

Tongues in Use: The Case of Two Southeast Asian Boundary Communities

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1. Introduction

This paper considers patterns of communication between two Iban communities, one situated in the Lower Baram district of Sarawak in east Malaysia, the other in the southern part of Negara Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei). They are connected by a two-mile path, which traverses the border between Malaysia and Brunei. Central issues in these patterns are the relative social, economic and cultural situations of each community. These 'social' factors serve to illustrate the extent to which the environment inhabited by each group has affected the language repertoires and affiliations of these particular communities.

The Iban comprise the most numerous of the indigenous groups in Borneo and the second most numerous in Malaysia after the Malays. While the Iban constitute an indigenous majority in Sarawak (in East Malaysia on the island of Borneo), they are a minority in Brunei as well as being considered non-indigenous to the state. Given that many of the minority groups in Brunei appear to be undergoing a process of ethnolinguistic assimilation under the hegemony of the numerically and politically dominant Malays, one might reasonably assume some degree of cultural and linguistic assimilation for the Iban (despite their relatively strong ethnolinguistic vitality rating by Martin (1995:32)).

Cultural and linguistic shift in Southeast Asia have received increasing attention in recent years, major contributions including (among others): Thurston (1987), Mullhausler (1989), Florey (1991), Kulick (1992) and Dutton (ed., 1992), the latter editing an issue of *Pacific Linguistics* devoted to cultural and linguistic change as evidenced through a series of individual case studies.

In Brunei there has been the work of Kershaw on the position of Dusun (1994a) and the ongoing work of Martin with respect to the ethnolinguistic vitality of indigenous languages in Brunei under

the domination of Malay (1995); Sercombe (in press) has briefly considered the ethnolinguistic situation among the tiny group (of officially non-indigenous) Penan, former hunter-gatherers, for whom the transition to a settled existence has itself been a dramatic change.

To date the Iban in Brunei (and their language) have received little close attention other than in the demographic studies of Austin (1976, 1977a, 1977b) and in Nothofer's survey of Brunei languages (1991). The Iban in Sarawak however, in comparison to other Borneo groups, have received considerable attention from scholars especially over the last three decades, including among others: Kedit's work on modernization among the Iban (1980a, 1980b), Asmah's description of Iban grammar (1981), Freeman's detailed ethnographic study, whose main focus is Iban agriculture (1992), Sutlive's study of the effects of urbanization on the Iban (1972, 1988, 1992) and Jawan's attention to the Iban in the arena of Sarawak politics as well as economic development among the Iban in Sarawak (1992, 1994).

This paper aims to address the issue of language repertoires and language attitudes among the residents of two Iban villages situated approximately two miles apart, but otherwise located in the separate nation states of Brunei and Malaysia. They inhabit markedly different circumstances, especially in relation to their economic conditions, and these I believe, are presently what most affect their patterns of language use. The picture given here is a general one and is without a detailed consideration of the potential significance of age and gender differences, thus lacking a precision, which might otherwise have revealed finer distinctions in language use between various subgroupings within each community.

2. Background to the Study

2.1 History of the Iban people

The history of the Iban in Sarawak commenced with their migration from the Kapuas River region in western Kalimantan by way of the low-lying watershed between the Kapuas and the Batang Lupar river (around three centuries ago). They came in

search of new lands for cultivation and to expand their territories (Sandin 1967:1, 1994:79).

The Iban have been particularly noted for their considerable mobility (Austin 1976:64), and this accounts for their spread into and throughout Sarawak since they first arrived in Borneo, compared to the less widespread movement of other groups; Ibans however, remain predominant in western Sarawak. Groups of Iban began to migrate east across Sarawak to the Baram River area in significant numbers between 1900 and 1941 where they settled largely in the Lower Baram and its larger tributaries, the Bakong and Tinjar. This was as a result both of their own desire to acquire new lands and encouragement from the ruler of Sarawak Charles Brooke during the early part of this time, who saw the Iban as a security buffer against the Brunei sultanate, besides them being a useful means of keeping the inhabitants of the Baram district in check. During this period the indigenes of Sarawak's Baram division still remained an unknown quantity to senior administrators in Kuching (Pringle 1970:269-272).

2.2 Economy of the Iban people

The Iban have been characterized traditionally as a lowland people, practising dry rice shifting cultivation. The swidden method of agriculture meant there was an ongoing search for new lands, which the Ibans were able to continue colonizing until fairly recently. Theirs is basically a rice cult, aimed at ensuring ample supplies of this staple food. However, in recent decades, cocoa, pepper and rubber, among others, have been planted as cash crops. Nowadays though, increasing numbers of Ibans are seeking work in urban, coastal areas (cf. Sutlive 1992), as among other ethnic groups throughout Borneo, to satisfy changing values and needs: symbols of status are rapidly becoming: "consumeristic, mass cultural and alien to local ethnic traditions" (Mulder 1996:175). Both village communities considered here, rather than buying large ceramic jars, the traditional wealth totems of old, now buy video players and televisions for the home, a trend that is certainly not exclusive to today's Ibans (even though large ceramic jars continue to be admired, but more as antiques, or relics of a past era rather than as symbols of status).

2.3 Social Organisation

Ibans (like the majority of other indigenous groups in Borneo) have traditionally occupied longhouses, being generally located next to and facing rivers. They have comprised mainly autonomous communities, that are unstratified, unlike many other settled groups in Borneo who are generally more institutionally hierarchical in their social organisation (cf. Revel-Macdonald 1988:80). Even so they are not necessarily egalitarian (cf. Rousseau 1980:52-63), often having affluent and domineering lineages. Every longhouse village however does have a headman (*tuai rumah*) or - rarely - a headwoman, but since the arrival of European colonizers, the way an Iban headman is viewed and remains in that position has come to be even more influenced by factors outside Iban society, particularly central government. As recognised by Steward, in his description of notions and means to account for cultural change among primitive societies around the world, "In states, nations and empires the nature of the local group is determined by these larger institutions no less than by its local adaptations" (1955:32).

2.4 Distinctive cultural features

Despite massive social, political and economic changes throughout Borneo, especially since 1963 when Sarawak joined Malaysia (cf. Cleary and Eaton 1992:3; Ave and King 1986: 65), the Iban nevertheless tend to remain strong adherents to certain traditions and are famous throughout Borneo for their *gawai* (festivals), particularly the harvest festival, held annually at the end of May. Significant here is that even when Ibans embrace a major religion such as Islam or Christianity, many continue to observe their festivals with vigour.¹

2.5 The Iban language

Iban is an isolect of the Austronesian language family, which is characteristically agglutinative. It is part of the Malayic subgroup of languages and shares a number of cognates with Malay, although the two languages are mutually unintelligible (Hose 1912:249; Asmah 1981:5). Hose, in his late nineteenth century study of the different tribes of Borneo, writes "Iban . . .