

Community Migration as an Additional Branch of Migration Linguistics: Evidence from Borneo

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Abstract

This paper is about migrations of communities within, into, and out of Borneo. It seeks to adding a further category, community migration, to the four original categories of labour, family, education, and forced migration proposed by Borlongan (2023). This underpins research within the sociolinguistic frameworks of Language Contact and Ecology of Language, from both historical and contemporary perspectives. The introduction provides historical background about the migration of Austronesian peoples from Taiwan through the Philippines to Borneo and beyond. The main section of the paper covers some more recent migrations within and around Borneo of both coastal Malay/Muslim and interior groups collectively termed “Dayak.” A particular focus is on the Iban community’s migration across Borneo and into Brunei and the linguistic and sociolinguistic consequences of this. The Iban are the largest indigenous ethnic group in the Sarawak region, Malaysia (28.8% of the state’s population, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Sarawak). Other community migrations discussed are those of the Kayan, Bidayuh, Berawan, and Belait/Lemeting groups. A tentative four-way classification of Borneo community migration strategies is proposed:

migrate and maintain (e.g., Iban, Malay); migrate and conquer/occupy other communities’ territory => conquered, enslaved group shifts to conquering the group’s

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language (e.g., Kayan); migrate and diversify/shift (e.g., Bidayuh); and migrate and merge (e.g., Berawan, Belait/Lemeting). The conclusion of the article critically evaluates the notion of community migration, connecting this to Borlongan's other categories. The relevance of the Language Contact and Ecology of Language frameworks to the study of Migration Linguistics in Borneo is also addressed.

Keywords: Community Migration, Migration Linguistics, Language Contact, Ecology of Language, Borneo Indigenous Communities

1. Introduction

This article seeks to extend the scope of Migration Linguistics beyond the four categories proposed by Borlongan (2021, 2023): labour, family, education, and forced migration, by adding a further category, community migration. Exemplification, analysis, and discussion of case studies of migrating communities in Borneo are offered, using overarching sociolinguistic frameworks of Ecology of Language (Haugen, 1972) and of Language Contact (Lim & Ansaldo, 2016), from both historical and contemporary perspectives. The article does not attempt to chart all the complex histories of community migrations across and around Borneo. More modestly, it outlines some documented case studies of migrating and migrated communities and the effects of the migrations on their languages.

Community migration can be defined as the tendency for ethnolinguistic groups to move from place to place. This could be either whole groups or subgroups motivated by competition for land and better access to food sources, or by a desire to conquer and subjugate other groups. Such groups have always migrated throughout the course of history, and as with the other categories of migration, community migrations continue to this day, facilitated by access to transport, especially by road and especially from inland villages and longhouses to coastal towns and cities. These migrations have effects on the languages used by the community and on those groups with whom they come into contact.

Consequently, there is a need to move on from static descriptions such as maps showing particular named communities inhabiting a particular place (Anderson, 1991) and speaking particular named languages.

2. Background: Borneo

The map in Figure 1 shows how the island of Borneo is divided between Indonesian Kalimantan and the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, with Brunei Darussalam as the only independent polity.

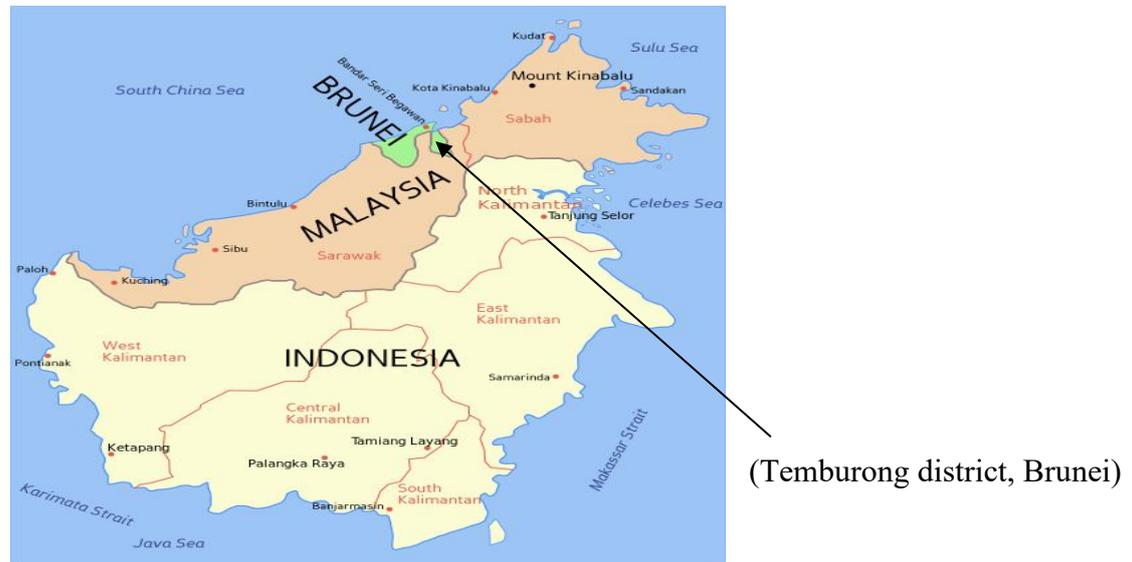


Figure 1. Political Map of Contemporary Borneo

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Borneo2_map_english_names.svg

In the context of Borneo, it is necessary to distinguish between groups who migrate and those who were and are nomadic. Nomadic groups such as the Penan did not practice settled agriculture, such as padi or swidden (hill rice) cultivation, but moved around according to seasons, and are classified as hunter-gatherers (Sellato & Soriente, 2015). Concerning the Iban community, it has been argued that their language is “exo-Borneo” (Hudson, 1978, p. 18) on account of its high percentage of shared cognates with the Malay of the Peninsula and Sumatera. But this article argues that Malay is indigenous to and indeed originates from Borneo, and the exo-/endo-Borneo debate is peripheral to the investigation of community migration and its effects on the ecology of languages.

2.1 Historical Background

Borneo is thought to have been originally inhabited by peoples known as Australoids, a contested term, prior to the migrations of Proto-Malays speaking Proto-Austronesian languages from southern Taiwan via the Philippine Islands:

Linguistic and archaeological evidence shows that speakers of Austronesian languages began moving into Island Southeast Asia from Taiwan about 4,500 years ago, initially into the Philippines and thereafter Borneo and Sulawesi, later colonizing the remaining parts of Island Southeast Asia, southern Vietnam, the Pacific Islands, and Madagascar.

(Druce, 2016, p. 18)

The Malay language belongs to the Austronesian language family, specifically the Malayo-Polynesian branch. All indigenous Borneo languages also belong to this branch of Austronesian. The history of Austronesian migrations, as illustrated in Benton et al. (2012) which shows the spread and the sub-branches of the Austronesian language family, demonstrates that the seas and oceans connect rather than divide. Mountains divide. Historically, Austronesians were, and today many still are, formidable navigators. This in part explains the vast spread of Austronesian languages, from Madagascar, off East Africa, to Rapanui (Easter Island), off South America and belonging to Chile. One striking example of Austronesian migration out of Borneo is that of the Banjarese to Madagascar, for which there is linguistic, cultural, and genomic evidence suggesting that the migrants were from the Barito river interior Ma'anyan community (Ricaud & Brucato, 2018). Adelaar (2006, p. 88) suggests that these people may have been subordinates of Malay sailors: slaves, ships' crew, or labourers, who remained behind in Madagascar.

Many people residing in and around Borneo lived their lives entirely on the water, in water villages such as the Bajau Laut communities at Semporna and Sandakan in the Malaysian region of Sabah and Brunei's Kampong Ayer. Some still do. Among the major inventions of Austronesian peoples is the outrigger boat, single or double (Horridge, 2006), which facilitated long trans-oceanic voyages and migrations. Malay is the first case study of community migration discussed in this paper.

2.2 Complementary Frameworks: Ecology of Language, Language Contact

The complementary frameworks of Ecology of Language (Haugen, 1972) and Language Contact (Ansaldo, 2009; Lim & Ansaldo, 2016) are deemed appropriate for this investigation, in view of the high levels of multilingualism found across Borneo, historically as well as in the present time. Languages, like plant and animal species, coexist in ecosystems in multilingual contexts, influencing each other in complex ways. Martin (1994, 1995, and *passim*) applies Haugen's Ecology of Language model to Brunei as well as to Eastern Sarawak.

The Language Contact model, as described by Ansaldo (2009) and by Lim and Ansaldo (2016), draws on Haugen's model, facilitates description of the synchronic and diachronic linguistic effects of contact between ethnolinguistic communities. The great diversity of languages in Borneo is shown in Table 1 and the map in Soriente and Inagaki (2015, p. 8). As a consequence of the still porous boundaries between the polities and of community migrations across Borneo, these numbers are not mutually exclusive: Malay, Iban, and other languages are found in all four polities.

Table 1. Languages of Borneo

Polity	Number of living languages	Number of indigenous languages, all of the Austronesian family
Kalimantan (Indonesia)	77 (est.)	74
Sabah (Malaysia)	55	32
Sarawak (Malaysia)	54	46
Brunei Darussalam	26	7 (+ 3 Borneo-indigenous)

3. Case Studies: Malay, Iban, Kayan, Bidayuh, Berawan; Lemeting/Belait

These case studies are necessarily selective and cannot be viewed as generalizable to the whole of Borneo. They are chosen for the availability of both academic research sources and traditional knowledge of community elders about their migration histories.

3.1 Malay

The people now known as Malay (orang Melayu) are traditionally seagoing and have wide knowledge of navigating, boat building, and fishing. Discussing the early histories of the Malays, Milner (2008, pp. 1–5, 18–25) makes frequent references to mobility and migrations. Bellwood (2006, pp. 105–106), and Adelaar (2006, pp. 89–91) express support for the argument for a Borneo homeland for the pluricentric language now known as Malay in its current political standardized varieties: Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia, and Bahasa Melayu (the official language of Brunei). Bellwood (2006, p. 113) suggests that the dispersal of Proto-Malayo-Polynesian from the Philippines to Borneo happened in the late third and in the second millennium BC. Andaya (2001, p. 306) adds to this, claiming that

.....from about 1500 to 500 BCE there was a further movement southward in Borneo, then out to the western half of Java and westward to Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and the central part of Vietnam.

3.2 Iban

The name ‘Iban’ is an exonym, generally acknowledged as deriving from the Kayan lexeme ‘Hivan’, meaning ‘people who migrate’ (Rousseau, 1990, p. 12). But it is now accepted by the Iban community across Borneo in preference to the earlier colonial-era term ‘Sea Dayak’. The name attests to the propensity of the communities now known as Iban to migrate (King & Knudsen, 2021, p. 13–17) across western and central Borneo.

3.3 Kayan

Originating from the Apau Kayan highlands in what is now Kalimantan Utara, Kayan communities, like the Iban, have a propensity for migrating. As stated by Eghenter (1999, p. 9), “Kayan and Kenyah long-distance migrations are unique in that they typically involve a large number of people, sometimes the entire village, travelling across sparsely populated territories to a distant destination”. Thus, they are a prime example for the study of community migrations in Borneo.

3.4 Bidayuh

Bidayuh (alternative spelling ‘Bidoyoh’, preferred by some members of the community, meaning ‘people of the land’) were formerly known by the exonym Land Dayak in colonial times. This contrasted with the ‘Sea Dayak’ exonym, which referred to Iban communities. The Bidayuh migrations, from their ancestral homeland around Mount Sungkong in Kalimantan Barat into present-day Sarawak, are outlined in Noeb and Ridu (2006, p. 6), classified as an example of the ‘migrate and diversify’ strategy.

3.5 Berawan

As outlined by Metcalf (2010) and by Burkhardt (2014), the Berawan migrated from their original homeland, the Usun Apau highland plateau in eastern Sarawak, initially in two directions on opposite sides of the plateau, “and that separation is still reflected in linguistic divergence” (Metcalf, 2010, p. 185). From the mid-19th century, these two further diverged into four.

3.6 Belait/Lemeting

A major source for the study of the Belait community's migrations into Brunei is Martin's (1994) ethnolinguistic inquiry. This reveals that the Lemeting community moved from the Tinjar (a.k.a. Lemeting) tributary of the Baram river in Sarawak into the Belait river valley and 'became' the Belait, through a process of intermingling with groups already settled there, taking their name from the river, as commonly occurs across Borneo (Martin 1994, p. 168).

4. Discussion: Suggested Classification of Community Migration Effects on Languages

These proposed migration strategies are not mutually exclusive, and more than one of them may be salient, especially in the disappearance of languages. 'Migrate and diversify' could equally apply to the Berawan as well as to the Bidayuh (Metcalf, 2010, pp. 185–186). They do, nonetheless, offer a framework for further analysis of community migrations in relation to other migration types and the effects of these on language maintenance and shift in Borneo and beyond.

4.1 Migrate and Maintain

The first strategy is labelled 'migrate and maintain' and is exemplified by the Malays migrating across the seas and around Borneo, with the maintenance of the language as one consequence of its role as a lingua franca and trade language in ports. The Malay language was maintained and spread mainly through its role as the major lingua franca of ports and trading across the Southeast Asian region (Collins, 1998), as well as through processes of 'masuk Melayu' ('enter Malay': Metcalf, 2010, p. 206), through which other groups are subsumed into the Malay community through adopting the Islamic religion and following Malay customs and culture. The first European sailors to reach Southeast Asia found it necessary to use Malay for trading purposes in ports such as Batavia, Melaka, and Brunei. Pigafetta's Malay wordlist, dating from 1521 (Collins, 2024), compiled during and after his ship's visit to Brunei, offers evidence of this, as does the earlier account of the ethnicities of traders in Melaka in Tomé Pires's (1515), *Suma Oriental que trata do Mar Roxo até aos Chins*. Collins (2024, p. 26) states that "Bahasa yang didokumentasikan oleh Pigafetta merupakan bahasa Melayu Nusantara Timur yang berasaskan varian Melayu di Brunei" (Tr. 'The language documented by Pigafetta is East Indies Malay based on the Brunei variety of Malay').

The migrations of Iban people, from what is now Kalimantan Barat (West Kalimantan) province (see Figure 1) east- and northwards into Sarawak and eventually as far as modern-day Brunei (King, 1976, King & Knudsen, 2021; Mawar, 2007; Sandin, 1967), also serve as examples of ‘migrate and maintain’ but within Borneo. Sandin (1967, p. 1) draws on oral traditions, ‘tusut’ (genealogies), and ‘pengap’ (chants) of Iban bards, noting that “[t]he Iban have always been migrating across Borneo for many generations”. Sandin (1967, pp. 26–27), the major Iban chronicler of the migration histories of the community, writes of three major “migration streams”: one from the Kapuas River in Kalimantan Barat, another group who came ashore at Tanjong Datu at the westernmost extremity of what is now Sarawak, and a third who reached “Merudu Hill, near Brunei” in the mid-19th century. The Iban language serves as a lingua franca in many areas of Borneo’s interior and is perceived to have relatively little internal dialectal variation (Asmah Haji Omar, 1969, 1983; Sercombe, 1999). As cited by King and Knudsen (2021, p. 15), Misa Juliana anak Minggu (2019) refers to the search for previously under-occupied land for (swidden) rice cultivation as one prime motivation for Iban groups moving from the area of Lubok Antu, Batang Ai, Sarawak, into the Temburong District of Brunei (see Figure 1) from the late 19th century onwards. In Iban villages and longhouses in Temburong, the Iban language is maintained and transmitted intergenerationally to this day, and Iban children may only encounter Malay when they start attending Brunei government pre- and primary schools.

4.2 Migrate and Conquer

The ‘migrate and conquer’ strategy is where one community attacks and defeats another, occupying their territory and enslaving their people. Evidence of this strategy can be deduced from the many named languages of the conquered groups, which are no longer spoken, having been submerged by those of their conquerors. While this strategy can equally be applied to Iban migrations, the migrations and conquests of the Kayan in central Borneo (Rousseau, 1990; Metcalf, 2010, p. 183) serve as the prime example of this strategy. Metcalf (*ibid.*) contrasts the relative uniformity of the Kayan language in the upper Baram region of Sarawak with the diversity found in their original Apau Kayan homeland in what is now North Kalimantan province in Indonesian Borneo. Due to inter-group quarrels, overpopulation, and the consequent scarcity of resources, Kayan communities migrated in different directions (Rousseau, 1990, pp. 331–334). Without coming under direct Malay control, they did the bidding of coastal Malay Sultanates, notably Brunei, by attacking perceived enemies such as Murut and Bisaya in the Trusan and Limbang river valleys.

4.3 Migrate and Diversify

The third strategy, ‘migrate and diversify,’ is illustrated by the Bidayuh migrations from Kalimantan into western Sarawak. In contrast to the Iban, who take their subgroup names from the rivers where they built their longhouses, the Bidayuh identify their origins and places of settlement by mountains (Nuek & Dundon 2009, p. 1). Linguistic evidence, along with origin stories from within the community of speakers, claims that the Bidayuh people originated from Bung Sikung (Mount Sungkong) in Kalimantan Barat (Adelaar, 2006; Aichner, 1949; Noeb & Ridu, 2006; Nuek & Dundon, 2009, p. 2) and spoke a common proto-language (Rensch, 2006). They later dispersed into western Sarawak and are now divided into at least five distinct language varieties (isolects), with relatively low percentages of shared cognates between non-contiguous groups (see Noeb & Ridu, 2006, p. 6). Only neighbouring varieties, e.g., Bau-Jagoi and Biatah have sufficiently high percentages of shared cognates (PSCs, obtained via lexicostatistical analysis) for mutual intelligibility (McLellan & Campbell, 2015; Noeb & Ridu, 2006).

Topping’s (1994) comparative survey of Bidayuh isolects demonstrates the levels of mutual intelligibility between these. One consequence of the Bidayuh migrations is contact with Malay and with Malayic-speaking coastal communities in western Borneo, which has led to the adoption and use of Malay kinship terms alongside the original Bidayuh terms. Campbell (2021, p. 843) observes the use of Malay terms among the Bijagoi Bidayuh of Bau District, which is contiguous with coastal Malay- and Malayic-speaking areas, as shown in Table 2. Salako (see Noeb & Ridu, 2006, p. 6) is said to be an outlier compared to the other Bidayuh varieties: Table 3 shows the closer relations between the other three isolects, whilst the Salako forms retain the preploded nasal sounds which the other isolects have lost. Traditional wisdom in Bidayuh communities has it that the waters of the different rivers that the Bidayuh groups drink affect their tongues in different ways, causing the wide diversity between the Bidayuh varieties (Dawos Mamit, 2003, p. 26).

Table 2. Bijagoi Bidayuh Kinship Terms (after Campbell, 2021, pp. 841–843)

Malay term	Gloss	Bijagoi term
kakak	older sister	sikie dayung
abang	older brother	sikie dari

adik	younger sibling	sudi dayung (f) sudi dari (m)
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Table 3. ‘moon’, ‘star’, ‘cloud’ and ‘rain’ in Four Bidayuh Isolects

Bukar-Sadong	Biatah	Bau-Jagoi	Salako	(English)
buran	buran	buran	buatn	<i>moon</i>
bintang	bitang	bitang	bintakng	<i>star</i>
ambun	abun	abun	apokng	<i>cloud</i>
ujan	ujen	ijjan	ujatn	<i>rain</i>

4.4 Migrate and Merge

The fourth strategy, ‘migrate and merge,’ is the hardest to identify and exemplify, as it involves changes of name, both exo- and endonyms. Examples include the Berawan in Sarawak and the Belait, who migrated from Sarawak into present-day Brunei, as noted above. The Berawan merged into two, then four communities after they migrated downriver from their original Usun Apau volcanic plateau homeland (Burkhardt, 2014, p. 12). Substantial Berawan migration to Long Teru, one of the four on the Tinjar River, caused the disappearance of the former Lelak language in that location around the Loagan Bunut lake.

Lemeting, a language hitherto presumed extinct (Martin, 1994, p. 193), named after the Kenyah name for the Tinjar tributary of the Baram river, is shown by Martin to be almost identical with modern Brunei Belait, named after the Belait river to which they migrated. The name Lemeting survives in the Kiudang Meteng (Meting) subbranch of Belait, located in the valley of the Tutong River in central Brunei, but it is also highly endangered through intense contact with Dusun, Tutong, and especially Brunei (Pan-Bruneian) Malay.

5. Community Migration

Community migration is proposed as an addition to the categories of Migration Linguistics proposed by Borlongan (2021, 2023), which are labour, family, education, forced, and undocumented. Community migration connects to and enmeshes with all of these in many ways. But cases of whole or partial community migrations, as outlined in this article, can be distinguished from the other categories in terms of their linguistic effects, notably changes within languages owing to language contact and language shift. These, in turn, are dependent

on the power or powerlessness of the communities involved and on the degree of communication accommodation, convergence, or divergence in the particular context.

5.1 Community and Labour Migration

Language shift occurs in major labour migration movements from rural to urban spaces: distinct urban language varieties emerge, while the language varieties that migrants bring from their rural home areas may be lost or only maintained in marginal squatter communities (Cleary & Eaton, 1992, pp. 114–133). The urban language varieties are not always the variety used by the original inhabitants of the urban spaces: for example, in the oil town of Miri, in eastern Sarawak, the Jati Miriek language of the earliest inhabitants is almost extinct, replaced by Sarawak Malay as the main lingua franca, by English as the working language of the oil and gas industry, and by the Chinese languages used by the majority ethnic Chinese population. Martin and Yen (1994) document ongoing language shift among the interior Kelabit community, many of whom have migrated to Miri to obtain work: their observation, interview, and survey data show code switching between Kelabit, Malay, and English, and a tendency for younger Kelabit children residing in Miri to use less of their heritage language.

Likewise in Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital of Brunei, the original Kampong Ayer (Water Village) variety of Brunei Malay, also known as Balandih, is seriously endangered, replaced by “Pan-Brunei Malay” (Noor Azam & McLellan, 2022, p. 237) as the major lingua franca of all Bruneians. The numerous foreign workers from South Asian nations who work in the construction industry and in small shops acquire and use a pidginized variety of Pan-Brunei Malay to communicate with their employers and customers.

5.2 Community and Family Migration

Family migration may also lead to language shift in cases where the migrating family has less contact with their extended family remaining in the original home area. This shift has been found to take place typically over three generations, including in contexts of community rural-urban migration: G(eneration)1, those who migrate, continue to use the languages they bring with them; G2, the children who receive their education in the new polity, are bilingual in their heritage language and the language used in education in the adopted homeland; and G3, the grandchildren, have less need of their heritage language and speak only the languages of power and influence, usually national or international languages.

5.3 Community and Education Migration

In some migrant communities in Borneo, as elsewhere, efforts are in place to maintain heritage languages by setting up play- and preschools in the urban and suburban areas into which formerly rural families have migrated. This is taking place for Bidayuh families who have migrated to the Sarawak state capital, Kuching (Nuek & Dundon, 2009). In this and comparable cases, the categories of community, labour, family, and education all contribute. The perspectives of both communities and families are paramount, as shown by the interview findings with Bidayuh parents and teachers in McLellan and Campbell (2015): they expressed support for Bidayuh languages being offered as subjects at the primary level and below, but were less enthusiastic about their children being educated in other subjects through the medium of Bidayuh. The reasons for this were pragmatic: they felt that if their children continued to study solely through the medium of their home variety of Bidayuh, they would be disadvantaged in the labour market.

5.4 Community and Forced Migration

Forced migration, for example, indentured and slave labour practices, certainly existed: the Brunei Malays, as well as many others, were slave owners and slave traders. These were the consequences of one community defeating and subjugating another. Arguably, forced migrations still occur in Borneo, for example, there are sizeable communities of Indonesian labourers in the palm oil plantations and in the timber industry in the Malaysian Borneo states, and of Filipina and Indonesian domestic helpers, whose employers and sponsors hold their passports, preventing them from leaving, in Brunei.

5.5 Community and Undocumented Migration

Historically, the boundaries between all the Borneo polities were porous, usually following the watershed, and all migrations were undocumented and only accessible through the oral histories, especially origin stories, of the communities. Identity cards and passports showing place of residence and ethnic affinity are artifacts of colonial governments: to this day, many people in the interior of Borneo do not possess these, and some have minimal awareness of the *perintah* (authority, central government) emanating from Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Bandar Seri Begawan. Eilenberg (2014) describes how Iban in particular “had a long history of migration and movement and a well-established network of trade” across both sides of the border (p. 6), which defied Dutch attempts to demarcate and delimit the borderline between

Dutch Western Borneo and British Sarawak along mountain ranges that formed the watershed in the interior of Borneo.

6. Conclusion

Migrations of all types continue to be the norm, as opposed to stasis; migrations continue to produce linguistic effects and consequences, especially rural-to-urban community migrations motivated by the desire for paid employment, for example, the Iban custom of ‘bejalai’ as described by Kedit (1993). Partly as a result of community migrations, it can be confidently stated that no one in Borneo uses one language only today. The monolingual fallacy is found in the production of maps in the colonial era, which presume a state of stasis, with one ethnolinguistic community residing in one area. It is much more likely, in view of the history of migrations outlined here, that only some remained in one location for any length of time. Thus, present-day Iban and Bidayuh (etc.) speech and writing, especially in keyboarded social media domains, contain insertions and alternations with Malay, English, Chinese, and other Borneo languages, and all indigenous Borneo languages ‘borrow’ from others with which they have contact.

Issues for further research into community migrations in Borneo include further detailed investigation of the linguistic effects of community migrations across Borneo, for example, whether Iban and Bidayuh retain or modify their distinctive prosodic features in contact situations with Malay communities. Another issue would be the effects of the reduction in isolation of interior communities, brought about by developing accessibility by road and air. A third is residual residence—whether those who remain in their original place maintain or shift their languages—and reverse migrations—cases where communities return to their original places of settlement. There is scope for further research into the linguistic and sociolinguistic effects of Indonesia’s Transmigrasi (transmigration) policy, in place since the Dutch colonial era and still in place now, though on a reduced scale: this forced many Javanese to relocate from overpopulated Java to Kalimantan.

These and other issues can be addressed through the lenses offered by theories of Ecology of Language and Language Contact, with the important proviso that externally derived theories always need to be used with caution and that Borneo-based or Southeast Asian approaches, as outlined by Heryanto (2007), among others, may prove to be of equal relevance.

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