

# Resilience and Flexibility : History of Hunter-Gatherers ' Relationships with their Neighbors in Borneo

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## **Resilience and Flexibility: History of Hunter-Gatherers' Relationships with their Neighbors in Borneo**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the relationships between settled hunter-gatherers and their neighbors in Central Borneo. Most previous studies have examined the relationships between Penan/Punan and farmers in Borneo. In these studies, inter-ethnic relations are described mainly as patron-client relationships, based on their forest products trade. However, hunter-gatherers who lived in the middle reaches of the rivers could have more frequent contact with more numerous neighboring groups. In other words, these groups have a different interaction model from the Penan/Punans who lived in the upper reaches of rivers. In addition, the contemporary relationships between settled hunters and neighbors, including Chinese, have not been well argued. Therefore, this article aims to explore the plural ethnic relations between settled hunter-gatherers and Chinese, as well as other ethnic groups. It describes the Sihan, minority settled hunter-gatherers living in the upper Rajang River of Malaysian Borneo. Two points are discussed using field data, including oral history, which the author has collected since 2003, and the government gazette. The first point is the historical plural inter-ethnic relations of the Sihan. When living along the middle Rajang River during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Sihan had daily close relationships with Lugat, Bekatan and Lisum. On the other hand, they had been embroiled in Iban headhunting and political conflict by Kayan. Economically, the Sihan had trade relations with Chinese since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The second point examined in this article concerns the change of inter-ethnic relations in contemporary life. The Sihan have strong economic relations with Chinese. Most of them work for the Chinese and live in rental houses owned by Chinese in Belaga Town. On the other hand, Sihan have marital ties with various ethnic groups. As a result, it discusses how individuals have diversified relationships with their neighbors.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Approximately 25,000 former and contemporary hunter-gatherers live in

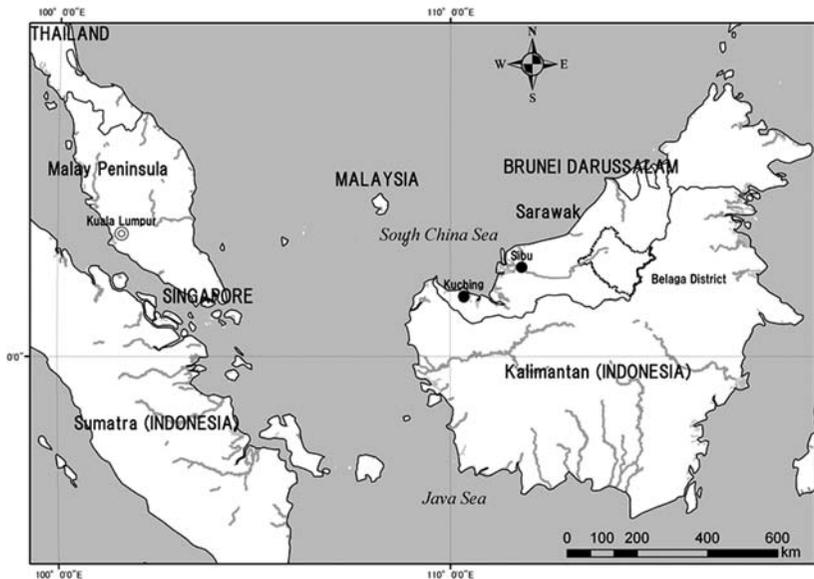


Figure 1 Map of Borneo Island

Borneo Island, which is divided among Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei (Kaskija 2016) (Figure 1). Most of these populations had settled in villages during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are engaged in shifting cultivation. Currently, some people live in towns and have permanent jobs. There are also those who have converted to Islam and live in largely Muslim communities. Most previous studies of hunter-gatherers in Borneo were conducted on the Penan and Punan, who have comprised the largest hunter-gatherer population. Previous studies about Penan and Punan revealed several social features such as flexibility, immediacy, sharing, opportunistic, individual autonomy, and adaptation to settled life (Needham 1954, 1972; Sellato 1994; Kaskija 1998; Langub 1972, 1974, 1996; Puri 2005; Sellato and Sercombe 2007). Previous studies of the relationships of hunter-gatherers with their neighbors have mainly focused on Penan/Punan relationships with farmers, and have demonstrated patron-client relations with them, especially among peoples like the Kayan and Kenyah, who have stratified societies (Needham 1954, 1972; Rousseau 1990).

Those studies explained that farmers traditionally had a strong relationship with hunter-gatherers through the trading of forest products, and sometimes that farmers have protected hunter-gatherers from headhunters (Photo 1). Chinese traders also have an important relationship through their obtaining of forest products, especially eagle wood (Ooi 1995). These traders were sometimes seen as having entrapped hunter-gatherers in debt chains. For example, Ooi (1997) analyzed the system of forest product trade in the inland area. He reported that farmers, like the Kayan, became intermediate buyers that bought various forest

products, such as eaglewood, bird nests and rattan from the Penan. These farmers then sold the goods to Chinese buyers in downriver areas.

Ooi (1995, 1997) and Rousseau (1990) reported that these forest products trades between farmers and hunter-gatherers were often unequal, since, being unaware of their real value, Penans were often cheated and forced to sell their products at low prices. Penans were also enmeshed in debt chains. Therefore, the Brooke government established several trade points (*tamu*) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and oversaw fair trade. In addition, farmers also mediated official notifications from the Brooke government to the hunter-gatherers (Needham 1972). Needham (1972) reported that farmers protected Penans threatened by headhunters. Penans sometimes helped work Kayan's rice fields. Such relations are termed patron-client relations.

There are other minority former hunter-gatherers in Sarawak in addition to Penan, including the Bhuket, Lugat, Bekatan, and Sihan. Historically, these minority hunter-gatherer groups inhabited the middle reaches of the Rajang River (Low; 1884a). Compared to the Penan, who lived in the far upper reaches, these minority groups should have had more intimate relationships with neighboring ethnic groups in earlier decades, in part because they lived close to forts and bazaars. These groups started settling down and cultivating rice fields in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Low 1884a; Buck 1888; Sandin 1968). This was much earlier than the Penans who mostly started to settle in the 1960s (Langub 1972, 1974, 1996; Kiyu 1982; Koizumi 2005; Thambiah 1995; Chan 2007; Rousseau 1990; Sellato and Sercombe 2007; Kaskija 2007).

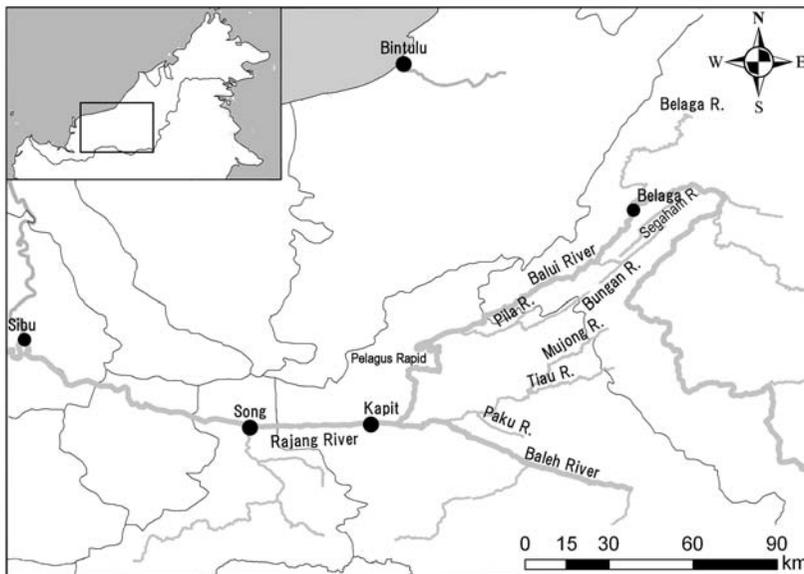
Apart from the discussion in these studies, Sandin (1968) and Uchibori (1994) reported the alliance of Bekatan and Iban. Bekatan are former hunter-gatherers living along the middle Rajang River<sup>1</sup>). According to Sandin (1968, 1980), Bekatans were forced to flee or be taken into the Iban community when the Iban migrated from today's West Kalimantan to Sarawak and engaged in headhunting. Uchibori (1994) reported that the Bekatan also supported the Iban and became



**Photo 1** Iban headhunting team (Hose and McDougall 1966).

forest guides when the Iban went headhunting. This case indicates that the hunter-gatherers living in the middle river areas should have different relationships from the Penan. Therefore, this article demonstrates the plural relationships of Sihan and neighboring ethnic groups, including Chinese and Malay, as well as other hunter-gatherer communities.

This article discusses the following three points. The first point is to show the case of minority hunter-gatherers living in the middle reaches of the rivers. Previous studies were mostly conducted on Penans living in remote upper river areas. Therefore, only a few reported on minority hunter-gatherers living in the middle reaches of the rivers, and who were assumed to have different relationships with neighboring ethnic groups. The second point is that the previous studies focused on the relationship between hunter-gatherers and farmers, and therefore overlooked the plural relationships between hunter-gatherers and Chinese traders or hunter-gatherers and other hunter-gatherer communities. The third point concerns the contemporary relationships between hunter-gatherers and neighbors. People do not engage in headhunting any more. They also do not engage in forest product trade actively as before. Therefore contemporary relationships should differ from the previous ones. Below, the Sihan's socio-economic background is described. Then inter-ethnic relations in history and contemporary life are discussed.



**Figure 2** Map of Rajang River and Balui River in Sarawak

## SIHAN AS A MINORITY GROUP OF SETTLED HUNTERS IN CENTRAL BORNEO

### 1) Socio-economic history of Balui River

In this section, the historical background of the upper Rajang River, and the socio-economic background of Belaga Town are described. Rajang River changes its name to Balui River in upper area. Several towns are located along the Rajang River, including Sibu downriver, Kapit in the middle reaches, and Belaga in the upper area (Figure 2). Historically, Sihan have mostly lived in the area between Kapit and Belaga.

Most longhouse villages along the Rajang River between Sibu and Pelagus are inhabited by Iban currently. In contrast, various ethnic groups inhabit the area from Pelagus to the upper reaches, including the Bekatan, Punan Bah, Tanjung, Sekapan, Kayan, Kenyah, Kejaman, Lahanan, Penan, Sihan, Seping, and Bhuket among others. This article describes the plural inter-ethnic relations of Sihan with these people. The population of Rajang River was very low before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the area was governed by the Sultanate of Brunei (Freeman 1955). The Melanau, Kanowit, Rajang, and Bekatan lived down river, the Bhuket, Punan Bah, Bekatan, Lugat, Lisum, Sihan, Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan inhabited the middle reaches, and the Penan and Seping lived in the upper river before the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Low 1882a, 1882b; Rousseau 1990). These people traded several forest products with Malay traders from Brunei.

However, the ethnoscape of the Rajang Basin has changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kayan and Kenyah migrated into the Balui River valley from the present Indonesian Kalimantan (Rousseau 1990). Iban also migrated from today's West Kalimantan of Indonesia into the lower Rajang River valley, while conducting shifting cultivation (Freeman 1970). The Rajang Basin became politically unstable, and many inter-ethnic battles involving small ethnic groups who had long lived in the area occurred after these migrations. Some groups fled to the neighboring Balingian and Tatau rivers to avoid the political conflict (Sandin 1980). Forts were constructed at Kapit and Belaga in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by English officers in the service of the Brooke rule, which had been requested by the Sultan of Brunei to govern these unstable areas. After the forts were constructed and the areas governed by Brooke officers, many Chinese traders moved up the rivers and settled near the fort to trade various forest products with the people living inland (Yao 1987; Chew 1990).

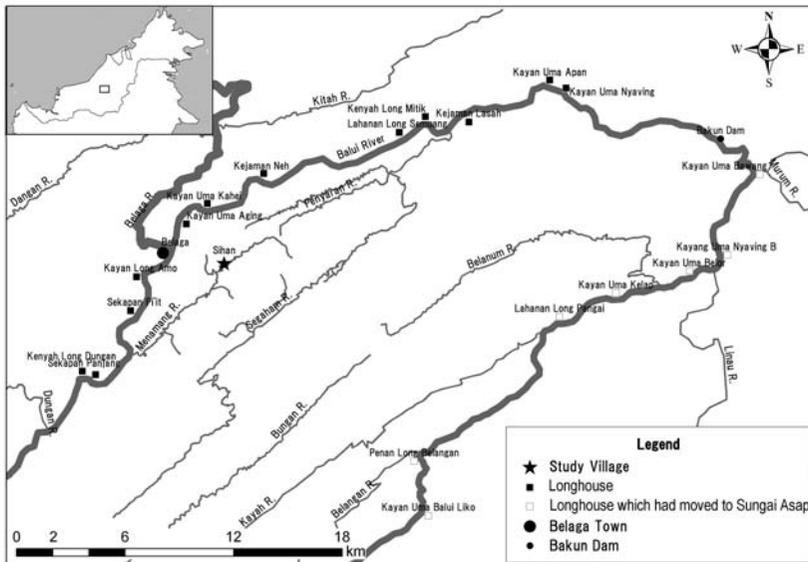
The Brooke officers opened the fort and trading market in Belaga in 1884, after which it became the district's political and economic center (Photo 2). Schools, government administrative offices, a police station, a post office, a bank, a mosque, and churches are located in Belaga Town currently (Photo 3). In addition, there are Chinese shop houses and Malay village. Until the late 1990s, Belaga Town was the administrative and economic center for people living along



**Photo 2** Belaga Fort in the 1880s (Sarawak Museum).



**Photo 3** Belaga Bazaar in 2008.



**Figure 3** The distribution of longhouse villages along Balui River

the Balui River. It was crowded with people selling vegetables and fish at the market, buying daily necessities at the Chinese shops, and going to the administrative offices in the morning. The situation changed in 1997, when the Bakun Dam was constructed, and many longhouse villages were resettled in the Sungai Asap Resettlement Scheme. Therefore, people who still live in longhouses located along the lower Balui River, and Sihan mainly come to the town currently (Figure 3). For convenient access to these services, many rent houses and live in Belaga Town.

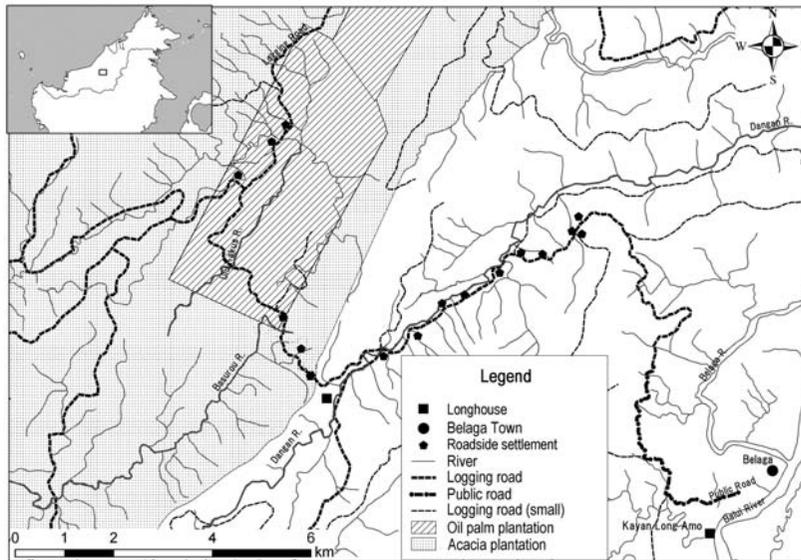


Figure 4 Map of the Kakus River and Dangan River

## 2) Historical background of Sihan

The Sihan is a settled hunter-gatherer group that began settling in a longhouse village in the 1960s (Sandin 1985; Maxwell 1992). Historically, they lived in the middle reaches of the Rajang River. The *Sarawak Gazette* reported in 1882 that the Sihan lived along the Mujong River, a tributary of Baleh River, and then moved to the Pila River valley (Low 1882b). Their oral history also records that they migrated from the Mujong to the Pila River, then up to the Bungan River, the Segaham River and then to the Menamang River valley (Sandin 1985; Maxwell 1992).

At present they live dispersed in three places. One is their former longhouse village located in the upper Menamang River valley, a tributary of the Balui River. The second place is a new longhouse village located along the upper Dangan River, a tributary of the Belaga River. This new longhouse is located along the logging road (Figure 4). Before they constructed a new longhouse at Dangan River in 2010, some families had started to farm rice on the upper Kakus River, a tributary of the Tatau River. This was partly because of the advice of a Kayan man of Uma Aging who have farmed there. The Kayan advised the Sihan to farm at the upper Kakus River and later also advised the Sihan to construct a new longhouse near the Dangan River, 3km southeast of the settlement at the upper Kakus River. The third place is in Belaga Town, where the Sihan have either rented or bought or constructed houses since the 1980s (Photo 4). They move frequently, and change their living places among these three places (Kato 2011, 2014). The population in these three places is about 200, quite small compared to



**Photo 4** Sihan houses in Belaga Town.

**Table 1** Ethnic groups and their population in Belaga District

| Ethnicgroup | Longhouses | Population |
|-------------|------------|------------|
| Kenyah      | 15         | 9,010      |
| Kayan       | 15         | 6,795      |
| Penan       | 20         | 2,793      |
| PunanBah    | 7          | 1,457      |
| Kejaman     | 2          | 962        |
| Lahanan     | 2          | 758        |
| Malay       | 1          | 648        |
| Sekapan     | 2          | 634        |
| Bhuket      | 1          | 518        |
| Seping      | 2          | 470        |
| Chinese     | 1          | 379        |
| Sihan       | 1          | 226        |
| Tanjung     | 1          | 179        |
| Iban        | 1          | 156        |
| Total       | 71         | 24,985     |

(Belaga District Office 2008)

that of the Penan (Table 1). Recently, most Sihan live in Belaga Town and longhouse villages. However, a few also live in coastal cities such as Bintulu, Sibul, Kuching, and in Peninsular Malaysia. The Sihan speak an indigenous language which is different from Penan, but close to the Lugat, and Punan Vuhang.

Sihan's subsistence activities have been based on hunting wild animals, fishing, small-scale farming and gathering jungle products such as wild sago, fruits, and rattans (Kato 2008). They might have started farming in the 1880s, as stated by Hugh Brooke Low (1884a). However, they did not concentrate on farming. Nicolaisen (1976) reported that the Sihan foraged in the forest as recently as 30 years before her study was conducted (i.e., the 1930s). Kedit (1992) also reported that hunting is their most important daily activity. The present subsistence pattern of the Sihan is complex since, besides hunting and gathering, they engage in wage labor and cash cropping of oil palm and rubber.

## THE HISTORY OF INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SIHAN AND THEIR NEIGHBORS

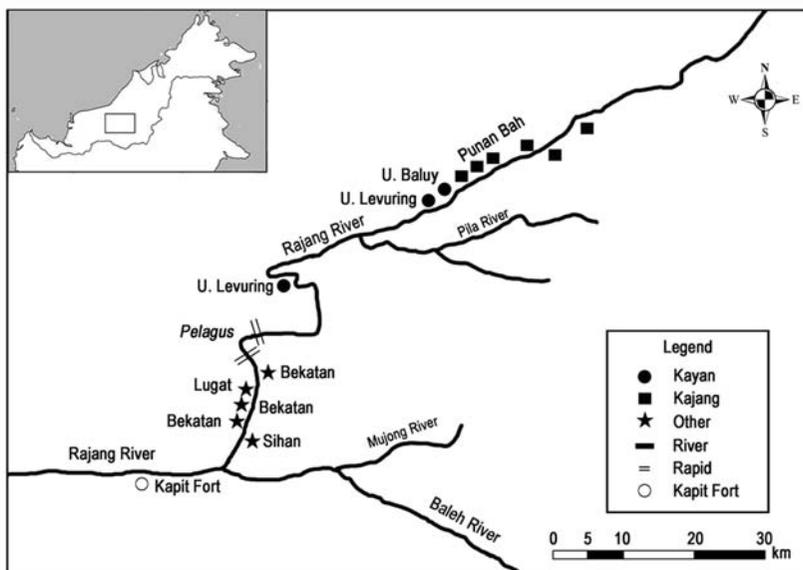
In this section, the Sihan history of mobility and inter-ethnic relations is discussed. Unlike the Penan, the Sihan lived in the middle reaches of the Rajang River, where, since earlier decades they have faced other ethnic groups. As mentioned above, the Sihan have lived along several rivers, thus their inter-ethnic relations have changed frequently. Below the migration history of the Sihan is

traced, and their inter-ethnic relations at each living places including the Mujong River, Pila River, Bungan River, Segaham River, and Menamang River and discussed.

### 1) Inter-ethnic relations at the Mujong River during the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Only a few materials are available to reveal Sihan life before the 1880s. The earlier accounts are silent about the Sihan. However some 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century sources mention them. Roth (1968), Baring-Gold and Bampfylde (1909), gave a few snippets of information about the Sihan. By far the more important source on them is the set of diary entries published by Low in the *Sarawak Gazette* of 1882 and 1884. According to Sihan oral history and a report of Low (1882b), the Sihan lived along the Mujong River, a tributary of Baleh River until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is located about 100km downriver from their present village.

According to Sihan oral history, they lived along the Tiau and Paku rivers, both tributaries of the Mujong, as well as in the Mujong Valley itself (Buck 1888). They believe it was the frequent Iban invasions which led them to flee to the Pila River, a tributary of the Rajang. According to Freeman (1955), the Kayan were involved in similar patterns of conflict. According to Sandin's report of 1985, the Sihan then split into two groups, one fleeing to the upper Mahakam River, in present East Kalimantan, and the other to the Pila. However, current Sihan elderly have no idea about this migration to East Kalimantan. It is possible that the Sihan could have fled to the Pila as early as the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or perhaps even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Maxwell 1992). Sihan oral history also indicates that they



**Figure 5** Village distribution along the middle Rajang River in the 1880s (modified from Rousseau 1990)

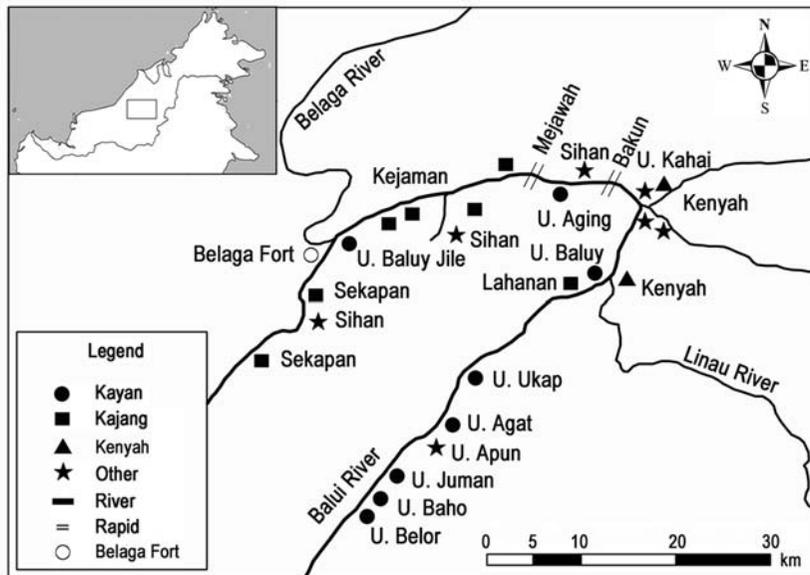
had close relationships with the Lugat and Punan Batu at the middle Rajang River. They had intermarriage, so that some Sihan say they have Lugat descent. However, they had conflict against Iban and Kayan, it made the Sihan flee from the Mujong River to the Pila to escape invasion by the Iban and an expedition of the Kayan.

## 2) Inter-ethnic relations along the Pila River during the 19<sup>th</sup> century

After living along the Pila, the Sihan became fragmented. According to Sandin (1985), one group remained at Pila and lived together with the Bekatan. So some Sihan also have Bekatan descent. In contrast, the main group moved up river to take refuge with the other dominant groups, like the Sekapan, Kejaman and Kayan. After they moved to the Pila River, the Sihan lived close to the Kayan and Kenyah (Rousseau 1990). At that time they were tyrannized by the Kayan.

Low (1882b) reported that the Sihan were strangers along the Rajang River. Their skin was fairer than that of other ethnic groups because the Sihan lived in the forest. Their dwellings were very simple huts, and they lacked property except for spears and dogs. Low also reported that recently they learned to plant rice from the Kayans (Low 1884a). At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Sihan lived together with the Lugat, Lisum and Bekatan in Pulau Raya, located in middle reaches of the Rajang River (Low 1882a) (Figures 5).

At the Pila River, Sihan lived peacefully with the Lugat, Lisum and Bekatan, although Sihan were still attacked by Iban. In addition, sometimes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century they said they joined with the Kayan and assisted in their battles.



**Figure 6** Village distribution along the Balui River in the 1880s (modified from the Rousseau 1990)

### **3) Inter-ethnic relations along the Bungan River during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century**

After the main group left Pila River, the Sihan moved to the Bungan River, a tributary of the Balui (Figure 6). They crossed Bungan Hill, however there was a massacre attack by a united group of Iban and Bekatan, which caused the Sihan to flee again to the Segaham River. Some little Sihan girls were captured as captives of Iban<sup>2)</sup>. They continue to pass down their long oral traditions to the younger generation about when this occurred.

The Sihan had relationships with the Sekapan when they lived along the Bungan River. A Sekapan chief mediated communication between the Sihan and the Brooke officers. There were at least two marriages with Sekapan at that time. However, the Sihan were often cheated by the Sekapan chief. Low (1884b) reported that Matu Navit, a Sekapan chief asked the Sihan to pay double taxes. It is likely that the Sihan lived at the Bungan River for only a short period before they fled to the Segaham River.

### **4) Inter-ethnic relations at the Segaham River during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century**

After the Sihan were raided by the Iban and the Bekatan at the Bungan River in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they fled to the Segaham River, a tributary of the Balui. After further Iban raids, the Sihan moved to Kitah River, a tributary of Belaga River, where they were attacked again, so they moved to Penyaran River, where they lived together with the Kejaman. After a time they returned to their earlier territory at Segaham, where they were taken by the Sekapan. It was during the time of the father of Penghulu Oyong Puso Abun who was the Sekapan leader in the late 1930s (Sandin 1985; Maxwell 1992).

Some Sihan were captured by the Sekapan when they were at the Sawak River, near the Sekapan village. They lived in Sawak for a number of years and worked the Sekapan's rice fields, then returned to their early territory of Segaham River again. After being raided by the Iban again, the Sihan went to the Bungan and Sawak River once more. They were taken there by Penghulu Puso, and worked for the Sekapan. This would have occurred during the 1940s approximately, when the present headman was a small boy (Maxwell 1992). After more conflict with the Sekapan, the Sihan returned again to Segaham for about 10 years.

When the Sihan lived along the Segaham River, they had close relationships with Sekapan and Kejaman. Sandin (1985) reported that the Sihan started to learn rice cultivation from the Sekapan chief Matu when they lived at the Segaham River in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. When interviewed, the Sihan also mentioned that sometimes they farmed together with the Kejaman when they lived at Segaham River. The Kejaman occupied the lower reaches and the Sihan inhabited the up-stream areas of this valley. Relationships with the Sekapan were sometimes problematical during the times of local chief Penghulu Puso's grandfather (Matu;

1860–1890s), Penghulu Puso’s father (Abun; 1910s), as well as Penghulu Puso (1930s–1940s) himself. However, on an individual level, the Sihan also had marital relations with the Sekapan during that time. When living at the Bungan and Segaham rivers, at late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Sihan had closer relations with the Bhuket. Thambiah reported that the Bhuket also frequently fought against the Iban (Thambiah 1995, 2007). Sihan mentioned the Bhuket had “*jung atei*”, meaning “one soul” with the Sihan.

The Sihan have had a fair amount of regular contact with the Penan of Long Belangan<sup>3</sup>). Many have married the Penan Belangan since the 1960s when the Penan moved from Bunut River to the Belangan River (Chan 1995; Egay 2008). They frequently visited each other and stayed in the same camps to engage in gathering forest products. Chinese in Belaga Town were also Sihan trading partners.

### 5) Inter-ethnic relations at the Menamang River in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century

The Sihan then moved down the Bulu River, a tributary of the Menamang, and later they moved to the mouth of the Bulu River. After this they lived at the Saan and Sekabui rivers. Finally they moved to their present location in the Menamang River valley. This was advice of Brooke officers and neighboring chiefs since the early period, because Menamang River is closer to the Belaga Fort, so the Sihan were easier to be notified by Brooke officers. The Kejaman shared land along the Menamang River, when the Sihan moved there. Maxwell (1992) stated that although the Sihan settled down in the 1960s, they still moved

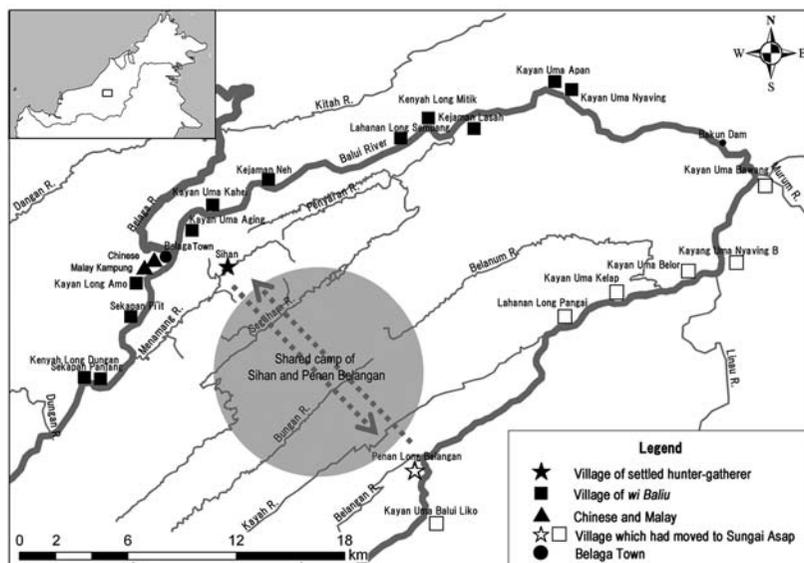


Figure 7 Neighbors of the Sihan in the Balui Valley

repeatedly along the Menamang River or even went back to the Segaham River and the Penyarang River to collect forest products. These products include rattan cane, and illipe nuts. These forest products were mostly traded with Chinese in Belaga. At the Menamang River, Sihan had relationships with the Kayan of Uma Aging, whose longhouse is close to theirs. Sometimes, The Sihan farmed together with the Kayan. The Kayan were their trading partners too when the Sihan traded forest products with the Kayan's *atap belian*<sup>4)</sup>. They sold rattan handicrafts to the Kayan of Uma Aging and gained *atap belian* from them. Later the Sihan reconstructed a new longhouse village in the middle of the 1960s using the *atap belian*. According to Sihan oral history, they were still being attacked by the Iban when they lived at the Menamang River. However, neighboring chiefs of the Kayan, Sekapan, and Kejaman also gathered and assisted the Sihan to repel the Iban.

Historically, the relationships of Sihan with neighbors including Iban, Bekatan, Kayan, and Sekapan were sometimes problematic. However, the Sihan also had marital relations with these people individually.

### INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE

In this section, I describe the contemporary relationships of the Sihan with their neighbors. The contemporary neighbors of the Sihan include the following people. First, are those who live in the longhouse villages along the Balui River. The Sihan refer to them as “*wi Baliu*”, which means people living along the Balui River<sup>5)</sup>. It includes Kayan, Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, Kenyah, and Punan Bah<sup>6)</sup>.



**Photo 5** Sihan selling rattan handicrafts.



**Photo 6** Sihan selling wild rattan shoots.



**Photo 7** Sihan working in a Kayan's rice field.

As the Sihan did not live along the main stream of the Balui River, they recognize themselves as not being part of the *wi Baliu*. Second, Penans<sup>7)</sup> who are not recognized as being *wi Baliu*, particularly the Penan Belangan. Third, those Chinese and Malay who live in Belaga Town. More recently, Indonesians working in this area have become the Sihan's new neighbors. Here the Sihan's relationships with these people in contemporary life are discussed (Figure 7).

### **1) Inter-ethnic relations with *wi Baliu***

The present day relationships of the Sihan with *wi Baliu* include those concerning the forest product trade, wage labor employment, agricultural work, and marital relations. The Sihan trade various forest and agricultural products with Chinese, Malay and *wi Baliu*, including Kayan, Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, and Kenyah in the market and corridors of Chinese shophouses in Belaga Town. Products which the Sihan sell include rattan handicrafts (mats, baskets, brooms), rattan shoots, fish, palm shoots, ginger shoots and flowers, frogs, and fruits such as durian and rambutan (Photos 5, 6). Sihan sell these products mostly to the Chinese, Kayan, Sekapan and Kejaman. Also they sell items such as rattan brooms to Malays. Most rattan handicrafts sold in Belaga Town are produced by the Sihan. *wi Baliu* also sell some fruit, when in season. On the other hand, the Sihan usually buy rice, Balui River fish, and vegetables from the Kayan, Sekapan, Kenyah, and Malays.

Some *wi Baliu* often employ Sihan for agricultural and domestic work. Kayan and Sekapan, Punan Bah, and Kenyah often employ them for clearing vegetation, planting, and harvesting of their rice fields and oil palm fields (Photo 7). The Sihan themselves also cultivate rice and oil palm, but they do not employ these people. When Sihan need to use a threshing machine in Kakus, they rent it from the Kenyah. They also ask the Kenyah to transport their harvested oil palm to mills. Sihan are employed by Malays and Chinese to do housework, which includes domestic work, weeding house gardens and cemeteries, carriage, and house cleaning before ceremonies like Hari Raya and Chinese New Year. However, the Sihan do not employ neighbors for these tasks, but do the work themselves. Neighbors of *wi Baliu*, including Kayan, Sekapan, Kenyah, and Punan Bah, tend to employ Sihan for agricultural work, whereas Malays and Chinese employ Sihan for housework. In other words, the Sihan have plural economic relations with neighbors living in Belaga Town.

At present the Sihan have a close relationship with the Tanjung, who rent houses neighboring the Sihan in Belaga Town. They visit each other and chew betel together. Following the logging of the 1980s, they had a political conflict with neighboring villagers regarding land. However, individually they also have marital relations.

## 2) Inter-ethnic relations with Penan

The Sihan have marital relations with various neighboring ethnic groups. Most common is intermarriage with the Penan Belangan. The Sihan had a close relationship with the Penan Belangan, between the 1940s and 1960s when the Sihan lived at the Segaham River. At present most Sihan also have a Penan descent. Intermarriage with the Bekatan is the next most numerous. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Sihan also lived close to the Bekatan at the Pila River and in Pulau Raya, along the middle Rajang River. They still visit each other and have marital relations because of this old kinship. The Sihan also have marital relations with the Kayan, Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, Malay, Punan Bah, Tanjung, and Kenyah, although these are less than with the Penan and Bekatan. Recently the Sihan have had increased marital relations with people who are not neighbors. Nowadays, they marry various other ethnic groups including Melanau, Bidayuh, Kelabit, Kadazan, Iban, Chinese in urban areas, and Indonesians.

In this region there are other settled hunter-gatherer groups, including Penan, Bhuket, Lisum, Seping, and Bekatan. However, most live far away, so the Sihan do not have daily contact with them, except for the Penan Belangan, who have moved to Sungai Asap. The Sihan have closer social relation with the Penan Belangan compared to the *wi Baliu*, despite the Penan village being located far away. Since the 1960s many Sihan have had kin relations with the Penan Belangan, therefore most Penan Belangan are bilingual, speaking both Penan and Sihan (Egay 2008). Even today they visit each other. For example, one elderly female from Penan Belangan visited her son who married into the Sihan and

stayed with the Sihan for several months. An elderly male visited his sister who married a Sihan and stayed with them for more than a year. Sihan also frequently visit Penan Belangan. They stay for several months. The younger generation visits each other more frequently than do others. In addition, they often give gifts to each other, such as a jungle knife, hunting spear, rattan basket, or clothes frequently and help each other overcome problems. The relationships with the Penan are different from those with other ethnic groups.

### **3) Inter-ethnic relations with Chinese in Belaga**

#### **Labor employment by the Chinese**

The Sihan have close economic relations with the Chinese in Belaga. They have been working for the Chinese since the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An elderly Sihan mentioned that they had done transportation work for the Chinese, prior to the introduction of motor boats, moving goods by paddling a Chinese trader's boat. They remember that they had to carry the boat and goods on foot, when passing rapids. Opportunity for wage labor increased around 1980, when the government developed Belaga Town and needed construction workers. Chinese contracted for these works and employed Sihan to perform them.

One Chinese employed Sihan for construction work around 1980. At that time, the Sihan walked from the longhouse in the morning to town, located 4km away, and returned to the longhouse in the evening. Eventually, the Chinese offered land for the Sihan to construct a simple house, and at first several Sihan lived there together and worked for the Chinese. When the Sihan began attending school, children also stayed at the house. At one time, several families lived there together. Additional houses were built as the number of Sihan who worked in Belaga Town gradually increased. In addition, some people lived in other vacant houses when working for these owners.

Abdullah (2000) stated that the Sihan relied on hunting wild boar in their daily life. They were not interested in rice cultivation. In 2000, only 10 of 35 families planted rice. He also stated that most young people worked in the construction sector in Belaga Town, and that most of its buildings had been constructed by the Sihan. Currently the Sihan have engaged in several kinds of wage labor for the Chinese, including road and house construction, collecting sand, transportation, shop work, and repair work (Photo 8).

#### **Rental house, schooling, and multiple residence**

The number of Sihan settled in Belaga Town and engaged in wage labor has increased gradually. They have worked for many different Chinese, and rent houses from various others. In 2008, 20 Sihan families live in Belaga Town. Four of 20 families live under the above mentioned Chinese. Others rent a house from different Chinese, Kayan, and Malay, or else live in government quarters, buy a house, or construct one themselves. The demands of wage labor and ability to rent houses in Belaga Town attracted more people from longhouses to Belaga. The *wi*



**Photo 8** Sihan working for Chinese shop owners.

*Baliu* also rent houses at Belaga Town when their children attend school there.

The existence of rental housing and wage labor at Belaga Town also enable the Sihan to attend school, which they have done since the 1950s. Although until the 1980s most attended school for only several days, the number of children attending has increased since the 1980s in parallel with the availability of rental houses and wage labor in Belaga Town. The availability of rental housing is crucial because the Sihan prefer not to live in the dormitory. Their longhouse is too far to attend school daily. Although renting houses in Belaga Town, the Sihan also live in both old and new longhouse villages, and move frequently between the three. They hunt and farm when staying at the longhouses, whereas they engage in wage labor under the Chinese and take care their children's schooling when living in town.

## DISCUSSION

Historically, the Sihan have had plural relationships with various neighboring ethnic groups. Three points are discussed below. These are plural relationships with various ethnic groups, the long term economic relationship with the Chinese, and the diversity of relationships of the individual. These points are important in considering the relationships between hunter-gatherers and their neighbors in Borneo.

### 1) Plural relationships with neighboring ethnic groups

Historically, the Sihan had multiple relationships with various neighboring ethnic groups, including Lugat, Lisum, Iban, Kayan, Bekatan, Sekapan, Kejaman, Kenyah, Malay and Chinese. The Sihan's frequent historical mobility may have affected these plural relationships. The Sihan did not have close relationships with the Lahanan because they lived far away compared to other ethnic groups. However, they had indirect relations through Penan relatives, who had lived close to the Lahanan of Long Pangai, and several marriages had existed.

Although the Sihan fought against groups of Iban and Bekatan during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were also marriages with them. There were numerous marriages with Bekatan. This demonstrates that relationships differed at the community level and the individual level. According to Sihan oral history, the pattern of their migration reflects persistent Iban raiding. They said that is why they had to leave Mujong and flee to the Pila, Bungan, and Segaham rivers. However, it was not only Iban who continuously frustrated the Sihan. Low's brief notes from the early 1880s suggest that the Sihan occupied a politically and socially subordinate position in the larger social system of this part of middle Balui; "...[t]he Sihans...constitute but a feeble tribe numbering three doors at Bluit at the Mercy of the Kayans, five at Segaham under the Kejamans, six at Bungan under the Sekapan and twenty seven at Pulau Raya enjoying independence under the shadow of Fort Kapit (Low 1882b)". However, Low mentioned a number of villages exist above Pulau Raya, suggesting that certain Sihan had been under Kayan domination at the Pila River (Low 1882a). These brief remarks indicate that the Sihan were subject to some form of political and social domination by neighbors.

At some point, the relations with neighboring farmers until the 1960s were similar to Penan relations reported in the previous studies discussed above. The neighboring Kayan and Sekapan chiefs mediated information between the Sihan and the Brooke officers. Low also reported that a Sekapan chief asked the Sihan to pay tax with their dogs and spears (Low 1884a). Sihan were also cared for by the Sekapan chief, when the Iban seemed ready to invade. Along with these situations, the Sihan farmed together with the Sekapan and Kejaman, and learned rice cultivation. The Sihan also farmed together with the Kayan of Uma Aging when the Sihan lived at Menamang River, in the 1960s.

In some points the Sihan's relations with neighboring groups differs from the Penan's. The Sihan traded forest products, including illipe nuts and rattan with Chinese traders more frequently than the neighboring farmers. It was because the Sihan lived close to the Belaga bazaar. Despite the government conducting several farming projects for the Sihan between the 1960s and 1980s, they did not concentrate on farming, but continued to engage in gathering forest products, thereby developing economic relations with the Chinese. The characteristic feature of Sihan historical relations with neighboring ethnic groups is that the Sihan had

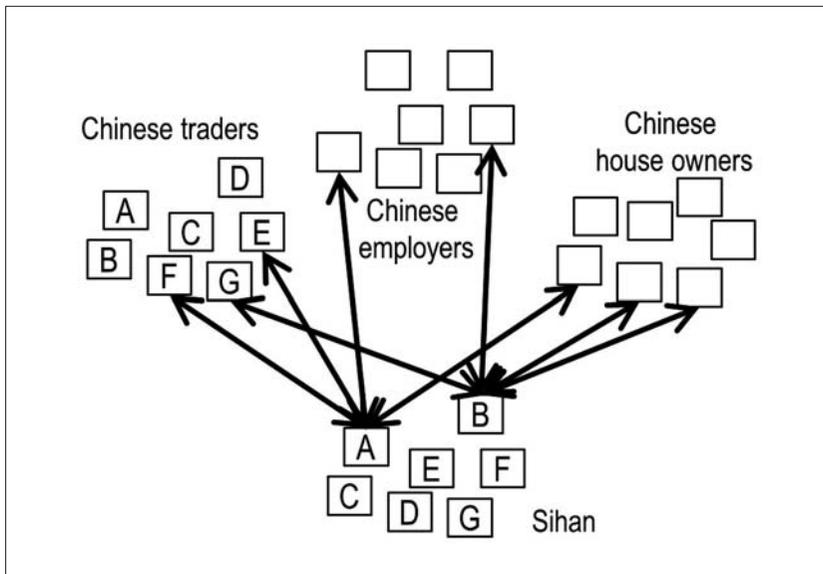


Figure 8 Plural relationships with Chinese in Belaga Town

multiple relations on a daily basis, and also that they had strong economic relations with Chinese traders.

Previous studies in Borneo reported mainly on the relationship of hunter-gatherers with farmers, and clarified historical patron-client relations. However, this article describes the contemporary relationships of the Sihan with various neighboring ethnic groups. The neighbors of the Sihan changed according to the place and situation of the Sihan's residence. This is related closely with the frequent mobility of the Sihan. Sihan also have marital relations with almost all ethnic groups in the Balui River Basin. That means the Sihan have wide social relations not only with the *wi Baliu*, but also with Malay and Chinese.

## 2) Flexible and plural relationships with Chinese in Belaga Town

Sihan have been trading forest products with many different Chinese. Also they have been employed by different Chinese for various kinds of wage labor. They also have rented houses from different Chinese owners (Figure 8). Sometimes the Sihan change these relationships within a short period, although some maintain them over the long term. The younger generation tends to change Chinese employers frequently, depending on the work, but after several months they sometimes return to a former employer. Sihan frequently change their employer according to job description, and wage rate. Having plural relations with many different Chinese employers, house owners, and traders enable the Sihan to maintain life in both longhouse and town. The Chinese in Belaga and the Sihan have more than a century of economic relations. The Chinese sometimes order the

forest products they need and ask the Sihan to gather them. Besides trade relations with the Chinese, the Sihan often ask them to keep their money, instead of putting it in the bank.

Despite the Sihan have no marital relation with Chinese in Belaga, the relationships with the Chinese is important for the contemporary life of the Sihan. Since the 1980s, the Sihan labor force has also been essential for Chinese contractors. This has arisen because the Sihan have lived close to Belaga Fort before, which enables them to have closer contact and diversified relationships with local Chinese.

Unlike the Penan's trade relations with farmers reported in previous studies, from early on, the Sihan have had close economic relations with the Chinese. This has occurred because the Sihan have lived along the middle reaches of the river and so did not need to trade with farmers, but they could trade directly with Chinese. This economic relation is also important in the contemporary life of the Sihan, enabling them to maintain multiple residences. It also enables them to engage in hunting-gathering, agriculture and wage labor.

### **3) Diversity of relationship by individual**

Social relations with neighbors differ by individual. There have been always marital relations individually, although the Sihan had political conflicts with neighboring groups historically. Currently people have tended to work in coastal urban areas, like Bintulu, Sibul, and even in Peninsular Malaysia. Individuals make social relations at these places too. Marriage with people not from the upper Balui River valley increases. Not just the Sihan go to urban areas; people from other regions often come to Belaga for work. These include Iban, Chinese from other regions, and even people from Indonesia. They work for logging companies, and in dam, electrical, and various other construction works. Recently, mobility has increased and expanded, and now, for example, Sihan maintain various social networks using mobile phone and the internet. Therefore, the importance of social relations with those who are not neighbors is increasing. Marriage with these people also increases. Sihan's relationships with neighbors would become more diversified as a consequence of individual lifestyle and choice.

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## NOTES

- 1) Bekatan are originally from the upper Kapuas River. Currently there are also Bekatan villages along the upper Tatau River.
- 2) Later, these girls were returned to Sihan by Brooke officers.
- 3) Penan of Long Belangan are also called Penan Talun. More recently they are also called Penan Asap, because they have resettled at Sungai Asap.
- 4) Wood for roofing made by Borneo iron wood.
- 5) Sihan call the Balui River Baliu.
- 6) Sihan call Punan Bah Punan Baliu, which means “river Punan”.
- 7) Sihan call Penan Punan Tano’, which means “forest Punan”.

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