HAKKA IN ENGLISH, SARAWAK: COMMUNITY & IDENTITY*

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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. 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 intermarry 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.

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