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### MARGINALIZATION OF LANGUAGE REVISITED: WHAT HAS CHANGED FOR IBAN, AND FOR OTHER BORNEO INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES, SINCE 1992?

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#### Abstract

This presentation seeks to revisit and update the arguments advanced in an important paper which was presented by Ariffin Omar and Teoh Boon Seong at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Borneo Research Council Conference held at Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, in 1992. Entitled 'Marginalization of language: The case of Iban in Sarawak', it was subsequently published in 1994 (in Martin, P.W., Ed., *Shifting Patterns of Language Use in Borneo*).

This presentation covers the major themes of Ariffin and Teoh's paper, asking what has happened to Borneo indigenous languages in the intervening 26 years, and whether they are now more or less marginalized. This question is addressed in terms of their sociolinguistic domains of use, especially education but also within home and family, commerce, and the Internet and social media - new domains which hardly existed in the early 1990s.

With specific reference to Iban, significant developments include: the maintenance of Iban as a subject and as a medium in the mainstream Malaysian education system; the research and publication efforts, especially lexicographic, of the Tun Jugah Foundation; and the development of programmes in and on Iban at universities both in Borneo and at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in Tanjong Malim, Perak, West Malaysia. There is also evidence of language maintenance among Iban children in Temburong and Belait Districts in Brunei, from observations and interview data.

The presentation also offers a brief overview of some other Borneo languages in terms of their level of marginalization: whether this persists, or whether there have been positive moves to combat marginalization.

(253 words)

*Keywords:* Borneo, indigenous, languages, marginalization

#### **Introduction**

This paper seeks to revisit and update the arguments advanced in an important paper which was by presented by Ariffin Omar and Teoh Boon Seong at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Borneo Research Council Conference held at Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, in 1992. Entitled 'Marginalization of language: The case of Iban in Sarawak', it was subsequently published in 1994 (in Martin, P.W., Ed., *Shifting Patterns of Language Use in Borneo*).

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The scope of the paper is not restricted to Iban, but also includes some reference to other indigenous minority languages of Sarawak and of Negara Brunei Darussalam. The marginalization of indigenous languages elsewhere in Borneo: in Sabah and in Indonesian Kalimantan, lies outwith the scope of this paper, although there is great potential for a comparative study covering the whole of Borneo.

This paper initially summarises the arguments of Ariffin and Teoh's (1994) paper. The central section asks what has changed in the intervening years, firstly in Sarawak, then in Brunei Darussalam. Discussion and a brief conclusion follow, with suggestions for further research.

## Ariffin and Teoh (1994) - summary

The first question that must be asked is why Iban, the language of the largest ethnic community in Sarawak, comprising some 30% of the state's total population, should be considered as marginalized? Ariffin and Teoh (1994, p. 117) argued that whilst Iban was by no means a dead or dying language, there was a danger of the language falling into disuse in the face of the strong promotion of both Bahasa Malaysia and English, the two major languages used in the Malaysian national education system. They claim that

“the decline of Iban would appear to be inevitable, as it is not uncommon for a language to fall into disuse in a nation which is multilingual and as a result of economic, political and social preferences which may bring material gain to the nation.” (p. 119)

Ariffin and Teoh contend that in contrast with an earlier point in time where Iban rivalled Bahasa Malaysia in its role as a *lingua franca* in Sarawak, the Iban language is now perceived as being at the same level as Chinese and Tamil in the national education system (government schools), available only under the “Pupils’ Own Language” (POL) provision, whereby a minimum of 15 parents can request that their language be offered as a subject outside of schools hours, for which the school authorities are obliged to find a teacher. Broadening their discussion, they provide statistics showing that the Bidayuh and Iban had the lowest rates of literacy and the highest rates of poverty across all major Sarawak ethnic groups (ibid., p. 123), thereby suggesting links between ethnolinguistic vitality and socioeconomic factors. In the political sphere Ariffin and Teoh ask whether the rise of “Dayakism” might help arrest or reverse the marginalization of the Iban language.

## What has changed? – Sarawak

The name “Iban” is an exonym, reportedly from the Kayan term “Hivan” which was used to refer to the migratory groups who moved from Kalimantan into parts of Sarawak in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ray, 1913, p. 9; King, 1998, p. 3), whereas the Iban tended to refer to themselves according to the rivers beside which they lived. During the rule of the three white Rajahs of the Brooke family, from 1841 to 1941, Iban were known as “Sea Dayak”, or just “Dayak” (or Daya), a term meaning ‘people’ often used loosely for all Borneo indigenous groups (Asmah, 1983, pp. 483-484). Hence “Iban”, like Malay and many others, is a created ethnic label. In the light of the Iban migratory history it is perhaps surprising that there is relatively little dialectal diversity in the Iban language (Asmah, 1983, p. 490; Postill, 2008, p. 212): processes of standardization operate through broadcast, print and now online media, through formal education, literature, linguistic descriptions of phonology and grammar, and lexicographical development of dictionaries.

Asmah (2017, p. 21) describes Iban (and Kadazandusun in Sabah) as “minor languages” of Malaysia, but at the top end on a scale of vitality. Iban is still used in media domains: private and national radio, newspapers and television. The Malay-language *Utusan Borneo* newspaper has an Iban section which is published weekly in the print edition; an online section in Iban, <https://www.utusanborneo.com.my/iban>, is updated daily with new reports.

Updating the focus on socioeconomic and political factors relating to language maintenance, of course much has changed since the mid-1990s. Literacy and poverty rates have gradually improved. Politically the dominance of federal (West Malaysian) interests has persisted, as has the dominance of Malay and Melanau, achieved by continuing colonial era divide-and-rule strategies which ensure that other Sarawak indigenous groups remain disunited and fragmented, represented and courted by various political parties. It is too early to offer any prognosis about the recent change of government following Malaysia's 14<sup>th</sup> general election in May 2018, and the subsequent realignment of Sarawak political parties: whether these will be conducive towards maintenance of Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Sarawak Malay and the many other languages of Sarawak.

As noted by Sandai and Ong (2016, p. 115), Iban is the only Borneo indigenous language offered in national schools at primary and secondary levels. Iban is also now available at tertiary level, both in Sarawak, e.g. at UNIMAS Faculty of Languages and Communication in Kota Samarahan (<https://wiki.unimas.my/unimaswiki/bin/view/About+UNIMAS/PBN0033+-BAHASA+IBAN+PERINGKAT+1+>), and in Semenanjung Malaysia at Universiti Malaya and at UPSI, Tanjong Malim, Perak (<http://fbk.upsi.edu.my/index.php/en/2016-12-01-03-15-57/background>). UNIMAS also offers modules in Bidayuh languages (<http://titan.calm.unimas.my/course/category.php?id=262>).

The contribution of the Tun Jugah Foundation (<http://tunjughafoundation.org.my/>) needs to be acknowledged here, in particular the publication of the “Bup Sereba Reti Jaku Iban” dictionary of over 1,300 pages (2011, <http://tunjughafoundation.org.my/oral-history/report-of-research-projects/>).

A further significant language maintenance initiative in Sarawak is the opening of play schools and pre-schools which follow principles of Mother-tongue based Multilingual Education (MTBMLE), aiming to ensure that children achieve initial oracy, literacy and numeracy in their home language (mother tongue). The Bidayuh community’s Multilingual Education Project is perhaps the best known and best documented of these (Ik Pahon, Josak, Tan, Vega & Simpson, 2010), but similar projects are known to exist for the Kelabit and Iban communities, as well as for the Iranun and Kadazandusun in Sabah. In line with similar MTBMLE initiatives in indigenous languages across the world, results demonstrate not only success in establishing the home language as the initial medium of education, but also better results once the cohort of children educated through their home language move on to primary and secondary schools where they learn through the medium of more powerful languages: Malay and English in Sarawak (Ik Pahon, Josak Siam, Tan, Vega, & Simpson, 2010).

### **What has changed? – Brunei**

Brunei Darussalam was not the focus of Ariffin and Teoh’s (1994) study, and modern Brunei is not an area traditionally inhabited by Iban people. However, the status of Iban, the people and their language in Brunei can offer valid comparison with Sarawak for addressing issues of marginalization and language maintenance and shift. Migration began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainly from the Lubok Antu area in what was the Second Division of Sarawak under the Brooke Regime. Land for farming was in short supply around Lubok Antu, hence Iban were encouraged to migrate to the valleys of the Belait, Tutong, Pandaruan and Temburong rivers in Brunei (Sercombe, 1999, p. 597).

In Brunei the Iban are a minority, traditionally residing in these upriver areas. The last census to give a specific figure for the Iban population of Brunei was that of 1991: 15, 665, 6% of the nation’s total population. The 1999 Borneo Bulletin Yearbook gives a figure of around 18,000 (cited by Sercombe, 2014, p. 29). In subsequent yearbooks and official statistics the Iban population is subsumed under “Others” / “*Lain-lain*”. Coluzzi (2010, p. 122 n.9) cites a figure from personal communication with the Temburong District Office of 20,000 Iban in the whole of Brunei, with 1891 of them residing in Temburong. Martin and Sercombe (1996, p. 307) note that in the village of Sukang in the upper reaches of the Belait river, Iban serves as the *lingua franca* for interethnic communication between the Iban, Dusun and Penan who inhabit the area.

As in Sarawak, there has been considerable rural to urban migration, with many Iban families now residing and working in Bandar Seri Begawan, the national capital, and in the centres of the oil and gas industry, Kuala Belait, Seria and Lumut. Iban is not one of the seven “puak jati” groups recognized as indigenous by the Brunei constitution. Many (not all) Iban have Bruneian citizenship.

Coluzzi’s (2010) study is based on survey and interview data which demonstrate that the Iban language is being maintained by being passed on intergenerationally to children. Coluzzi (2010, p. 124) describes the Iban language in Temburong as “healthy and vital”: he found that only 3% of Iban in Temburong District claimed to use “mostly Malay” in their day-to-day communication. This is despite the complete non-use of Iban in formal education in Brunei. Other anecdotal evidence of Iban maintenance is from current (2018) Universiti Brunei Darussalam students gathering data for assignments: Farah Fatin Yusuf, Ulyana Shvets-Teneta Gurii and fellow Russian students report maintenance of Iban among the younger generation from their visits to longhouses.

Small-scale semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight members of the Iban community in the Belait District. Table 1 below shows the interview rubric, with closed- and open-ended questions, which was also made available in Malay and in Iban for the convenience of the participants:

**Table 1:** Iban interview rubric

#### **Interview /Discussion questions on the Iban language in Brunei Darussalam**

To participants: Thank you very much for your willingness to answer these questions. In line with research ethics guidelines and practices, no names will be disclosed, unless you especially request to be named and quoted.

1.	How often does your family use the Iban language?	A: always B: often C: sometimes D: rarely E: never
2.	What is the status ( <i>taraf</i> ) of the Iban language?	A: strong B: fairly strong C: fairly weak D: weak E: threatened ( <i>terjejas</i> )
3.	Apart from with family, when do you use the Iban Language? _____	
4.	Please add any further comments or opinions about the Iban language: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	

Thank you very much for your kind cooperation.  
Dr James McLellan, james.mclellan@ubd.edu.bn

Open-ended responses to the first question, on frequency of use of Iban in the family domain, included the following, quoted directly from the interview transcripts so as to foreground the views of the participants rather than those of the researcher – see below for acknowledgments:

- (i) Everyday, usually in our conversation everyday. Of course the sound of language that we use- especially English but still is more on Iban , when I talk to my parents.
- (ii) Not at all. Never. Because my mum is a Malay, so that is the reason why we never speak Iban, so even when my grandparents came to Brunei before, they will speak Malay to us.
- (iii) Bahasa Iban ni kalau untuk dalam lingkungan keluarga memang digunakan sepanjang masa-lah, tapi digunakan semasa di rumah-lah.
- (iv) Kalau di rumah memang kerap digunakanlah. Setiap masa.
- (v) Seringkali
- (vi) Kadang-kala, campur. Sama suami, sama kanak-kanak cakap Melayu.
- (vii) If I talk to my husband, always. My children, almost never.

(viii) Always. (*with children:*) Almost 100%.

Five of these Iban participants state that Iban is used in their home and family. For the one exception, (ii), non-use of Iban is because of the mixed ethnicity of the family. The sixth respondent states that her family use mainly Malay, but mixed with some Iban; the seventh uses Iban with her spouse but not with their children.

The second question, “What is the status (*taraf*) of the Iban language?” elicited the following responses:

- (i) Aaa, it feels threatened, yeah... I’m staying in Brunei, so if I meet my cousins from Sabah, Sarawak, their language use is more deeper than the Iban language that I’m using now with my family, because we tend to, we replace Iban language with Malay words, that’s why I said that it is threatened. It is more- how do you say, it’s not the pure language yeah pure Iban.
- (ii) I think it depends on the surrounding and where they live. If they are still in the kampong area, they still speak Iban, but those who are educated, they speak English and Malay.
- (iii) Kalau mengikut pandangan sayalah, daripada itu, saya rasa Bahasa Iban ani agak bertahanlah dari kalangan kaum Iban sendiri.
- (iv) Status atau taraf Bahasa Iban di Negara Brunei Darussalam ini kira agak bertahan lah, pasal kenapa ia bertahan, pasal ia lebih mudah difahami oleh bangsa-bangsa lain.
- (v) Masih lagi agak bertahan.
- (vi) Kalau di Brunei, pasal campur-campur, jadinya agak sederhana lah. Mungkin agak bertahan kalau orang tua-tua lah.
- (vii) In Brunei, I think it will not die, because there are many other Iban families as well, they’re using Iban even though ours is just a small group of Iban people who don’t use Iban at home. But they’re many others as well, still using Iban.
- (viii) ...if it’s in Belait District, I do find that Iban is mainly used by Iban people when they speak to each other.

The first participant views Iban in Brunei as being threatened by mixing with Malay, hence no longer pure; the second makes a distinction based on level of education, with those with higher levels of education tending to speak more English and Malay. All the four participants who chose to respond in Malay use the expression “agak bertahan” (strongly maintained) with reference to Iban. The sixth respondent makes specific reference to using Iban with older people. The seventh refers to Iban in Brunei being maintained and unlikely to disappear, and the eighth refers to maintainance of Iban in the Belait District before going on to suggest that Iban may be less well-maintained elsewhere.

To the third question, “Apart from with family, when do you use the Iban Language?” participants responded as follows:

- (i) Friends like, if I have Iban friends I can count a few would only use Iban language but mix with English and Malay language. Not that pure Iban conversation.
- (ii) With my colleagues, yes. I learn to speak Iban, to understand Iban was when I was in xxxx (School), we have a few colleagues who are Iban.
- (iii) Macam itu lah, kalau biasanya penggunaan Bahasa Iban biasanya di kalangan keluarga, kawan-kawan dan saudara mara cematulah, memang penggunaannya akan dipakailah setiap, pada setiap masa dipakailah dalam pertuturan seharian.
- (iv) Selain menggunakan bersama keluarga, kalau saya berjumpa dengan keluarga seperti adik-beradik, ipar dan saudara mara, durang memang menggunakan Bahasa Iban bersama sayalah, kadang-kadang pun bangsa lain durang pun ada jua bercakap Bahasa Iban, sambil durang belajar bahasa itu bah, durang bercakap Iban jua.
- (v) Selainnya di rumah, jika ada majlis-majlis tertentu then dengan kawan-kawan yang memang berbangsa Iban, dan begitu juga dengan kawan-kawan, sanak saudara, masih lagi mengekalkan dan menggunakan Bahasa Iban lah.
- (vi) Dengan orang-orang tua Iban... Sama kawan-kawan jarang.
- (vii) With friends who are Iban... I have one colleague who can speak Iban very well, but he is Malay. We do speak Iban as well.
- (viii) As long as I know they’re Iban, I would speak to them in Iban.

These responses show reported maintenance of Iban in the friendship as well as in the family domain, with the exception of the sixth participant, who again refers to using Iban only with older Iban people. The use of Iban with a Malay colleague is noted by the seventh participant.

The final open-ended question allowed participants to expand on their views about the Iban language in Brunei. Responses included...

- (i) Language, okay, if Iban, the language, if you hear it, the pure language of Iban, there is a different way of saying it, the accent. Here in Brunei, we used to mix it with other words, for example, pants, I'm talking about pants, trousers. We here in Brunei, we use it to say 'seluar', 'seluar de'. But actually, if you want to hear the real pure Iban when using the word to describe trouser is 'tanjut'. So a lot of things, especially like 'padam lampunya' to switch off, right? It's more like Malay, right? It's not 'padam', It's more to- I don't know, I forgot the word, there's a word that my father actually, how do you say, tell us and stressed not to use that word because that is more to Malay words.
- (ii) [Do you know why they don't speak Iban?] Maybe they are ashamed. Yeah, some some, I can say that because I have a few friends, they are embarrassed to speak their own languages, especially Iban, those Ibans. I do not know why but among themselves they speak Malay or English. When I ask why, they just smile and laugh.
- (iii) ...kalau di Brunei ani Bahasa Iban tu cuma ditutur saja, tidak diterjemahkan dalam peringkat persekolahan. Maksud saya, tidak ada pengajaran dari segi apabila ayat penggunaan bahasanya, jika dibandingkan macam di negeri jiran macam Sarawak kan, Bahasa Iban ni ia merupakan satu subjek, sudah menjadi satu subjek yang sudah disediakan dalam sesebuah sekolah lah, yang dipelajari dan bukan saja ditutur, ia dipelajari sama macam ia dengan Bahasa Melayu bah, ada penggunaan bahasa, tatabahasa penulisan, kadang-kadang ada juga macam perumpamaan macam peribahasa. Bahasa Iban tu memang ada jua.
- (iv) Pengalaman saya mengenai Bahasa Iban ani, sejak di mana pun semasa saya bertugas, atau mengajar di sekolah-sekolah, selalunya mereka lebih suka bertanyakan apa Bahasa Iban ani, durang mau tau bah apa Bahasa Iban ani dalam satu benda, kalau cakap Iban apa, sambil-sambil cakap Melayu kan
- (v) Apa yang dilihat Bahasa Iban memang masih digunakan walaupun kadang-kadang ada yang memang sudah belajar dalam peringkat yang lebih tinggi tetapi penggunaan Bahasa Iban dari di kalangan orang ramai apa, masih lagi durang kekalkan, and then tidak patutlah kalau ia- memang ia bahasa ibunda dari turun temurun dari sebelum-sebelumnya, memang patutlah untuk diteruskan untuk generasi yang akan datang, memang patut dikekalkan
- (vi) Bangsa Melayu mahu belajar Bahasa Iban. Anak-anak Iban yang muda-muda masa ani pun mahu belajar Bahasa Iban. Mendengar pandai, bercakap inda berapa pandai.
- (vii) ...Iban will always be Iban. Even though the language is not, the identity is still Iban. Nobody can change that.
- (viii) I think ...it's not being marginalised, but it's up to the people's choice in a way whether they want to maintain it or not.

In these extracts from interviews, the participants offer a rich range of opinions and experience relating to Iban in Brunei, covering (i) resistance to the use of Malay lexical items in place of Iban lexis, (ii) embarrassment about using Iban in public locations, (iii) and (vi) interest in Iban among non-speakers, (iv) the lack of any provision for the study of Iban in Brunei, in contrast with the situation in Sarawak, (v) the need to maintain Iban so it is acquired by future generations, (vii) the maintenance of Iban identity even if there is language shift from Iban to Malay, and (viii) that maintenance of Iban depends on the will of the Iban community in Brunei.

Overall, the responses to these interview questions reveal a range of nuanced and thoughtful opinions, mostly attesting a strong desire to maintain Iban at least in the family and friendship domains. Two respondents suggest raising Iban to the level it is at in Sarawak, i.e. including the language as a school subject; they refer to interest in learning Iban among younger Iban and among non-Ibans.

### **Cyberspace as a potential domain for Borneo indigenous language maintenance and revitalization**

One major development which affects language maintenance and language shift in complex ways is the affordances of cyberspace: the Worldwide Web and Social Media. Since the appearance of Ariffin and Teoh's (1994) study these

have become widespread, including across Borneo, although the digital divide and the disparity between rural and urban communities in terms of connectivity remain problematic. Whilst cyberspace was initially perceived as inimical to minority languages and as promoting the further dominance of global languages such as English, this has been challenged by those who have developed apps and sites for networked communication, as well as for language learning, using less widely spoken languages. Cyberspace is now perceived as language-neutral: Borneo indigenous languages are used in cyberspace, on personal, commercial and community websites, in blogs and especially in social media domains such as Facebook. With the increasing access to cyberspace young children are growing up as digital natives using online platforms for in-group as well as out-group interaction. Time and space constraints do not allow for in-depth analysis of the use of Iban, Bidayuh and other Borneo languages in cyberspace in this paper (see, however, McLellan, 2016 and McLellan and Jones, 2015), but there is undoubtedly great potential, partially realized, for cyberspace to play a role in Borneo indigenous language maintenance.

### **Discussion: languages in conflict, or coexistence?**

As noted in a number of previous studies (e.g. McLellan, 2010), languages are not part of any 'zero sum game' in highly multilingual societies such as are found across Borneo and throughout Malaysia. More of one language in no way implies less of another. It is quite realistic to aim for maintenance of local languages such as Iban and Bidayuh among the younger generation, whilst at the same time encouraging and promoting acquisition and formal learning of more powerful languages including Arabic, Spanish, Bahasa Malaysia and English for instrumental as well as for national reasons.

### **Conclusion**

Both in Sarawak and in Brunei there is positive evidence of maintenance of the Iban language, and some evidence of maintenance of other Borneo indigenous languages. Are we then justified in concluding that Ariffin and Teoh's fears about marginalization were unfounded? I contend that, on the contrary, the concerns so cogently expressed by Ariffin and Teoh have been instrumental in raising awareness of the need to be more proactive in efforts to maintain the Iban language. For example the Tun Jugah Foundation, based in Kuching, has been very active in language documentation and maintenance, and in cultural preservation.

Maintenance of culture and tradition, including language and oral literature, is a notable feature of Iban society, including in contexts such as Brunei into which Iban began to migrate in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (also in Johor in Semenanjung Malaysia, where there is a substantial Iban migrant community: Kedit, 2010, cited in Tun Jugah Foundation, 2014).

Comparing Iban with other Borneo ethnic groups, there appears to be no correlation between mobility and dialectal variation: Iban, who are said to have originated from the Upper Kapuas river in what is now West Kalimantan (Sercombe, 1999, p. 597), are known for having minimal dialectal variation. Bidayuh on the other hand, whose common origin has been traced to Gunung Sungkong, also in West Kalimantan, are renowned for wide variation with five major varieties, which by lexicostatistical analysis count as distinct non-mutually intelligible languages rather than dialects (Minos, 1990, pp. 8-9, 121-127). Uniformity of language may be a contributory factor in language maintenance, and resistance to marginalization. This may be a partial explanation for Bidayuh political leaders' strong desire to develop a unified standard variety of Bidayuh, based on the geographically central Biatah. This may not come to pass, though, as Bidayuh retain loyalty to their local variety and those from other areas are unlikely to switch to the use of Biatah in the family and friendship domains.

As noted above in the Introduction section, Ariffin and Teoh (1994) relate Iban language marginalization to wider socioeconomic and political factors. They expressed the hope that the rise of "Dayakism" as part of the awakening of political consciousness by indigenous peoples of Borneo might lead to a raising of the status of the Iban language in the educational domain. It remains to be seen what changes may result from the very recent political realignments in Sarawak and in all of Malaysia following the parliamentary election of May 2018.

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At this point the research outlined in this paper is unfunded.

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