

UNDERSTANDING THE INDIGENOUS MINDSETS IN MALAYSIA: A FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

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ABSTRACT

Much research was conducted in many parts of the world to help the indigenous community, either to increase their well-being, to maintain their cultural richness, to introduce entrepreneurial minds to the community, etc. Different approaches were used to understand the community. In some cases, the indigenous community received a continuous influx from groups of researchers into their community, with the aim to further upgrade their well-being, but the outcome of the research is minimal. The question that arises is what causes the inconsistencies between the efforts and the result; is there an unexplored and unearthed fissure that could be suggested and implemented? Should there be a more comprehensive sequential studies that could enlighten researchers about the community? A comprehensive and inclusive studies need to be carried out to scrutinize every possible angle to identify the underpinning reasons. This paper aims to conduct a fundamental study on the indigenous community and to outline future research agenda and directions based on the elementary findings through a 2-phase study: Phase 1- a phenomenology study on the indigenous communities to understand the fundamental mindsets and what welfare means to them. Phase 2- to examine the life satisfaction scale towards the living conditions of the indigenous community.

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All these phases are hoped to provide a better idea to governmental bodies or agencies on how to support the indigenous leading them to accept the initiatives offered to them. This study provides some fundamental findings on the indigenous community and the living conditions. Recommendations on how to further enhance the understanding of the indigenous community were also proposed.

Keywords: indigenous, mindsets, satisfaction, welfare, wellbeing, voluntaristic

INTRODUCTION

Since independence, the Malaysian government has embarked on many inclusive programs and strategies in their efforts to develop the indigenous communities regarding mindset changes—education, economics, welfare, health, etc. There are two classifications of these developments: public development, which impacts on the community; and planned development targeted for the community (Mohd Asri, 2012).

The government of Malaysia, in its Tenth Malaysia Plan, has outlined adequate measures, integrated development programs and specific enhancement supports to address the high incidence of poverty and health situations among the indigenous. These steps and programs are intended to motivate and stimulate the welfares and economies of the poor. In the Tenth Malaysia Plan, the government has also put forward her plans to provide assistance to the indigenous people to upgrade their economic status and poverty levels; in the forms of training and funding (Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2010).

Different approaches were used to understand the community. In some cases, the indigenous community received a continuous influx from groups of researchers into their community, with the aim to action and further upgrade their well-being, but the outcome of the research are minimal. In many instances, research findings from large-scale scientific studies are often misapplied, with negative results, when generalized and applied in communities with unique features, contours and needs could cause further issues to the community (Nelson-Barber & Johnson, 2016). With the many efforts from the research and academic community, it is necessary to find a link that enables researchers and academics to understand the community better.

The main thrust of this paper is to conduct a fundamental study on the indigenous community and to outline future research agenda and directions based on the elementary findings.

In many instances, some people are willing to accept change, and some prefers the status quo. In this paper, the targets are the entire community, ranging from individuals who are willing or unwilling to accept changes (what are behind their mentality and mindsets). Through a

proper systematic approach (sequential phases) to understand the community, it is hoped that the fundamental findings in this paper will shed more understanding on the sensitiveness of the indigenous community for future research agenda. In other words, how to change the mindsets of the community—why and under what conditions these voluntaristic mindset changes might take place.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The indigenous communities in Malaysia settle in the rural areas in West Malaysia; most of them stay along the major Malaysian rivers; whereby accessibility are through few hours of driving either 4-wheel drives or through river transportation. In Sarawak, the two biggest ethnic groups within the Dayak community are the Iban (also known as Sea Dayaks), who constitute just over 31 percent of the population, and the Bidayuh; others include the Kenyah, Kayan, Kedayan, Murut, Punan, Bisayah, Kelabit, Berawan, and Penan. Dayaks who live in the interior of Sarawak are the Orang Ulu or people from the interior. Members of this group typically live in longhouses and practice shifting cultivation; they engage in fishing to supplement their diet if they live near a river. Only a few hundred of the Eastern Penan continue to live as a nomadic people of the rainforest. While in Sabah, some of the largest minorities are the Kadazan-Dusun (about 25%), Bajau (15%), and Murut (3%). These are in fact broad categories, with for example 13 primary languages spoken within the Kadazan-Dusun grouping. About 500,000 people speak languages from four indigenous language families: Bajau, Dusunic, Murutic or Paitanic. Less than 10 percent are ethnic Malays.

Though there are some indigenous staying in the rural areas, some of them have also shifted to the town area. Those that are living near to the cities, their living conditions are still relatively lower than the other ethnics in Malaysia. Many measures and programs were implemented since independence to help the indigenous, but the success rate for certain indigenous communities were minimal, especially in the rural areas, whereby accessibility to the community are difficult and inconvenient. The important question that many would ask are—are these programs and supports beyond the acceptance levels of this community, rendering to its discrepancies and failure of the programs and supports? What constitutes acceptance among these communities that could further enhance the acceptance of these programs and supports? Could there be an influence of voluntarism power among the community that empowers the community to uphold further and increase their welfare and economies?

According to Popova (2014), it is crucial that initiatives and plans to bring the indigenous out of poverty and better living conditions can be done only through their specificities of social, economic, and political settings where they live. Hence, this requires participatory approaches to integrating better the aspirations of the indigenous, of whom are the focus of much economic development or poverty alleviation initiatives. There are, however, strong reservations within academia, researchers, and indigenous communities on the overall worth between the flawed and culturally suspect of much earlier investigations and analyses on indigenous' developments (Cuervo, Barakat & Turnbull, 2015). The paucity of research on the indigenous issues in Malaysia and to understand how the indigenous communities could take a bold step forward is timely, nationally and internationally significant to map a fundamental research landscape and paradigm.

According to Panda & Khuntia (2015) and Popova (2014), lacking mechanisms that can help reinterpreting indigenous' views and practices into what is beneficial to both the indigenous and the government in policy and planning are puzzling many modern societies. Bird et al (2013) support their views, who state that cultural knowledge between the indigenous and the mainstream community is crucial in understanding the developments of the indigenous communities. The rationales to study indigenous are in line with the grievances of these marginalized communities to enhance their welfare and living conditions according to the government aspiration and target.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

In many instances, indigenous are labeled as having few assets, low education, and lack business mindsets (Bultjens et al., 2010; Furneaux & Brown, 2008; Soares, Steele, & Wayt, 2016), which impedes them from enjoying economic independence (Pearson & Helms, 2013). Foley (2007) support the views, who notes that the mainstream, governmental bodies, and organizations seldom hear the voices of the indigenous during planning and decision making. Most of the plans and measures are taken accounts for the generalizations, misconceptions and profound understanding of the indigenous people (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006) and the erroneous understanding of the indigenous communities (Cuervo, Barakat & Turnbull, 2015). Champagne (1996) asserts that social change in the indigenous communities is a negotiation between the indigenous communities of its values, interests, and institutional organization of the public and the government. Indigenous are conservative and will accept change within their understanding and interpretation of the worldview (Champagne, 2005). Popova (2014) stipulates that to be successful in initiatives and plans to bring the indigenous out of poverty

and better-living conditions, it is crucial that programs and projects should correspond to the specificities of the social, economic, and political settings in which the indigenous communities live. It is paramount that though many indigenous are interested in education, markets, and institutional innovations, the change should be on their terms and their ways which are closely related to their community values and institutional relations (Champagne, 2006; Hall, Foxon & Bolton, 2016).

Through the body of research, much informed analysis and assessment to date about the indigenous community has been presented. Some factors impede the indigenous communities' transitions and the strategies, philosophies, and approaches that have demonstrated success in enabling or assisting the community to overcome these barriers; it is crucial that the voices of the indigenous are heard and incorporated into the decision-making. We propose that there should be some research on the indigenous and to understand the notion of voluntarism change through the quality of connections between the indigenous and the mainstream (Cuervo & Wyn 2014). Therefore, this paper will highlight how, by bringing together the aspect of voluntarism and the studies on the indigenous, the exploration will fill a significant gap in the sociology of the indigenous communities.

METHOD

It is crucial to ensure that the data collected from the indigenous community is reliable. To ensure the reliability of the evidence, triangulation of the data obtained (the voices of the indigenous community) is required. Two different sequential phases of evidence collection are collected in this paper so that there is minimal bias in the data obtained (phenomenology study and survey). To get a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of how voluntaristic change can be accepted and implemented by the indigenous communities, an initial 2-phase study is proposed. Data was collected from two different indigenous communities in Sarawak. A random sampling and snowballing procedures were employed. The reason for the use of snowballing procedure was to get in touch with the indigenous staying in the city area (as there are no proper listings for the indigenous staying in the city).

The accessibility to the informants were difficult for phases 1 of the study. Hence, a referral by some acquaintances to the community could be utilized. Through the referral, rapport with the participants can be built as well.

Phase 1

To better understand the mindsets of the indigenous, it is proposed that a phenomenology study on the indigenous communities be carried out (30 informants). The reason for this phase is to understand the fundamental mindsets and what causes the difference between government's initiatives and supports and their acceptance level. Hence this phase will discover the underpinning reasons to their behavior.

Phase 2

To tap into the indigenous mindsets, in phase 2 (100 initial informants), we used the life satisfaction scale to measure whether the indigenous are satisfied with their living conditions using a scale developed by Diener, Larsen & Griffin (1985). In this phase, the indigenous were surveyed according to:

- i. Staying in the remote area (group 1)
- ii. Moved to the city area (group 2)
- iii. Natives adopted new mindsets (group 3)

This scale is used in many studies to understand life-satisfaction. Though there are 5 items in the scale, it is proven to be able to capture the satisfaction levels of the people. Using a Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"), and the total scoring (should be a total sum for each respondent) the benchmark used are as follows: 31 - 35 Extremely satisfied; 26 - 30 Satisfied, 21 - 25 Slightly satisfied; 20 Neutral; 15 - 19 Slightly dissatisfied; 10 - 14 Dissatisfied; 5 - 9 Extremely dissatisfied.

Initial Findings

Phase 1

In the phase 1 study, altogether 30 informants staying in the rural areas and in the cities were interviewed to understand their behavior. These informants ranges from ages between 11 – 65 years old. Out of the 30 informants, 26 informants have been to the cities before, following either their families or friends. The conditions in which the community stays are well reflected from one informant, "*All of us stay in one long-house, which are connected, we can almost run from one end of the long-house to the other end. All of us are related to each other, and we clique well with each other, forming a natural bonding. Our live is closely knitted with each other.*" (group 1, informant #9, 62 years old, male).

Few interesting findings from other informants are as below:

“People always think that we are stubborn, but in reality, our thinking are more liberal than the city people. City people only think of making money and trying to raise their standard of living, but it seems that their living conditions are always not met. As for me, I have the whole world to explore...” (group 1, informant #2, age 26 years old, been to the city for 3 years but do not like the city lives, male).

“Come to think of money, if we work very hard, there is nothing much that we want to buy. We have already “owned” everything and most importantly, we can do whatever that we want and not restricted to the daily rules by people” (group 1, informant # 25, age 56 years old, have stayed in the rural areas almost all her live, though she went to the cities once to visit relatives).

For respondents living in the city area, one informant responded *“I have tough time adjusting to the living conditions in the city area, the people are less friendly and more materialistic. Their behavior is totally different from the people in the indigenous community, they are more selfish,”* (group 2, informant #24, jus started working for 4 months in the city, female).

One respondent from group 3 clearly stated, *“living costs in the city area are very expensive, though we earn a lot, we spend a lot too, hence, to actually save is difficult. If we were to live in the rural areas, I believe we could be able to enjoy more, as the living costs is much lower”* (informant #6, successful entrepreneur, 56 years old, male).

Phase 2

The findings from the initial study show very interesting results. There are great differences in terms of mindsets of the indigenous in the 3-group study.

Altogether, 100 respondents were sampled and the respondents are equally distributed (see table 1). Based on the profiles of the respondents, there is an interesting trend that could be captured through the responses. The respondents from Group 1 are mostly satisfied and are contented with their living style in the rural area.

From the 100 respondents who were approached, 7 respondents actually wanted to live in the city areas. They are younger, between the ages of 18 – 35 years old. The main reason that they want to live in the city area is because of the opportunities that they can find:

“I know most of us are poor, though we can find food in the jungle, but our living conditions can always be improved. My teacher told me, I have to study hard so that I can improve my living conditions, I want to do my degree in the cities,” (informant # 12, age 16 years old, male).

The respondents in Group 2 are still struggling with their lives in the city area and requires guidance and advice. While respondents from Group 3 are saying that there are just slightly satisfied with their living conditions though there are very successful (due to the pressured living condition).

Table 1. Respondents Profile

Study Phase	Number of Respondents	Responses to life satisfaction scale	Category
Group 1	32	28.43	Satisfied
Group 2	38	23.22	Slightly satisfied
Group 3	30	21.24	Slightly satisfied
ANOVA		0.00	

The findings from the preliminary data analysis and data gathering show that respondents staying in the rural areas (group 1) are generally satisfied with their lives. They believe they are able to blend well with nature, and they are free to do what they like. They are also able to live a satisfied life, and does not worry much about their living conditions. They can hunt wild animals and live on the plantations.

Respondents from group 2 are generally struggling to make ends meet. The cost of living in the cities and towns are very expensive. Most of the indigenous living in the city areas are having only diploma (78%), degree (17%), and postgraduate (5%); and hence, their salary is relatively lower than the mainstream. Therefore, it is not surprising that they do struggle with their daily living.

As for respondents from group 3 (successful indigenous), they are generally older; 2% are below 40 years old, 13% are between 40-44 years old, 67% are between 45-55 years old, 18% are above 55 years old.

The life satisfaction scale for all three groups are:

Table 2. Satisfaction with Life Scale

Life satisfaction Scale	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
In most ways, my life is close to my ideal	28.2	23.5	21.2
The conditions of my life are excellent	27.3	24.1	21.7
I am satisfied with life	28.8	22.5	21.3
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life	26.4	22.6	20.4
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing	27.5	23.4	21.4
ANOVA	0.00	0.00	0.00

The initial findings show that there are differences between group 1, group 2, and group 3 in terms of their perceptions towards life satisfaction ($p < 0.00$). Therefore, this study will be an eye-opener to the government, non-governmental bodies and agencies to further understand the perceptions and expectations of the indigenous community in terms of life satisfaction.

DISCUSSIONS

Based on the initial findings from the 2-phase studies, it is evident that there are different satisfaction levels between living needs from the indigenous community. Hence, the government needs to be careful when rendering their assistance to the indigenous community by trying to understand the type of assistance and support needed by them.

In the modern world, the pursuit of a meaningful life is widely endorsed as a way to living. The developmental misery has fueled the idea that life was better in the "good old days"

(Dryman et al., 2016; Veenhoven, 2005), which is evident through this study (respondents in group 1 are generally satisfied with their lives as compared to respondents in group 3).

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Since there are differences in terms of government's agenda and the success of implementation, a sequence of studies should be conducted to measure the sequential behavior of the indigenous and map the behavior accordingly. This is important to understand the gaps at each live station (group 1, group 2, and group 3) and to understand the needs and wants of these groups.

Another research agenda is to incorporate a 3-phase study to understand the fundamental mindsets of the indigenous community—how the indigenous community could accept voluntaristic change and acceptance instead of coerced change, through a systematic and proper manner. In the first phase, researchers could firstly explore the initial conditions of the indigenous community, and expand the study to capture those that have already accepted the change. Phenomenology or ethnography studies from the emic and etic perspective to ensure a generalizability of the research findings are suggested throughout the three phases of the study. Phenomenology or ethnography studies could be used in this study as it will provide a comprehensive understanding of before (indigenous staying in the remote areas) and how changes can be accepted (indigenous moving to the city areas or successful indigenous) through the structures of experience and exposures. This study would form a systematic reflection of the changes. The evaluation studies of the Indigenous community could begin from a different starting point: listening to, hearing and engaging with the responses and narratives and analyses of Indigenous community as they discuss and recount their exposures and experiences.

Other suggestions could be incorporating initiatives and plans to bring the indigenous out of poverty and better living conditions through their specificities of social, economic, and political settings where they live. In other words, empowering the indigenous social structure to provide them with the opportunities to gather together to form a greater coalition to sell their gains. This could be a new model development, to underline the processes and procedures for the purpose.

Community identity is important in the indigenous community. With the rise in the community identity and the value systems that are built around the identity could create a new entry to understand how outside value can be absorbed into the community and change be

initiated. This could involve a participatory research or action research to fully understand the indigenous community.

Based on the proposed research questions and methodology, it is hoped that there will be better understanding between the indigenous communities and the relevant bodies to further understand the mentality behind the indigenous communities. When there is no proper understanding, it is hard to comprehend precisely the needs and wants of the indigenous communities. Hence, the supports and assistance rendered might not be relevant to the community or appreciated by the community.

The proposed method above is to explore the fundamental and causal reasons that could lead to acceptance and change, which is hoped to be able to offer a concrete motive for behavioral change. It is hoped that through this paper, researchers could forward a new approach that could provide a framework for the indigenous communities to become successful voluntarily. Hence, this study can shed great insights into the mindsets of the indigenous by providing the government, non-governmental bodies or agencies to understand better what are needed by the indigenous community in order to be able to extend assistance and support to the indigenous community.

CONCLUSION

It is crucial that people understand the minds of the indigenous community to help the community to reach a higher living standard and welfare. The cries of the indigenous community are always left unheard as some of the communities lives far into the jungle where accessibility becomes an issue. Though most of the informants are satisfied with their living conditions, there are some indigenous who are hoping that they could change and upgrade their living conditions. In order to help the community, one has to take the initiatives to understand what is behind the mindsets of the community.

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