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OOHHAA! KAMEK ORANG SARAWAK: A GLIMPSE INTO SARAWAKIANS' DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE SARAWAKIAN

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ABSTRACT

'Sarawakian' identity continues to be a topic of active discussion both within Malaysia and internationally. While these debates have brought Sarawakians into the spotlight, there is a pressing need for a deeper understanding of the complex nature of Sarawakian identity, which is often limited by narrow perspectives. This article seeks to expand our understanding of how Sarawakians define and perceive the terms Sarawakian and Sarawakian identity. To explore this, we surveyed 311 participants from diverse backgrounds within Sarawak and used thematic analysis to identify key interpretations of these terms. Our analysis revealed 13 distinct themes. Participants defined Sarawakian in relation to culture, diversity, and heritage, while Sarawakian identity was linked to cultural pride and a strong connection to the region. Importantly, our findings highlight the multifaceted role of Sarawakian identity, not only as a tool for self-classification but also as a crucial aspect of participants' collective identity. These insights are especially relevant given the growing 'Sarawak for Sarawakian' sentiment, which is fueled by ongoing calls for greater autonomy. Our study contributes to a deeper understanding of Sarawakian identity, particularly in the context of recent political developments.

Keywords: identity, nationality, Sarawakian, Sarawak, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The term 'Sarawakian' evokes a range of thoughts, especially among Malaysians from Sarawak. It is commonly associated with the diverse people of Sarawak, who come from various ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. This concept is closely tied to the Sarawak Malay phrase *kamek orang Sarawak*, which many Sarawakians use to describe themselves or their origins. Another

well-known expression, *Oohhaa!*, originally used by the Iban community for celebrations, has been adopted by many Sarawakians for festive occasions. Even the late Chief Minister, Pehin Seri Adenan Satem, used it as a friendly greeting and a motivational phrase (Ling 2016). Together, these images and expressions form a shared sense of Sarawakian identity, which many Sarawakians embrace as part of their collective self-identification.

However, we wish to clarify that the term Sarawakian is not a borrowed or adapted phrase. It is a common expression in the Sarawak Malay dialect, familiar to many Sarawakians from diverse linguistic groups. It is often used in self-introductions alongside other Malay phrases such as *Saya orang Sarawak*, *Kami orang Sarawak*, or *Aku orang Sarawak*. While these expressions reflect a shared Sarawakian identity, they may carry deeper meanings and subtle mechanisms that influence how Sarawakians understand their identity. Our data, based on survey responses from Sarawakians, did not delve into these complexities, but we acknowledge this limitation and suggest that future research explore these deeper facets of Sarawakian identity. Sarawakian identity is not merely a label or category for a specific group; it situates Sarawakians within both local and broader social contexts shaped by unique historical, cultural, and political factors. Beyond serving as a means for Sarawakians to classify themselves, it is also essential to how they relate to others within Malaysia and globally. In light of ongoing political developments—particularly regarding race, religion, and Sarawak's autonomy—preserving Sarawakian identity is more important than ever. These issues highlight the need to safeguard Sarawakian identity amidst shifting political dynamics. This article explores Sarawakians' views on their identity today, focusing on the meanings of the term Sarawakian and Sarawakian identity, and outlining several key objectives: to deepen our understanding of Sarawakian identity, to emphasise the role of Sarawakian identity in shaping collective identity and relationships, locally and more broadly, to raise awareness about safeguarding Sarawakian identity, especially considering recent political developments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity: Concepts and Configurations

Identity plays a vital role in shaping who we are, formed through a complex mix of cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, values, and beliefs. These elements influence how we view ourselves and our place in the world, helping us form connections and relationships. A strong sense of identity is crucial for belonging—without it, we may struggle to understand where we fit in.

Identity is multifaceted, with different aspects that shift depending on the context. According to self-categorisation theory (SCT) by Turner and Reynolds (2012) identity consists of two components: personal identity (how we see ourselves as individuals) and social identity (how we identify with groups). The prominence of each can vary based on the situation. For example, personal identity may be more apparent in a one-on-one conversation with a close friend, while social identity becomes more pronounced in group settings.

SCT is aligned with social identity theory (SIT) by Tajfel and Turner (1979), which suggests that our self-concept is heavily influenced by the social groups to which we belong, such as religious, ethnic, national, gender, or sexual groups. SIT highlights that social identities are most significant when we strongly identify with a group, often leading to in-group favouritism and bias against out-groups. These biases can result in 'within-group assimilation' (pressure to conform to in-group norms) and 'inter-group bias' (evaluating the in-group more favourably than the out-group) (Leaper 2011).

However, as Jackson (2006) notes, this group-based identity can also foster negative attitudes towards outsiders, often leading to 'Othering'—the process of framing differences as inferior. Ethnocentrism, for example, involves viewing one's own ethnic group as superior to others (Staszak 2020).

1. This tension between groups can lead to the creation of three major forms of collective identity, as described by Castells (2010):
2. Legitimising identity: This is shaped by dominant societal institutions to justify and perpetuate their power over others.
3. Resistance identity: Formed by marginalised groups in opposition to the dominant institutions, focusing on survival and defiance.
4. Project identity: This evolves from resistance identity, where marginalised groups use available cultural resources to redefine their societal position and work towards social transformation.

Castells' (2010) framework resonates with Shamsul's (1996) dual approach to identity in multiethnic Malaysia, which distinguishes between authority-defined social reality (shaped by those in power) and everyday-defined social reality (experienced by individuals in their daily lives). Shamsul (1996) argues that identity formation occurs in both contexts: the authority-defined reality reflects the perspectives of the dominant power structure, while the everyday-defined reality is shaped by the lived experiences of individuals within society. In summary, identity is a dynamic and multifaceted concept, influenced by both personal experiences and group affiliations. It can shape our sense of belonging, but also lead to tensions, biases, and divisions between groups.

Key scholars in Malaysian identity politics, such as Shamsul (2001; 2013) and Chua (2007), offer valuable perspectives on the fluid and dynamic nature of Sarawakian identity. Both argue that identity is shaped by a complex interplay of personal experiences and external influences, including state policies and legal definitions.

Shamsul (2001) challenges the idea of a static identity through his analysis of 'Malayness.' He shows that Malayness is constantly redefined by historical, political, and social processes, influenced by state policies and the lived experiences of those who identify with it. This view aligns with the notion that Sarawakian identity, like Malayness, is not fixed. Instead, it evolves based on external factors, such as state-imposed ethnic categories, and internal factors, including culture, personal histories, socioeconomic conditions, and ethnicity. In his later work, Shamsul (2013) conceptualises Malaysia as a 'nation-of-intent,' where diverse ethnic groups and political factions continuously negotiate their visions for the nation. This perspective underscores the evolving nature of Sarawakian identity, which is shaped by ongoing negotiations and renegotiations. While Sarawakians may identify with official ethnic categories, these categories only represent a small part of their broader, more fluid identities.

Chua (2007) further supports this idea by studying the Bidayuh, an indigenous group in Malaysia. She explores how the Bidayuh navigate the country's rigid ethnic classification system, which forces individuals into predefined categories. Despite being categorised under the broader Dayak group, many Bidayuh reject or redefine these labels based on local experiences and personal histories. This process of negotiation mirrors how Sarawakians engage with official ethnic and legal classifications while asserting a more flexible and personal sense of identity. Chua (2007) emphasises the tension between the 'fixity' of these ethnic categories, designed to standardise identity, and the 'flux' of ethnic identity, which evolves through personal, social, and political processes.

Together, the works of Shamsul (1996; 2001; 2013) and Chua (2007) highlight that identity in Malaysia, and by extension, Sarawakian identity, is fluid and shaped by a combination of personal, social, and political factors. The negotiation between state-imposed labels, such as ethnic classifications and legal definitions, and personal identity demonstrates that Sarawakian identity is continuously evolving. Far from being static, it is shaped by lived experiences and broader social, political, and historical forces. The desire among Sarawakians to preserve their unique identity further emphasises the importance of understanding identity as a dynamic, lived process that state-imposed categories cannot fully

capture. These insights will be further explored in our findings. The theories discussed offer important insights into the nature of identity and its diverse configurations. These insights are critical in understanding the complex nature of Sarawakian identity, which is often constrained by limited viewpoints, such as the view that it is a regionalist construct that may threaten national unity (Yii 2016). The theoretical framework in Figure 1 outlines how these theories will be applied to explore the subject under study.

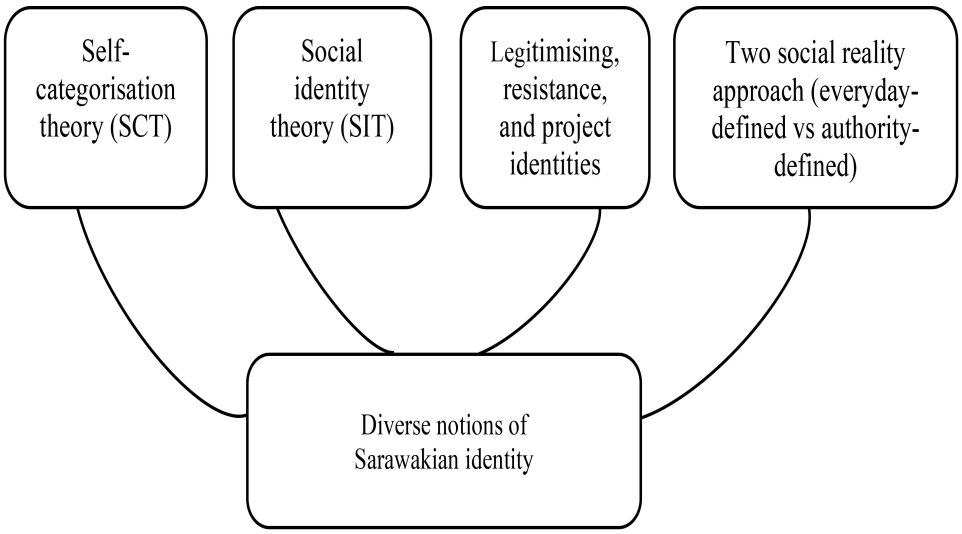

Figure 1: Theoretical framework of the study.

Sarawak Identity: Notions and Constructions

Sarawak, Malaysia's largest state, spans 124,450 km² (48,342 mi²) on northwest Borneo. It borders Sabah, Brunei, and Kalimantan (see Figure 2). With a population of around 2.8 million, it is home to diverse ethnic groups, including Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, and various Indigenous groups like Kayan, Kenyah, Lun Bawang, and Penan (see Table 1).

Figure 2: Map of Sarawak.

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts Sarawak (n.d.)

Table 1: Population by ethnic groups in Sarawak, 2020[P]

Ethnic group	Total	
	N	%
Malay	655,500	23.3
Iban	812,600	28.8
Melanau	142,600	5.1
Bidayuh	223,200	7.9
Other Indigenous	179,200	6.4
Chinese	627,800	22.3
Indians	7,700	0.3
Others	8,300	0.3
Non-Malaysians	159,500	5.7
Total	2,816,500	100.1

Notes: [P] Projected; Total percentage exceeds 100 due to rounding off

Source: The Official Portal of Sarawak Data (n.d.)

Studies show that Sarawakian identities are closely tied to ethnicity, dialect, and place of origin (Ting and Jerome 2017). For the Malay, Bidayuh, and Chinese, ethnic identity is defined by descent, language, and food. The Iban and Bidayuh associate their identity with ancestral homegrounds, but differ in key aspects: Iban value rituals, crafts, and tattoos, while Bidayuh emphasise traditional costumes, and Malays view Islam as central to their identity. Indeed, this is accurate because, as Sarawakians, many people in Sarawak tend to adjust how they identify themselves based on the parameters of the question and the person asking it. If a Sarawak Malay person were to ask a fellow Sarawakian of the Bidayuh ethnicity, *Kitak orang apa*? and *Kitak dari sinei*?, the latter would probably answer *Kamek orang Bidayuh* and *Kamek dari Serian*. If a fellow West Malaysian were to ask a Sarawakian: *Awak orang apa*? or *Awak orang mana/dari mana*? He/she would probably answer: *Saya orang Sarawak/Saya dari Sarawak*. Some Sarawakians would even provide more specific answers by mentioning their current place of residence/place of origin, such as *Saya orang Sibu/Saya dari Sibu*.

The above-mentioned parameters of self-identification have been used extensively by many Sarawakians for a long time, and continue to be used today. Various explanations exist to account for this. For example, local wisdom and colonial knowledge play a central role in the formation of identities among Sarawakians (Jehom 1999). Concerning local wisdom, Sarawakians, especially those residing in the interior, establish their identity through the designation of a location, river, mountain, or the title of a local leader (Jehom 1999). For example, the Ibans of Sarawak often identify themselves based on geographical locations, such as *kami Skrang* (we of the Skrang river) or *kami menoa* (we of this area) (Walker 2002). The Malays in Sarawak would mainly identify with their geographical communities, for instance, using the term *orang Saribas* to refer to the people from the Saribas River area (Milner 2008). When it comes to colonial knowledge, administrators during the era of Brooke Rule (1841–1941) widely employed ethnic labels to distinguish and differentiate between various ethnic groups in Sarawak (Jehom 1999). This left a deep impact on the minds of the people, to the extent that ethnic identity remains crucial for self-recognition and the acknowledgement of one's sense of ethnic belonging (Jehom 1999). Despite ethnicity being heavily emphasised for identification, many studies have found a notable agreement among the people of Sarawak to identify themselves using the same term (i.e., Sarawakian) and/or the same identity label (i.e., Sarawak identity) (Muzaini 2017).

Sarawakian identity is also shaped by the common language used for inter-ethnic communication among Sarawakians. Scholars like Ting (2001) argue that indigenous groups in Sarawak typically avoid standard Malay, Malaysia's official language, when interacting with Malays or other indigenous Sarawakians. Instead, they use the Sarawak Malay dialect, which reflects a distinct Sarawakian

identity, setting it apart from the standard Malay associated with West Malaysia (Ting 2001). This preference for Sarawak Malay is shared across various groups, including the Iban (Metom, Ting and Ling 2021a; 2021b; Ting, Tinggang and Metom 2021), Kejaman (Joan and Ting 2021), Bidayuh, and Melanau (Ting and Berek 2021).

Lian (2018) further emphasises that Sarawakians also share common cultural symbols that unite them and embody their identity. These include images of the hornbill, Kuching cats, Dayak people in traditional attire, the Sarawak map and flag, and wildlife such as orangutans and the Rafflesia flower. Natural landmarks like rugged mountains and the Rejang River also contribute to this identity. Additionally, terms like '*orang asal*' (referring to indigenous people) and '*anak-anak Sarawak*' (children of Sarawak) are commonly used to represent Sarawakian identity (Lian 2018).

While these elements are key to understanding Sarawakian identity, it is more complex than it might seem. As noted earlier, Sarawakian identity is not just a label for a group of people from a specific region. It situates Sarawakians within both local and broader social contexts, shaped by their unique conditions and circumstances. Beyond serving as a way for Sarawakians to identify as members of a particular group in East Malaysia, their identity is also crucial to how they relate to others both within Malaysia and globally.

Therefore, we highlight three key issues and challenges that are economic, sociocultural, and political in nature, which not only shape the current understanding and constructions of Sarawakian identity, but also play a critical role in the formation of a Sarawakian consciousness among present-day Sarawakians.

First, Sarawak/ian identity has often been put at the centre stage of the state government's ongoing efforts to push for greater autonomy via amendments to the Malaysia Agreement (MA63) (Chin 2021). Such efforts, as the Sarawak Premier, Tan Sri Abang Johari Tun Openg, maintains, not only serve the state's interest in regaining its rights under the agreement that has eroded over the years, but also further strengthen the identity of Sarawakians as part of the larger Malaysian society (Bong 2021). This degree of autonomy is needed to bolster the existing power under the state constitution that Sarawak has to make decisions tailored to the state's situation. The Premier of Sarawak further maintains that the Malaysian Family approach can see the differences and plan development policies that are appropriate to the situation in Sarawak and Sabah so that these regions can develop faster in following the footsteps of the Peninsula: "Like in a family, each member of the family has differences in terms of characters and requires different treatment. As the head of the Sarawak government, I see that the approach should be different to elevate

the economic status of Sarawak as the economic fundamentals of Sarawak are different from that in Peninsula" (Bong 2021). Heedfully, "the ability to make decisions for the interest of Sarawak should reflect the identity of Sarawakians in determining their own future so that the state can be on par with other states or countries that are already ahead" (*The Borneo Post* 2021). This is clear from the state government's various efforts to improve the socioeconomic situation of its residents, including creating a state-owned digital pass called the Sarawakpass. This online platform serves as a reliable digital identity for Sarawakians, providing easy access to a wide range of public and private services, including the eagerly awaited Autonomous Rapid Transit (ART) system (Bong and Pilo 2023). The imposition on non-Sarawakians to use a passport when they travel into and out of Sarawak also reinforces the Sarawak identity. The state government is committed to further developing the Sarawak identity, as evidenced by the recent establishment of the Pehin Sri Adenan Satem Research Chair at the Universiti Putra Malaysia Sarawak Campus in Bintulu. Datuk Pattingi Tan Sri Abang Johari Tun Openg believes that this initiative can generate more research to bring to light the richness of Sarawak's cultural diversity and strengthen Sarawakian identity (Lim and Chua 2021).

Second, the Sarawak Premier is not the only one in this regard; other leaders, each in their unique ways, share a similar sentiment. The public also resonates with the idea of greater autonomy and a stronger sense of Sarawakian identity. Indeed, there is a growing demand for the recognition of locally based identities among Sarawakians, marked by their affiliation with the state/region of Sarawak. Findings from a study by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute exemplify this, revealing that 63% of respondents (aged 21 and above who resided in Sarawak) identified themselves as Sarawakians first, while 25% identified themselves as Malaysian citizens first (Lee 2018). This was largely influenced by respondents' views and support for greater state autonomy, especially in economic development, natural resource exploitation, and education (Lee 2018).

Third, the respondents' strong feeling of Sarawakian first is not unfounded. Numerous individuals from Sarawak's local organisations and grassroots movements strongly feel that the state has not been granted the complete autonomy and advantages that were assured through the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63). These sentiments of being treated unfairly and overlooked have contributed to the increasing rise of 'Sarawak for Sarawakian' feelings among them. As a consequence, there is a growing demand for secession and, ultimately, complete independence for the state. Foremost among these organisations and movements is the Sarawak for Sarawakians (S4S), a pro-autonomy advocacy coalition dedicated to advocating for the state's sovereignty (Ngu 2018). Since its inception in 2013, S4S has been actively engaged in organising rallies to ensure that the voices of Sarawakians, particularly their demand for the restoration of the state's oil and gas rights, are strongly conveyed (*Dayak Daily* 2018; Chin 2019).

These rallies, often referred to as 'Sarexit' (Sarawak Exit) show clear signs that many Sarawakians want to leave due to their disappointment of how 'Malaya continues to treat them as step-children' (Siah 2019) and the logical choice is for Sarawak to separate from the Federal Government and Malaysia if there is no reason to endure a painful, distrustful, and miserable 'relationship' (Siah 2019). Conducting a referendum in Sarawak is the most effective method for demonstrating whether the prevailing sentiment among Sarawakians is accurate or not (Siah 2019), and this has been realised by the Sarawak Association of People's Aspiration (SAPA) and Sabah Sarawak Rights Australia New Zealand (SSRANZ) (*Dayak Daily* 2021) in their open memorandum to the Sarawak government. This memorandum urges the state government, under the administration of Tan Sri Abang Johari Tun Openg, to consult Sarawakians, including political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community groups. It is about negotiating a Referendum on Sarawak Independence within a specified time frame, grounded in legal, constitutional, political, and socioeconomic reasons under UN Resolution 1514 (*Dayak Daily* 2021).

While the earlier arguments highlight how Sarawakian identity plays a central role in the pursuit of increased autonomy, it is essential to recognise the potential diversity of perspectives on this matter. Not all Sarawakians might share the same view; some might believe that progress has been made and that steps are being taken to address their apprehensions. Individuals outside the state believe the strong state nationalist-regionalist sentiments might divide all Malaysians and lead to regional discrimination, which could slow down the progress of the new Malaysia (*The Borneo Post* 2018). For a more comprehensive grasp of the subject, is important to refer to various sources such as news articles, opinion pieces, official statements from federal and state governments, as well as declarations from Sarawakian leaders and citizens.

METHODOLOGY

This article presents a study from a larger research project that examines how popular music from Sarawak's indigenous ethnic communities contributes to shaping a shared identity and fostering group cohesion, which may differ from Malaysia's mainstream national identity. However, the primary focus of this article is on the open-ended responses from a survey, where participants shared their views on the meaning of Sarawakian and Sarawakian identity.

A total of 311 participants participated in the survey (see Table 2). The largest group of respondents was from Kuching (30.2%), followed by Kapit (18%), Limbang (9.9%), and Sarikei (9%). In terms of age, the top three age groups were 20–24 years (20.2%), 25–29 years (20.9%), and 30–34 years (25.4%). The gender

distribution showed that 54.3% of respondents were male and 45.6% were female. Most participants identified as Iban (54.3%) and practiced Christianity (81.6%). Regarding education, a significant portion (37.9%) held a bachelor's degree.

Table 2: Participants' demographic information

Item	Category	Frequency (N = 311)	%
Age (years old)	15–19	22	7.0
	20–24	63	20.2
	25–29	65	20.9
	30–34	79	25.4
	35–39	28	9.0
	40–44	21	6.7
	45–49	14	4.5
	50–54	9	2.8
	55–59	5	1.6
	60–64	5	1.6
Gender	Male	169	54.3
	Female	142	45.6
Ethnicity	Malay	24	7.7
	Chinese	26	8.3
	Indian	1	0.3
	Iban	169	54.3
	Melanau	15	4.8
	Bidayuh	41	13.1
	Kenyah	5	1.6
	Kayan	10	3.2
	Kelabit	5	1.6
	Lun Bawang	3	0.9
	Bisayah	5	1.6
	Penan	1	0.3
	Others	6	1.9

(*Continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*Continued*)

Item	Category	Frequency (N = 311)	%
Religion	Islam	41	13.1
	Christian	254	81.6
	Hinduism	1	0.3
	Buddhism	10	3.2
	Traditional Chinese religions	2	0.6
	No religion	3	0.9
Place of birth	Kuching	94	30.2
	Samarahan	14	4.5
	Serian	9	2.8
	Sri Aman	10	3.2
	Betong	25	8.0
	Sarikei	28	9.0
	Sibu	7	2.2
	Mukah	20	6.4
	Bintulu	9	2.8
	Kapit	56	18.0
	Miri	8	2.5
	Limbang	31	9.9
Educational background	Primary education	6	1.9
	Secondary education	56	18
	Vocational education	14	4.5
	Diploma	79	25.4
	Undergraduate	118	37.9
	Postgraduate	32	10.2
	Others	6	1.9

(*Continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*Continued*)

Item	Category	Frequency (N = 311)	%
Employment	Employed	188	60.4
	Self-employed	36	11.5
	Unemployed	25	8.0
	Student	62	19.9

Data for the study were collected using a self-administered questionnaire, distributed to participants through purposive sampling. The initial participants were recruited by the research team through personal contact, followed by invitations sent by phone, email, text message, and social media. To ensure the questionnaire's validity and reliability, a pilot test was conducted. Validity was established by using established measures and scales from prior research by scholars such as Boer (2009), Tan and Rickard (2012), and Herrera, Soares-Quadros and Lorenzo (2018). Reliability was assessed through the test-retest method, where the questionnaire was administered to a sample of participants on separate occasions before the main survey to ensure consistency. The pilot testing allowed for refinement of the questionnaire before its wider distribution. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university's research ethics committee.

The survey was conducted in Malay and English via Google Forms in the first quarter of 2022, during the transition from the COVID-19 pandemic to its endemic phase. The online format was chosen for its convenience and cost-effectiveness, particularly given the pandemic restrictions (Singh and Sagar 2021).

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2014) framework, was used to identify key themes in the data. Data cleaning was performed to remove blank or incomplete responses. After cleaning, 282 responses for the question on Sarawakian and 276 responses for Sarawakian identity were retained. These responses totalled 2,264 and 2,208 words, respectively, with an average of eight words per response. All personally identifiable information was removed from the transcripts.

The analysis began with immersion in the data, reading the full responses multiple times. Statements related to Sarawakian and Sarawakian identity were identified and coded. These codes were grouped into overarching categories based on common themes, which were further refined to develop final thematic patterns (see Figure 3).

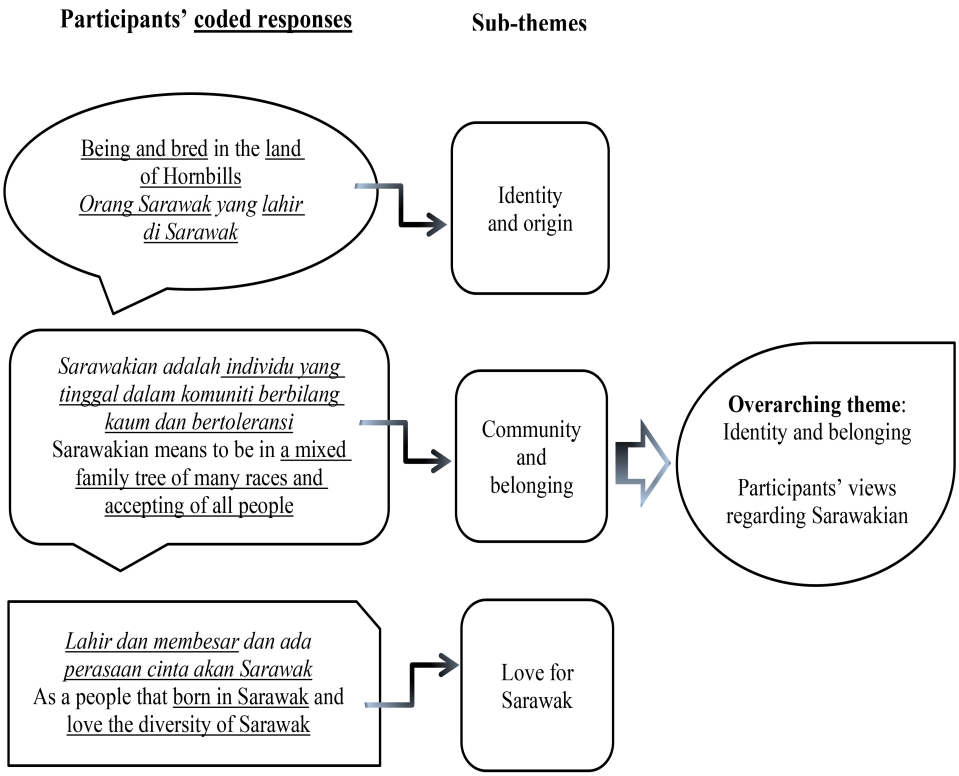

Figure 3: Sample thematic analysis of participants' views regarding Sarawakian.

Both researchers reviewed and discussed these emerging themes until they were deemed to accurately represent the data. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, the themes were subject to ongoing discussion, review, and refinement by both researchers at each stage of the analysis to establish consensus and enhance reliability (Nowell et al. 2017; Korstjens and Moser 2018).

RESULTS

Our analysis revealed 13 themes. Specifically, three themes emerged from participants' thoughts on the term Sarawakian, while 10 themes surfaced from their perspectives on Sarawakian identity, as illustrated in Figure 4.

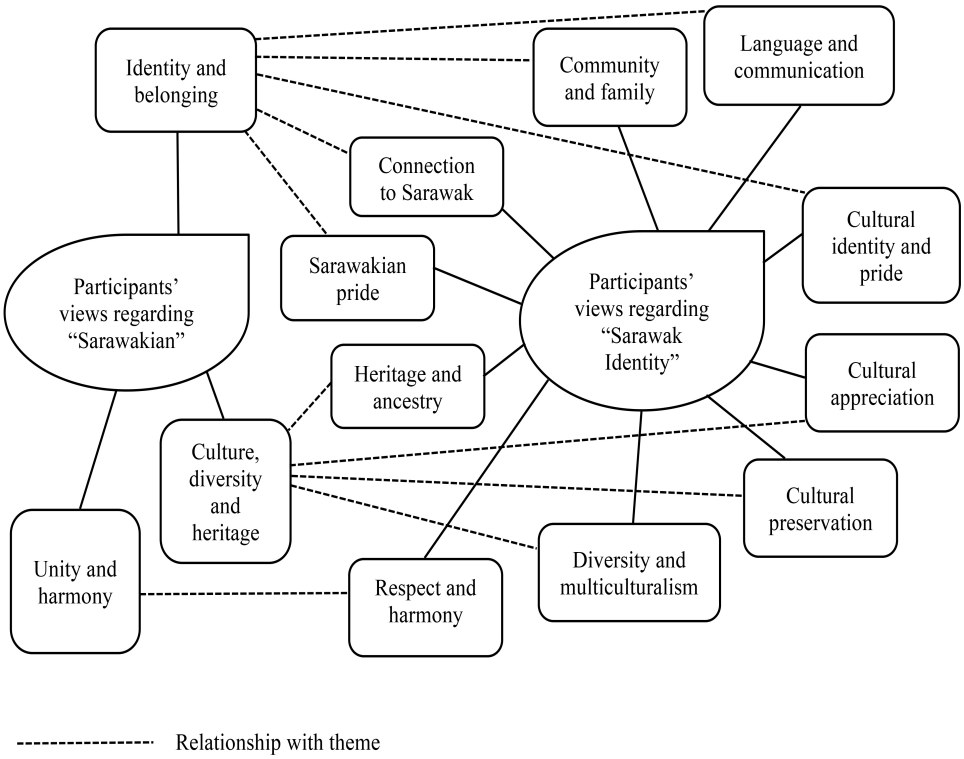

Figure 4: Themes derived from analysis of participants' views regarding Sarawakian and Sarawakian identity.

The themes provide a glimpse into the various perspectives Sarawakians have on their sense of identity. These themes touch upon fundamental aspects of what it means to be Sarawakian, encompassing cultural identity, pride, diversity, connection to the land, and sociopolitical factors. Together, they form a tapestry that shapes how Sarawakians view themselves, both individually and collectively.

Participants' Perspectives on Sarawakian

Identity and belonging

The prevailing perspective among the 311 participants indicated that the term Sarawakian primarily denoted the participants' sense of identity and heritage. It encompassed not only those who were born in Sarawak but also individuals with Sarawakian lineage or parents from Sarawak. This is illustrated by the following excerpts:

> The term Sarawakian also signified the participants' profound bond with Sarawak as their place of origin and their strong identification with the state's customs and values. This was articulated by the following participant: *Penduduk asal Sarawak dan memegang asas kepada budaya dan adat asal penduduk peribumi Sarawak.* (Translation: The indigenous population of Sarawak, who uphold the foundations of the culture and customs of the native Sarawakian people).

Moreover, the participants perceived the term Sarawakian as representing their feeling of being a part of the Sarawak community and their deep connection to the land, its people, and its culture. Their profound sense of affiliation is evident in the way they stay connected to their hometowns or villages and enthusiastically participate in local festivals, as articulated by the following participant: "Sarawakians love to go back to hometown/village to celebrate their festival".

This strong sense of connection was additionally bolstered by how the participants perceived the term Sarawakian as a reflection of their profound affection for the state and their unwavering attachment to its culture and traditions. They proudly label themselves as Sarawakians, expressing their pride in calling Sarawak their home, as demonstrated in the following excerpt: "Sarawakian are people who are proud to call Sarawak as their home".

Unity and harmony

Another dominant viewpoint revealed in the survey highlighted that the term Sarawakian underscored the unity of individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs living in peaceful coexistence. In essence, the term embodies their capacity to embrace and respect diverse races and cultures, as well as their pride in the state's cultural diversity and ethnic richness. The following excerpt exemplified this: "*Masyarakat yang terdiri daripada pelbagai suku kaum tetapi dapat hidup harmoni dan bersatu padu*".

Furthermore, the term was frequently employed to describe Sarawakians recognised for their respect and tolerance towards individuals from diverse backgrounds, along with their ability to understand and embrace various ethnicities, languages, and traditions. As articulated by one participant:

> *Sarawakian bermaksud orang yang lahir di Sarawak, bertutur bahasa Sarawak, dan mengamalkan cara hidup orang Sarawak yang terbuka dan bertoleransi tinggi antara satu etnik dengan etnik yang lain.* (Translation: Sarawakian means a person who was born in Sarawak, speaks Sarawakian languages, and practices the open and highly tolerant way of life among different ethnic groups in Sarawak).

Some participants regarded the term Sarawakian as emphasising the significance of communal harmony, even in the face of differences in race, customs, and languages. The term symbolises the unity of Sarawak's residents as they peacefully coexist and take pride in celebrating their diversity. As one participant aptly stated: "Sarawakians means various ethnic groups come together as a community, which creates a diverse background which is special and not found elsewhere".

Culture, diversity and heritage

Another prominent perspective highlighted by the survey was that the term Sarawakian encompasses a vibrant cultural heritage, including traditional attire, languages, music, and indigenous customs. The songs that bring out the Sarawakian identity include *Bekikis Bulu Betis*, *Aram Begawai*, *Kumang Sarawak*, and *Ngetan Bubu Ridan* (Jerome et al. 2023). To the participants, this term represents the preservation and reverence of Sarawak's distinctive cultural elements. This is demonstrated in how Sarawakians cherish their diverse festivals and traditions and remain dedicated to upholding these customs, as voiced by the following participant: "The understanding and respect for the diversity of the multi culture and religion among The People of Sarawak". Furthermore, the term is frequently linked to symbols such as the state's national symbol, the hornbill, the state anthem, musical instruments used by various ethnic groups, tribal arts, and traditional practices.

Participants' Views Regarding Sarawakian Identity

A widely held perspective among the respondents was that Sarawakian identity represents their cultural identity and a source of pride (Theme 1). They conveyed a profound sense of pride in their Sarawakian identity and frequently referred to their ethnic backgrounds, such as Iban, Bidayuh, or Kayan, and how these identities influenced their lives. This is evident in the following excerpt: "*Saya bangsa Iban dan sewajarnya mempertahankan hak-hak sebagai orang Sarawak*" (Translation: I am Iban by ethnicity, and I should rightfully uphold the rights as a Sarawakian).

Additionally, the term Sarawakian identity epitomised the participants' dedication to both cultural preservation (Theme 2) and cultural appreciation (Theme 3) through diverse activities, including wearing traditional attire, actively engaging in cultural festivals, upholding traditional customs, and showing admiration for Sarawak's cultural elements, such as its music, traditional dress, and cuisine. This is exemplified in the following excerpt:

> *Saya akan memakai pakaian bercorak etnik Iban seperti pua kumbu apabila menghadiri sesuatu majlis kerana saya adalah orang Iban.* (Translation: I will wear traditional Iban-patterned clothing, such as *pua kumbu*, when attending an event because I am an Iban).

Moreover, some participants characterised the term Sarawak identity as a reflection of their heritage and ancestry (Theme 4), specifically emphasising their family's enduring ties to Sarawak. Additionally, other participants emphasised the role of community and family (Theme 5) in shaping their sense of Sarawak's identity. Some even cited mixed marriages and the distinctiveness of their heritage as factors that influenced their Sarawakian identity, as illustrated in this extract:

> *Saya Sarawakian yang berdarah kacuk kayan, cina dan iban tetapi bermuka melayu dan fasih berbahasa native.* (Translation: I am a Sarawakian of mixed Kayan, Chinese, and Iban heritage, but I have a Malay appearance and am fluent in the native language).

Furthermore, several participants asserted that language and communication (Theme 6) were instrumental in shaping their Sarawak identity. Numerous participants highlighted that Sarawakian identity could be characterised by their proficiency in speaking the Sarawakian language, as elucidated by the following participant: "I was born and raised in Sarawak for 22 years ongoing, and is capable of speaking multi-languages that can only be found in Sarawak".

However, others noted that their ability to communicate with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds in Sarawak, using various languages, was significant in expressing their Sarawakian identity. This is exemplified in the following excerpt: "*Dapat menggunakan bahasa etnik-etnik lain untuk berkomunikasi dengan rakan-rakan yang berlainan kaum*" (Translation: I can use the languages of different ethnic groups to communicate with friends from different ethnic backgrounds).

Another prevalent perspective revealed in the survey linked Sarawak identity with diversity and multiculturalism (Theme 7). Participants mentioned their ability to engage with individuals from various backgrounds and appreciate diverse cultures. They also noted that through this identity, they celebrated the multicultural essence of their society, emphasising the harmony among different ethnic groups, as expressed by one participant: "To show the world that we are diverse in ethnicities and to show them the uniqueness of us Sarawakian".

Similarly, numerous participants defined Sarawakian identity in terms of respect and harmony (Theme 8), taking pride in their capacity to respect and coexist harmoniously with people of diverse backgrounds. Moreover, participants defined Sarawak identity as Sarawakian pride (Theme 9), highlighting a shared

sense of pride in being Sarawakian that transcends ethnic or racial backgrounds. Some even mentioned their active involvement in promoting Sarawak and advocating for their rights as Sarawakians, as noted by one participant: "Proud to be born in Sarawak and will fight for my rights as a Sarawakian".

Finally, the connection to Sarawak (Theme 10) through participants' birth and upbringing in Sarawak was identified as a fundamental aspect of their Sarawakian identity. Many expressed their love for the state, its culture, traditions, and natural beauty, as demonstrated by the following participant: "I was born in Sarawak and love Sarawak culture".

DISCUSSION

Our analysis uncovered several overarching themes that reflected participants' viewpoints on the notions of Sarawakian and Sarawakian identity. These encompassing themes included identity and a sense of belonging; culture, diversity, and heritage; unity and harmony; community and family; and language and communication. While we initially sorted these themes for analytical purposes, we soon realised they were interconnected. This interconnectedness was particularly evident when participants discussed the term Sarawakian, consistently associating it with the concept of Sarawakian identity.

The findings of this study indicate that the participants' perceptions of their Sarawakian identity align with the principles of both the self-categorisation theory and the social identity theory. In essence, Sarawakian identity is predominantly a social identity constructed and expressed by the participants within the specific social context to which they belong. This identity becomes especially pronounced when the participants discuss their status as Sarawakians in relation to other Sarawakians residing in the state. Furthermore, for the participants, Sarawakian identity serves as a collective identity formed through a strong sense of group affiliation influenced by factors such as within-group assimilation (e.g., we embrace diversity in ethnicities, we truly embody multiculturalism) and a positive evaluation of one's ingroup relative to out-groups (e.g., we possess a unique identity).

It is not surprising to find that some participants perceive their Sarawakian identity as a form of collective-resistance identity, a concept articulated by Castells. This identity emerges among those who occupy devalued or stigmatised positions within larger social institutions. As one participant put it: "*Orang Sarawak secara tradisinya menolak konfrontsi dan polarisasi politik*" (Translation: Sarawakians traditionally reject political confrontation and polarisation). Although this statement lacks further elaboration or specific context, we can infer that, in the participant's view, Sarawakians resist any

political manoeuvres, whether external or internal to the state, that could potentially divide or discriminate against them. The diversity of perspectives among our participants on the definitions of Sarawakian and Sarawakian identity resonates with Shamsul's (1996; 2001; 2013) and Chua's (2007) contentions about identity construction in the Malaysian context. Being a Sarawakian is not solely defined by official criteria, such as being born in Sarawak or having parents born in the state. It also encompasses everyday notions, which we will delve into shortly. Moreover, being a Sarawakian is not simply a matter of being under the umbrella of Sarawakian due to geographical residence or adopting the term as locals do, as Muzaini (2017) suggested. To our study participants, it holds a much deeper significance.

Firstly, both local traditions and colonial legacies continue to influence how participants define their Sarawakian identity. They often refer to themselves as *orang Sarawak* or *rakyat Sarawak* (people of Sarawak) and, on occasion, identify with their specific ethnicities (*saya Iban*, an Iban, *saya berbangsa Iban*, *etnik Iban*). Secondly, language remains a significant factor in shaping participants' Sarawakian identity. It extends beyond the ability to speak the Sarawak Malay dialect, as highlighted by Ting and Berek (2021). Various dialects also play a role, as one participant explained: "For me, it's the language. Speaking both Iban and Kayan, that defines my Sarawakian identity". Thirdly, cultural symbols and imagery continue to mould how participants perceive themselves as Sarawakians. While they acknowledge the cultural symbols and images mentioned by Wan Sageng et al. (2024), they also provide additional examples, including local cuisine such as *Sarawak Laksa*, *Kolo Mee Merah*, *Sio Bie*, *Kuih Lapis*; local eateries like the Open Air Market; local festivals like Gawai; traditional dances such as *Tarian Ngajat*; and the Sarawak anthem *Ibu Pertiwiku*. Participants employ various terms for collective identification, such as *rakyat Sarawak*, *anak jati Sarawak*, *warganegeri Sarawak*, Sarawak origin, True Sarawak People, and People of Hornbill Land. Some even emphasise the unique number 13 and the letter K on their Sarawak identification cards.

Lastly, it is noteworthy that while participants shared their views on what the terms Sarawakian and Sarawakian identity meant to them, some responses resonate with current issues and challenges facing Sarawakians in their pursuit of greater autonomy within the state. For instance, the phrase *Sarawak untuk Sarawak* (Sarawak for Sarawak) was mentioned by three respondents when asked to explain their perception of Sarawakian. Other responses included *Sarawak adalah untuk orang Sarawak* (Sarawak belongs to Sarawakians), *orang Sarawak sahaja punya Sarawak* (Sarawak belongs solely to Sarawakians), and *Sarawakian bermaksud Sarawak persendirian* (Sarawakian means Sarawak independence). Some participants even expressed their readiness to fight for their identity and rights, as illustrated by the following statements:

> *Sarawakian bermaksud adup samah adup. Kita hidup di negeri Sarawak harus hidup harmoni walaupun kita berbilang bangsa, adat dan budaya yg berbeza kita tetap dpt hidup dlm komuniti yg harmoni. Apapun yg berlaku, kita mesti mempertahankan hak dan kebersamaan semua kaum.* (Translation: Sarawakian means 'adup samah adup', which translates to live together, live in harmony. Living in the state of Sarawak, we must coexist harmoniously despite our different ethnicities, customs, and cultures. Whatever happens, we must uphold the rights and unity of all communities).

While the participants did not provide a detailed explanation of the term *hak* or rights, it is reasonable to assume that this refers to the rights of Sarawakians and the state of Sarawak as outlined in the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63). At least one participant defined the concept of Sarawakian identity with the phrase '*serah kepada awak*' (hand it over to you), which we interpret as a wordplay or a creative twist on the term Sarawak. Some participants even took it a step further by using the term '*negara*' or 'country' when describing their sense of Sarawakian identity.''

It is also safe to say that the participants in the study shared the same sentiments as their fellow Sarawakians, who have historically and continue to advocate for their rights through the Sarawak for Sarawakian movements. The analysis suggests that Sarawakians offer diverse interpretations of the terms Sarawakian and Sarawak identity, rather than merely adopting them as superficial labels for identification. It underscores the potential diversity in Sarawakians' perspectives on the current issue regarding the significance of 'Sarawakianness' in the efforts led by the state government, local organisations, and grassroots movements to attain greater autonomy as stipulated in MA63. While many Sarawakians in our study associate their Sarawakianness with a sense of identity and belonging, a deep love for and pride in their home state, some also express Sarawak-for-Sarawakian sentiments that echo those of the state government, local organisations, and grassroots movements. Instead of simplifying this as nothing more than a regionalist or nationalist sentiment that might divide Malaysians and lead to regional discrimination, further exploration is needed to understand their feelings and the vision they hold for Sarawak and Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

The study on how Sarawakians define and perceive the terms Sarawakian and Sarawakian identity has revealed distinct themes: Sarawakians were often associated with elements of culture, diversity, and heritage, while Sarawakian identity was frequently tied to cultural identity, pride, and a profound connection to Sarawak itself.

Our study has several limitations. Firstly, we relied primarily on participants' responses to open-ended questions asking for their interpretations of Sarawakian and Sarawak identity. While this approach provided valuable insights, the open-ended format has inherent limitations, including the potential for ambiguous responses. Future research could address this by using alternative methods, such as interviews and group discussions, to gather more in-depth data. Additionally, while our questions were broad, future studies could incorporate more specific prompts to further explore participants' views and elicit richer responses.

Our main analytical tool was thematic analysis. However, future research could consider complementary approaches such as sentiment analysis to examine the emotional dimensions of participants' responses. This may offer deeper insights into the nature of collective identity, particularly in understanding whether it is oriented more towards legitimation, resistance, or projection.

Despite these limitations, our study provides important insights into the complex nature of Sarawakian identity, which is often constrained by narrow viewpoints. For instance, some perspectives reduce Sarawakian identity to a mere regional construct, overlooking its deeper significance for Sarawakians. These views fail to acknowledge how Sarawakian identity shapes collective identity, fosters relationships, and drives a commitment to preservation. This is particularly important given recent political developments, where tensions related to race, religion, and Sarawak's autonomy within the national framework are at the forefront.

As a final takeaway, the results presented here offer just a glimpse into the diverse perspectives on Sarawakian identity among those surveyed. While we used images and expressions to capture respondents' sense of shared identity, it is important to recognise that these may carry deeper meanings and functions that our study could not fully explore due to the limitations of our survey questions. We acknowledge this gap and encourage future research to dig deeper into these complexities. Sarawakian identity—what we refer to as Sarawakianness—is far more intricate than it may initially seem. Additionally, while our data touched on concerns related to Sarawakian identity, such as the potential impact of 'outsiders' on the region's peace and harmony, we were unable to address the full spectrum of issues and concerns surrounding this identity. We urge future researchers to further investigate these dynamics and the underlying factors shaping Sarawakian identity. We hope our study serves as a starting point for more comprehensive research in this important and evolving field.

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