive characteristics (race, class, generation and geography) to delineate ethnic boundaries (Chai, 2005). Using this categorisation, the subjective characteristics of an ethnic group are referred to as cultural ascriptive characteristics, and are less salient in defining ethnic identities for collective action (Lopez & Espiritu, 1990, as cited in Chai, 2005). However, ethnic markers considered important traditionally have been the target of cultural preservation and ethnic tourism. For example, folklores have been used to express Hungarian identity (Dégh, 1984). There are also attempts to use technology to cultivate interest in folklores among the younger Bidayuhs. Campbell et al.'s (2012) study showed that the younger Bidayuh expressed interest in learning folktales online as a means to learn the Bidayuh culture and language but the reality of their interest has yet to be tested. In fact, cultural traditions are the mainstay of ethnic tourism to show ethnic distinctiveness and diversity. In ethnic tourism, "the notion of 'tradition' invoked by the agents within the tourist industry may be little more than a contemporary reconstruction of cultural practices to meet market demand of the tourists' needs" (Ardhana & Maunati, n.d., p. 7).

3.3 Emerging salient ethnic markers for Bidayuh participants

The emerging ethnic markers that play some role in defining Bidayuh identity are living among Bidayuh family, living in a Bidayuh area, eating Bidayuh food, going back to *kampong* every month and looking like a Bidayuh (ranked 4th to 8th by the Bidayuh participants, Table 1). Having the typical physical attributes of a Bidayuh has been discussed in relation to Bidayuh parentage earlier, hence the focus here is on the other four ethnic markers.

Living among Bidayuh family, living in a Bidayuh area and going back to *kampong* every month can be grouped as frequent contact with the Bidayuh community. The contact may be within the family, or extended to the Bidayuh community. In the past, the Bidayuh community in the longhouse is very close knit and the extended family lived together. Now many Bidayuhs work elsewhere and do not live in Bidayuh-dominant areas such as Bau or Singai, then contact with the wider Bidayuh community takes the form of returning to the Bidayuh *kampong* frequently. Otherwise, Bidayuh who are Christians meet in church on Sundays. The closeness and frequent contact with the Bidayuh community is seen as an important criterion of ethnic membership. The oneness with the Bidayuh community is crucial because the sense of ethnic identity is derived from membership in the community. Being in a collectivistic society, belonging to the group is more important than individual existence. The frequent contact with other members of the Bidayuh community builds solidarity and strengthens the shared identity. Furthermore, the Bidayuh identity and traditional knowledge are interwoven into the fabric of life. Burkhardt (2007) made this deduction based on a study of how Salako women teach others how to make thatched roof, and one of the Bidayuh identity highlighted is attribution of expert status based on the women's age rather than their skill level and also that they teach one-to-one rather than to a group. When members of the Bidayuh community are in close contact, this allows transmission of values which are important to the community, particularly for smaller groups living in a multi-ethnic state.

The findings of this study suggests that with the reduced salience of Bidayuh costumes and oral traditions as defining criteria of Bidayuh identity, the attention has turned from physical artifacts to social group identification. Ethnic identity is one of the many social identities individuals are defined by in various situations and settings, and a prominent social identity in ethnically diverse societies is ethnic identity. This is partly because the orientations of the citizens are consistent with official frames of national community (Schlenker-Fischer, 2010). Since the Malaysian government requires ethnic identification in official documents such as identity cards, passports, and applications for school and work purposes, the ethnic awareness of the people is heightened. Because of the heightened ethnic consciousness, government ethnic differentiation policy can reinforce distinctive cultural practices for minority groups (Ngeow, 2011). Based on the responses

of the Bidayuh participants in this study, the sense of community is very important in keeping them together and crucial to their self-identification as Bidayuhs. Seen in the larger context of Sarawak, the Bidayuh population of 8.03% is small relative to the Iban, Chinese and Malay population of 28.87%, 23.37% and 22.98% respectively. The community needs to maintain its ethnic distinctiveness to offset influences of more numerically dominant groups because urban living makes ethnic groups homogeneous in their lifestyle, living quarters and activities. Other than Bidayuh parentage (which may not be seen in the name as Bidayuh may give their children English or Christian names), physical attributes (which may not be distinctive) and Bidayuh language (which many do not speak with non-Bidayuh or Bidayuh from other isolects), what brings the Bidayuh community together is their contact with one another on a big scale through the Gawai Dayak celebration. Besides the annual get-together, they meet family and other Bidayuh on a smaller scale throughout the year. The frequent contact with other Bidayuhs is emerging as an important ethnic marker because it connects individual Bidayuh with the bigger Bidayuh community, and through this, they are linked to the shared culture and historical past which form their roots.

Food has surfaced as an ethnic marker for the Bidayuh. Table 1 shows that as the Bidayuh participants increase in age, the importance attributed to eating of Bidayuh food decreases – the ranking of importance dropped from 4 for secondary school students, to 5 for university students and 6 for working adults. Partaking of Bidayuh food is part of community living. Examples of Bidayuh food are *romang, tiboduk* and *pansuh*. In urban settings, Bidayuh who do not cook at home end up eating food that is similar to that eaten by other ethnic groups (e.g., Western fastfood, Chinese food, Malay food), which is what the older Bidayuh participants in the study might have realised. Esterik (1982) notes that:

> In everyday meals, food may have ceased to be an external marker of a particular ethnic group; but it can serve as a symbol of ethnicity to observers unfamiliar with the actual food habits of a particular group, as well as to members of that group. (p. 209)

While food is recognised as an expression of identity and culture (Bessiere, 1998; Cusack, 2000; Ritchie & Zins, 1978, as cited in Langgat, Mohd Zahari, Yasin, & Mansur, 2011), the younger members of the Bidayuh community may not know how to prepare and cook Bidayuh food. This may make the relevance of food as a Bidayuh identity marker relevant. Based on their study of 151 Iban, Orang Ulu and Melanau around Miri, Langgat et al. (2011) found that modernisation through commercialisation lessens interest of the young generation towards native food compared to the older generation. Langgat et al. (2011) surmised that because the young generation has less interest to learn and cook ethnic food, the uniqueness and cultural identity through native food will fade.

However, ethnic food maintains its symbolic importance during Gawai Dayak celebration for the Bidayuh. For example, in *kampong*s where the traditional Gawai is still celebrated, some of these ethnic food are prepared as offerings to the spirits, but in today's modern Bidayuh *kampong*, these food are still prepared as part of the celebration itself. More and more stalls are selling some of the Bidayuh ethnic food but a major part of the promotion is done by the Sarawak Cultural Village, as well as food fairs in Sarawak. This is an avenue for Bidayuh food to make a continued presence in the lives of the younger members of the Bidayuh community – and it is no coincidence that Bidayuh food has surfaced in the results as an emerging marker of Bidayuh identity.

4 CONCLUSION

The study on ethnic markers for the Bidayuh shows that the salient markers are the language, parentage and ethnic festival but it is not necessary to listen to Bidayuh radio station, Bidayuh songs, stories and folktales or wear Bidayuh costumes to be considered a Bidayuh. The symbols which are emerging as ethnic markers for the Bidayuh are frequent contact with the Bidayuh community and partaking of Bidayuh cuisine. The frequent contact with the Bidayuh community takes the form of the auspicious annual Gawai Dayak celebration, visits to the *kampong* and living in a Bidayuh area. There is an age group difference in the salience attributed to Bidayuh language and Bidayuh parentage as defining characteristics of Bidayuh ethnicity – the secondary school students and working adults ranked the Bidayuh language as number one but the university students ranked it as third in importance. Instead the university students singled out Bidayuh parentage as the most important criterion of being a Bidayuh, possibly because they have fewer opportunities to use the language while they are living on campus. In the ethnically diverse university settings, descent-based attributes is more important for ethnic categorisation than cultural ascriptive attributes, of which language is one. Using the Bidayuh as a case study, the findings offer empirical evidence for the discussion of comparative political scientists on classification of ethnic identity (see Chandra, 2006). The findings suggest that eligibility for membership is based on distinction between categories of membership (parentage) but common culture still has a place (language, ethnic festival), showing the role of cultural ascriptive characteristics in defining ethnic identities need to be further investigated as a context-dependent phenomenon.

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