Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements

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chapter 7

Lily Eberwein: Her Life and Involvement in the Anti-cession Movement in Sarawak

Welyne J. Jehom

This chapter examines the political involvement of Lily Eberwein (1900–80) in what is referred to as the anti-cession movement in Sarawak, now a part of Malaysia. This little-known nationalist movement in the 1940s attempted to retain the “independence” of Sarawak against takeover by Britain. Although it failed to achieve its objective, it did serve to politicise many local people, including women.

Despite being Eurasian by birth, Lily Eberwein identified with the Malay community in the multi-ethnic society of Sarawak and was active as an educationalist and a political leader. She was a pioneer in a number of ways, being the first “Malay” woman offered a job as a telephone operator at the government department in 1927, and then the first “Malay” woman principal of Permaisuri Girls School, the first Malay girls’ school in Sarawak, founded in 1930. During the Japanese occupation in Sarawak, the Japanese appointed Eberwein as the leader of the Malay section of the Kaum Ibu, a multi-ethnic women’s association.1 In March 1947 she was elected as the chairperson of the women’s wing of the Malay National Union of Sarawak, a leading group in the anti-cession movement.2 Eberwein resigned from her post as the principal of Permaisuri Girls School in 1947 as a gesture of protest against the cession, but she continued her role as an educationalist by establishing new schools.

From a theoretical point of view, the anti-cession movement is a strange nationalist phenomenon because it supported the continuation
Kaum Ibu MNU, Sarawak, 1946. Courtesy of Datuk Sri Hajjah Hafsah Harun

Lily Eberwein Abdullah, 1980. Courtesy of Datuk Sri Hajjah Hafsah Harun
of the rule of the “White Rajahs” of Sarawak. Sarawak was traditionally under the suzerainty of the Brunei sultan, who ruled through Malay chiefs. In 1841 the British Brooke family took over, and three generations of Brookes managed to maintain their control over this remote and neglected part of Borneo and generate goodwill and support among the local population. As in other parts of Southeast Asia, however, the Japanese occupation during World War II swept away the old regime; and after the war Britain negotiated with the reigning Brooke Rajah to “cede” Sarawak to the British empire, adding it to their other colonies in the region. Politicised by their experience of Japanese rule, local leaders opposed the cession, wishing to keep Sarawak independent of the British empire. Although it may seem odd to label as nationalist a movement that supported one form of British rule, that of the Brookes, against another, the British empire, it is understandable from the point of view of local Malay elites who identified the Brookes with their long-standing political domination in Sarawak, and from the point of view of the anti-cession movement’s vision of a new future for their independent nation.

Focusing on Lily Eberwein helps to draw attention to the involvement of women in the anti-cession movement, a matter that has largely been neglected in historical works — although women’s participation has been mentioned by Sabihah Osman, Hasbie Sulaiman, Sanib Said and Robert Reece. Nordi Archie, who wrote about the participation and the role of women in Sarawak politics between 1946 and 1996, briefly discussed their early political engagement in the anti-cession movement in 1946. This chapter is based on very limited archival sources and an interview with Eberwein’s daughter who was a former minister of culture, youth and sport in Sarawak, Datuk Sri Hajjah Hafsah Harun.

**Historical Background**

Sarawak is located on the island of Borneo, separated from West Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia) by the South China Sea. (For place names in this chapter, see map 5.) It is one of the two states that have made up East Malaysia since the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. Among the more than 40 ethnic groups in Sarawak, the major ones are the Iban, Chinese and Malay, followed by Bidayuh, Melanau, Orang Ulu and other indigenous groups. Terminology is loose: Ibans and Bidayuh have often been referred to as Dayaks.
Table 1 gives the statistics for the ethnic groups in 1947. The category “Other indigenous” includes groups such as Kayan, Kenyah, Penan, Kelabit, Bisaya, Kajang and Sembop, while the category “Others” includes Indians.

**Table 1** Sarawak population by ethnic group, 1947

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>97,469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea Dayak [Iban]</td>
<td>190,326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Dayak [Bidayuh]</td>
<td>42,195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanau</td>
<td>35,560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other indigenous</td>
<td>29,867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>145,158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5,719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>546,385</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Malays in Sarawak were divided into the aristocratic elite (*perabangan*) and commoners — the latter were mainly fishermen, petty traders involved in riverine trade with indigenous people of the interior, and farmers growing rice, coconut and rubber. The indigenous groups practised shifting cultivation, planted sago, or lived by fishing. Chinese cultivation concentrated on smallholdings of cash crops such as rubber and pepper.

Although Malays were a non-indigenous minority, they dominated the area politically. Sarawak was ruled by the Malay Brunei sultanate until the arrival and involvement of James Brooke in the “Sarawak affair” in 1839, when Sarawak was in rebellion against the central power. Brooke assisted the sultan’s representative and brought peace to the area, for which he was rewarded in 1841 with the title of Rajah of Sarawak. According to Sanib, “James Brooke and the ‘dynasty’ which he founded in Sarawak, seen in a larger context of the Malay world, was just another of those Malay kingdoms that mark the history of the archipelago.” However, Reece has argued that the Brooke Raj should also be seen as part of the development of European imperialism in insular Southeast Asia, rendering ambiguous later objections to the takeover of Sarawak by the British colonial office. Nevertheless, the Brooke Raj depended on the Malay aristocratic elite to rule Sarawak. In a country where immigrant Malays had been accustomed to rule, apparently there was little objection to having another
kind of foreigner as rajah. Under the Brookes, members of the traditional Malay elite were recruited to hold highly respected posts in the civil service, where they gained administrative experience, subordinate only to the Brookes and their European officers.\(^\text{14}\)

The last White Rajah of Sarawak, Charles Vyner Brooke, took up his post in 1917 and was forced out of power by the Japanese during World War II. After the war he decided that the best future for Sarawak was to become a British Crown Colony, and so, on 6 February 1946, the colonial secretary announced in the British Parliament that Rajah Vyner Brooke had decided to cede his country to the British Crown. The decision to cede\(^\text{15}\) Sarawak to the British Crown was made without consulting the Rajah Muda (Prince) Anthony Brooke,\(^\text{16}\) who expected to become the White Rajah after his uncle, Vyner Brooke. According to Reece, “It may have been that his nephew’s (Anthony) inflexibility in negotiations with the Colonial Office finally persuaded the Rajah that he should not succeed him and that Sarawak should instead become the colony of the Crown.”\(^\text{17}\)

During the 1930s, officials of the Colonial Office had toyed with the idea of taking over the Sarawak government from the Brooke regime and considered potential economic opportunities opened up by such a move. At the end of World War II, access to rubber and oil

| The Anti-cession Movement in Sarawak |
|------------|---------------|
| 1839       | Arrival and involvement of James Brooke in “Sarawak affair” |
| 1841       | Sultan of Brunei rewards James Brooke with title of Rajah of Sarawak |
| 1917       | Last White Rajah of Sarawak, Charles Vyner Brooke, takes up his post |
| 1941–45    | Japanese occupation of Sarawak |
| Feb. 1946  | Britain announces that Rajah Vyner Brooke has decided to cede his country to the British Crown |
| July 1946  | Sarawak becomes a Crown Colony |
| 1946       | Beginning of anti-cession movement |
| 1963       | Formation of the Federation of Malaysia, including Malayan Peninsula, Sarawak and Sabah |
in Sarawak acquired a greater priority in view of the impending independence to be granted to India and Burma. The British arranged with Rajah Brooke for Sarawak to become a Crown Colony on 1 July 1946. Sarawak was to remain under British administration until it joined the Malayan Peninsula with Sabah to form the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. The loss of Sarawak’s independence in 1946 was resisted by elements within it, in what was called the “anti-cession movement”. This movement indicated the politicisation of important sections of the population in the previous decade.

The Anti-cession Movement

Until the late 1930s, state politics in Sarawak was confined to the Brooke family and the 70 to 80 Europeans in the Sarawak Service. Traditional Malay and a handful of Chinese elites monopolised the representation of native and Chinese interests. Then Malays and Chinese began forming communal organisations that threatened to bypass the traditional leadership. The Ibans also began to assert themselves by establishing a communally based cooperative aimed at competing with Chinese traders.

The catalyst for this social change was education. Christian churches had established mission schools, and the Chinese had also set up schools privately. Elite Malays had the opportunity to be prepared for clerical government posts in the National College, which was founded by the government in 1919. Government provision for Iban education was negligible. However, in the early 1930s there was a considerable increase in educational opportunities in the Sarawak capital, Kuching.

While schooling was spreading among all communities, particularly in the larger towns, employment opportunities were not. The Native Officer Service remained the monopoly of the perabangan in spite of the growing number of educated Malays and Ibans who were much better qualified. It was not until 1941 that the government appointed the first Malay native officer who was not an aristocrat. By 1941, there were a substantial number of young educated people of all races whose expectations could not be satisfied by either the Brooke government or the traditional Malay and Chinese leadership.

Fajar Sarawak, founded in 1930 by a small group of educated Malays of non-aristocratic origin, was the first Malay-language newspaper in Sarawak. It showed the first stirrings of Malay political
awareness: it was very critical of the *perabangan*, describing them as being more concerned with their wealth than with helping poor Malays, and also hinted that the *perabangan* were doing very little to justify the position of prestige and authority that they had traditionally enjoyed. However, the paper disappeared after a few months, due to lack of support and to active opposition by the *perabangan*.²⁵

Haji Abdul Rahman pursued the idea of a pan-Malay organisation, which had been suggested by one of the founders of *Fajar Sarawak*, Rakawi Yusoff. Thus, 1939 saw the formation of Persatuan Melayu Sarawak (Sarawak Malay Union), which was renamed Persatuan Melayu Kebangsaan Sarawak (Malay National Union, MNU) after World War II.²⁶ Among its many objectives were: to unite Malays and work together for their advancement; to promote business, education, culture and the Malay language; and to protect the Islamic faith.²⁷ However, the most significant objective that showed dissatisfaction with the traditional form of representation through the *perabangan* was that the MNU aimed to liaise between Malays and the government.²⁸ Through the MNU, younger Malays sensed that to improve in their social and economic condition, they would have to bypass the *perabangan*.

Before the Japanese invasion, then, there were already manifestations of discontent among the newly educated generation vis-à-vis the traditional leadership. The Japanese regime broke the myth of European political and cultural supremacy. At that time, Iban were for the first time given the opportunity to participate in government administration by the Japanese. While the Japanese occupation did not provide opportunities for political activity, it did inspire people in Sarawak with the self-confidence to adopt a political stance and to organise what amounted to political parties. By the end of the war, therefore, all the main ethnic groups in Sarawak had become politicised.²⁹ Subsequently, the MNU, the China Distress Relief Fund committees, and the Dayaks Cooperative Society became the precursors of post-war political parties, two of them in response to the cession controversy in early 1946.

During World War II the Malay National Union (MNU) and educated Malays were not favoured by the Japanese, who followed the Brooke style of governing the masses through the traditional elite.³⁰ Nevertheless, networks among MNU members were maintained and their branches were revived after World War II, serving the cause of anti-cessionists in mobilising mass support within the Malay community.³¹
Following the announcement on 6 February 1946 by the rajah that the British Crown had consented to taking over Sarawak, the MNU and Sarawak Dayak Association (SDA) emerged as Sarawak’s first political parties. For many months, SDA leaders could not come to a clear stand on cession. Both organisations were apprehensive of Chinese domination. There were obstacles before the MNU and SDA could cooperate, due to suspicion that the former were simply using the latter to meet their own ends: this suspicion was fuelled by the patronising attitude to indigenous Sarawakians among MNU conservatives. However, agreement on cooperation was finally achieved as the Ibans were convinced by the close personal friendship between Robert Jitam and Mohd. Nor, and by Suhaily bin Matlayeir, who knew most of the Ibans in Kuching and spoke their language. However, from July until October 1946, the MNU faced internal conflict between the conservatives and younger activists. The latter were mostly English-educated Malays of non-aristocratic origin who found they had more in common politically with Robert Jitam of SDA. MNU members wished to see a reinstatement of the rajah, but not necessarily for the same reasons. For the traditional elite, reinstatement of the Brookes meant a return to the status quo in which they had occupied positions of power and prestige. The motivation of younger Malays in the MNU was more complex because while some just wanted the restoration of Brooke rule, others wanted self-government as promised in the 1941 constitution, which the Rajah had introduced just before the Japanese occupation.

After the war, the rajah made plans to return to Sarawak in March 1946 to revive the 1941 constitution. In order to show that he was ceding the territory to Britain in a proper constitutional manner, the rajah called a meeting of the Council Negri (Council of State), which was held from 15 to 17 May 1946, solely for the purpose of passing the cession bill. Although 10 of the 16 Malay members voted against the bill, most European members (seven out of ten) voted in favour, and the cession bill was passed by 18 votes to 16 on a show of hands. In a cable sent to British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, the Malay leaders Datu Patinggi and Abang Haji Zaini stated that cession did not have the lawful assent of the representatives of the indigenous people and that five of the native members who had voted for cession were “under monetary influence”.

The anti-cession campaign took the form of expressions of loyalty to Bertram and Anthony Brooke, Rajah Vyner Brooke’s brother and
nephew respectively. Datu Patinggi invited Bertram and his son Anthony, who was regarded as the rajah’s successor, to return to Sarawak to initiate fresh discussions on the question of cession. In his letter opposing cession Datu Patinggi included a memorandum from MNU leaders and village heads, dated 12 March, pleading that if the rajah felt unable to continue taking charge of the government he should hand over to Anthony Brooke. The anti-cession movement, spearheaded by the MNU, was under way.

After the announcement of cession, there were mixed feelings among the Chinese in Sarawak. Some Chinese assumed that Sarawak would form part of the Malayan Union and that the Sarawak Chinese would enjoy the rights of Malayan Union citizenship. Others mentioned that “all we want is to have our status raised so that we can enjoy equal rights with the natives”, while some, although concerned that cession might bring an increase in taxation, looked forward to the development that they anticipated colonial status would bring about. Mission-educated Chinese who had a stake in economic development and modernisation but appreciated many of the features of personal rule were uncertain whether the new government would be able to exercise the same control over some of the Ibans of the interior, whose recent headhunting exploits were well known. Among the Ibans, only those who were mission-educated were aware of the cession. The other Ibans and most of the upriver people continued to think for some time that the rajah was still in authority.

The differing perceptions and reactions of the many ethnic groups in Sarawak determined the amount of support and participation in the anti-cession movement. However, published accounts of the movement give scant attention to women’s role in it. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the life of Lily Eberwein. The other important issue that is of interest here is whether those women thought of their action as political and of themselves as nationalists.

Locating Malay Women in the Anti-cession Movement

Among the Malays educated before World War II were women who had access to the first Malay girls’ school, Sekolah Permaisuri, which did not open until 1930. Up until that time, limited modern education was accessible only to aristocratic Malay girls. Although the kind of education available to Malay girls before World War II was intended merely to improve their feminine skills, nonetheless a few of these
Malay women excelled in their studies and pursued teaching careers. A student of Lily Eberwein, Ajibah Abol, who studied at Sekolah Permaisuri, later pursued a teaching career in the same school. Malay women were not visible in career advancement until after the 1950s.\(^{41}\)

The Japanese occupation gave women in Sarawak their first taste of being in associations and working together. Ethnic-based associations were encouraged during the Japanese occupation between 1941 and 1945.\(^{42}\) These associations were responsible for organising demonstrations of loyalty and cultural events to celebrate the Japanese emperor’s birthday and war heroes. The Japanese also sponsored the setting up of a women's association known as Kaum Ibu (Women's Group), which included representatives of the four major ethnic groups. Its leaders were Eberwein, the headmistress of Permaisuri Girls School, for the Malay section; Mary Ong, the daughter of Ong Tiang Swee, a trained nurse, for the Chinese; Barbara Bay (Bayang) of the Dayaks Cooperative Association (Syarikat Kerjasama Dayak) for the Ibans; and Mrs Gopal, the wife of an Indian doctor, to represent the Indians. Their tasks in Kaum Ibu were to collect unused and recyclable metal and to organise fairs to raise funds for Japanese soldiers. Kaum Ibu was also responsible for organising singing and dancing for such events. Apart from that, Kaum Ibu was responsible for encouraging women to grow tapioca as a substitute for rice, which was in short supply.\(^{43}\)

These women from the four ethnic groups were given an opportunity to create networks in carrying out the tasks given to them by the Japanese. Furthermore, their involvement in the association indirectly gave them self-confidence and some encouragement to become interested in politics even if they did not know the meaning of politics and being political. With this experience behind them, some of the women — and for our case here, Eberwein — took a further step to become politically active in the anti-cession movement in 1946.

The Life of Lily Eberwein Abdullah

Lily Eberwein Abdullah was born in 1900 and passed away in 1980. Her father, John Eberwein, a Eurasian of Dutch and Scottish descent from Cocos Island, was a relative of the Clooney Ross family, rulers of that island. He worked with the Straits Steamship Company as the captain of the Rajah Brooke. Like many other European businessmen,
Eberwein’s father looked for a local female partner when he was in Sarawak. The difference between John Eberwein and the others was that while the latter took local women as mistresses, John married a local Malay woman, Maznah bte. Ali bin Alang of Simanggang, and eventually brought her to live in Singapore, where they had two children, Lily and Edward. Although the family followed a Christian way of life in Singapore and the children had a Christian upbringing, Maznah continued to practise as a Muslim.

Eberwein attended St. Mary’s Mission School in Kuching, Sarawak, until she was eight years old and then continued her studies at Raffles Girls School in Singapore. When her father died suddenly, however, she returned to Kuching with her mother and rejoined St. Mary’s Mission School, where she completed standard seven (equivalent to form three, age 15).44

After John Eberwein died and the family returned to Kuching, their lifestyle changed completely. Eberwein had to adjust to a Muslim Malay upbringing, denoted by the addition of Abdullah to her name. In an interview, her daughter Hafsah Harun explained that her mother’s upbringing was different from that of other Malay girls. Having had a European lifestyle in Singapore, when she returned to Kuching she missed her freedom and disliked being confined to the house. She had been accustomed to having male servants to serve her when her father was still alive in Singapore, but back in Kuching she had to serve her uncles. Furthermore, being an educated woman she was very outspoken and independent.

Eberwein converted to Islam in 1913 when she was just 13 years old. She took her time in making this decision, wishing first to learn about the religion. According to Hafsah, her friends in Singapore sent her papers and books to read on Islam, and she also learned from her immediate family members. Apparently her knowledge about her new religion impressed her neighbours, to the extent that many people in the village sent their sons to Eberwein to learn to read the Quran. This gesture showed how highly the people in the village trusted her and respected her, because at that time and in that setting, women were rarely consulted for religious teaching. Eberwein had become accepted, and identified herself, as a Muslim Malay, terms that were seen as inseparable. Hafsah explained that acceptance by people in the village was not really an issue because Eberwein was related to about half of them.
In 1927 Lily Eberwein became the first Malay woman to work in a government department when a Mr Tate, the director of the local telephone company, recruited her to work as a telephone operator (the telephone company was a government enterprise). She had an excellent command of both Malay and English, as was required of a telephone operator, and her father had been a family friend of Mr Tate's. In 1929 she resigned from this post when the Brooke government appointed her as the principal of the Permaisuri Malay Girls School, which was opened in Kuching in 1930. Through her educational activities, both religious and secular, she became known as Cikgu (teacher) Lily.

She was over the age for marriage by that time. She was a single woman until 1938, when she married and proceeded to have three daughters, with the first, Hasnah, being born in 1940. Her husband, Harun bin Haris, was ten years her junior, with only five years of primary education, and worked in the Sarawak Police Constabulary. Hafsa recalled that her father was very supportive of her mother’s involvement in the anti-cession movement and her passion for education. He respected her as a woman and as a wife. In Sarawak at that time, being married at a later age and having a much younger husband would definitely have been controversial. However, Eberwein seemed to be able to take it all in her stride. She was highly respected, especially among Malay people, because of her dedication to educating Malay girls.

**Lily Eberwein as a Nationalist Woman Leader in the Anti-cession Movement**

Lily Eberwein's first step into the overtly political arena came when the women's wing of the Malay National Union, Kaum Ibu MNU, was established on 16 March 1947. Eberwein was elected the organisation's chairperson at its inaugural meeting of more than 1,000 Malay women members. Reece later commented, “In pre-war times, Malay women never appeared in public without covering their heads and it must have seemed an extraordinary development that they should now be speaking on a platform and taking part in politics.” Nonetheless, that platform was not new to Eberwein as she had led a public life for many years. An editor of Sarawak Tribune, describing the meeting as “History in the Making”, was struck by the range of topics addressed by the speakers, which included Malay nationalist movements, Sarawak
history, the backwardness of women in Sarawak and their demand for rights. The editor reflected:

What a far cry the women of today are from their grandmothers…
There is no trace of bashfulness that so characterized a woman in the old days when making a public appearance, and the woman of today stands out on just as firm and equal a ground as that of any man, in full realization of the part they have to play in the country.46

Reece stated that “like the younger group within the MNU, the leadership of the Kaum Ibu represented a movement towards social change”.47

Eberwein appeared an obvious choice to be elected as the first chairperson of Kaum Ibu MNU. She was well educated and had leadership experience in a women’s organisation established by the Japanese during the occupation. She also had full support from her husband and her family.48

As can be seen from the earlier description of political events in Sarawak, this was a highly charged period, when the British government faced opposition to cession within Sarawak. The colonial government in Sarawak attempted to curb the activities of local anti-cessionists by issuing an instruction (Circular No. 9) prohibiting all civil servants from getting involved in any way or being liable to instant dismissal from their post. Those who could not comply needed to inform their respective head of department by 31 December 1946. The anti-cessionists refused to acknowledge Circular No. 9 and organised campaigns in Kuching and Sibu to obtain as many signatures as possible to protest against the circular. About 400 government servants, of whom three were non-Malays, were served three months’ notice till 1 April 1947 to quit when they made known their inability to comply with the circular to their superior.49 Most of them were Malay schoolteachers, and this caused the closure of one-third of all government Malay schools.50 On that day, all 56 teacher trainees of the Sarawak Malay Teachers Training College abandoned their studies in protest against the circular, and 500 other Malays working in schools and non-government occupations also took leave to manifest their displeasure.51

Eberwein as the headmistress of the Permaisuri Malay Girls School and her teaching colleague Ajibah Abol were among the Malay schoolteachers who resigned. Ajibah became Eberwein’s secretary in
the Kaum Ibu MNU, headed by the latter. Eberwein's husband, who was a corporal in the Sarawak Constabulary, resigned soon afterwards. In this case, Eberwein's resignation was her own decision and not governed by her husband's influence. According to Reece, for those who resigned it was a momentous personal decision as well as an act of political commitment, because there was very little prospect of obtaining employment outside government service. Among the 400 who resigned, there were only nine women.52

As the anti-cession struggle continued, the closure of these Malay government schools became a serious concern as affected students could not find places in other Malay schools. Four schools in Kuching and another in Sibu were established by those teachers who resigned. In order to assist children of resigned public servants who boycotted government schools, Eberwein helped to establish a religious school for girls and women (sekolah rakyat) in the premises of the Masjid Bintangor Haji Taha building.53 Eberwein and teachers who had resigned in protest against the circular taught in this and other schools without pay.54 Hence Eberwein's actions appeared to be balancing two parallel concerns: fighting for Sarawak's political destiny as a nationalist, and providing an education for Malay women to effect social change as an educationalist.

In an interview with the Straits Times (Singapore) dated 21 July 194755 on the anti-cession movement, Eberwein expressed her concern for its impact on Malay education. In the article, titled “Education at a Standstill”, she stated that the protest against cession had had the most serious effect on education, which was virtually at a standstill. She emphasised that the position of education in Sarawak must remain a matter of gravest public concern “for as long as this unhappy controversy lasts”, referring to cession. She also stated, “We Malays, in conjunction with the other indigenous races, will fight with unwavering purpose for the redress of the wrong that has been done to our people in the extinction of our nationhood and independence.” In the article she clearly identified herself as a member of the Malay community and with the cause of Sarawak's national independence, but also expressed her concern about the effects of the nationalist struggle on education and thus on the people of Sarawak.

In his memoirs, Anthony Brooke clearly recognised the importance of women's role in the anti-cession movement. He specifically highlighted Eberwein's effort, stating that “a new impetus was given to the movement due to the initiative of Chegu (head teacher) Lily
Eberwein, who formed a women’s branch of the movement. This met with considerable support from women of all ages from throughout the country.”

The MNU sent a group of representatives to meet Brooke in Singapore in February 1947. The Kaum Ibu organised events by petitioning the colonial government and taking part in demonstrations. It also sent a three-member delegation, including Eberwein, to Singapore in July 1947 in anticipation of the arrival there of Kathleen Brooke (the wife of Anthony Brooke) before she proceeded to Sarawak in August 1947 for a tour of the state. Representing her husband, who was banned by the British from entering Sarawak, Kathleen was a force for support of the anti-cession movement. She was accompanied by Eberwein as well as by male members of the MNU. The Kaum Ibu groups that had sprung up around the state since 1946 received Kathleen's tour group with enthusiasm.

Together with Kathleen Brooke, Eberwein and other male and female leaders carried out an arduous rural anti-cession campaign on foot and by boat, travelling to remote longhouses to explain to the longhouse chiefs and get their thumbprints as affirming their opposition to cession. They also sold photos of Anthony Brooke and Sarawak flags to the villages to collect funds. The rural campaign managed to gain the support of 52 Iban penghulu, including Paramount Chief Temenggong Koh and Penghulu Jugah. However, the British administration used its influence to get anti-cessionists, including the latter two, to withdraw their stand.

Based on Hafsah Harun’s recollections of her mother’s activities during the anti-cession campaign, Eberwein to a certain extent had to sacrifice her time with her young children. Malay women in Sarawak at that time were groomed to be “famous for their skill in weaving sarongs, knitting” and they were expected to stay home taking care of the children. Malay women’s activities were all confined to the domestic domain. The anti-cession movement was an exceptional event for Eberwein and other Malay women at that time because they joined in the campaign along with their male counterparts, participating in demonstrations and petitioning the colonial government — and Malay women had their own section in Kaum Ibu even though it was under the male-dominated MNU. Significantly, Hafsah did mention that occasionally, after their meetings, Eberwein complained about her male colleagues, indicating that it was not always easy for her to deal with them.
It is difficult to determine the source of the commitment of Malay women in general and Eberwein in particular to the anti-cession movement, because of the speed of events. Kaum Ibu was created in March 1947, and within a few months women were rallied and campaigning against cession. Although the meeting with Kathleen Brooke in Singapore and her six-month visit to Sarawak until February 1948 may have spurred on the Malay women of Sarawak, by that time Kaum Ibu had already been established, with more than 1,000 Malay women members at the inaugural meeting.

Even for Eberwein, who had more exposure to the outside world than most other Malay women in Sarawak, political activity was not something she had dreamed of, according to her daughter Hafsah. However, she was accompanied to meetings by Ajibah Abol, and the two of them made a good team. Whether or not Eberwein saw herself as a political activist, she was committed to social change through education for Malay girls, as was shown by her lifelong leadership in teaching.

**Eberwein’s Legacy**

After the failure of the anti-cession movement, Eberwein turned her attention mainly to education. In 1950 she established the Satok English School (SES). According to her daughter Hafsah, she started the school because she realised the importance of the English language as a medium of communication, especially in the government service. SES was a stepping stone for students to pursue their studies in government schools.

The school never received any funds from the government, and this showed Eberwein’s true dedication to it. According to Hafsah, there were six classes up to form two, each having two sessions with five or six teachers, and the school survived solely on the sale of handicrafts and collection of funds from former students. The students were taught not just the normal curriculum but to be disciplined and determined. The school was multi-ethnic, taking Malay, Iban, Bidayuh, Chinese and Indian students. Although mainly for girls, the school also admitted a few boys from the boys’ home who were sent to SES because they were too old to enter public school. The troublesome students from the boys’ home were made to feel important, and gradually they became well behaved.
Although Eberwein was a very active anti-cessionist, she never joined any political party. Nevertheless, in 1950 she became the first woman to be appointed as a councillor of the Kuching Municipal Council — another occasion on which she was a pioneer for women in public life in Sarawak. She participated actively in various voluntary organisations, such as the Prisoners’ Aid Society, Anti-Tuberculosis Association Sarawak and Red Cross. She remained the chairman of Kaum Ibu in the Malay National Union of Sarawak until 1960, when she also retired from her own school, Satok English School. After that she occasionally assisted Hafsah, who replaced her as the school principal.

In recognition of her services, Eberwein was given two Sarawak state awards after the Malaysian federation was formed, and she was named an exemplary teacher of Malaysia in 1977. After being a diabetic for 20 years, Cikgu Lily Eberwein died in 1980.

Although Eberwein was heavily involved in the anti-cession movement, her daughter claimed that from what she understood, her mother did not see herself as a politician and was probably unaware of being a nationalist leader: she just saw herself as a protester against the cession of Sarawak to British colonialism. According to Hafsah, Eberwein saw her role in the Malay National Union of Sarawak as participating in a non-governmental organisation, not a political movement. Evidence of her unwillingness to belong to a political party is seen also in her later life. As Hafsah said, “When Sarawak joined Malaysia, she [Eberwein] did not get involved in any political parties.” Hafsah went on to point out that Eberwein’s colleague Ajibah Abol “was one of her former students who were active in politics but it was easier for her because she was single”, although she admitted that if a woman were single she could be subjected to gossip.

In Sarawak there is still only a limited place for women in the public sphere, especially in politics. Although Eberwein herself did not participate in public political life after the anti-cession movement ended, she inspired the few women politicians Sarawak had soon after it joined in the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Ajibah, Eberwein’s former student and colleague whom she appointed as her secretary in Kaum Ibu MNU, became the first woman to win a seat in the state parliament — a feat she accomplished in 1970 and again in 1974. She was appointed the minister of welfare and culture for Sarawak but died in 1976 after a short illness. The second woman who entered the
Sarawak political scene was Hafsah Harun, Eberwein’s daughter. In the 1976 election Hafsah took over the seat left empty by Ajibah’s death. Subsequently, in 1981 she was appointed minister of culture, youth and sport. Her last position as a minister, before she retired as a politician in 1987, was in the Sarawak Ministry of Social Development.

Hafsah expressed fond memories of her upbringing and regarded her mother as an exceptional woman. She stated that her mother had instilled exceptional qualities in her and her sisters — to be independent and outspoken, and to have determination. She brought her daughters to meetings and left them in the next room. Hafsah claimed this experience caused her to perceive herself as a woman politician in the making. She had a very close relationship with her mother, especially after her mother established the Satok English School. Her mother was her role model. Hafsah was taught to speak her mind and was allowed to disagree on matters with a clear conscience. Her mother taught her daughters about religion. She was very strict, but at the same time she was more liberal than most Malay mothers in bringing up her daughters. They were allowed to go out at night but had to come back at a certain time and be escorted at all times.

**Conclusion: Reflections on Eberwein’s Evolving Identity**

Eberwein was born Eurasian, and when her father was still alive she had the opportunity to travel and experience a European home and Christian upbringing, as well as an English-medium school in Singapore. Back in Sarawak, her life and identity changed when she converted to Islam. She obtained Islamic knowledge that made her a respected Quran teacher in her village, which was rare for a woman at that time. Eberwein dressed in Malay clothing — the long skirt and blouse called the baju kurung — covered her head when she went out in public, read and taught the Quran to village boys at the request of their parents, married a Muslim man and lived a Muslim life, and spoke Malay. This behaviour showed that she had adopted a Malay identity, and for that reason the Japanese appointed her as the leader of the Malay section of the women’s association Kaum Ibu. Eberwein opened a religious school for Malay girls and women after her resignation from Permaisuri Malay Girls School in 1947, and she started the Satok English School in 1950 upon seeing the importance of English as a language of communication. She was concerned about
Malay women’s education because she hoped Sarawak women could become educated and independent like herself.

Thus, Lily Eberwein Abdullah’s life demonstrates her involvement in Malay society beyond her leadership of Kaum Ibu MNU in the unusual, brief and failed nationalist movement that was the anti-cession movement in Sarawak. More generally, she earned a place in Sarawak history by inspiring Malay women of her generation and afterwards to play a part in public life.

Notes
2. Ibid., p. 274.
6. Reece, Name of Brooke.
8. Datuk Sri Hajjah Hafsah Harun started her career as a minister at the Chief Minister’s Office in July 1976 and was appointed as Sarawak’s minister of culture, youth and sport in 1981. Her last position as a minister before she retired as a politician in 1987 was at the Ministry of Social Development of Sarawak.
10. Ibid., p. 348.
11. Ibid., p. 346; Sanib, Malay Politics in Sarawak, p. 8.
15. In the circumstances, “cession” is an odd word for what happened in 1946. Runciman states categorically that by the Order in Council on 26 June 1946, “Sarawak was ‘annexed’, not ceded to His Majesty’s dominions” (Steven Runciman, The White Rajahs: A History of Sarawak from 1841 to 1946 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960], p. 301.
16. According to Reece, the period of Anthony Brooke’s administration of Sarawak from April until September 1939 is of some interest; but there are very few records, and those that have survived consist largely of complaints made about him by his critics (Reece, Name of Brooke, pp. 66–7).
17. Ibid., p. 192.
20. Reece, Name of Brooke, p. 128.
22. The Merpati Jepang School opened in 1930. Enche Buyong School opened in 1931, and in the same year two existing schools were merged to form the government-sponsored Malay College, which was intended to train Malays as native officers and teachers. By 1933 enrolment had reached 400, bringing the number of students in Malay schools in Kuching up to 600 (three times the 1921 enrolment). Most important, Malay-language education was no longer restricted to the children of elite families. The first Malay girls’ school, the Sekolah Permaisuri, opened in 1930; and by the late 1930s a handful of Malays had attended the Sultan Idris Training College in Malaya. The English-medium schools in Kuching, St. Thomas (Church of England) and St. Joseph (Roman Catholic), had become popular with the Chinese because of the growing importance of English. These two schools were also attracting some Malays. Clerkships in government departments required proficiency in English and were normally filled by mission school graduates. Christian missionaries were working among the Ibans in the Second Division, opening schools, and Reece stated: “Iban prosperity … had also brought about something of a social revolution since the early 1920s. St. Augustine’s School …, St. Luke’s …, St. Andrew’s and other schools later opened … in response to Iban requests. Although reduced income from rubber in the early 1930s made it difficult for parents to send their children to school, the Iban demand for education was insatiable” (Reece, Name of Brooke, p. 129).
23. Ibid., p. 130.
24. Rakawi Yusoff, the driving force of *Fajar Sarawak*, was a former customs officer who died in 1936. He was a Malay representative on the Kuching Municipal Board in 1934–35 and was one of the few Sarawak Malays who had links with developments in Malaya. A member from 1934 of the Persaudaraan Sahabat Pena Malaya, the first vehicle of Malay cultural nationalism, he had probably been in contact with members of the Kesatuan Melayu Singapore (Singapore Malay Union), established in 1926 (Ibid., p. 132).

25. Ibid., p. 134.
26. Ibid., p. 160.
27. MNU objectives were similar to those of contemporary associations on the Malayan Peninsula (Ibid., p. 135).
30. Ibid.; Sabihah, “Malay-Muslim Response”.
32. Ibid., p. 249.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., p. 250.
37. Bertram’s birthday on 8 August, which was designated as a public holiday, was marked by all government offices and most shops. Malay National Union members gathered at the Indian mosque, where the Sarawak anthem was sung and a number of speeches were made before the imam closed the meeting (Ibid.).
38. Ibid., p. 219.
39. Ibid., pp. 208–9. Christopher Dawson of the Malayan Civil Service, who was elected to act as chief secretary of the new colonial government if the cession went through, felt that as long as there was an undertaking that the rajah’s replacement would visit them from time to time, “simple Dayaks” would accept cession (Ibid., p. 221).
42. The Japanese attempted to garner support from the natives of Sarawak through the latter’s participation in the Japanese-controlled government. Civil servants were asked (not forced) to remain in their administrative positions to help run the Japanese-controlled government. In fact, a Japanese military decree of 1943 emphasised “the political participation
of natives in the administration of North Borneo (including Sarawak).” The Ken Sanjikai, or the Prefectural Advisory Council that had been authorised by the military decree in 1943, chose its councillors from the old elites. The councillors were supposed to advise the Japanese administration on social and political questions (Hasbie, *Perjuangan Anti-cession Sarawak*; Sabihah, “Malay-Muslim Response”).


44. There is conflicting information about her educational background. Abg. Yusof Puteh (1990) mentioned that she was the first Malay woman to be educated at Raffles Girls School in Singapore until standard seven, which was equivalent to form three, age 15. However, another source written in 1982 by her own daughter, who was then serving in the Chief Minister’s Department of Sarawak, mentioned that after the untimely death of her father, young Lily returned to Kuching, Sarawak, and continued her studies until standard seven at St. Mary’s Mission School. The latter information seems to be more accurate, because the daughter still has Lily’s school certificate given on completion of form three at St. Mary’s Mission School.


46. Ibid., p. 275.

47. Ibid.

48. Interview with Lily’s daughter Datuk Hafsah Harun at her residence, 5 Nov. 2010.


52. This figure comes from the list of 338 with the names and their respective departments published in *Sarawak Tribune* on 3 April 1947 (see Hasbie, *Perjuangan Anti-cession Sarawak*, pp. 107–21).

53. The school was closed after only a few months due to a lack of funds (Sabihah, “Malay-Muslim Response”, p. 161).


58. Ibid., p. 127.

59. Reece, *Name of Brooke*; Sabihah, “Malay-Muslim Response”.

60. Reece, *Name of Brooke*; Hasbie, *Perjuangan Anti-cession Sarawak*.

62. Ibid., p. 54. Evidently the Ibans and others upriver were not aware of the cession. Even many of the educated Ibans in Kuching did not respond positively to the anti-cession campaign. Robert Jitam (who resigned from government service) failed to persuade Iban government servants to do the same in relation to Circular No. 9, and as a response to that he reconstructed the SDA committee so that Alfred Jamuh, who resigned from the Forestry Department, was elected the new SDA president (Reece, *Name of Brooke*, p. 272).


64. “Mrs. Brooke back from Sarawak”, *Straits Times*, 18 Feb. 1948, p. 5.