

Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 2756-1224

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*,
vol 16. Editor: Peter K. Austin

Sihan (Sarawak, Malaysia) — Language Snapshot

PETER PUXON

Cite this article: Peter Puxon (2019). Sihan (Sarawak, Malaysia) —
Language Snapshot. In Peter K. Austin (ed.) *Language Documentation
and Description*, vol 16. London: EL Publishing. pp. 176-181

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/173>

This electronic version first published: August 2019



This article is published under a Creative Commons
License CC-BY-NC (Attribution-NonCommercial). The
licence permits users to use, reproduce, disseminate
or display the article provided that the author is attributed as the
original creator and that the reuse is restricted to non-commercial
purposes i.e. research or educational use. See
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

EL Publishing

For more EL Publishing articles and services:

Website: <http://www.elpublishing.org>
Submissions: <http://www.elpublishing.org/submissions>

Sihan (Sarawak, Malaysia) – Language Snapshot

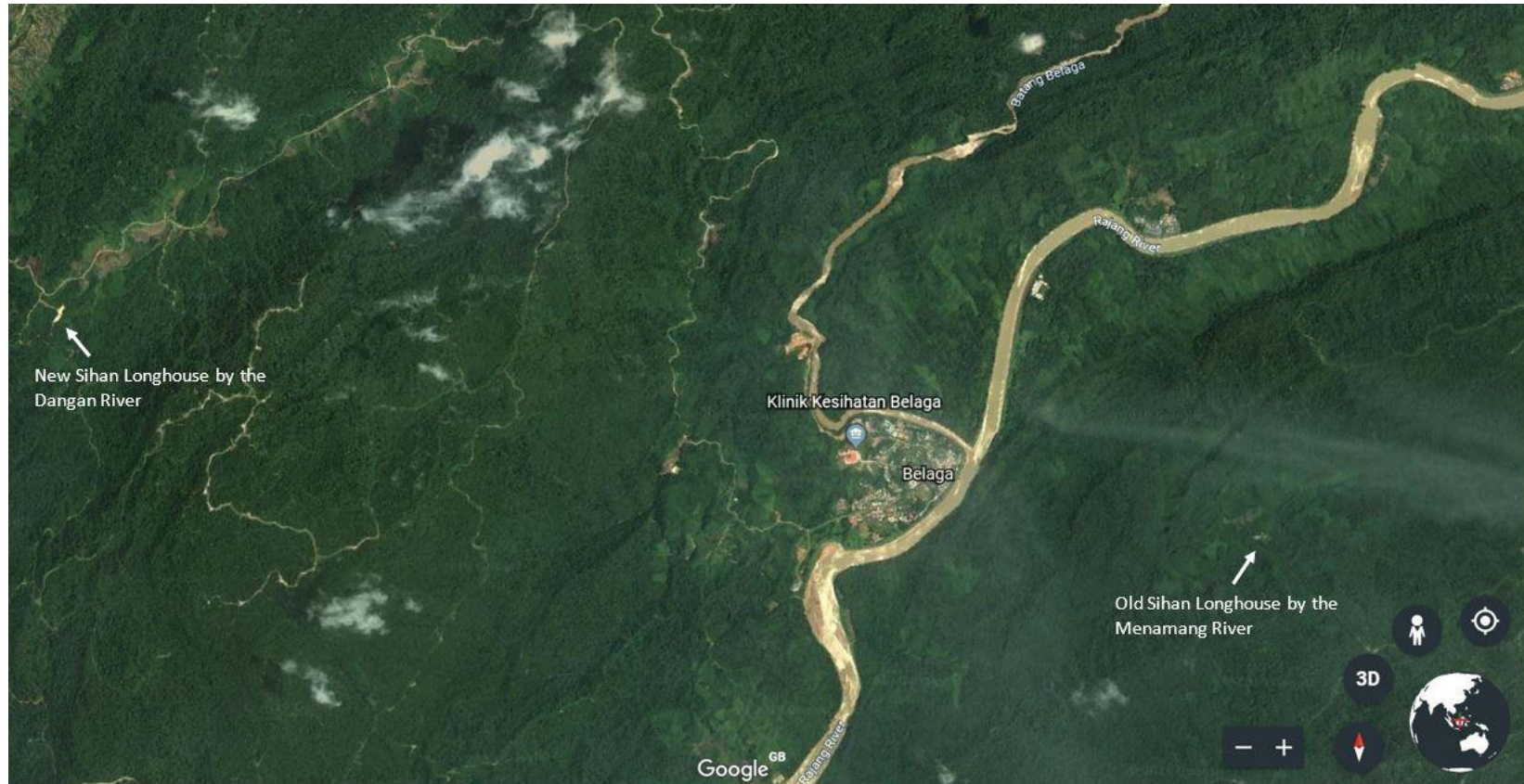
Peter Puxon

SOAS, University of London

Language Name:	Sihan (also Sian)
Language Family:	Punan subgroup, Western Malayo-Polynesian, Austronesian
ISO 639-3 Code:	SPG
Glottolog Code:	sian1255
Population:	~250-300
Location:	2.7199° N, 113.7018° E
Vitality rating:	EGIDs 6a-6b

Summary

Sihan (also known as *Sian*) is a Malayo-Polynesian language of the Austronesian family spoken by approximately 250-300 people who live mainly in the Belaga district of Sarawak, Malaysia. *Sihan* is also the name of the community who speak the *Sihan* language and reside in *Sihan* settlements. In the past, the *Sihan* were hunter-gatherers; however, nowadays they are settled mainly in three locations in Belaga. The language appears to be similar to other Punan languages, although the degree of mutual intelligibility is difficult to determine as these languages are spoken in widely-dispersed places across Borneo.



Map 1. Location of current Sihan settlements

1. Overview

The Sihan people are former hunter-gatherers who are first recorded as living along the Mujung River, a tributary of the Belah River in the 19th century (Low 1882). Due to a series of head-hunting raids and attacks by Iban, Kayan and Sekapan groups throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Sihan were forced to migrate several times before settling next to the Menamang River in the 1960s (Sandin 1985, Kedit 1992, Maxwell 1992). Nowadays, most Sihan people live in Belaga town and in a new village settlement near the upper Dangan River, which is located 20.6km by road north-west of Belaga town. Some community members also occasionally reside in their old longhouse by the Menamang River, which is a 5.5km walk after crossing the Rajang River, east of Belaga town (Map 1). People move regularly between these three places due to work or educational commitments, or hunting and gathering opportunities. According to Malaysian government 2018 census data, there were 253 Sihan living in Belaga district, an increase from 207 in 2015 (Belaga District Office 2018). There are also Sihan who live in other towns in Sarawak, such as Bintulu, Miri and Kuching, as well as a small number who reside in West Malaysia.

Traditionally, the Sihan have focused on a mixture of sago palm processing, fishing, hunting, and rainforest foraging for their subsistence. Apart from sago palm processing, people still engage in all these activities. Wild animal meat, rattan products, and forest fruits and plants are still brought to the daily market in Belaga town to be sold. The Sihan also make their living through a combination of wage labour in shops and cafes, palm oil cropping, small-scale farming, and construction work. Several people also work on the daily boat service from Belaga to Kapit. Some families in the Belaga district also subsist in part on remittances from family members who live in larger towns, as well as on various state subsidies.

Since the 19th century, the Sihan have been in contact with numerous ethnic groups in the middle Rajang area (Sandin 1985, Maxwell 1992, Kato 2016). The Sihan consider themselves more culturally and psychologically similar to other former hunter-gatherers (e.g. Penan Talun), rather than groups of stratified agriculturalists (Kenyah, Kayan, Sekapan, Kejaman, Punan Bah, Lahanan), who they call the *wi balui* ‘people of the Balui River’ (Kato 2017). Regardless of these differences, there have been many inter-ethnic marriages between the Sihan and most other ethnic groups in Belaga district. Due to this preference for exogamous marriage and the historical

contact with other groups in the area, there is a high level of multilingualism within the community. The present headman, *Main Magui*, who can communicate in most of the languages of the other groups in the district, is typical of the Sihan community's multilingualism in general.

Attitudes within the community towards the Sihan language are positive, however, most are uncertain about the future of their language (Mohamed & Hashim 2012). Whilst Sihan is used by all generations, the transmission of the language to children varies from family to family. Parents who move away from the community in Belaga district to more urban centres tend to be less likely to pass on the language to their children. For instance, the headman's grandchildren are growing up in Bintulu, where they learn Malay and English; as a result, they cannot speak Sihan. In contrast, a three-year-old girl with a Sihan mother and a Chinese father, who is growing up in the new longhouse (next to the Dangan river) is learning to communicate primarily in Sihan. There are also differences in the amount of Sihan language spoken by ethnically non-Sihan people marrying into the Sihan community. For example, a man from the Bekatan ethnic group, who is married to a Sihan woman and has lived in the settlement by Dangan for a long time, has not learnt to speak the language. However, a Kenyah-speaking man from Kalimantan (Indonesia) speaks Sihan at home with his Sihan wife and children. Intergenerational (vertical) transmission is contingent on proximity to the Sihan community in Belaga, while intergroup (horizontal) transmission of Sihan depends on personal preference of the in-marrying individual.

Although the language is widely used in the domain of the family and within everyday Sihan social interaction, the use of Sihan in both the customary domain and the traditional medicine domain is on the decline (Mohamed & Hashim 2012). Older generations still occasionally recite *suket* 'folk tales' in the evening on the veranda of the longhouse; however, the younger generations do not know how to perform these stories. Some older members of the Sihan community, as well as surviving relatives of *Meli* (the last Sihan person to practise traditional healing), can still recite *sangen* 'healing songs'. However, these songs are now delivered as a performance rather than in an active healing ceremony. *Meli's* son, *Bojong*, still uses Sihan in certain rituals related to the Bungan religion, yet most Sihan are now members of the Roman Catholic Church or the Borneo Evangelical Church, in which services are conducted in Malay.

There is no published grammar of Sihan and no official orthography has been developed. In 1992, Allen Maxwell (University of Alabama) recorded 200 words and translated one narrative into Malay. At the time, Maxwell

stated: ‘the Sihan are surely one of the least known peoples of Sarawak’ (Maxwell 1992:18). Since 2003, Yumi Kato (Fukui Prefectural University) has been conducting anthropological research with the Sihan (Kato 2016, 2017) and has collected oral histories and an unpublished word list. The most recent linguistic work using Sihan data has classified the language as part of the ‘Outer-Sarawak’ group (Rensch 2012). Rensch’s comparisons reveal that Sihan has 61% similar vocabulary to other Kajang languages and may be related to Melanau-Kajang languages. This is based on comparisons of sound changes across languages in the Rajang region of Borneo. However, the data for this study was taken from Maxwell’s 1992 list and is not supported by any primary recordings. A recent in-depth study into the historical links between languages in Borneo (Smith 2017) does not contain data on Sihan. Preliminary lexical comparisons based on primary data I have collected suggest the language is most closely related to Punan Aput and Punan Lisum, both of which are under-documented Sarawak languages.

2. Current research

I am undertaking an MA degree at SOAS, University of London (to be completed in September 2019) and have just finished eight months of fieldwork on the Sihan language, as part of a project funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme. I primarily worked with older Sihan community members in the village by the Dangan river in order to document knowledge within the domains of use which are the most endangered. The resulting collection of primary audio-visual recordings can be viewed by registered users of the ELAR archive.¹ The archive collection includes elicited word lists, oral histories, hunting narratives, discussions of taboos and prohibitions, healing songs, and folk tales. Transcriptions and translations into English of these recordings using ELAN software are being completed and will be added to the archive when finished. My MA dissertation is on voice alternations in Sihan with comparisons to other languages Borneo. I also plan to conduct a historical comparison with other Punan languages in order to clarify Sihan’s classification within the Punan subgroup.

¹ <https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI1104004> (accessed 2019-05-04)

References

- Belaga District Office. 2018. *Profail Daerah Belaga*. (Typescript).
- Kato, Yumi. 2016. Resilience and flexibility: History of hunter-gatherers' relationships with their neighbors in Borneo. *Senri Ethnological Studies* (94), 177-200.
- Kato, Yumi. 2017. Perceptions of Iban in the Sihan ethnoscape. *Ngingit* (9), 49-58.
- Kedit, P. M. 1992 Bornean Jungle Foragers: The Sihan of Sarawak. *Bulletin of the Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association* (12), 44–47.
- Low, Hugh Brooke. 1882. Journal of a Trip up the Rejang. *Sarawak Gazette* (November 1st) 12 (202), 93–96.
- Maxwell, Allen. 1992. Balui reconnaissances: the Sihan of the Menamang River. *Sarawak Museum Journal* 43 (64), 1-45.
- Mohamed, Noriah & Nor Hashimah Hashim. 2012. Language Vitality of the Sihan Community. *Kemansuiaan* 19 (1), 59-86.
- Rensch, Calvin. 2012. Melenau and the Languages of Outer Central Sarawak. SIL Electronic Survey Report.
- Sandin, Benedict. 1985. Notes on the Sian (Sihan) of Belaga. *Sarawak Museum Journal* 34 (55), 67-76.
- Smith, Alexander D. 2017. *The Languages of Borneo: A Comprehensive Classification*. Unpublished PhD dissertation (Available at http://ling.hawaii.edu/wp-content/uploads/SMITH_Alexander_Final_Dissertation.pdf. Accessed 2019-05-04).