Shaping Identity, Shaping Power: The Politics of Kadazandusun Ethnic Identity in Sabah

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Abstract

The Kadazandusun ethnic identity in Sabah, Malaysia, has long been a subject of political and socio-cultural debate, particularly regarding its inclusivity and representation of Dusunic, Murutic, and Paitanic-speaking communities. Since the introduction of "Kadazandusun" as a unifying identity in 1989, efforts to consolidate this identity have been marked by contention and negotiation. Political leaders and ethnic organizations have repeatedly called for unity, transcending political ideologies, to establish a singular generic identity for the Kadazandusun that could also replace the "Lain-lain" (Others) category in official government classifications. This article examines the evolution of Kadazandusun identity politics, focusing on how political elites and ethnic organizations construct, reconstruct, and mobilize ethnic identity to achieve both cultural and political objectives. Adopting a multifaceted methodological approach—including thematic analysis, content analysis, and ethnographic methods—the study reveals that Kadazandusun ethnic identity is not static but continuously shaped by the strategic actions of political elites and the instrumentalization of identity for political and electoral gains. By analyzing these dynamics, the article provides critical insights into the complex interplay between identity construction, political leadership, and cultural representation within the Kadazandusun community.

INTRODUCTION

The Kadazandusun ethnic identity in Sabah, Malaysia, has been a topic of political and socio-cultural debate for decades. Since the term Kadazandusun was introduced as a unifying identity in 1989, its inclusivity and acceptance have remained contentious among various groups (Bagang, 2019; Puyok & Bagang, 2011). The roots of this identity formation trace back to 1961 with the establishment of the United National Kadazan Organisation (UNKO) by Donald Stephens, also known as Fuad Stephens. Stephens promoted the term "Kadazan" as a distinct ethnic label for the indigenous communities, particularly the Kadazan and Dusun, in an effort to foster unity. Among educated Kadazandusun, especially those in Penampang and Papar, Kadazan gained acceptance as a term symbolizing pride and social prestige, in contrast to Dusun, which had historically carried connotations of low socio-economic status (Luping, 1985; Puyok & Bagang, 2011; Sabihah, 2008).

The Kadazan Resolution of 1961 asserts that Kadazan serves as the collective identity for several Dusunic, Paitanic, Idahan, Murutic ethnic groups, along with countless additional sub-ethnic groupings and linguistic communities (KDCA, 2019). However, the adoption of Kadazan met resistance, particularly from the Kuijau group in Keningau and the Lotud community in Tuaran (Luping, 1985). This identification dispute gradually became a complex and divisive political issue (Luping, 2016; Luping, 1985; Reid, 1997).

In 1989, the term Kadazandusun was unanimously adopted as the most suitable generic identity and an effective means to address the identity crisis associated with Kadazan or Dusun. Despite the efforts of the Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA) to resolve the identity crisis and promote unity among the Kadazandusun, the KDCA's actions were viewed as an attempt by Joseph Pairin Kitingan to reinforce his Kadazandusun support while undermining the Dusun support within the USDA (Puyok & Bagang, 2011). Pairin, who served as the Chief Minister of Sabah from 1985 to 1994, is a prominent figure in Kadazandusun comunities. He currently holds the position of President of the KDCA and serves as the paramount leader of the Kadazandusun community, known as the *Huguan Siou*, a title he continues to uphold to this day. The identity issue persists as an unresolved matter, generating ongoing controversy within the Kadazandusun communities. Recognizing that the matter of identity could lead to fragmentation within the Kadazandusun community, Bernard Giluk Dompok urged the Kadazandusun to progress and call for unity regardless of political ideologies (Daily Express, 2015). Dompok is the founder of United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO) and currently serves as the Chairman of the UPKO Advisory Council. He served as the Chief Minister of Sabah from 1998 to 1999. Dompok was also a long-serving Member of Parliament and held various ministerial portfolios at the federal level, including Minister in the Prime Minister's Department and Minister of Plantation Industries and Commodities. He was an ambassador to the Holy See (Vatican) from 2016 to 2020. Furthermore, the Kadazan, the Dusun and the Muruts should stop arguing about their identity as they share a common culture as reiterated by the President of *Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah* (*PBRS*), Joseph Kurup (Daily Express, 2015). The Murut began to express their apprehension regarding their ethnic identity, despite the acceptance of the name Kadazandusun as a collective identity as outlined in the KDCA's constitution (Daily Express, 1992). It prompted the introduction of the term Kadazandusun Murut or its acronym, *KDM* (Tangit, 2017). While the Rungus community asserted their right to determine their ethnic identity via the Sabah

Momogun Rungus Association (SAMORA)(Daily Express, 1992). SAMORA advocated for the exclusion of the Rungus ethnic group from the Kadazandusun category, leading to the introduction of a new ethnic label, *KDMR*, which encompasses the Kadazandusun, Murut, and Rungus communities, traditionally representing the non-Muslim indigenous populations of Sabah (Chan, 2020). In an effort to address the identity issue, the Momogun National Congress (MNC), proposed the term *Momogun* as a generic identity for groups belonging to the Dusunic, Paitanic, and Murutic categories (Daily Express, 2016a; Lai, 2024; MNC, 2016b). The term *Momogun* has always been part of the Kadazan, Dusun, Murut and the Rungus community, which refers to the indigenous communities in Sabah (Munang, 2024; Tombung, 2016). As the issue of the *Momogun* term remains unresolved, the Kadazandusun communities found themselves in conflict once again over a proposal from the President of Homeland Solidarity Party (STAR) cum President of the Borneo Dayak Forum International Jeffrey Kitingan to adopt Dayak as their singular identity (Samad, 2019). The struggle for a cohesive ethnic identity reveals the deeper historical grievances, cultural diversity, and competing political interests within the Kadazandusun community.

This article explores the development of Kadazandusun ethnic identity politics, with a specific focus on the roles of political elites, cultural leadership institution, ethnic organizations and political parties in the construction, reconstruction, and political mobilization of ethnic identity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ethnicity as a Social Construct

Ethnicity is a socially constructed concept encompassing various identity markers, such as race, language, religion, tribe, and caste. While early scholarship often adopted a primordialist view—asserting that ethnic identities are fixed, ancient, and unchanging—modern perspectives emphasize the dynamic and fluid nature of ethnic identity. This shift from primordialism to constructivism has transformed our understanding of ethnicity, including its formation, evolution, and role in ethnic conflict and violence.

Constructivists argue that ethnic identities are not singular or fixed but are multiple, adaptable, and shaped through social interactions and external influences (Chandra, 2006; Nagel, 1994). Barth (1969) reinforces this view by positing that ethnic

boundaries are not immutable; instead, they are continuously negotiated and redefined through social interaction. Building on this, Jenkins (2010) asserts that ethnicity is reconstructed through both intra-group and inter-group interactions, highlighting its evolving nature. These perspectives collectively challenge static notions of ethnicity, presenting it as a social process subject to historical, structural, and social transformations.

The transformation of ethnic identity has been examined in various contexts. For example, Shamsul (1996, 2008) explores how economic pressures and governmental interventions since the colonial period reshaped Malay identity, forging a new collective identity. Similarly, Nagel (1994) highlights that identity formation and reformation are driven by both internal group dynamics and external forces, including social, economic, and political elements. This dual influence underscores the inherent volatility and adaptability of ethnic identities, as groups redefine themselves in response to changing contexts.

Empirical studies further illustrate the constructivist approach. König's (2016) research on the Dayak and Madurese communities in West Kalimantan provides an insightful case study of identity construction in the context of ethnic conflict. Focusing on the Kanayatn Dayaks, König demonstrates that ethnicity is shaped by ongoing interactions and historical legacies, neither entirely static nor purely constructed. This nuanced understanding aligns with the constructivist emphasis on the interplay between historical factors and contemporary social processes in shaping ethnic identities.

Ethnicity also plays a significant role in political mobilization, often serving as a tool for both dominant and marginalized groups. Leach, Brown, and Wordan (2008) examine how ethnic identity influences personal and collective identities, noting that ethnic identity politics, while often perceived as divisive, can be leveraged by different groups to achieve varying objectives. Dominant groups may use ethnicity to consolidate power, while marginalized groups mobilize around it to challenge inequality and assert their rights. This instrumentalist perspective sees ethnicity as a means to secure resources and navigate modern political landscapes. Brass (2003) and Brubaker (2004) argue that elites play a central role in shaping ethnic identity, strategically selecting cultural symbols and assigning new meanings to them to mobilize support. Agashe (2022) elaborates on this manipulation, showing how elites amplify grievances and frame ethnic concerns as political goals to garner support. For example, Hasanah (2018)

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examines how the marginalization of the Dayak under the New Order regime fostered ethnic consciousness, which was subsequently mobilized by elites during the 2007 West Kalimantan regional elections. Her work shows how historical exclusion can lay the foundation for political mobilization based on ethnicity.

The instrumentalist view underlines the link between ethnicity and conflict, arguing that ethnic tensions often arise from elite-driven political maneuvers (Agashe, 2022). When ethnicity is politicized, it becomes a powerful tool for contesting or consolidating power, thereby fueling conflict. This dynamic underscore the dual role of ethnicity as both a social construct and a political instrument, shaped by historical legacies and elite strategies.

This article applies both constructivist and instrumentalist perspectives to analyze the ethnic identity politics of the Kadazandusun in Sabah. The constructivist perspective is particularly pertinent in this context, as the creation of a collective Kadazandusun identity emerges from internal negotiations among subgroups and external pressures exerted by political actors. This process illustrates that Kadazandusun identity is not static but dynamically shaped through cultural practices, linguistic adaptation, and political engagement, emphasizing the active role of human agency in the construction of ethnicity. Meanwhile, the instrumentalist perspective highlights how elites strategically manipulate ethnic identities for political gain (Brubaker, 2004; Yang, 2000). This approach sheds light on the efforts of Kadazandusun political elites, who, through political parties and ethnic organizations like the Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA), United Sabah Dusun Association (USDA), Momogun National Congress (MNC), Sabah Momogun Rungus Association (SAMORA), and Kadazan Dusun Murut (KDM) Association Malaysia, have sought to construct a unified ethnic identity as a means of mobilizing support. From this perspective, ethnicity becomes a strategic resource, leveraged to achieve political objectives, rather than a purely cultural or historical phenomenon (Brubaker, 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnic Identity, Intra-Party Rivalry, and Political Mobilization

The interaction between ethnic identity, intra-party rivalry, and political mobilization is a critical focus in contemporary political studies. Ethnic identity, far from being merely a cultural construct, serves as a powerful driver of political loyalty and activism. This literature review synthesizes key insights into the interplay of these factors and their impact on political dynamics.

Ethnic identity plays a pivotal role in shaping political behavior, as scholars have emphasized its influence in mobilizing individuals and communities (Chandra, 2006; Hasanah, 2018; Horowitz, 1985). For instance, Barelly et al. (2021) highlight the role of ethnic identity in local political contestations in Makassar City, Indonesia. Their study reveals how growing awareness of ethnic belonging fosters solidarity, which in turn drives political mobilization. Using a qualitative-exploratory approach, they examine the destabilizing effects of ethnic identity politics, warning that it exacerbates social tensions and undermines productive political contestation. This aligns with Prasad's (2016) observation that ethnic identities are not intrinsic but strategically constructed and mobilized by political actors to secure electoral advantage. Her analysis underscores the instrumental role of ethnicity in political parties, where electoral strategies often exploit ethnic categories. While Malaysia's politics explicitly target ethnic identities, Indonesia employs coalition-based approaches, though ethnic and religious appeals remain influential.

Liu (2007) critiques Malaysia's attempts at fostering national unity under the *Bangsa Malaysia* vision, arguing that ethnic identity persists as a dominant factor in governance and societal interactions. Ethnic-based policies, such as those addressing disparities between Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera citizens, often exacerbate divisions rather than promoting unity. Citizens are perceived and treated based on their ethnic affiliations, amplifying inequalities and undermining the notion of inclusive national unity. Similarly, Chin (2014, 2017) examines the marginalization of Non-Muslim Bumiputera (NMB) communities, such as the Dayak in Sarawak and the Kadazandusun in Sabah, within Malaysia's multi-ethnic framework. He argues that while policies like the New Economic Policy (NEP) claim to benefit all Bumiputera, they disproportionately favor Muslim Bumiputera (MB), reinforcing ethnic and

religious hierarchies. This selective implementation has deepened inequalities and sidelined NMB groups, perpetuating their marginalization.

Ethnic identity is also a critical factor in political mobilization, especially in contexts of perceived discrimination or marginalization. Gadjanova (2013) critiques constructivist frameworks for overlooking how ethnic appeals connect with communities, asserting that such appeals often incorporate legitimacy and rights-based claims. Her analysis links the strategic politicization of ethnicity to governance outcomes and power-sharing dynamics. Similarly, Suherman et al. (2020) illustrate how political elites in Indonesia exploit ethnic and religious diversity to secure electoral support, using media to intensify divisions and influence voting behavior.

In Malaysia, the Kadazandusun community exemplifies the politicization of ethnic identity. Puyok and Bagang (2011) argue that the introduction of the Kadazandusun identity aimed to unify diverse indigenous subgroups but instead underscored internal divisions and fueled political rivalries. Political elites leveraged cultural associations, such as the Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA), as tools for political mobilization. However, the fragmentation of political representation among Kadazandusun-based parties has weakened their collective bargaining power, highlighting the complex interplay between unity, representation, and intra-party dynamics.

Intra-party rivalry significantly shapes the expression and mobilization of ethnic identities. Caspersen (2008) challenges the notion of cohesive ethnic groups, arguing that internal divisions over leadership, strategy, and resources often undermine unity. In Malaysia, intra-Malay rivalry has long influenced the political landscape. UMNO, historically championing Malay nationalism and economic interests, has competed with PAS, which emphasizes conservative Islamic values, creating a distinct ideological divide (Abdul Hamid, 2018; Shamsul, 2001). Over time, this rivalry intensified with the emergence of Malay-based parties such as Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu) and National Trust Party (Amanah), further fragmenting Malay political unity. Similarly, intra-ethnic rivalry within the Dayak community in Sarawak has diluted their collective political influence. Sub-ethnic groups such as the Iban, Bidayuh, and Orang Ulu have exhibited varying political loyalties and preferences, complicating efforts toward unity and effective representation (Puyok, 2024). These rivalries demonstrate

how intra-party and intra-ethnic dynamics can weaken collective political action, even within communities united by shared histories and grievances.

Ethnic identity thus emerges as a central force in political mobilization, shaped by both external pressures and internal divisions. While it fosters solidarity and activism, its politicization by elites and the fragmentation caused by intra-party rivalries reveal its dual role as a unifying and divisive factor. This complex interplay continues to shape political behavior, governance, and social cohesion in multi-ethnic societies.

METHODOLOGY

This study is designed qualitatively and employed ethnographic and ethnohistorical approaches to examine the construction and reconstruction of identity within the Kadazandusun group. The use of ethnographic approaches in political research is beneficial, and it will enable researcher to discover new insights and open new knowledge (Hagene, 2018). Ethnography allowed the authors to interact directly with the participants, who shared valuable insights into Kadazandusun identities and the politics surrounding them. Participatory observation enabled the authors to attend and observe significant events, such as cultural festivals, conventions, annual general meetings, and political gatherings.

Combined with ethnography, ethnohistory was used to explore the historical evolution of Kadazandusun identity and its political implications. Through the examination of historical texts, archival documents, and oral traditions, the authors traced the development of ethnic consciousness and the influence of political elites, cultural institution, ethnic organisations and political parties in shaping the identity of the Kadazandusun people over time. Data for this study were gathered through in-depth interviews with key informants, including politicians, leaders of ethnic organizations, and community leaders. The interviewees provided valuable insights into the convergence of identity and politics, explaining the complex ways in which ethnicity is exploited for political purposes. Furthermore, content analysis was employed to examine political speeches, media reports, and other public materials related to Kadazandusun identity politics. This facilitated the identification of key themes, narratives, and discourses concerning ethnic identity, along with the influence of cultural institution, ethnic-based organizations and political parties in constructing these narratives.

FINDINGS

Construction and Reconstruction of Kadazandusun Identity

The pre-colonial period in Sabah was featured by a mosaic of indigenous communities, each with its unique customs, language, and socio-cultural practices (Luping, 1985; Singh, 2011). The Kadazan, Dusun, and Murut people lived as distinct ethnic entities, maintaining individual social structures and cultural boundaries. While these communities interacted through trade and shared rituals, they primarily identified with their respective lineages and regional identities (Kitingan, 2012).

With the advent of British colonial rule, administrators sought to categorize these groups under broader ethnic classifications to streamline governance (Roff, 1969). These classifications often disregarded indigenous perceptions of identity, leading to confusion and occasional resistance among local populations. The British term Dusun, for example, was applied broadly to various highland communities, although coastal groups identified as Kadazan found it incongruent with their own identity (Appell, 1968; Roff, 1969; Rutter, 1929). Likewise, the Murut people, who inhabited the interior regions, were classified separately, further reinforcing colonial definitions of ethnicity (Reid, 1997; Rutter, 1929).

The early confrontation to British rule, coupled with the desire to preserve indigenous customs, cultivated a sense of communal solidarity among these groups (Sulaiman & Bala, 2020). This growing consciousness laid the groundwork for an organised ethnic identity that surpassed traditional boundaries. Influential leaders like Donald Stephens and Gunsanad Samson Sundang better known as GS Sundang harnessed this unity to advocate for broader recognition of Kadazan and Dusun identities as distinct ethnic groups. This efforts could be seen as initiatives aimed to promote cultural pride and strategically consolidate political supports (Luping, 1985).

In 1961, Abdul Rahman put forth the proposal for Malaysia, leading to the establishment of the first political party in Sabah, United National Kadazan Organisation (UNKO), by Donald Stephens in August of that same year (Luping, 1985; Roff, 1969; Siti Aidah, 2007). UNKO was perceived as an ethnic-based party due to its membership predominantly comprising individuals from the Kadazandusun communities. Motivated by the aspiration to unify the Kadazan and Dusun peoples in

political, social, and economic spheres, UNKO committed itself to advocate for their rights and interests while enhancing the connections between the Kadazan and Dusun communities. On top of that, the establishment of UNKO was driven by the need to establish a political platform that could represent the Kadazan community's interests in the negotiations surrounding Sabah's entry into the Malaysian Federation. Stephens, a key figure in this movement, believed that the term Kadazan could serve as a rallying point for indigenous people across Sabah, uniting them against potential marginalization in politics as well as to improve their standard of living (Luping, 1994; Yamamoto, 2002). Despite the justification for the term Kadazan used in the name of UNKO, there were objections to its usage. The most significant opposition originated from the Kuijau group of Keningau and the Lotud people of Tuaran (Luping, 1985). Shortly after the establishment of UNKO, the Dusun-Lotud Association was formed, soon followed by the creation of the United Sabah Dusun Association (USDA). It is widely accepted that the leaders of the Kadazan in Tuaran played a critical role in the establishment of these two associations, with financial support from non-Kadazan leaders who were opposed to the political strength and unity of the Kadazan community. The ongoing disagreement regarding the term evolved into a contentious political issue (Luping, 2016; Luping, 1985). At the same time, The Pasok Momogun organization was established, comprising Muruts and individuals related to the Kadazans, while rejecting the term of that regional ethnic name (Lee, 1968). Nevertheless, after so much deliberation between UNKO and Pasok Momogun, both were agreed to merge as one party in 1964 and renamed it to United Pasok Kadazan Organisation (UPKO)(Luping, 1994; Ongkili, 1989). By the time UPKO was established, Malaysia had already been formed on September 16, 1963.

The formation of Malaysia involved complex negotiations, during which the identity issues of the Kadazandusun community were not prioritized. This lack of attention was largely due to the significant focus placed on achieving consensus among the negotiating parties. Consequently, these important identity matters were overshadowed until Malaysia officially came into being on September 16, 1963.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the Kadazandusun communities in Sabah were confronted with a resurgence of identity concerns, which were further exacerbated by political and cultural tensions within the leadership of indigenous groups (Puyok & Bagang, 2011; Reid, 2010). Pairin, the Chief Minister of Sabah and the President of the Kadazan Cultural Association (KCA), and Mark Koding, the Deputy Chief Minister and

President of the United Sabah Dusun Association (USDA), were two important personalities who played a pivotal role in the conflict. Although both leaders initially cooperated under the *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS), a substantial rift emerged due to their divergent perspectives on community identity and leadership (Puyok & Bagang, 2011).

Reconciliation and the Construction of "Kadazandusun"

The ongoing debate regarding the terms Kadazan and Dusun presents a significant risk that Koding may divide the support of both groups towards Pairin, potentially undermining the PBS government. To avoid the division of supports due to Koding's actions, Pairin leveraged his role as President of KCA to emphasize that the Kadazan and Dusun are essentially the same group, irrespective of their chosen ethnic designation (Puyok & Bagang, 2011; Reid, 1997, 2010; Yamamoto, 2002).

On November 5, 1989, delegates at the 5th Kadazan Cultural Association Conference unanimously adopted the term Kadazandusun as the most suitable generic identity, aiming to resolve the identity crisis associated with Kadazan and Dusun. The association's name was subsequently changed from the Kadazan Cultural Association (KCA) to the Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA)(KDCA, 2019; Puyok & Bagang, 2011; Reid, 2010). The incorporation of the term Dusun into the KCA designation signifies a transformative period for the state's tribal communities, aiming to dispel the notion that the KCA is exclusively associated with the Kadazan people. Moreover, the adoption of the Kadazandusun term expedites the effort to introduce the indigenous language and address the standardization of dialects in the Dusunic linguistic family (Lasimbang & Kinajil, 2010; Tangit, 2017).

Reconstruction of Kadazandusun Murut (KDM)

Despite the official adoption of Kadazandusun, debates persisted over the term's inclusivity and effectiveness. The Murut started to voice their concern over their ethnic identity even though the name Kadazandusun has been accepted as a generic identity stipulated in the KDCA's constitution. It triggered the idea to introduce the term Kadazandusun Murut or its acronym *KDM*. This term encompasses the three main ethnic groups. The term *KDM* was somehow initiated and popularised by United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO) when they wanted to include the Murut as part of their party identity (Tangau, personal communication, April 21, 2021. To strengthen support from the Murut community in Sabah's interior, particularly in

Keningau and Pensiangan, the late Suffian Koroh, a prominent Murut leader, joined UPKO. Following his membership, the party amended its constitution to include Murut in the term Kadazandusun, renaming it *Kadazandusun Murut* (*KDM*) to reflect inclusivity and acknowledge the Murut community's significance (Tangau, personal communication, April 21, 2021). At the same time, the term *KDM* was extensively used in UPKO publications and their leaders' written speeches. For instance, the *KDM* term was formally used and printed in the souvenir book during UPKO's 25th anniversary in 2019 (UPKO, 2019). Additionally, the term *KDM* appears frequently in printed media, particularly among columnists (Stephen, 2000). The move was deliberately undertaken to promote the widespread acceptance of the term *KDM* throughout the state. Since then, it has been embraced by many Sabahans as a term to refer to the Kadazandusun Murut people. While the term *KDM* is commonly employed in everyday discussions, there is no official documentation nor recognisation from the government indicating that the abbreviation *KDM* serves as a replacement for the term Kadazandusun.

From KDM to Kadazandusun Murut Rungus (KDMR)

The terms Kadazandusun and *KDM* have not definitively resolved the issue of ethnic identity. The Rungus group contended that their ethnic identity ought to be defined by their affiliation with the Sabah Momogun Rungus Association (SAMORA). SAMORA aimed to exclude the Rungus ethnic group from the Kadazandusun ethnic category, despite the Rungus being acknowledged as one of the ethnic groups in the KDCA Constitution (Daily Express, 1992, p. 21; Utusan Borneo, 2016). Jelani Hamdan, President of SAMORA, challenged the classification of the Rungus ethnic group as a sub-ethnic category rather than a full ethnic group within the KDCA, along with the exclusion of 'R' in the abbreviation 'KDM' (Utusan Borneo, 2016). The term *KDMR* refers to the Kadazandusun Murut and Rungus, indigenous peoples of Sabah who are traditionally non-Muslim (Chan, 2020). The *KDMR* acronym became more prominent during UPKO's expansion into Northern Sabah (Porodong, personal communication, November 9, 2020). The acronym *KDMR* enhanced the status of the Rungus ethnic group, placing it on par with the Kadazan, Dusun, and Murut. Fieldworks conducted by the authors in Northern Sabah, specifically in Kudat, Motunggong, and Kota Marudu, indicated that politicians often utilized the term *KDMR* in their speeches. For example, a roadshow organised by the *Parti Kesejahteraan Demokratik Masyarakat* (KDM), in Matunggong, Sabah, addressed the local communities as *KDMR*. Peter Anthony, President of *KDM* party, along with members of his party's supreme council, refrained from using the terms Kadazandusun or *KDM*,

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instead emphasizing the use of *KDMR* in their speeches and conversations with community members. The authors posit that observations from multiple events in northern Sabah reveal a political strategy employed by parties like UPKO and *KDM* to engage and attract the Rungus communities. The term is a political construct that includes the main Kadazandusun ethnic groups: Kadazan, Dusun, Murut, and Rungus. Recognizing the *KDMR* would confirm that Rungus communities represent a notable ethnic group in Sabah.

"Momogun" and the Ongoing Identity Discourse

The identity crisis persists and continues to be contentious within the Kadazandusun communities. On June 3, 2015, an ethnic based organisation known as MNC proposed the term *Momogun* as a generic identity to refer to groups of Dusunic, Paitanic and Murutic. The MNC's constitution Clause 27(1) refers to *Momogun* as "multi-ethnic natives or indigenous peoples of Sabah which the Supreme Council shall determine" (MNC, 2017). Dompok, the founder and the honorary advisor of MNC, urged the communities to work together under the collective identity of *Momogun*. This sentiment was echoed by the late Kurup, who advised the Dusunic, Murutic, and Paitanic groups to reach a consensus on adopting *Momogun* as their shared national identity. Kurup emphasized the importance of achieving consensus in order to strengthen unity, harmony, and cooperation among the indigenous communities of Sabah (MNC, 2016c). The term *Momogun* has always been part of the Kadazan, Dusun, Murut and the Rungus community, which refers to the indigenous communities in Sabah, especially Kadazandusun Murut and Rungus (Munang, 2024). The Murut and the Rungus communities used the term commonly to reflect their identity. The Murut communities spelt the term as *Memagun* or *Mamagun* while the Kadazan, Dusun and Rungus spelt as *Momogun* (Munang, personal communication, 23 February, 2023). The first Momogun National Convention of MNC was held on October 29, 2016 in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah as the first attempt to legitimise *Momogun* identity. Twenty one delegates from Kadazandusun ethnic associations signed a declaration to support the use of *Momogun* term (Borneo Post, 2016a). However, the resolution from the convention failed to be materialised and debates over this issue continue (Bagang, 2019; Borneo Post, 2016b; Daily Express, 2016b).

The effort to recognise the term *Momogun* is ongoing. On August 1, 2024, once again the MNC organised the 2nd Momogun Convention 2024 held in Penampang, Sabah. The prime objective of this convention was to obtain consensus and agreement

among the *Momogun* community in Sabah and to urge the state and federal governments to replace the term *Lain Lain* (Others) with the term *Momogun* in official government forms (Lai, 2024). The convention was officiated by the Finance Minister of Sabah Masidi Manjun and at the end of the convention, the closing ceremony was done by Ewon Benedick, the President of UPKO cum Minister of Entrepreneur and Cooperatives Development of Malaysia. The convention received positive feedbacks from the Dusunic, Murutic and Paitanic groups whereby seventy-five ethnic-based associations signed a declaration agreeing to the use of 'Momogun' as a generic identity (Anjumin, 2024b).

The *Momogun* proposal has been met with mixed reactions. Advocates argued that it represents a more inclusive and unifying identity, while critics contend that it risks erasing the distinct cultural identities of subgroups like the Kadazan, Dusun, and Murut (Anjumin, 2024a; Bagang, 2019; Daily Express, 2016b, 2016c; Munang, 2024). While the term has gained some traction, it has not yet achieved the same level of institutionalization as Kadazandusun (KDCA, 2019). Most Kadazan and Dusun oppose the term *Momogun*, arguing that it is merely a noun and thus unsuitable for use as a collective identity (Tangit, 2017). In addition, the term *Momogun* has emerged as a significant topic of political debate, with figures like Jeffrey Kitingan promoting it within the context of a Pan-Borneo identity narrative that resonates with wider regional movements, including the Dayak identity in Sarawak and Kalimantan. Jeffrey, President of STAR, proposed that the Kadazandusun people adopt a Dayak identity to unify and empower the indigenous peoples of Borneo, thereby enhancing their collective voice (Patrick, 2019; Santos, 2024). In contrast, Ewon Benedick, President of UPKO, proposed the adoption of *Momogun* to represent the indigenous people of Sabah (Borneo Post, 2024). This proposal was consistent with the MNC main struggle to use *Momogun* term as generic ethnic identity (Lai, 2024; MNC, 2016a). The contentious over ethnic identity from Kadazandusun, *KDM, KDMR* toward *Momogun* and Dayak reflects the ongoing fluidity of ethnic identity in Sabah, where political elites continuously reconstruct identity labels to suit changing political and social dynamics.

The Politics of Identity and Political Mobilisation

The conflict over ethnic identity among the Kadazandusun political elites underlines the complexity of representation and the strategic deployment of ethnic identity in political and socio-cultural domains (Bagang, 2019; Puyok & Bagang, 2011).

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This dynamic is important in understanding the interplay of identity politics within the Kadazandusun community and its consequences for broader political institutions.

Since the term Kadazandusun was officially recognized by the KDCA in 1989 as a unifying generic identity and a resolution to the long-standing Kadazan versus Dusun identity crisis, the politics surrounding it have continued to persist (Bagang, 2019; Puyok & Bagang, 2011; Topin, 2017). In response to these controversies, other than KDCA and USDA, several ethnic-based organizations started to take part in the discourse and play a pivotal role in attempting to address identity related issues. The Kadazan Sabah Society (KSS), MNC, SAMORA, *KDM Malaysia* and Sabah Tatana Cultural Association (STCA) are expressing their perspectives and proposing solutions to resolve the identity matters while fostering unity within the Kadazandusun community. These organizations frequently operate at the confluence of cultural preservation and political advocacy. KSS speaks a distinct perspective on the issue of ethnic identity, especially regarding their own identity. KSS has voiced its opposition to the approach use by the MNC in promoting the term Momogun as a unifying identity for the Dusunic, Murutic, and Paitanic speech communities in Sabah (Daily Express, 2016c). KSS stands firm that the Kadazan community, as native Malaysians of Sabah origin, has always taken pride in being able to co-exist with the various ethnic groups and races in Sabah. President of KSS, Marcel Leiking, said:

> *The Kadazan community has been recognized by the federal government as one of the founding community partners in gaining independence of North Borneo, now Sabah, and the formation of Malaysia on August 31, 1963 and on September 16, 1963 respectively. We have our history, language, tradition, customs (adat) (Leiking, July 24, 2016).*

The interplay of ethnic identity among various ethnic organizations—whether culturally, socially, or economically oriented—provides a foundation for political mobilization. Notably, members of the KSS primarily consist of Kadazans from Penampang and Papar. During the early days of Malaysia, the people of Penampang perceived "Kadazanism" as closely tied to their identity (Yamamoto, 2002). Therefore, even though KSS is not associated with any political party but KSS is deeply concerned about the interests of the Kadazan communities and their representation in various domains, particularly in matters related to culture and positions in government, both in politics and bureaucracy.

Similarly, the MNC, a brainchild of Dompok, was founded on his strong belief that the adoption of the *Momogun* identity would herald the emergence of a genuine and deeply rooted sense of belonging and unity among the Dusunic, Murutic, and Paitanic linguistic groups in Sabah (Jimmy, 2016). Dompok said;

> *The realization of this unity will have a hugely positively impact on the future well-being of the community. Being the biggest single community in Sabah, the Momoguns will become one of the major determinants as regards to the direction and pace of the country's development. At the community level, there is no stopping the three linguistics groups to work together to create the necessary synergy to propel themselves up the economic and social ladder* (MNC, 2016b).

Dompok's initiative to unify the Kadazandusun community under the single identity of *Momogun*, similar to the Dayak identity in Sarawak, has been commended by some for its potential benefits. If the *Momogun* identity were officially recognized and accepted by the government, it could replace the *Lain-lain* (Others) category in government classifications, leading to a larger and more significant statistical representation for the *Momogun* group. However, this initiative has also been interpreted as a dual strategy, as Dompok simultaneously promoted the *Momogun* identity while garnering support for his party, UPKO.

The MNC, which reflects UPKO's influence due to its inception by Dompok, initially saw a significant portion of its members originating from UPKO. Over time, however, its membership diversified to include individuals from various backgrounds, with a notable presence of retired civil servants (Anggang, personnal communication, 8 April, 2021). The MNC's efforts to ensure that the *Momogun* identity to be recognized and adopted are continuously voiced out by UPKO leaders. Former UPKO President, Madius Tangau, argued that the term *Momogun* is a more suitable term for identifying the indigenous peoples of Sabah. He stressed that the ongoing debate over the appropriate terminology should be resolved promptly, advocating for the media to adopt *Momogun* instead of the commonly used acronym *KDMR* (Anjumin, 2024a). The *Momogun* identity gained further prominence under the leadership of current UPKO President Ewon Benedick, who proposed that the Sabah Government consolidate the indigenous ethnic groups in Sabah under the *Momogun* category. This initiative aims to create a more inclusive and unified representation of Sabah's indigenous communities (Borneo Post, 2024). Obviously, UPKO is seen championing this issue through MNC especially in MNC's national conventions, mini carnival, round table discussion and the

International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples (*Sambutan Hari Orang Asal Sedunia 2024 – HOAS2024*). This could be seen as a strategy and indirect efforts to attract Kadazandusun to join UPKO.

Jeffrey Kitingan, President of STAR Sabah and the Borneo Dayak Forum International (BDF), has advocated for adopting Dayak as a unified identity (Patrick, 2019). He said:

> *"[T]he term Dayak has a rich history and has been widely accepted in neighboring regions such as Sarawak and Kalimantan, where it has been used for centuries to describe the diverse indigenous peoples of Borneo. I firmly believe that adopting Dayak as a collective identity in Sabah can provide a stronger sense of unity among our communities. This term is not new to us. Historically, it has been used as early as the 1600s and was even recognized by the British to describe the ethnic groups of Sabah. In Sarawak, Dayak is already a well-established identity, and the same applies to Kalimantan in Indonesia. By embracing Dayak as a shared identity here in Sabah, we align ourselves with a broader regional identity, one that unites the indigenous peoples of Borneo as a significant collective. By recognizing ourselves as Dayak, we acknowledge the strength in our diversity—be it Dusun Dayak, Murut Dayak, or others. This identity is more inclusive than terms like Momogun, which may not resonate as widely. It allows us to move beyond smaller, segmented identities and present ourselves as a larger, cohesive demographic. This is crucial in ensuring that our voices are heard, our presence is felt, and our significance is recognized at both national and regional levels" (Jeffrey, personal communication, February 22, 2021).*

In response to the *Momogun* identity proposal recently, Jeffrey has also advocated for the term "Natives of Sabah" or (*Anak Negeri Sabah*) to represent all indigenous peoples in the state (Miwil, 2024). He argues that this inclusive designation, grounded in legal definitions within both the Federal and State Constitutions, would replace the *Lain-lain* (Other) category in official documents, thereby acknowledging the diverse indigenous communities beyond the Kadazandusun group. Previously, Jeffrey had proposed adopting the term Dayak as a collective identity for Borneo's indigenous populations, similar to its usage in Sarawak and Kalimantan. However, this suggestion faced resistance from the KDCA, KSS, and USDA, who opposed replacing established identities with Dayak. With the 17th Sabah state election approaching, Jeffrey's current proposal for the "Natives of Sabah" identity appears to be a strategic move to garner broader support from various indigenous communities, including the Bajau and Brunei groups. He contends that a lack of inclusivity risks alienating these communities, making them feel ignored and marginalized. By promoting a more encompassing

identity, Jeffrey aims to foster unity among Sabah's indigenous populations, potentially strengthening his political leadership and appeal across diverse groups in the state.

The identity politics of the Kadazandusun manifest in various forms. Ethnic organizations such as the KDCA, KSS, USDA, MNC, and SAMORA actively engage in articulating their positions on ethnic identity issues, emphasizing cultural preservation and identity consolidation. In contrast, KDM Malaysia adopts a different approach, focusing less on identity debates and instead prioritizing efforts to garner and mobilize political support. This association concentrates on many efforts aimed at enhancing welfare and socio-cultural programs, including the organization of the Harvest Festival (*Pesta Kaamatan*) and *Kalimaran* Feast, football tournaments, and charitable activities (Willie, personal communication, 18 October, 2024). KDM Malaysia is headed by Peter Anthony, the President of *Parti Kesejahteraan Demokratik Sabah* – KDM. Previously, Peter was the former Vice President of *Parti Warisan Sabah* (Warisan). In order to obtain supports from the Kadazandusun, Peter employed KDM Malaysia to organize and mobilise political support from Kadazandusun and Murut communities across various constituencies in Sabah for Warisan. It played a significant role in political mobilization, particularly in areas such as Kiulu, Tamparuli, and Ranau. Its influence also extended to interior constituencies like Pensiangan, Tenom, and Keningau. During Warisan's campaign in predominantly Kadazandusun areas during the 14th General Elections, 16th Sabah State election, and the 15th General Election, KDM Malaysia played a pivotal role as a platform for introducing candidates, organizing events, and conducting house-to-house campaigns. This strategic involvement helped to strengthen Warisan's presence and outreach within these communities, leveraging KDM Malaysia's network and influence to mobilize support effectively (Rampas, personal communication, 17 August 2024). In 2020, KDM Malaysia drew public attention during the Kimanis by-election when it faced accusations of organizing a Christmas celebration that included activities such as gift distribution through lucky draws. This event sparked controversy, as it was perceived by some as a potential strategy to influence voter sentiment during the election period (Malaysiakini, 2020).

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between the key leaders of the Kadazandusun, their political affiliation and ethnic organisations. Their roles play the strategic deployment of ethnic identity and its impact to electoral politics. Ethnic identity significantly influences the political landscape of Sabah, affecting leadership dynamics, party affiliations, and voter mobilization strategies. The connection between cultural

and political authority is apparent in the dual roles held by numerous leaders. Individuals like Pairin and Jeffrey utilize their roles as President and Deputy President of KDCA, as well as their positions as paramount leaders and thinkers of the Kadazandusun (Huguan Siou and Huguan Siou Lundu Mirongod), along with their affiliations in political parties. Their dual positions facilitate the integration of cultural influence with political power, establishing an effective platform for voter mobilization grounded in shared heritage.

Table 1: *Key Leaders of the Kadazandusun and Their Affiliation to Political Parties and Ethnic Organisations*

Key Leader	Political Party and Role	Position and Ethnic Organization
Joseph Pairin Kitingan	Founder and advisor of *Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS)*	President of Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA); Paramount leader of the Kadazandusun (*Huguan Siou*)
Jeffrey Kitingan	Founder and the president of *Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku* (STAR SABAH)	Deputy President of Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA); Kadazandusun (*Huguan Siou Lundu Mirongod*); President of Borneo Dayak Forum (BDF)
Bernard Dompok	Founder of United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO); Chairman of UPKO Advisory Council	Founder and advisor of Momogun National Congress (MNC); Life Member of KDCA
Madius Tangau	Honorary president of United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO)	Life Member of KDCA
Ewon Benedick	President of United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO)	Life Member of KDCA
Wences Anggang	Advisory Council Member of United Progressive Kinabalu Organsation (UPKO)	President of Momogun National Congress (MNC); President of Sabah Tatana Cultural Association (STCA)
Marcel Leiking		President of Kadazan Society Sabah (KSS)
Peter Anthony	President of *Parti Kesejahteraan Demokratik Masyarakat* (KDM)	President of KDM Malaysia Association
Henrynus Amin	President of *Parti Kerjasama Anak Negeri (Anak Negeri)*	Life member of MNC; Life member of KDCA
Ewon Ebin	Coordinator P.179 Ranau for *Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS)*	President of United Sabah Dusun Association (USDA)

Ethnic organizations function as essential conduits for political engagement, facilitating a direct link between leaders and their communities. Organizations such as KDCA, MNC, KSS, USDA, and KDM Malaysia play a dual role in preserving cultural identities and facilitating political outreach. Leaders utilize these platforms to establish legitimacy, thereby fostering trust and solidarity within their ethnic constituencies. The interaction between cultural representation and political aspirations highlights the persistent significance of ethnic identity in Sabah's political environment.

The intersection of ethnic identity and political leadership is particularly evident in the electoral performance of Kadazandusun-based political parties. The varying success of parties like *PBS, STAR*, and UPKO shows the centrality of identity politics and the influence of charismatic leaders such as Pairin and Jeffrey. These leaders, regarded as paramount chiefs by rural and older Kadazandusun voters, wield significant cultural and political authority. At the same time, the fragmentation of Kadazandusun-based parties and the introduction of new identity labels like *Momogun* highlight the challenges of unifying diverse subgroups under a single political and cultural banner. This complexity is further reflected in the strategies of political elites, who navigate identity politics to mobilize support and consolidate their influence within Sabah's multi-ethnic political landscape.

Table 2 demonstrates the electoral performance of Kadazandusun-based political parties from 2013 to 2020, revealing distinct patterns shaped by identity politics and the leadership of influential figures. Among these parties, *PBS* and *STAR* emerge as the most successful, demonstrating consistent voter support across the years. *PBS* maintained its strength with seven state seats in both 2013 and 2020, and six in 2018, while *STAR* experienced significant growth, rising from just one seat in 2013 to six seats in 2020. This success can largely be attributed to the enduring influence of traditional leaders like Pairin for *PBS* and Jeffrey for STAR. These leaders are revered as paramount chiefs within Kadazandusun communities, especially among older voters and those in rural areas, where traditional leadership holds significant sway.

In contrast, the UPKO experienced a sharp decline in electoral performance. From winning four seats in 2013 and five in 2018, UPKO managed to secure only one seat in 2020. This decline likely stems from the party's shifting alliances and its perceived deviation from championing traditional Kadazandusun interests, which may have disillusioned its core supporters. Meanwhile, *PBRS* demonstrated stability but

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limited influence, winning a single seat in each election year. Similarly, KDM Malaysia made its electoral debut in 2018, securing two seats and maintaining this performance in 2020, indicating stable but modest support among specific constituencies. The Anak Negeri, however, failed to win any seats across all three elections, reflecting its inability to establish a strong political presence or resonate with Kadazandusun voters, highlighting the challenges faced by newer or smaller parties in a political landscape dominated by parties led by established figures like Pairin and Jeffrey.

The overall electoral trends underline the centrality of identity politics in Kadazandusun-based parties, where the leadership of traditional figures significantly shapes voter loyalty. Pairin and Jeffrey's roles as cultural and political icons continue to draw support, reinforcing their parties' positions. At the same time, the fragmentation among Kadazandusun parties reflects the ongoing debates and struggles over identity, such as the adoption of terms like Momogun or broader designations like Natives of Sabah. These debates not only influence voter perceptions but also impact the strategies and cohesion of Kadazandusun political elites.

The electoral outcomes of Kadazandusun based parties also illustrate the interplay between traditional leadership, identity politics, and electoral success. While *PBS* and STAR benefit from the enduring influence of Pairin and Jeffrey, the struggles of other parties like UPKO, *PBRS*, KDM and AN indicate the challenges of maintaining relevance and unity in the context of Kadazandusun identity debates. These dynamics highlight the importance of cultural and symbolic leadership in shaping the political choices of Kadazandusun voters.

Table 2: *The Electoral Performance of Kadazandusun Political Parties from 2013 to 2020*

Political party	Electoral performance (State seats won)		
	2013	2018	2020
Parti Bersatu Sabah (*PBS*)	7	6	7
Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku (STAR SABAH)	1	2	6
United Progressive Kinabalu Organisation (UPKO)	4	5	1
Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (*PBRS*)	1	1	1
Parti Kesejahteraan Demokratik Masyarakat (*KDM*)	N/A	1	2
Parti Kerjasama Anak Negeri (*AN*)	0	0	0

LIMITATION

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of Kadazandusun identity politics in Sabah, it is subject to several limitations. Firstly, while the study focuses on the political and cultural dimensions of identity, it does not fully explore the socio-economic factors that may influence identity construction. These factors, such as income levels, education, and access to resources, play a significant role in shaping how individuals identify with their ethnic group. Secondly, the findings may not fully capture the broader dynamics of indigenous identity politics across Malaysia or globally. Indigenous groups in other countries may experience different forms of identity politics influenced by distinct historical, cultural, and political contexts. Finally, this study primarily examines the perspectives of political elites, cultural institution, ethnic-based organizations, and political parties. While these groups hold significant influence, the study may overlook the individual opinions and lived experiences of ordinary people regarding their ethnic identities. Personal narratives and grassroots experiences could provide additional insight into the everyday reality of ethnic identity, which is often shaped by factors that elites may not fully represent.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic identity remains a powerful and dynamic force in Sabah's political landscape, deeply embedded within leadership structures and party organizations. Shaped by historical, social, and political contexts, it is frequently instrumentalized by political elites as a strategic tool to advance factional or personal interests. This instrumentalization fuels identity politics, manifesting in both unifying and divisive forms. Ethnic organizations such as KDCA, USDA, MNC, and KDM Malaysia, along with political parties like *PBS, STAR,* UPKO*, KDM* and *AN*, play dual roles—rallying community support while navigating the blurred boundaries between cultural advocacy and political maneuvering. Within the Kadazandusun community, the politicization of ethnic identity shows the broader struggles for power, representation, and unity in Malaysia's multi-ethnic framework. While efforts to consolidate identities, such as Kadazandusun or *Momogun*, aim to unify diverse subgroups, they also reflect ongoing identity debates among political elites, exacerbating divisions and perpetuating crises of representation. These dynamics not only shape political behavior but also illuminate the complex interplay between identity construction, leadership, and power in multi-ethnic societies. The findings of this study emphasize the need for a critical examination of

ethnic identity's role in shaping political and social cohesion. Theoretical implications suggest that ethnic identity, far from being a static or purely cultural construct, is a dynamic and politically charged force that reflects deeper contestations of power and belonging. Addressing these challenges requires fostering inclusivity while reevaluating the role of political elites and ethnic organizations in shaping collective identity and representation.

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