



# Language and education: The experience of the Penan in Brunei

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## ABSTRACT

Rurally situated minority groups in Southeast Asia, especially those with nomadic backgrounds, such as the Penan in Borneo, have received relatively little scholarly attention with regard to language knowledge and use, language education and levels of achievement in formal learning contexts. When individuals from these small, as well as socially, politically and generally economically vulnerable groups enter formal education, they are almost inevitably immersed in school settings where the medium (or media) of instruction are either second or foreign languages, and where they receive little or no second or foreign language support for their immersion or, rather, submersion experience. These minorities, in this case the Penan of Brunei, frequently attain (unnecessarily) poor academic results for reasons that are posited and discussed in subsequent pages. This article depicts the environment of Penan in Sukang, in the southern part of Brunei, and describes ways in which the Penan are affected by aspects of the context they inhabit, including national policies, in terms of language and social categorization. This is part of a larger consideration of ways in which Penan have been adapting to settlement, since they gave up a nomadic hunting and gathering existence (Sercombe, 2007), a significant aspect of which is processes of socialization and ways in which formal education has impacted on the lives of Penan in Brunei. The paper begins with an outline of the locality, physical and social, and goes on to describe the language ecology of this part of Brunei. It then considers more closely the local school and its role, as a conduit for the implementation of national policy, and ways in which this affects Penan children's educational progress, as well as suggesting strategies that might be implemented for the benefit of all stakeholders.

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## 1. Introduction

Rurally situated minority groups in Southeast Asia, especially those with nomadic backgrounds, such as the Penan in Borneo, have received relatively little scholarly attention with regard to language knowledge and use, language education and levels of achievement in formal learning contexts. When individuals from these small, as well as socially, politically and generally economically vulnerable groups enter formal education, they are almost inevitably immersed in school settings where the medium (or media) of instruction are either second or foreign languages, and where they receive little or no second or foreign language support for their immersion or, rather, submersion experience. These minorities, in this case the Penan of Brunei, frequently attain (unnecessarily) poor academic results for reasons that are posited and discussed in subsequent pages. This article depicts the environment of Penan in Sukang, in the southern part of Brunei, and describes ways in which the Penan are affected by aspects of

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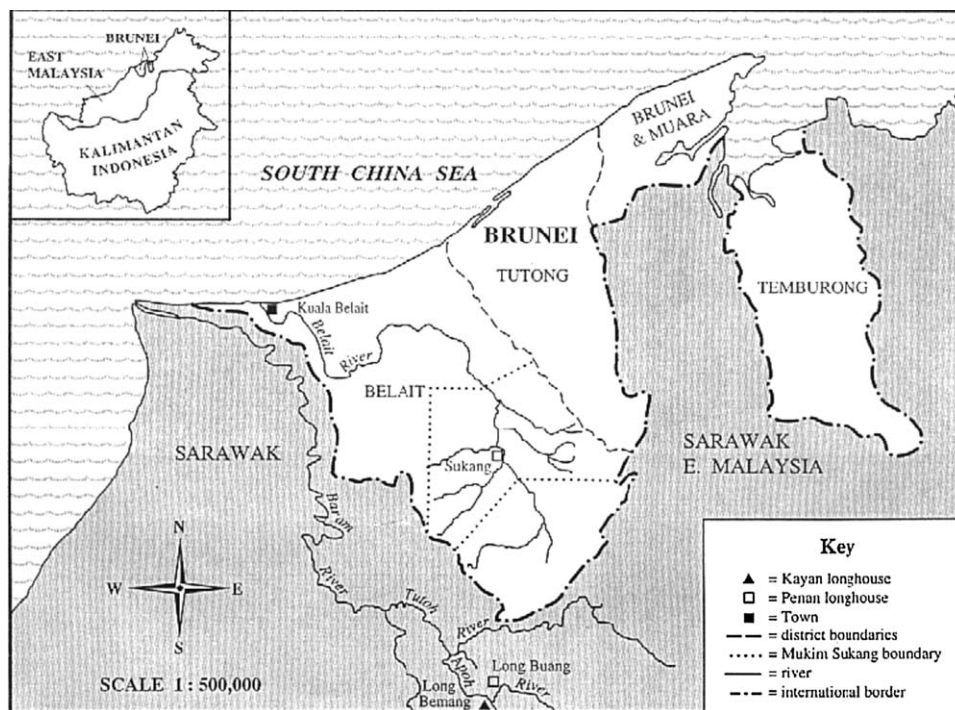
## 2. Physical and social context

### 2.1. Geography

The Penan comprise a discrete community of around 55 people, permanently settled only since 1962. Previously, they were hunter-gatherers in the rainforest of southern Brunei and neighboring Sarawak, in East Malaysia (Sercombe, 2002). The 2700 km<sup>2</sup> Belait River basin, where the Penan live, is composed

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Map 1. Sukang Sub-district (*Mukim*), in the context of Belait District in Brunei.

mostly of primary rainforest, and is sparsely populated with an average of less than 10 people per km<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>; and this is traversed by Brunei's longest waterway, the Belait River. Distinct from coastal Brunei in a number of ways, Sukang is

- the largest sub-district in Brunei in terms of area (see Map 1)<sup>2</sup>
- the least populated sub-district, with the lowest population density of any part of the country
- realistically accessible only by river (or helicopter)
- without ethnic Malays (the nation's demographic and political majority), Chinese traders, or expatriate inhabitants (both of these otherwise being a significant numerical presence in coastal parts of Brunei)
- economically focused on subsistence agriculture, and is
- an area in which the national code, Brunei Malay, is infrequently used and, hence, where the local language ecology is marked in relation to that of coastal Brunei

It is important to bear in mind the physical and social setting in which the Penan and neighboring communities live and interact for, as Gal (1979, p. 16) suggests, 'To understand the social aspects of synchronic linguistic heterogeneity, it is necessary to describe the social processes that maintain it ... and the constraints placed on it by speakers' social networks.' Consequently, part of this article's purpose is to clarify the ecology of the local linguistic heterogeneity and show how this affects the position of the Penan.

## 2.2. Sukang Village

Sukang Village is set within Sukang Sub-district (as delineated within small dotted lines on Map 1) in a large area, comprising primary as well as old growth secondary rainforest. It is presently only accessible by a 2-h private boat journey from the nearest small downriver settlement, from where there is road access to

Kuala Belait, the district's main coastal town. Of importance is the relatively remote location of Sukang Sub-district, in contrast to coastal Brunei, including: the pre-industrial rural situation; the relative inaccessibility from main intercity roads and highways, hospitals, cinemas, air-conditioned supermarkets, government offices and the modern life of metropolitan Brunei. This contributes to a sense of being removed from the dominating and homogenizing effects of national culture (cf. Steward, 1972, p. 50; Rousseau, 1990; Verdery, 1994).<sup>3</sup> Due to this relative isolation, inhabitants of Sukang show fewer signs of being absorbed into the Malay-dominated majority of Brunei's population (cf. Brown, 1970, p. 4). Furthermore, this separation reflects a different local social ecology (notions of which are considered further below), especially with regard to language. However, the government's Islamic Propagation Centre (*Pusat Dakwah*) actively proselytizes in Sukang. It has gained a number of converts, including 12 Penan in Sukang (who are offered financial incentives to embrace Islam). Even so, there remains little sign that Penan have undergone deep cultural shifts in their daily behavior or practices.<sup>4</sup> Sukang Village comprises an eight-door single-storey Penan longhouse and a small four-door Dusun longhouse. There is also a village school that constitutes an important social gathering place, not only for staff, pupils and occasional visitors to the school, but also as a location for village meetings. There is also a small medical clinic, a sub-district police post, a government rest house, a small Muslim chapel (*surau*) and four small government-provided houses, used as teachers' quarters. The population of the sub-district (as shown in Table 1) has been declining, slowly but steadily, over the years, with a steady shift of inhabitants to the coast. Currently, inhabitants of Sukang make their livelihood locally, via the

<sup>3</sup> Four-wheel drive vehicles have reached Sukang three times from the coast (to date), on each occasion as part of a local expedition, taking upwards of three days in each case.

<sup>4</sup> Apart from Penan who have become Muslims in Sukang, there are six other Muslim converts in the Dusun longhouse of whom two are Iban. There are other Dusun who have converted to Islam through marriage, who live elsewhere but who originate from Sukang.

<sup>1</sup> The national average is 56 people per square kilometer.

<sup>2</sup> It is nearly one tenth of the size of the whole country, out of a total of 29 sub-districts.

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