

THE BUMIPUTERA POLICY – DYNAMICS AND DILEMMA: THE ORANG ULU PERSPECTIVES

Francis J. Lian
Human Resource Consultant
Miri, Sarawak

THE ‘ORANG ULU’

Who are the ‘Orang Ulu’? The term ‘Orang Ulu’ is not a legal term and no such racial group is listed in the Malaysian constitution. It is a term politically coined to group together 27 very small but ethnically diverse groups in Sarawak with a population ranging from less than 300 persons to over 25,000 persons. Together they totalled approximately 150,000 persons (0.04% of Malaysian population in 2000). In the state of Sarawak, they are the fifth largest of the minority groups after the Iban, Chinese, Malay and Bidayuh. The other minority groups are the Melanau and Indians.

The Orang Ulu are found largely in the inland areas of Kapit, Bintulu, Miri and Limbang division of Sarawak. Within these divisions each ethnic group is concentrated within a specific geographical location. Unlike other ethnic groups, for example the Iban, the Orang Ulu normally do not move from region to region in rural Sarawak. However, in the last few decades many have migrated to urban towns and cities, especially to Lawas, Limbang, Miri, Bintulu, Kuching and even Kuala Lumpur. In some of these towns, especially Miri, they form a significant percentage of urban squatters. As a result a common demographic trend in Orang Ulu longhouses and villages is depopulation as the middle age and younger generations move to the urban areas in search for job and education (Lian, 1987). This occurred even among the remote groups such as the Kelabits which registered a staggering rural-urban migration rate of approximately 68% (Ose & Andrew, 2003). This does not mean that the Orang Ulu are abandoning their longhouses and villages.

The Orang Ulu are located in the remote areas of the Sarawak which, once, were accessible in the past only by days of travelling by boat, jungle trek or by light planes. Today, approximately 80 percent of the

Orang Ulu longhouses and villages are accessible by road, especially timber treks passable using by 4WD vehicles.

STOCK TAKING

This paper does not attempt to deliberate on the goals, objectives, concepts and policies of the *Bumiputera* Policy as these have been covered in the other papers. However, before it is possible to evaluate the dynamic and dilemmas of the *Bumiputera* Policy on the Orang Ulus, it is necessary to have a glimpse of the past (prior to the *Bumiputera* Policy) and present socio-economic conditions of the Orang Ulus. It must be emphasized that this will be a generalized picture based on very scanty secondary sources aided by discussions between the writer with some Orang Ulus.

The Orang Ulu Economy – Past and Present

Most of the Orang Ulu are traditionally shifting cultivators (Chin, 1985; Lian, 1987; Padoch, 1982), with the exception of the Lun Bawang, Bisayas and Kelabits who had shifted to wet paddy cultivation. Paddy cultivation is still part of their cultural heritage and not just an economic activity. In the past it was intertwined with their religious beliefs, social and cultural systems. However, the Orang Ulu communities have always been involved in many forms of cash-earning activities to cater for their non-subsistence needs. Until the mid 1960s, the activities include traditional collection of jungle products such as *damar*, *rattan*, *gutta percha*, *gaharu* (aloe wood), etc. (Lian 1988; SMJ, 1988). This activity was replaced since the mid 1960s by the cultivation of cash crops, especially rubber and coffee. Since the late 1970s, the major sector of employment among the Orang Ulus is the timber industry, which unfortunately accounted for over 3,000 deaths among the Orang Ulu from related industrial accidents (Luhath, 2003).

Education enabled the Orang Ulu to find employment both in the government services and in the private sectors, all over the country and even overseas. Although the number is small, they are found employed in almost all the economic and industrial sectors. For example, a study of the Kelabits who have migrated to the urban areas showed them involved in all sectors of the economy (Table 1). Unfortunately the same

figure also shows a large percentage under the Inadequately Described category (28%), which consisted mainly of unemployed adults. This currently is one of the major concerns of the Orang Ulu.

Table 1: Number of Bumiputera Entrepreneurs by Ethnic Group

Ethnic Group	Frequency	Percentage
Malay	1,688	60.4
Iban	453	16.2
Bidayuh	132	4.7
Melanau	377	13.5
Orang Ulu	57	1.9
Others	92	3.3

Source: Extracted from BCIC Master Plan Study of Sarawak, 1999 (2000)

Nowadays, these non-agricultural sectors have replaced paddy cultivation as the backbone of the Orang Ulu economy as traditional shifting cultivation agriculture cannot even cater for the annual subsistence needs of the family, least of all their non-subsistence needs (Lian, 1987; 1988). The Orang Ulu do not believe in the viability and sustainability of the agricultural sector. This is excusable as the high cost of transportation, low commodity prices and lack of effective marketing outlets and networks cause low returns from their agricultural enterprises.

The shift to the cash economy and search for employment in the non-agricultural sectors are among the main reasons behind the massive rural-urban migration. Despite the negative effect of rural-urban migration, the Orang Ulu, for the time being, consider this development as a more effective means to earn immediate cash to place their children in better equipped and staffed schools. This development partly resulted from the drastic decline in employment opportunities in the declining timber industry. Despite the emergence of numerous palm oil plantations close to their villages, the Orang Ulu are not interested in employment in these plantations due to very low wages. Interestingly, many Orang Ulu do not consider entering such employment as significant progress compared to employment in the commercial and industrial sectors and in the public services.

The Orang Ulu involvement in the business and industrial sectors is still minimal. We do have a handful of very successful businessmen moving

into the corporate sectors. Most are in the retail trade and small-scale contracting. A Master Plan Study for Sarawak in 1999 (Table 1) showed that the Orang Ulu form only 1.9 percent of the Sarawak *bumiputera* involved in business (BCIC Master Plan for Sarawak, 2000).

Status in Non-Economic Sectors

Within the internal context of the Orang Ulu, development in other socio-economic fields registered significant improvement if compared to their early Malaysia period. The question is whether these changes are due to the *Bumiputera* Policy or not. However, compared to other racial and ethnic groups in Malaysia, the Orang Ulu are staggeringly way behind socially. For example in education, which is an important component of the plan as well as programmes for uplifting the socio-economic conditions of *bumiputera*, drastic efforts are needed to improve their performance in this field. Although some official reports suggests that the Orang Ulu perform better than some *bumiputera* ethnic groups in Sarawak in terms of literacy rate and percentage of the population reaching higher education, the actual number receiving higher education is very small. To date, the community produced about 1,500 degree and diploma holders. This problem is not so much the unavailability of educational centres but school with adequate facilities and unmotivated teachers. As shown in Table 2, there were 110 primary schools and 10 secondary schools with a total population of 16,041 and 8,214 students respectively in the District of Belaga, Lawas and Baram in the year 2000. The majority of the students in these schools are from Orang Ulu's children. Despite this high number of enrolment in primary and secondary schools, the number entering higher education is very small. Less than 20 Orang Ulu students were accepted to Public Higher Education Centres each year. There are many reasons and the most common ones were: very high drop-out; poor performance in public examinations; financial difficulties and inability to compete with the other *bumiputeras* for places in the colleges and universities. How can the Orang Ulu children compete with children from other racial groups in an uneven playing field? Expectedly, the Orang Ulu are concerned about the move to accept students in public universities based on meritocracy. Meritocracy works on a level playing field. Table 2 also shows one of the major problems in education in the state, especially among the Orang Ulu, that is, a very high rate of school drop-outs. This

is partly illustrated by the vast difference in enrolment between the primary and secondary school.

Table 2: Number of Schools and Total Student Enrolment in Schools in Belaga, Lawas and Baram District in 2000

Particulars	Belaga	Lawas	Baram
Primary School	11	31	68
Students	2,934	5,244	7,863
Teachers	190	393	695
Secondary School	1	3	6
Students	1,408	2,844	3,962
Teachers	70	167	242

The Millennium Scenario

On August 31, 2003, Sarawak celebrated its 40 years of independence within Malaysia. Forty years is indeed a very long period and many ethnic groups in Sarawak experienced development in every sector of their socio-economic conditions by leaps and bounds. At the national level, the vision is to be an industrialized nation by the year 2020 with all the luxuries (and trappings of course) that come along with it. Poverty eradication is no longer a significant national economic issue. Plans, strategies and programmes are to guide the country into the K- and E-economy. In West Malaysia, all major cities and towns are linked by super-highways. It would be unimaginable to find villages in West Malaysia, apart from remote Orang Asli *kampung*, without power, water supply and road. In contrast, the best form of transportation serving most Orang Ulu longhouses are earth timber roads passable only by 4WD vehicle. A significant section of the community still rely on river transport for part of their transportation to the urban areas. The highland areas are only accessible by light planes.

All Orang Ulu longhouses and villages in the Baram and most in other regions are without treated water supply and power supply from public sources. Only a few longhouses have been granted financial loans to upgrade their longhouses and houses.

Although poverty rate even at state level is reportedly not less than 10 percent, the rate among a majority of Orang Ulu is still very high. It is a fallacy to believe that poverty rate among the Penan is less than 10

percent. While the government have allocated billions of ringgit to assist the hardcore poor, only a handful of Orang Ulu benefited from this programme.

While businessmen from other ethnic groups are competing for loans to build sky-scrapers, developing thousands of hectares of land for plantation, industrial development, an Orang Ulu businessman would consider it a miracle if his application for loan even from facilities meant to assist *bumiputera* entrepreneurs is approved by the bank. Entrepreneurial development programmes create only frustration. "Your loan cannot be approved because you do not have the experience in running a business" is a frequent feedback received by Orang Ulu businessmen – another classical "chicken and egg" dilemma.

The brief presentations above provide some perspective upon which the theme of this conference, in as far as the Orang Ulu is concerned, is assessed and evaluated.

If the above are what 40 years of independence meant, then the millennium scenario is cruel and unfair to the Orang Ulu. Vision 2020 is meaningless for a community most of whom are still struggling to provide even for their basic needs. To state it bluntly, the *Bumiputera* Policy had brought hardly any benefit to the Orang Ulu communities. It can hardly claim any responsibility in contributing to the small social and economic improvements in the livelihood of the Orang Ulu in Sarawak.

ARE THE ORANG ULU SO INSIGNIFICANT AS TO BE TOTALLY SIDELINED?

The Orang Ulu are proud to be Malaysian, especially our contribution to the country, at least to the national cultural heritage. We have contributed to the nation even in such an exclusive arena such as in the field of sports – one Olympian hurdler, a few national footballers, South East Asia (SEA) game champion javeline thrower, and a few others. Most significantly, of course is the Orang Ulu's contribution to tourism – where their beautiful maidens adorn Ministry of Tourism, Sarawak Tourism Board, brochures and television advertisement while their *sape* music and hornbill dances are part of the national cultural heritage.

Orang Ulu handicraft and motifs adorn state, national and international museums. Some of the Orang Ulu, of course, are also known worldwide, for other reasons, notably ecological reasons – for example the Penan – which irritated some sections of the Malaysian society.

For a very small community, the Orang Ulu felt that they have contributed a lot more, relative to their population size, to the richness of the Malaysian culture to make it 'Truly Asia' or is it 'Truly Malaysia'. Thus the question and sense of inequitable treatment inevitably arose.

Why are they sidelined? The final section of this paper outlines some of the possible reasons which might or might not be true as only the national leaders know best.

IS THERE ANY SUCH 'BUMIPUTERA POLICY' TO THE ORANG ULU?

While the presence of such a national policy is known to all professional and literate Orang Ulu, unfortunately, it is practically not known and irrelevant to the majority of the community – the farmers, the labourers, Orang Ulu businessmen and traders. Even to those who are aware of such policy, it did benefit them very little, if any. From my discussions with some Orang Ulu businessmen and traders, all indicated that they have given up applying for any financial assistance, including those meant to assist *bumiputera* entrepreneurs and traders. In fact, I owed my current involvement in business to the unequal treatment of the *Bumiputera* Policy. There are many reasons why the Orang Ulu never benefited from the policy. Among these are:

1. The relevant plans and programmes accompanying these policies never reach the Orang Ulu. They are too remote to be reached and the population too scattered to make it financially feasible to provide them with even the basic amenities. The alternative is resettlement. But what are the objectives of resettlement. If resettlement means placing people in a place in which they are given three acres of land for making a livelihood, then the pay-off to the Orang Ulu is not worthwhile. In fact such plans, in many cases, are rhetorics. The Orang Ulu have been accused of not responding to the Native Customary Rights (NCR) Land Development Projects initiated by

the Ministry of Land and Rural Development of Sarawak. If the number of application for such projects and the failure of implementing a NCR project which have been accepted by the Orang Ulus are the indications, the Orang Ulus are not to be blamed.

2. In business, the Orang Ulu cannot fulfill the necessary requirements which qualify them to obtain and qualify for special economic packages meant to assist *bumiputera*. In response to an economic paper (Ose & Andrew, 2003) presented in a recent Orang Ulu Cultural Symposium, which outline the various types of economic programmes and packages of assistance, entrepreneur development programme, franchise system and umbrella programmes which the Orang Ulu can tap into to assist them in business, a few Orang Ulu businessmen sarcastically responded that it is easier to dig for gold than to get any of the above. Applications for bank loans, for instance, were stalled or were disqualified for lack of collateral. Yet land, which is the only tangible asset owned by the Orang Ulus are not titled. The lack of experience in business is another common reason. In fact, one wonders whether such loans benefited the *bumiputera* more than non-*bumiputera* as it is the *bumiputeras* who have the backing of a shadowy non-*bumiputera* partners who frequently qualify for most of the *bumiputera* economic programmes and packages. Indeed the gradual emergence of a business community among Orang Ulus in Sarawak is largely the result of the individual efforts of members of the community and not due to the *Bumiputera* Policy.
3. In short, the policy is nothing more than just a written policy in as far as the Orang Ulus are concerned, or simply stated, *cakap pun tak guna*.

In West Malaysia, *bumiputeras* enjoy a 5 percent discount on prices of houses built by the private sector, a benefit never extended to Sarawak. On the other hand, the Orang Ulu and other *bumiputera* groups in Sarawak have to pay higher prices for building materials due to high transportation costs and exploitation from a chain of middlemen. How would the *bumiputera* in West Malaysia respond if a bag of cement costs RM150.00 and a 14kg of liquid petroleum gas (LPG) also costs RM150.00 per cylinder. Indeed these are the prices the Kelabits are paying in Bario. Even in the middle Baram which is accessible by timber

road, gasoline costs RM1.80 per litre increasing to RM4.50 per litre in Bario.

None of the projects funded by federal funds through its various agencies and statutory bodies have reached the Orang Ulu area, although these agencies, such as Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), Federal Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (FELCRA), Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), etc. – are the principal agencies in implementing the various *Bumiputera* policies.

Are we treated as *bumiputera* by Malays in West Malaysia? Unless the situation is different now, the general experience of many non-Malay *bumiputera* of Sarawak is that we are not readily accepted as such by a significant percentage of *bumiputera* in West Malaysia, probably due to our socio-religious differences.

HOW HAVE THE ORANG ULU BENEFITTED?

Generally, the Orang Ulus are resigned to the fact that the *Bumiputera* Policy is meant largely for the Malays in West Malaysia, and probably those in Sarawak and Sabah. If they can have crumbs of what the policy brings, so much the better. They feel that, to date, they are just there to add to the plurality to justify the *Bumiputera* Policy – creating the dynamics as well as the dilemmas. But where are the crumbs?

The only sectors from which some benefited directly as other *bumiputera* races, is of course the Amanah Saham Bumiputera, (ASB) in which a significant number of the employed Orang Ulu invested in. Still a majority of the Orang Ulu cannot even afford to invest in ASB. How could the majority of the Orang Ulus benefit from the loan to invest in ASB, if most of them have no fixed sources of income. The benefit is supplemented, at the state level, by investment in Amanah Saham Sarawak (ASSAR).

The social and economic benefits gained by the Orang Ulus are mainly from the efforts of the state government most of which are funded from the state coffers instead of by the federal government.

While it may be argued that development such as education is federally funded, it reached the Orang Ulu not as a result of the *Bumiputera* Policy but through the overall development efforts of the government. In fact, the Orang Ulu owed their advancement in education and in other areas of their social and economic life to the efforts of various Christian missionaries instead of the *Bumiputera* Policy. Inevitably the situation declined with the decline and eventual takeover of the missionary facilities.

The Orang Ulu hope that with the continued efforts of the federal and state agencies in promoting tourism in Malaysia generally and Sarawak in particular in which they appeared prominently in the various advertisement media, they will eventually benefit from this industry.

REASONS FOR THE LIMITED BENEFITS

There are many but the following are sufficient to illustrate the case:

1. To the federal government and the larger racial groups such as the Malay and Chinese, especially in Peninsular Malaysia, the Orang Ulu are numerically too insignificant to be considered as threat, political, economic or otherwise. Indeed, how many West Malaysian have any knowledge of the Orang Ulu, least of all any of the 27 ethnic groups which form the Orang Ulu. Politically, the Orang Ulu are now represented by three members of parliament and one senator. Until 1987, the Orang Ulu were also represented in the federal cabinet by a deputy minister. In this context, the Orang Ulu representation in the federal government has declined.
2. A question of priority. It is inevitable that the larger racial groups and crucial geo-political regions will be given priority in any development efforts.
3. Federal versus state political ambivalence. The unique political structure between federal and Sarawak state government also plays a significant role, especially on any effort by the federal government to initiate projects related to land and mineral resources, other than oil, which are under the control of the state. In this context, marginalised ethnic groups such as the Orang Ulu suffered the effect

of dual mistreatment. At the state level, being in the remote areas, they are given lesser consideration for development compared to those in the urban areas as well as to politically and economically stronger ethnic groups. This is obvious in Sarawak where, due to their political power, the Melanau, who are a smaller population, are getting greater socio-economic benefits compared even to the much larger Iban communities.

4. Internally, the absence of a powerful political and communal leadership among the Orang Ulu themselves contributed to the situation. In fact, until 1987, the Orang Ulu were well represented in the State Cabinet by at least a full minister, one assistant minister and two political secretaries. Since 1987, this political power has eroded. The community is now represented by an assistant minister in the state cabinet assisted by two state assembly men and one political secretary.

CONCLUSION

One political slogan displayed prominently along road sides and broadcasted frequently over radio and television currently is "Keranamu Malaysia". It is indeed a very relevant and purposeful slogan. Malaysia could not be where it is today if not for the peaceful environment and the dynamic leadership. The Orang Ulu came out with their myriad of colourful culture to celebrate 2003 Malaysia Day, as they always did in the past. How wonderful would it be if there is also one – *Keranamu Polisi Bumiputera*. Additional dilemma, why not?

The recognition of the unique socio-economic problems of minority ethnic communities in Sarawak and Sabah under the OPP3 probably summarized the failure or limited success of the *Bumiputera* Policy in addressing their social and economic problems. In summary, categorizing them as *bumiputera*, had brought very little socio-economic benefits to the Orang Ulu compared to the Malays. To the Orang Ulu, they are more like paupers to the *putera* (prince) of the *bumi* (land) of Malaysia. Where in the world can you find a prince who does not have ownership (grant or title) to even the basic asset a human being has, that is, the land which he inherited from his ancestor. If you do not own the land on which you stay, you are forever an illegal squatter of the nation.

Even migrants to this resource rich nation have titles to their land. This scenario alone adequately sums up the dilemmas of the *Bumiputera* Policy in as far as the Orang Ulu are concerned. This paper cannot figure out the dynamics of it.

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