



Perceptions of the Iban in the Sihan Ethnoscape

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Biography

Yumi Kato is an Assistant Professor at Hakubi Center for Advanced Research and an Affiliated Assistant Professor at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University. Her major is anthropology. She has conducted anthropological research with Sihan in Belaga since 2003. She received Ph. D. in Area Studies from Kyoto University in 2011. Her Ph. D. dissertation is entitled “Change and resilience of a hunter-gatherer society in Sarawak, Malaysia: A case study of the Sihan”. Recently she wrote a paper entitled ‘Resilience and flexibility: History of hunter-gatherers’ relationships with their neighbors in Borneo’ in *Senri Ethnological Studies* 94. She also wrote a chapter entitled ‘Changes in resource use and subsistence activities under the plantation expansion in Sarawak, Malaysia’ in the book “Social-Ecological System in Transition” published by Springer. Her recent research interest is identity of ethnic minorities.

1. Introduction

The Sihan are a settled hunter-gatherer group who live in Belaga District, on the upper Rajang River in Borneo. Kaskija estimated the current population of hunter-gatherers in Borneo (including settled people) as about 25,000 (Kaskija 2016). Most of these people are Punan or Penan. The Sihan are a minority hunter-gatherer group with a population of about 300. The Borneo Post reported that they are one of the ethnic groups on ‘the edge of extinction’ (Cheng 2012). The Sihan explain that the reason for their small population is the repeated massacres in the past.

In the nineteenth century, the Sihan lived along the Mujung River, which is a tributary of the Baleh River (Low 1884). From there, they moved to Pulau Raya on the Rajang River, then in succession to the Pila, Bungan, and Segaham rivers, due

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to the political conflict against the Kayan who migrated into the Balui River area from the Kayan River, and later against the Iban who moved from the Kapuas to the Rajang River (Low 1884). Indeed, the Sihan were frequently attacked by parties of Iban up until the middle of the twentieth century (Sandin 1985, Maxwell 1992). They finally settled down at the Menamang River, 4 km southwest of Belaga Bazaar, in the 1960s following repeated advice from administrative officers and the chiefs of stratified groups such as the Sekapan and Kayan. They gradually started to rent houses in Belaga and engaged in occasional wage labour since the 1980s. Later, some families started to move to the logging roadside connecting Belaga and Tubau since the late 1990s. Sihan currently live in these three places: the original longhouses, Belaga Town, and new longhouses along the road, frequently moving between the three.

This paper describes how the Sihan of Sarawak view neighbouring ethnic groups, including the Iban. It especially discusses the different images that are evoked by the collectivity of ethnic groups and individuality by exploring the Sihan's ethnoscape perception in a multi-ethnic situation. It also considers how the Sihan identify and differentiate themselves from others.

Previous studies on inter-ethnic relationships between the Iban and other ethnic groups mainly described assimilation, the absorption of neighbouring groups, or the conflict with them that accompanied the Iban's historical expansion. Hunter-gatherers who often competed with the Iban for forest products were reported by saying that they were easy to have conflict, or be assimilated to, or be swallowed in the Iban (Sandin 1980, Rousseau 1980). For example, Thambiah explained the repeated conflicts between Bhuket and Iban in the past (Thambiah 1995). Urquhart mentioned that the Punan Batu experienced two epidemics that killed 70 of their people, and the remainder who settled down in the Iban longhouses did not know anything about Punan Batu history and customs (Urquhart 1951). Other ethnic minorities such as the Sru, Kanowit, and Rajang were also mentioned as having been assimilated to the Iban. In contrast, Sandin pointed out the alliance of the Bekatan⁴ and Iban, the Bekatan becoming the Iban's forest guides when the Iban conducted headhunting or searched for forest products (Sandin 1968). Uchibori examined marital relations between the Bekatan, Iban, and Lisum and wrote that most of the Bekatan males married Iban and lived in the Iban longhouses (Uchibori 1994).

After the Sihan themselves, the Sihan marry Iban more than any other ethnic group. This paper focuses on the current inter-ethnic relationship between the Sihan and the Iban, and compares with the relationships between the Sihan and other ethnic groups.

Leach proposed the 'Kayan–Kenyah–Kajang complex' and pointed out the similarity of stratified groups. However, Leach excluded the nomads of the Balui River Basin from his analysis and the inter-ethnic relationships of hunter-gatherers and stratified groups are unclear in his report. Rousseau discussed social units based on the river basin which he called 'basin society'. He also explained the social structure of the Kayan and pointed out that forest product trade with hunter-gatherers played

⁴ Bekatan are also spelled as Bukitan or Beketan. Sihan call them Begatan.

an important role for Kayan aristocratic clans in strengthening their political leadership (Rousseau 1990). How hunter-gatherers perceived stratified groups is unclear in his analysis.

As well as describing the hunter-gatherers' perception of other ethnic groups, this study considers the differences of images ethnic groups that is evoked collectivity and individuals. Lastly, it discusses how these different perceptions are significant in the Sihan's perception of other ethnic groups. This paper is based on the author's anthropological research between August 2003 and March 2017. A brief history of the Sihan is given below.

2. The Sihan ethnoscape in a multi-ethnic situation

The Sihan usually interact with people living between the Punan Bah downstream and the Kayan Uma Apan upstream. These people usually come to Belaga Town for education and administrative services like the Sihan do.⁵ The Malay and Chinese living in Belaga Town, people who come from other areas to work at Belaga Town, and those Iban and Indonesians who marry Sihan are also their daily neighbours.

Table 1. Population and number of village by ethnic groups in Belaga

Ethnic group	Number of viilage	Population
Kenyah	16	9073
Kayan	16	7104
Penan	25	2820
Punan	5	1457
Kejaman	2	962
Lahanan	2	758
Melayu	2	820
Sekapan	2	1085
Seping	3	470
Ukit (Bhuket)	1	518
Iban	1	156
Sihan	1	207
Tanjong	1	179
Cina	1	400
Total	78	26009

Source: Pajabat Daerah Belaga 2015

⁵ Detailed information on each ethnic group in Belaga District is contained in Langub's report (Langub 2003).

especially the Sekapan and Kejaman, were politically dominant on the Balui River. Brooke governed the Sihan through the chiefs of Sekapan and Kejaman (Low 1882). The Sihan's oral history also mentions that they were protected by the Wi Baliu's chiefs from the Iban's headhunters.

Psychologically, the Sihan maintain a distance from the Wi Baliu, although they interact very closely with them in everyday life. For instance, Sihan often demand that other Sihan share daily necessities like cooking oil or soap when they run out of them. They never ask Wi Baliu to share them even though they live very close. Of the seventy-two married couples including Sihan, eleven are Sihan–Wi Baliu couples. Five married Kayan, two married Lahanan and Kejaman respectively, and one married Sekapan and Kenyah respectively. There are also many Sihan who have Wi Baliu descendants, because the Sihan often divorce.

What is noticeable in the narratives of the Sihan about the Wi Baliu is their bilateral character. For instance, the Sihan often emphasize the differences between their customs (*adet*) and those of the Wi Baliu, but emphasize the similarities, usually when they talk with people from other areas in Malaysia. Then, the Sihan stress the similarity with the Wi Baliu, using the ethnic category of Orang Ulu, because both live in longhouses and conduct shifting cultivation. Recently, some young Sihan have married Chinese or Malays from other areas in Malaysia. In these cases, they wear the Orang Ulu costume, and emphasize their similarity to the Wi Baliu.

In contrast, the Wi Baliu recognize the Sihan as being similar to the Penan. The Wi Baliu often mention that 'the Sihan were like the Penan before; however, they have progressed because they live close to us'. The same narratives are also heard from the Sihan themselves. Johannes Nicolaisen wrote that the Sihan were sometimes called Punan Sihan by others (Nicolaisen 1976). Benedict Sandin said that his Sihan informant, Salek Gawit, referred to them as Punan Sihan (Sandin 1985). In fact, when the present author started fieldwork in 2003, the Kayan referred to the Sihan as Punan Sihan. Hence, the Wi Baliu's perception of the Sihan still remains that of hunter-gatherers, even though they currently engage in various forms of wage labour.

(2) Perception of Punan Tano'

The Sihan have a more intimate and frank perception of the Punan Tano' (Penan), especially the Penan Talun, in contrast to the distance they maintain from the Wi Baliu, possibly due to their intimate marital relations in the past. The Sihan and Penan speak different languages and their living areas were very far apart until the middle of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Their settlements became close after the 1960s when the Penan Talun moved to the Belangan River and they visited each other frequently by crossing the mountain ridges. They collected forest products together and occasionally lived together. The Sihan mention that their previous life was just like

¹⁰ The Sihan are originally from the Mujung River; however, the Penan Talun are originally from the Bunut River on the upper Balui River. The Sihan speak a Melanau–Kajang group language, while the Penan speak a Kayan–Kenyah group language (Low 1884, Chan 1995).

that of the Penan. Afterwards, marital relations between the groups increased.¹¹ After the Sihan themselves and the Iban, the Penan are the ethnic group that the Sihan most frequently marry. Of the 72 Sihan married couples, nine are married to Penan Talun. Moreover, most of the Sihan have Penan descendants, because divorce is very common in both groups.¹²

In contrast, the Sihan do not recognize the Penan as the same owing to the differences in their historical backgrounds.¹³ Interaction with the Penan Talun decreased after the Penan moved to Sungai Asap in the late 1990s. Sometimes the Sihan refer to the Penan Talun's current situation as fortunate because they are able to benefit many development projects having resettled in Sungai Asap. The Sihan also know that other Penan groups relocated due to the Murum Dam have many four-wheel-drive cars and many development projects. The Sihan perceive the Penan Talun as being treated differently by the government, although the Sihan and Penan Talun have intimate marital relations, and the Sihan consider the Penan's earlier lifestyle as having been the same as that of the Sihan.

(3) Perception of Iban¹⁴

The Sihan perceive the Iban differently from other ethnic groups, in that they tend to be recognized as individual characters rather than as being members of certain longhouses. The Sihan usually encounter Iban who come to work in Belaga, or who marry Sihan and live in Sihan community. These individual Iban are recognized as individual characters, because the Sihan never meet them as members of original longhouses.

Between the middle of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Sihan experienced repeated attacks and massacres by the Iban. For instance, an allied group of Iban and Bekatan launched a surprise attack on the Sihan at Dapat River, a tributary of the Bungan River. One party of Iban burned the Sihan's settlement at the Segaham River and another party attacked the Sihan at the Belanum River (Kato 2011). These massacres are reported in the studies previously mentioned (Low 1882, 1884, Sandin 1985, Maxwell 1992). The Sihan also emphasize this more than any other topic in their oral history. This memory remains strong among the elder generation. Hence, the Sihan often use the Iban as generic figures for ominous characters when telling a story, a custom referred to as *ngeluing*.

In contrast, the younger generation have more friendly relationships. Currently, the Iban are emerging as affinal relatives, because they are the ethnic group after

¹¹ Chan pointed out that the historical intimate relationship between the Sihan and Penan Talun was because both groups were the only settled hunter-gatherers in the main Balui River Basin (Chan 1995).

¹² Egay says that the Penan Talun have a mixed Penan–Sihan identity (Egay 2008).

¹³ The Sihan also have contact with other groups of Penan. They sometimes visit Penan groups farther away, when they need shaman treatment or special assistance for money or goods. In these cases, the Sihan use the Penan Talun kindred. The poverty image of the Penan in the past may arise from the experiences of hunger when they visited these Penan.

¹⁴ The Sihan call the Iban 'Ivan'.

the Sihan themselves that Sihan marry frequently.¹⁵ Of the 72 married Sihan couples, 13 are married to Iban.¹⁶ The behaviour of those Iban who marry and live in Sihan longhouses varies by individual. Some people never speak Sihan, others speak Sihan fluently. Some have never returned to their original longhouse, others visit their original longhouse frequently. What is notable here is that those Iban who live in Sihan longhouses do not gather, or form groups, or chat in Iban. Therefore, they do not emerge as a collective group in the Sihan community. Recently, the Sihan elders have changed the *ngeluing* phrase from 'Iban' to 'Iban moju' (Iban who live far away) when they tell stories with ominous characters, because the Iban have become their affinal relatives. The Iban, on the other hand, tend to recognize the current Sihan as part of the Orang Ulu group, because most Iban do not know the Sihan.¹⁷

(4) Perceptions of Chinese and Malay

Geographically, the Malays and Chinese live very close to the Sihan, because the Sihan rent houses beside the Belaga Bazaar or behind Kampung Melayu in Belaga Town. However, they are mentally more distant groups than the Wi Baliu in Sihan perception, because they do not live in longhouses, they rarely conduct shifting cultivation, and their customs are more different than those of the Wi Baliu. The relationships between Sihan and Chinese or Malays¹⁸ are chiefly based on employment.

However, the Chinese are currently the fourth ethnic group who Sihan frequently marry with eight of the 72 Sihan married couples being Sihan–Chinese. These people are young Sihan girls who married after 2010. What is remarkable here is none of those Chinese are from Belaga, but Chinese who live in other areas including Bintulu, Kuching, and Miri. The Malays are the fifth ethnic group that Sihan frequently marry, there currently being six Sihan–Malay couples¹⁹. Four of these Malays are people from other areas, including Kuching, Sabah, and Peninsular Malaysia.

While Sihan marry Chinese or Malays in urban areas, they do not often marry them in Belaga. This may be due to the different relationships and the different images of the Sihan held by people in urban areas and in Belaga. People in other areas do not have a collective image of the Sihan; the image is therefore based on the individual relationship. In Belaga by contrast, the images of the Sihan may be affected by the

¹⁵ In the 1920s, one Iban female from the Mujung River married into a Sihan community, even though the Sihan were frequently attacked by the Iban at that time. After that, another Iban female married a Sihan around 1980. Marriage between Sihan and Iban increased after the 1990s, because increasing numbers of Iban came to work at logging companies in Belaga. Some Sihan say that Iban are good to marry because they do not require a large dowry, just the same as the Sihan. The Wi Baliu, in contrast, require a large dowry.

¹⁶ Six of these couples usually live in a Sihan longhouse, one couple lives in an Iban longhouse, two couples occasionally move between two longhouses, and four couples live in cities.

¹⁷ For example, when the author conducted interviews in Tubau, the Iban did not know the Sihan, whereas the Kayan did.

¹⁸ The Sihan call the Chinese Kina', and the Malay Melayu'.

¹⁹ Kampung Melayu of Belaga absorbs those Wi Baliu including Sekapan, Kejaman, Punan Bah. Two Sihan girls married Belaga Malays around 1980. However, marriages with Malays from different areas are currently increasing.

collective image based on Sihan's historical background, because the Chinese and Malays seldom have intimate individual relationships with the Sihan.

(5) Bekatan and Indonesians

Bekatan and Indonesian cases show the variability of the ethnoscape by time and situation. Relationships with Bekatan are decreasing, whereas those with Indonesians are increasing. Numerous Sihan married and joined Bekatan communities when these two groups lived at Pulau Raya and the Pila River in the nineteenth century. Three Sihan are currently married to Bekatan, and many Sihan have Bekatan descendents. Bekatan usually go to Kapit and seldom come to Belaga because their longhouses are a long way downriver. They visit each other for funerals, but these two groups seldom meet in day-to-day life.

Indonesians have recently emerged as important aspects of the Sihan ethnoscape. Some Indonesians who came to Belaga to work in logging companies married Sihan in the 1990s. Increasing number of Indonesians came to work on plantations, construction, and service sectors after 2000. There are currently four Indonesians married to Sihan and they come from separate ethnic groups – Jawa, Bugis, Sambas, and Kenyah. What is noticeable here is that they never gather and chat using Indonesian in the Sihan community because they prefer to maintain their relationship with the families they have married into.

Discussion

In previous studies, the ethnoscape of the Balui River has mainly been described by the perceptions of stratified societies (e.g. Leach 1950, Rousseau 1990). This paper tries to understand the Sihan's perception of their ethnoscape by describing how they recognize and perceive other ethnic groups. They feel an affinity with the Penan, while in contrast they keep their distance from the Wi Baliu. Furthermore, they perceive Malays and Chinese as more distant again than the Wi Baliu. This may be a reflection of the images of collective ethnic groups in their history. The similarity of hunter-gatherers and farmers have been discussed in previous studies (Kaskija 2016), including the single-origin theory of Borneo hunter-gatherers and farmers proposed by Hoffman (1980). Currently, both groups conduct shifting cultivation and live in longhouses. Their lifestyles seem similar in this regard. However, the images of each group reflect historical recollections and the accumulation of daily experiences.

In contrast, what is unique about the Iban in the Sihan perception of their ethnoscape is that they tend to be recognized as individual characters rather than by a collective group image. The Iban whom the Sihan meet in daily life are those individuals who come from other areas to work in Belaga, or who marry and live in Sihan communities. Hence, these Iban do not emerge as a collective group with a specific historical identity. So far, the Iban have not formed groups in the Sihan communities, because each person maintains the relationship with their married families. The same would apply to the Iban who meet and live with Sihan in urban areas. The Iban in urban areas lack a collective image of the Sihan, seeing them instead as part of the Orang Ulu group.

The same situation is also reflected in the different images evoked by the Chinese or Malays in Belaga, and Chinese or Malays in urban areas. Chinese and Malays in Belaga seldom have intimate individual relationships with the Sihan, although they live very closely. Chinese or Malays in urban areas recognize the Sihan based on individual relationships because they do not have a collective image of them.

Perception of ethnoscape are variable depending on generations and current situations. Sihan elders have strong memories of Iban headhunting in the past. However, among the younger generation, many Sihan have marital relations and friendships with Iban. Previous studies on the relationships between the Iban and other ethnic minorities have mainly reported the assimilation and absorption of these ethnic minorities (Sandin 1980). Currently, the Tatau live together with the Iban, the Lugat live together with Chinese. It is possible that the Iban or other ethnic groups will become the majority in Sihan communities in the future, like the current situation of the Tatau and Lugat. Relationships with urban dwellers will also become more important as increasing numbers of younger Sihan prefer to work there. To understand how the Sihan in urban areas and their children perceive themselves and others is the next challenge for my research.

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