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The Iban of Melilas, Ulu Belait: From Migrants to Citizens

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The Iban of Melilas, Ulu Belait: From Migrants to Citizens

*Mahirah Nazatul Hazimah
Lian Kwen Fee*

Abstract:

There are an estimated 14,000 to 20,000 Iban living in Brunei, most of them in the Ulu Belait and Temburong districts. They migrated to Brunei from Sarawak just before the Second World War in search of new land and opportunity to improve their livelihood. Not recognized as one of the seven *puak* by the state, the common narrative is that they face challenges of incorporation into the Sultanate. In Mukim Sukang (Ulu Belait) there are eight Iban longhouses. This case study of the Iban of Melilas documents how one particular community has successfully negotiated and managed their acceptance as full citizens of Brunei while retaining their Iban identity.

Keywords: Iban, Melilas, Brunei, identity, ethnic

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INTRODUCTION

Estimates of the Iban population in Brunei range from 14,000 to 20,000 or less than 5 per cent of the total population (Pang 2018:1–2; Coluzzi 2010:122; Sercombe 1991:606) ; most of them originally from the Ulu Belait and Labi districts, with less than 2,000 in Temburong. The Iban are not considered indigenous to the Sultanate under the Brunei Nationality Act 1961, and therefore not recognized as one of the seven *puak* (indigenous communities) who are entitled to the full benefits of citizenship. For this reason, the common narrative amongst some members of the community and observers is that the Iban have found it difficult to be accepted and incorporated into Bruneian society. This paper examines how one particular group has managed and responded to the challenges of living as a non-*puak* community in the Sultanate.

The Iban migrated across Sarawak to the Baram river, located across the border with Brunei between 1900 and 1941, and settled in the lower Baram region (Sercombe 1999:597). The Iban of Melilas, the subject of this paper, first entered Brunei in 1944 in search of a better life before finally settling in their present location in 1946. Melilas is in the *ulu* (rural area) of Belait district. Mukim Melilas is the most remote village in the Belait district. This mukim is inhabited by only one Iban longhouse. A large number of them have ancestors who *bejalai* into

the Belait district from Sarawak and their current descendants are blessed with “almost” everything that the Brunei government has provided, such as education, welfare and other social benefits - especially if they are citizens. Today many of them have lived the ‘Bruneian life’ and their Iban-ness now may have changed compared to the early days when they arrived in Brunei. According to the head of the longhouse, Melilas has 15 permanent residents and 10 households. Most reside in the town areas of Kuala Belait and Seria because of work and education but the number can get up to 50 - 70 during weekends or public holidays. On weekdays, the population may decrease to less than 10 people.

Melilas is one of several longhouses in Mukim Sukang, Ulu Belait. The others are Sukang, Biadong Ulu, Bauu, Bang Taong (not currently occupied), Biadong Tengah, Kukub, and Dungun (Noriah Hamid 2017). In Mukim Labi also in Ulu Belait, there are four: Mendaram Besar, Mendaram Kecil, Rampayoh and Teraja. There is no published information on how active these other longhouses are and their significance for the local communities. This paper is a case study of the Melilas Iban and until research is carried out in the other longhouses, it is not possible to come to any conclusion about the position of the Iban in Brunei, how each community has responded and managed their ethnic identity in the Sultanate, and whether these are localized and specific. We hope that this work is a first step.

Why is the longhouse in Melilas still standing today and become a focal point for the non-residential Iban community ? What value does this longhouse hold for its people despite being exposed to modernity? Being the most remote village in Brunei Darussalam, what comes to mind is that the longhouse has lost its purpose as a permanent and reliable safe haven most days of the week, but the longhouse is consistently inhabited and almost never empty. In 2017, His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei sponsored a full reconstruction of the Melilas longhouse, from a wooden to a concrete longhouse. The original longhouse was deteriorating,

especially its roof. So, the inhabitants requested the Royal Brunei Armed Force to help them fix the roof, but they received more than what they expected - a new and fully renovated longhouse.

Many studies of the Iban refer to the effects of modernity on this ethnic group in relation to the decline or changes of cultural practices and traditions, some examine the social institutions of the longhouse such as marriage and leadership, and others look at migration. There are few documented studies on the Iban in Brunei. This paper will focus on the social changes that the Iban in Melilas have experienced and how they cope with them, especially because they are located far from urban life.

The Iban in Brunei appear to be more flexible and open to change compared to the past and different from the Iban in Sarawak. For example, the longhouse in Melilas is now fully concrete and half of the inhabitants in the longhouse have converted to Islam; the head of the longhouse is a Muslim himself. What makes it more interesting is that they have a small *balai ibadat* (prayer hall) for themselves.

Growing up one of the authors, Mahirah, recall that the typical Iban longhouse is made of wooden stilts decorated with traditional art on their walls, and the head of the longhouse is an elderly with distinguished tattoos on their body. Wooden stilt houses were preferred so that they can easily abandon the longhouse whenever they need to move or migrate. Having a concrete house means that they will settle for the long term or for good. The Iban in Brunei have been exposed to modernity as early as 1960s and by the 1980s, many Iban were employed in government sectors and the oil and gas industry (Anderson, 1987), but despite that, the longhouse is never forgotten nor abandoned.

Fieldwork and Interviewing

Some of the data for this research were drawn from blog entries and Melilas Community's very own facebook page called "Melilas Legend", and some were timeline entries from an old typewritten yellow paper kept by a key informant.

Gathering primary data through interviews is not an easy task. Although it was not difficult to look for respondents since the Iban community in Belait is small (as Iban are related in some way), the key informants were more challenging to identify. The process of interviewing elders also consumed a lot of time, as the respondents had difficulty recalling past events in their lives. Some answers were repetitive and vague, and some questions needed to be asked over and over again.

Another limitation is the restriction on field research because it takes at least three hours to get to Melilas and the poor road conditions resulted in cars getting stuck in the mud in the middle of the jungle. There is also no cellular network in the area. There were no language barriers. Even though Malay is not their mother tongue and speaking in Malay can sound a little awkward for them, one of the authors grew up in the Iban community and had no difficulty communicating with the respondents in Iban.

Mahirah is half-Iban and while interviewing one of the informants, she found out that both of their fathers are related. In this way and with others whom she discovered she is related, trust and rapport were established instantly.

Establishing rapport is very important in this research. To do this there must first be descriptive conversations as mentioned by Whyte (1984). This helps to minimize evaluative questions that may contaminate the data. According to May (2003) establishing rapport

consists of four processes. First, the interviewer should ask descriptive questions to open up the conversation. The second process is exploring what has been asked previously to ascertain what interests the informant and familiarity with the topic. The third stage is when both parties understand 'what to expect of one another' to facilitate ease of communication. The final stage is participation when, according to May, informants fully cooperate with the researcher in providing information. At this stage informants reveal new information that was not raised previously.

Another method used in this research is sequential interviewing. This is where the interviewer asks about the events that the informants have experienced, just like a life-history interview where the researcher is interested in the documentation of life events, experiences and meanings. Sequential interview uses a chronological format, where the informant recalls certain events that he or she has mentioned.

Background Literature

This research on the Iban in Melilas covers the years between 1945 and 1992.

There are few studies on the Iban in Brunei. However, this is not the case for the neighbouring state of Sarawak. Most of the literature used in this research were drawn from Sarawak. Many of the historical knowledge needed especially related to Brunei is buried in the memories of the people, and it is important to get access to this oral history.

Past studies about the Iban are primarily about their traditional way of life, language, migration and their traditional crafts. Most of these were conducted in Sarawak. One of the few studies of the Iban in Brunei was by Sercombe (1991), a comparative study of Iban in

Teraja Ulu Belait, Brunei with the Iban in Ridan of Marudi, Sarawak. His work focuses on language differences from a geographical perspective. He does refer to how being in Brunei changed the lives of the Iban, from a traditional to a modern Iban.

Another study by Yonda (2016), analysed social change and the Iban of Sungai Utik in Kalimantan and its consequences for traditional practices. The marriage ceremonies in the long houses no longer following the ancestral tradition. Many of the ceremonies carried out by them are now based on the Catholic practices. This had become the preferred new tradition compared to the ancestral tradition, religious conversion being the critical influence. In Brunei, a relevant issue is to examine how Islam has affected the lives of the Iban and how they have responded to the dominant Malay-Muslim influence.

In addition, King (1994) in “What is Brunei Society?” refers to how the promotion of Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) as a national ideology has contributed to the strengthening of Brunei Malay culture. Even though it is not explicitly stated that all ethnic groups should assimilate into the dominant Malay culture, Braighlin notes that assimilation is the long term goal of political incorporation through various means. King (1994) said, “It does translate into active strategies to incorporate the non-Malay ‘sub-groups’ into the dominant society and culture”. This paper addresses how the Iban of Melilas have managed to negotiate and adopt strategies to maintain their Iban identity even though they regard themselves as Brunei citizens loyal to the Sultanate, without necessarily being assimilated into the dominant Malay culture.

Derek Freeman (1980) saw the Iban on Sarawak as a *pristine society*, a society untouched by the forces of migrant labour, administration, schooling and modern media – at least until the time when his work was published. But his research focuses on the Iban in Sarawak. By the 1970s, the Iban in Brunei had already been exposed to schooling and work. In

fact, the Iban in Brunei have been exposed to modernity as early as 1960s and by the 1980s many Iban worked in government sectors and the Oil and Gas Industry (Anderson, 1987).

Vinson Sutlive's work (1992) is one of the most relevant to this research on the Iban of Melilas. This is based on research conducted among the Iban of the Sibul District between 1969 and 1972, at a time when significant social and economic changes were taking place which precipitated migration and mobility. In his discussion on Iban migrations, Sutlive (1992: 22 – 24) states that the practice of shifting cultivation by the Iban meant that they were constantly on the lookout for new or productive land to avoid overcultivation of the soils.

In order to sustain such a livelihood, they had to maintain a low density of population which resulted in the periodic hiving off of small groups. The seventh division of Sarawak - where Marudi is located by the Baram river and the original home of the Melilas Iban - had seen population growth for much of the 19th and early 20th centuries. This had put some pressure on the Iban to seek better land elsewhere. Furthermore, the establishment of colonial rule in Sarawak in the 19th century, the restrictions on Iban movements and headhunting, and the imposition of taxes had also contributed to their migration (Sutlive 1992: 32). For any group to survive and prosper in traditional Iban society, it was imperative for its leaders to be pioneers and demonstrate their competence in successful farming and in rice cultivation (Sutlive 1992: 25 -26). We shall see later in this paper how these are relevant to the movement of the Iban to Melilas and their success in adapting to the Brunei Sultanate.

The Iban: An Ethnic Profile

The majority of the Iban population in Brunei are located in Belait and Temburong. Most of the Iban longhouses are usually located at the riverside or on the side of the road because it is easy for them to facilitate work activities, connect and communicate with each other. Their lifestyle practices are based on customary law, tolerance, and based on the close ties of kinship with each other.

In colonial Sarawak, the term “Dayak” refers collectively to the three ethnic groups of Bidayuh, Iban, and Orang Ulu as a means of distinguishing the indigenous, non-Muslim peoples of the region (Boulanger 2002: 221-22). The Bumiputera which literally translates to “sons of the soil”, refer to those of the original inhabitants of the land, the autochthons, and is used in Malaysia. In Brunei the officially recognized indigenous communities are the “seven *puak* Brunei” which include the Brunei, Tutong, Murut, Bisaya, Belait, Kedayan and the Dusun (Md Zain 1998:41). Together, these “seven *puak* Brunei” constitute the census category of Malay in Brunei and form the majority population. Essentially, those who do not identify themselves as belonging to the recognized indigenous groups or *puak* are regarded as non-Bumiputeras – even though the term is not officially or unofficially used - and they are usually those who are from the Iban, Kayan and Penan ethnicity, among others.

The Iban are known for their mobility, or as the Iban call it “*bejalai*”, and are believed to have migrated from Sarawak to other parts of Borneo. Originally, they can mostly be found along the coastline of Sarawak especially in the Skrang and Saribas regions and eventually went on expeditions up north to the Kapuas river delta in Western Kalimantan (Austin, 1976:64). The Iban were believed to have entered Brunei during the sovereign rule of the famous “white Rajahs” of the Brooke family, hence it is likely for this reason that they are not

considered as a *puak* by the Brunei Sultanate in its Constitution, rather they are regarded as outsiders.

Their exclusion from being recognised as a *puak* has consequences for the integration of Iban into Bruneian society, especially the youth who are born and raised here. As an unrecognized, ethnic minority residing in a Malay dominated society, this presents a barrier to being accepted fully as Bruneians.

In truth, Iban can benefit from the privileges for being Bruneian citizens, which includes free education in public schools from primary level up to tertiary, free healthcare, and the housing schemes which ensures that every Bruneian citizen has the right to own a house. Nonetheless, they are denied the privileges provided specifically for the Malays. The recognized *puak* in Brunei are, beyond doubt, in a privileged position as they have the opportunity to access particular types of occupation such as enlisting in the Royal Brunei Armed Forces.

Iban tradition includes storing pots, gongs, and urns called *tajau*. It is inherited and honored. Tajau serves as a treasure and can be obtained by barter system. A handful of indigenous Iban communities still practice some of the ancestral beliefs.

Gawai festival is the main festival of the Iban tribe. There are many types of Gawai celebration such as Gawai Dayak, Gawai Burung, Gawai Batu, Gawai Kenyalang, Gawai Panggul, Gawai Kelingkang, Gawai Tuah, Gawai Lelabi and Gawai Antu. The Gawai Dayak, the one that is conducted on the first and second of June annually is important. Typically, there is a dance known as *Ngajat*, which is performed as thanksgiving for the rice harvest. The Tuai Rumah is the person responsible for managing this important celebration. Gawai festival also will not be complete, if *tuak* is not served. Tuak is made from yeast and rice which can be found in the longhouse.

The Iban are called " Master of Language ". Derek Freeman noted that the Iban are indeed the master of language because of their abilities in using the language in every line, composing beautiful poetry, and in choosing and arranging sentences. They compose poetry using words that are arranged to the harmonic surrounding. Iban people have their own language which is Bahasa Iban. Iban language is different in each place, although Iban of Sarawak and Brunei are similar, but they are different from those in Kalimantan and Sulawesi. In Brunei, the Iban language is vital and healthy - still widely spoken among the young generation of Iban in Brunei despite also being very fluent in Brunei-Malay and English. (Coluzzi, 2010:134).

Some Iban still live in the longhouses scattered throughout the river valley. They are engaged in agricultural activities such as cultivating padi or upland rice. Iban people in the past were leading pioneers in opening up the forest for padi planting. Exploration activities are carried out in suitable areas, with the goal of producing rich rice harvests, the main source of their food. In the Iban community, one who can produce a rich harvest is considered a wealthy and respected, intelligent and hardworking person. Nowadays, most of the younger generation who have gone to school and obtain educational qualifications work in the government and the private sector.

The Iban (like the majority of other indigenous groups throughout Borneo) have traditionally occupied longhouses, generally located beside and facing rivers. They are mainly autonomous communities, which are unstratified, unlike those of many other Bornean groups, which are generally more institutionally hierarchical in their social organization (Revel-MacDonald, 1988:80). They are not necessarily egalitarian (Rousseau, 1980:52-63), however, and every longhouse village has a headman (*tuai rumah*) or exceptionally a headwoman. Since the arrival of European colonisers, the way an Iban longhouse leader is viewed, and the way in

which he retains his position, has come to be more influenced by factors outside Iban society, particularly the central government. As was recognized by Steward, trying to account for cultural change among primitive societies around the world, 'In states, nations and empires the nature of the local group is determined by these larger institutions no less than by its local adaptations' (Steward, 1955:32).

Origin of the Iban in Melilas and Establishment of Community

The general background of the Iban people, initially referred as the Dayak by the British who came into contact with them in the 1840s, are a nomadic Borneo tribe known for a warring past and their inclinations toward riverine settlement.

Sam, the son of Melilas' first *Penghulu*, explained how the Iban first arrived in Melilas. "It all began at Marudi, a settlement by the Baram river, southwest of Brunei's border. My father's family came from there (Marudi) to Brunei through the Sungai Belait, before the Second World War, in search of a better life," he said. "They paddled by boat. The journey took about a week." His father who previously worked in the land survey department - was familiar with the route through Belait, with its grassroots leaders. They first arrived in Bukit Uding, building a temporary settlement. But after the Second World War, their community split into what became four longhouses - named Tempinak, Banggerang (1 & 2) and Melilas. All that were later demarcated within Mukim Melilas. Currently, Mukim Melilas consist of one longhouse which is Rumah Panjang Melilas. Many longhouses have been destroyed by massive floods and even the longhouse that is standing until today has been rebuilt several times.

Another respondent, Azlin, told me that during that time there was no border between Sarawak and Brunei. “You can even walk by foot,” he said. The Iban of Mukim Melilas moved from Marudi because they wanted to find a new land to live and farm. The first longhouse was led by *Tuai Rumah Kena* which later became the *Penghulu* of Mukim Melilas. Azlin had lived through several reconstructions of the Melilas longhouse. Its transition will be explained in the next section.

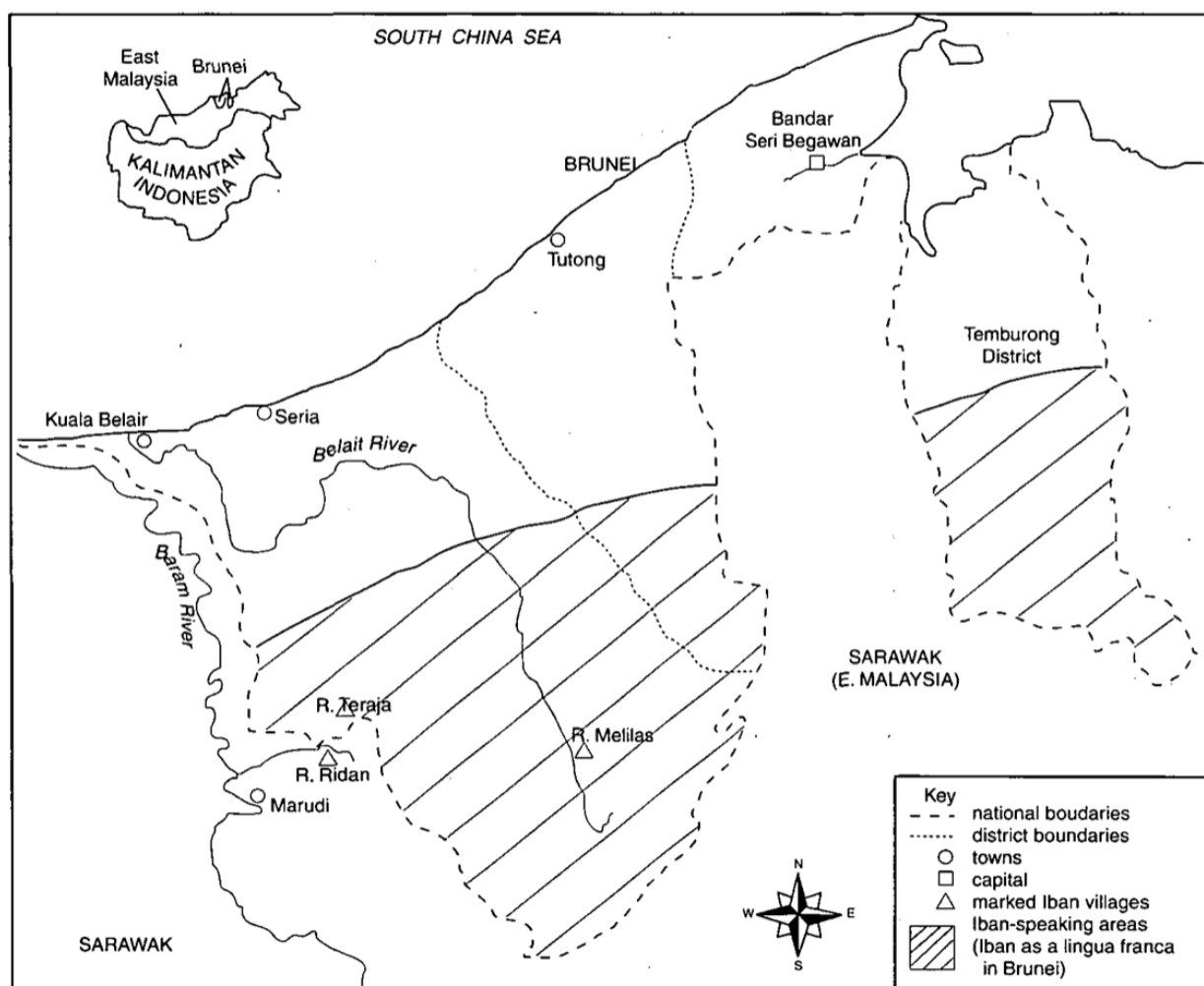


Figure 1 shows Brunei with particular reference to Melilas (Kampung Melilas) and Marudi, Sarawak. (Sercombe, 1991:600)

Mukim Melilas is governed by a *Penghulu*, according to the Administrative Divisions of Brunei. The administrative divisions consists of *daerah* (districts), *mukim*(subdistricts) and or *kampong* (villages). They are organised hierarchically, with *daerah* being the first level and *kampong* the third level. There are also a few municipal divisions: Bandar Seri Begawan and a few district towns. However, they are considered to be outside the hierarchy of the main administrative division. All the administrative divisions are under the Ministry of Home Affairs. The administrative areas have limited to no autonomy, the *kampong* has the most autonomy. The major socio-political aspects such as education and law are centralised and managed through separate government ministries or departments.

Currently Mukim Melilas is headed by a *Penghulu* (who is also the head of the longhouse) and it has a Village Consultative Council (*Majlis Perundingan Kampung*, or MPK). The MPK is equivalent to a community association or organisation consisting of a Deputy Head, Secretaries, Treasurers and five committee members. The other committee members consists of Women's Bureau (*Biro Wanita*) and also random village committees to organise events in the longhouse.

Currently, agricultural activity is usually for leisure and fun. It is no longer the main source of income since many Iban are employed in town. Some Iban of Melilas are well-educated and have become educators themselves. Others are civil servants. In addition, like most who reside in the Belait District, working in the oil and gas industry is common. Also, a few Iban women engage in handicrafts and sell their products in local markets and also overseas (in Thailand and China).

Informants

Azlin

Azlin is the key informant for this research. He is a 66 year old retired Malay language school teacher. He is one of the first group to convert to Islam in 1992. He is also one of the very first few students of the Melilas Primary School.

Azlin is the friend of Mahirah's father friend from Ulu Belait. The Iban-Muslim community is very small and that is how they know each other, moreover the Iban community itself is close despite living in separate longhouses. Being educated, working in the government and often an active representative for the Melilas community, he is the most knowledgeable person in the longhouse when it comes to Melilas' history and current progress. He has accompanied many researchers from different universities studying the Melilas rainforest.

Bu Hajah

Bu Hajah is Azlin's wife. She is a 63 year old housewife and she converted to Islam together with her husband. Bu Hajah's father was the man who proposed that education be introduced in the community, to encourage young children to go to school. Bu Hajah helped Azlin in recalling the past when growing up.

Aji

Aji is the *Tuai Rumah Panjang* Melilas, also the Penghulu of Melilas and *Ketua Kampung* (village head) of Melilas. He was one of the second group who converted in 1992. Aji manages the longhouse.

Sam

Sam is a 77 year old retired Brunei Shell Petroleum (BSP) worker. He is the son of the first *Penghulu* of Melilas and he came to Melilas from Marudi with his father by boat. He is knowledgeable about the location in the Ulu area.

Sally

Sally, 60 is the first Iban from Melilas to study in the United Kingdom. She is a retired lecturer from Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Sally was also one of the high achievers in Melilas Primary School. She initially wanted to pursue her lifelong career as a nurse but she was offered a scholarship by the government to pursue her Bachelor's Degree instead. As soon as she graduated and came back to Brunei, she said, "I went back to Melilas straightaway by boat. 'Deep down I know, I will always be an *orang kampung*."



Photo 1 shows Azlin (middle top) and his family attending an event in 1980s

Migration from Sarawak to Brunei (1944-1960)

The mobility of the Iban has been explained by many researchers (Soda, 2007, 2008). The institutionalized custom of the male's journey, in particular - has been regarded as symbolic of Iban mobility.

In Iban society, adult males often leave their villages for a considerably long period, from a few months to a few years - which is called *bejalai* in Iban language. Through this journey, Iban men accumulate rich experience in the outside world, so *bejalai* has played an important role for adult males to enhance their social prestige. Kedit (1993; 2) explains that to *bejalai* is to go on journeys to acquire wealth, material goods and social prestige. Some Iban never returned from their *bejalai* journey and settled somewhere else. Others return to improve their own community at home.

The Iban in Melilas entered Brunei in 1944 looking for a better land. A new fertile land ensures that they are able to grow crops for survival. As mentioned earlier, they left Marudi Sarawak in 1942 and settled temporarily in Bukit Uding (Brunei) until 1944. It was only in 1946 when they finally settled in Melilas. It was definitely not an easy journey to find the most suitable land to settle in. There were many challenges that they had to face including natural disasters such as floods. This will be elaborated later.

But nonetheless, it is still important to highlight their first entry to Brunei as an important event. By settling in Brunei for good, especially after World War 2 when the British were preparing to withdraw and grant independence to territories they had colonized, they were faced with a new challenge. National boundaries were beginning to develop and the official identification of inhabitants became a pressing issue. The Iban had no choice but to come to terms with affirming their allegiance to the government since they have settled in Brunei. In

other words, they need to live by the laws of the state in return for official recognition. This means they have to become Bruneians.

Being Bruneian (after 1960): “We need a school”

It is important to note that the reason why they move to the upper part of the river in 1960 is to facilitate the entry of officials from the Brunei government to the village. This was their first exposure to the state and the Bruneian people. The Iban of Melilas during that time wanted recognition of their existence, since they were already satisfied with the land they had settled in. Their crops and livestock farm prospered until 1974.

In early 1960s, Bu Hajah’s father decided to *bejalai* and visit their relatives in Sibu, Sarawak by foot. Although the borders were already drawn, going in and out of the country was still not a hassle for the people. It took him seven years to *bejalai* around - just to trace their long lost relatives. “My father was surprised when he reached there,” said Bu Hajah. “The people lived in modern conditions and the children went to school. Some became nurses, teachers, civil servants and so on. They were educated! We need a school!” The impression that schools made on Bu Hajah’s father is better appreciated by Sutlive’s (1992: 161 - 162) account of the state of education in Sibu in the 1960s. By the mid-1950s, Sutlive comments, many Iban parents realized the importance of education to employment. Schools had been built in sixteen Iban communities at a time when many other longhouse communities were demanding for them. In the urban areas where government-aided secondary schools were available, Iban parents were willing to pay fees to send their children there. Of the 143 Iban who had gone to secondary schools between 1960 and 1970, most of them were employed (Sutlive 1992: 161). Education had made it possible for the Iban to transit from rice farming to better employment.

It finally occurred to Bu Hajah's father how underdeveloped the Melilas community was back home. After seven years of his journey and when he returned to Melilas in the early 1970s, he consulted the community and proposed to the *Tuai Rumah* to build a small school hut for the children. The community gathered together, cleared a piece of land, and built a temporary hut just big enough for twenty students. The small, temporary and newly built primary school was first run by a Bruneian-Malay teacher, on the request of the *Tuai Rumah* to the District Office. Then, the District Office forwarded the proposal to the *Jabatan Pelajaran*/Department of Education (now Ministry of Education). Azlin was one of the first few students to study there, although he was older. He learnt Bahasa Melayu, MIB, English and also other subjects included in Brunei's primary school syllabus. In the early 1970s, the Department of Education decided to build a permanent and comfortable school for the community but it was regularly affected by floods. When a massive flood occurred in 1974, they had to move to the current location.

After 1975, Melilas Primary School was built on elevated land, just a few hundred metres from the new longhouse on a budget of BND\$150,000. Students who passed Primary Certificate of Education/PCE (now Primary School Assessment/PSR), were sent to a secondary school in the town area and stayed in the school hostel. Azlin and Sally were a few of the high achievers during that time. Azlin later became Melilas Primary School's principal. Sally had the opportunity to study until her National Diplomas and later became a nurse. She was offered a scholarship to pursue her studies in United Kingdom, just after she started working. She became a lecturer in Universiti Brunei Darussalam.



Photo 2 shows a photo of Melilas Primary School, built on stilts to avoid floods.

Daulat kepada Raja (To serve and be loyal to the King)

In early 1970s as well, the Department of Immigration and National Registration went to Melilas and a nearby longhouse in Sukang to encourage the community to become citizens. The two longhouses became an assessment center for Ulu Belait. Other longhouse residents such as Buau and Biadong had to walk quite a distance to come for the assessment but some gave up their journey half way.

Other races that were not considered as Malay and other people who have been living in Brunei for a while, who wish to be citizens of Brunei, may also apply. However, they must fulfil the requirement stated in the Brunei Nationality Act 1961. They will become citizens or subjects of His Majesty by registration or by naturalization. As stated in the act, an applicant must fulfil the following criteria to be granted citizenship:

(A) has been examined by a Language Board and such Board is satisfied that he:

1. has a knowledge of the Malay language to such a degree of proficiency as may be prescribed; and
2. is able to speak the Malay language with proficiency or is unable to speak such language with proficiency by reason of a physical impediment or an impediment of speech or hearing.

But according to Aji, when the government officials came to Melilas, they were not strictly assessed and it was only an oral assessment for everyone. As long as they can speak and understand a little bit of Bruneian Malay it was considered sufficient. What is interesting is that the community did not have to apply, instead they were offered citizenship. All of Melilas community became citizens of Brunei as a result.

“The most important thing about being Bruneian, and what makes us Bruneian is ‘*Daulat Kepada Raja*’ (means: to serve and be loyal to our King),” said Sam.

But being Bruneian does not mean that the Iban of Melilas have to abandon their identity. They still maintain their language and culture as long as they do not contradict Islam. The younger generation of Melilas can communicate in Iban fluently. Azlin and Bu Hajah teach their children and grandchildren to speak the Iban language. The current reconstruction of the longhouse is a modern structure, even though some traditional elements have been lost. There is also some negotiation, in terms of their traditional clothing. Being Muslim does not mean that the Iban dress as Malays. During national events such as National Day or His Majesty’s Birthday Celebration, the Iban of Melilas still appear with the Iban traditional dress proudly.



Photo 3 shows the Iban of Melilas in their traditional dress.

Sally reiterates that the younger generation should not forget their roots and stand with the Iban saying that goes: *Agi Idup Agi Ngelaban* which means “as long as one lives, one will continue to fight, seek challenges, strive to achieve and go all-out for improvements and success.” (source and translation by Low (421:2013, 2018)). In fact, this saying is held in the hearts of all Iban in Borneo and the Iban of Melilas took it to another level. They have proven that despite being a minority group, initially living far away in remote locations, they have not been left out nor hindered from self-development.

Becoming Muslims in 1992

It is also important to note that the Iban in Melilas consist of 85% Muslim (around 40 families). However, the remaining 15% are also living their everyday lives almost like Muslims. The only difference is that they have not yet embraced Islam.

After the Brunei government made it a policy to establish *surau* and *balai ibadat* (prayer hall) in every mukim and kampung, the Ministry of Religious Affairs at that time offered a special course for the Iban of Melilas, especially those who were unemployed. It was the “Kursus Bilal Masjid” (Bilal Mosque Course). The newly built prayer hall needed a few local residents working inside the prayer hall, especially assisting the Imam in managing it. However, in order to join the course and be employed, they must convert to Islam first. The first batch attended the course and were sent to the Pusat Dakwah Islamiah (Islamic Dakwah Centre). In the 1990s, converting to Islam was frowned upon in the Iban community in Ulu Belait. This is because converting to Islam results in food prohibitions, abandonment of ancestral practices, and also loss of identity.

After 20 years of formal education, the Iban of Brunei were exposed to Malay culture and values, but not as much to Islam. The earliest batch to convert comprised of four people and it was celebrated privately. Azlin and Bu Hajah were two of the first group. A year later, Azlin and Bu Hajah went for Hajj (pilgrimage) fully funded by the government. The pre-pilgrimage event took place in the longhouse.



Photo 4 shows Azlin and Bu Hajah pre-pilgrimage ceremony.

All new converts vowed and promise to abandon all beliefs, cultures and traditions that were incompatible with Islamic values. Indeed, it was expected that the new converts would abandon their Iban values.

The new Islamic values was brought into the longhouse by Azlin and his wife. But then again, Azlin and Bu Hajah showed that just because they had embraced Islam, it does not mean that they have to become ‘Malay’ and abandon their Iban identity. They can still be Iban but Muslim at the same time. “Whatever is *haram* (forbidden) in Islam, we abandon it. But whatever that does not go against Islam, we maintain it as much as possible.” said Azlin. Azlin and Bu Hajah’s new way of life attracted 32 new converts and it is the biggest conversion ceremony in Brunei to date.

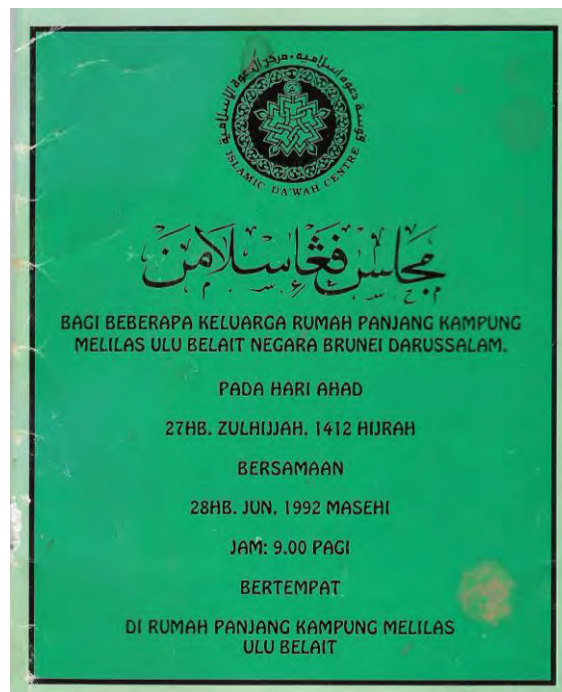


Photo 5 shows the front cover of the program booklet which its title translates: “Islam Conversion Ceremony for families of the Melilas longhouse in Ulu Belait, Negara Brunei Darussalam”. It was held on the 28th of June 1992.

When Azlin and Bu Hajah first converted to Islam and then had their first pilgrimage to Mecca, they did not know much about Islam yet. All they knew is pray, do and consume things that is halal and fast during Ramadhan. They live their Muslim lives based on guidelines prepared by the Religious Affairs. It was only after the mass conversion in 1992 that they finally learned about being a real Muslim. There were religious classes and religious events such as *Tahlil* and Doa Selamat held in the longhouse and prayer hall. The Melilas Primary School finally opened religious classes (*sekolah agama*) in the afternoon. Non-Muslim children also attended the afternoon religious classes.

Every year since 1992 until the present, officials from the Religious Affairs Department visited and stayed in the longhouse especially during Ramadhan and Hari Raya Aidilfitri (Eid) every year so that the Muslims, and also non-Muslims in Melilas can celebrate despite being far away from town. It definitely helps in building a strong Islamic community in the longhouse.



Photo 6 shows the women sitting on the floor during one of the religious events held in the longhouse in the 1990s.



Photo 7 shows the residents of Melilas celebrating their first Hari Raya in the new longhouse in 2017.

The Gawai celebration is without doubt considered *haram* for the Iban Muslims to celebrate. But that does not mean that they reject and isolate themselves every time Gawai is celebrated by the non-Muslim residents. “Some of our (non-Muslim) residents still celebrate Gawai in the longhouse. But of course with limitations in respect for those who are Muslims,” said Aji. “They (non-Muslims) definitely can’t serve pork if they want us (the Muslims) to attend the Gawai celebration,” “We (non-Muslims) understand the limitations,” Sally explained. “We won’t let this divide the community just because we have different beliefs. The Iban community here is one big *family* that is inseparable,”

The Muslim and non-Muslim residents in Melilas try their best to maintain the integrity and unity of the community. It is strongly felt by the non-Muslim residents that they have to modify their traditional practices in order to adapt to the Muslim majority. However modification of the traditions does not mean that the tradition is lost. “At the end of the day what makes you an Iban is your ancestral blood,” Azlin highlights. “You can be illiterate in Iban language, stop practising the culture and tradition and everything. But you can’t deny

what is in your blood and your ancestral roots.” The Iban are still Iban despite converting to Islam. For them, being Iban does not mean that they have to be Malay.

But as observed, the Iban of Melilas have maintained their longhouse, language and the integrity and unity of the residents. Of all longhouses in Ulu Belait, Melilas is the most optimistic and open to change. Yet, they find themselves trying their best to maintain their Iban identity.



Photo 8 shows a ritual dance during a Gawai celebration in Melilas in early 1990s.

The Making of *Rumah Panjang*

The longhouse is a traditional dwelling of many natives in Borneo such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Penans and other Orang Ulus. This indigenous architecture is made up of a long street of separate dwellings covered by one roof. Each longhouse is headed by a headman called *tuai rumah*. In a typical longhouse, every family who stays in the longhouse has their own separate room. Communal activities are carried out in the *ruai*, which is the verandah. A small number

of traditional longhouses in Ulu Belait are still in use today, such as in Kampung Buau and Kampung Biadong.

Even though some of the longhouses were built before World War II, they provide the basic need for shelter for the occupants. The use of local material and the setting creates harmonisation with the local environment and climate conditions, and provide for the comfort of the occupants. These practices also give a distinct architectural identity to the building. The use of local material reduces energy consumption and lessens the environmental impact of the development on the surrounding area.

Some of the Iban longhouses in Ulu Belait have disappeared, others are being constructed mostly for tourists or are being maintained as cultural artifacts rather than living spaces. There is a concern raised that someday the distinctive identity of the longhouses may be lost.

The Iban Longhouse in Melilas

As I was interviewing Azlin, a retired teacher and my key informant, he suddenly stood up from his living room sofa and rushed to his kitchen to call his wife, Bu Hajah. I picked up their muffled discussion in Iban language; they were recalling how their “rumah lama” (old house) looked like. He came back, sat down and looked into space.

“I don’t know about other longhouses, but for us in Melilas it’s like this. After we moved from Marudi to Bukit Uding in 1942, we only stayed for a while and established the first Melilas longhouse by the river in 1944. It was during the Japanese Occupation and the soldiers also established their small base at the opposite of the river,” he said. “The first longhouse that was built, was only a temporary settlement to build a bigger and sturdier one. But we stayed for only a decade as a temporary settlement, still. By 1960, we moved to the

upward side of the river near Sungai Belait so that our house was accessible by the government officials. It wasn't perfect, but it's habitable. We stayed there until 1974 then forced to move because there was a massive flood. It was difficult for us to do our activities. We even crossed the flood using rafts! Our properties, our farms, our ricefields and also our animals were destroyed."

The above explains the reason why the Iban did not settle permanently because they were always looking for better places to live. They knew living by the river can impose many environmental disadvantages, but the benefits of living by the river was very much needed for survival as well.

Azlin paused suddenly. He took his blue pen in his pocket and began to draw a floor plan of how the first longhouse looked like. After a few minutes, he finished his drawing. "Sorry *lai* (my child), there are no photos of the first house. And drawing it in 3D is too difficult for me so this is all I can do for you." Then, he chuckled to himself. It occurred to him how the house was so sturdy that its roof never leaked despite heavy rainfall. He remembered helping his people preparing the hardwood made of Berlian and Meranti trees for the house. The Berlian tree is a very rare and valuable tree found only in Borneo, which makes sense how the longhouse was able to stand for more than a decade.

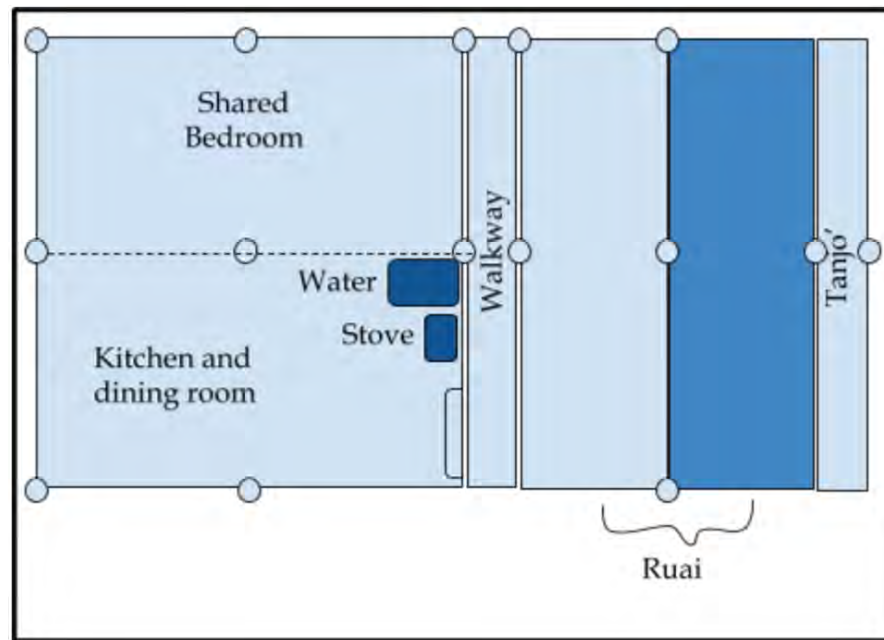


Figure 2 shows a digitalised floorplan of one bilik apartment of the first Rumah Panjang Melilas.

Structurally, each house consists of a series of family apartments arranged side by side. The same term *bilik* refers to both the longhouse apartment and the family group that occupies it. The *bilik* family typically consists of three generations — grandparents, a son or daughter, his or her spouse and their children — with membership acquired by birth, marriage, incorporation or adoption (Freeman, 1957:15-52).

Fronting the *bilik* is a covered, unpartitioned gallery called the *ruai*. This runs the entire length of the house and, while divided into family sections (each built and maintained by an individual *bilik* family), the whole area is available for communal use. The wall that separates the *bilik* from the *ruai* - bisects the structure into two equal halves. The darker shade of the *ruai* is covered with a woven mat made of rattan called *tikai*.

Each *bilik* apartment contains, at its front upriver corner, a *tiang*, literally a ‘source, foundation post’ (small circle in Figure 2). These posts or pillars are the first to be erected during construction and when the longhouse is completed, it extends down its central axis to separate the *bilik* apartments from the unpartitioned gallery.

An Iban hearth (*dapur*) consists of an earth-filled firebox, supported in a frame (*para*), posts extend through the house floor directly into the earth below. Above the hearth is a rack for storing and drying firewood and for keeping the family’s salt stores. Traditionally the hearth was constructed immediately behind the front wall of the *bilik*, inside an area of the family apartment. Next we will explain how different the *bilik* are between the first and second construction of the longhouse.

Permanent Resettlement



Photo 9 shows a glimpse of the second Rumah Panjang after settling permanently in Melilas, in which the land exists until today. It looks very similar with the first one, as well.

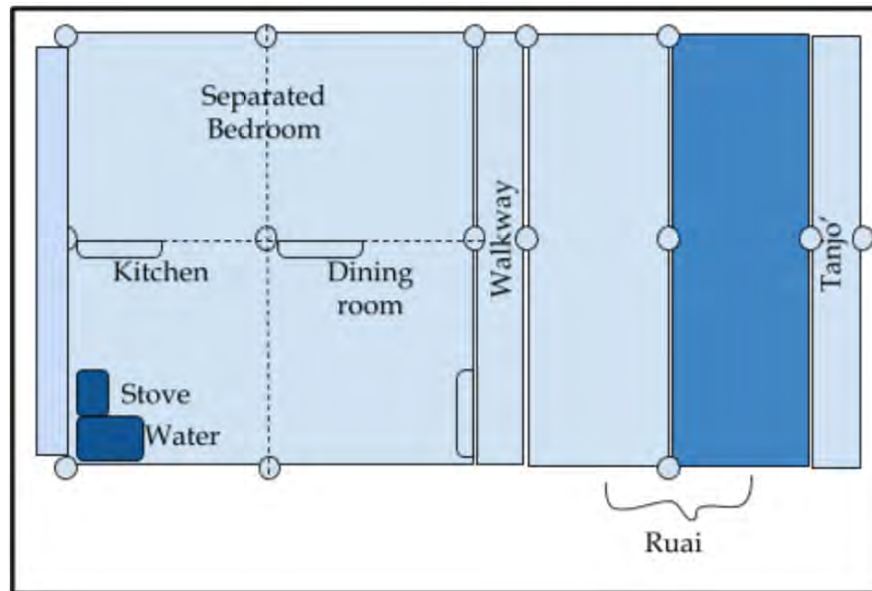


Figure 3 shows a floorplan of one bilik apartment of the second Rumah Panjang.

In 1975, the second longhouse was built on a piece of land that seems perfect and hopefully permanent. Azlin holds up another pen, coloured in red and did a few tweaks to the initial sketch. He would call his wife again to come into the living room to sit with us, so that he can double check his memory of the second house.

“There’s only a bit of differences from the first and second house. We added a back verandah for us to hang our clothes instead of the front at the tanjoh’. Some people would extend it with stairs so they could go down through the back, but my father didn’t. In the second house also, we finally had doors to our bedrooms. The kitchen is also finally at the back of the house instead of the middle,” Yassin and Bu Hajah giggled. “It’s funny how our elders couldn’t think of the consequences of having a stove and a sink in the middle of the house! Because if anything happen to the floor - burnt or wet, it will be very difficult to repair. The whole floor could collapse!”

Bu Hajah interrupted her husband. “Hygiene issues as well, *lai*! All those dirty water could get into our bedrooms and dining room floor but we were not aware of these back then.”

The above shows how education improved the way they think and live. When the first school was built in 1961 by the Iban themselves, it shows that by 1960s the people wanted to expose themselves to civilisation and modernity. “Without school, we could have been stuck just like the old ways,” said Yassin. With education, they are able to improve their lives gradually so that they could live at the same standard as the people in the city.

The second longhouse lasted for almost 40 years. In 2015, the roof and floor started deteriorating. The house was at the end of its life. They tried to fix the roof, ordered the material needed from the capital but the truck was buried in the mud on the way to the longhouse. Prior to 2017, the road to Melilas was fully off road and hiring contractors would be expensive considering the transportation fees. The people requested help from the Royal Brunei Armed Force (RBAF) instead. The RBAF were their only hope since they were always around in the Ulu. Officers and contractors inspected the place but realised that the house could not be fixed at all. In the end, His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanah Bolkiah Mu’izzaddin Waddaulah, decided that the house should be demolished and reconstructed into a fully cemented modern longhouse.



Photo 10 shows the second Melilas longhouse back in 2011.

The second Melilas longhouse had gone through a lot of changes, while still maintaining its physical appearance. From 1990 onwards, the second longhouse can be seen with Astro dishes on its zinc roof, television and radios inside the rooms, a generator power the fans and lights. The second longhouse had also witnessed changes, from the Iban who practised the traditional way of life to exposure to modernity and conversion of its people from animists to Muslims. It is not surprising why the longhouse has a special place in their hearts.



Photo 11 shows the current Rumah Panjang Melilas, under the Julangan Titah Project funded by His Majesty The Sultan Of Brunei Himself.

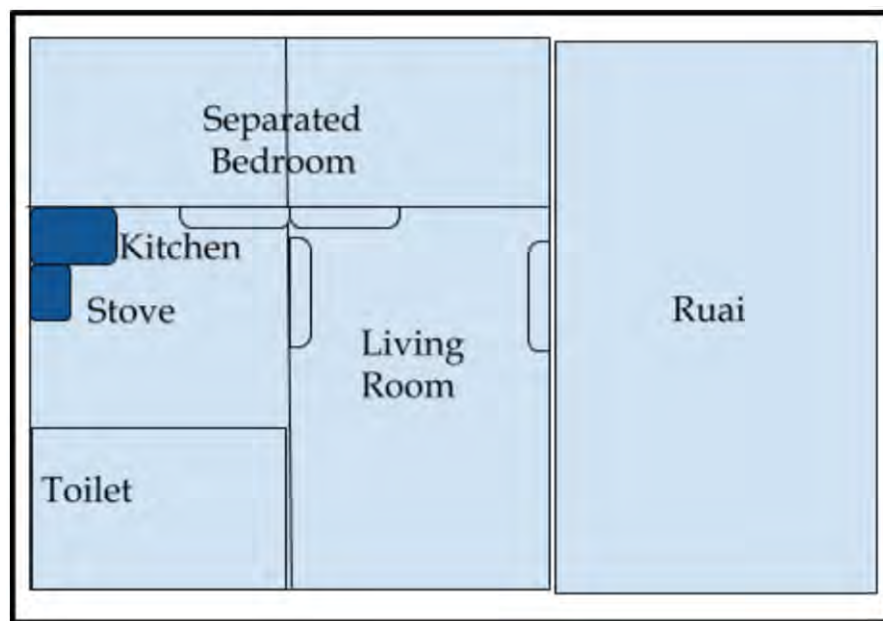


Figure 4 shows a floor plan of one bilik apartment of the current Rumah Panjang.

The current longhouse is like a typical terrace house. In each *bilik* apartment, there is a living room with at least two bedrooms, two toilets and a kitchen combined with dining room. The *ruai* is now indoors surrounded by walls and there are no *tiang* in the *ruai* anymore. The *ruai* is more like a long hall and it could definitely fit a wedding ceremony as it is so spacious and convenient for big events.

“It’s not that we are not happy with the new house. We just love the old longhouse (the second longhouse) more. We lived there for years, we grew up there, we got married and raised our children there. I wouldn’t want it to be demolished, but the old house couldn’t be saved. But I guess it’s good to some extent. If there is no more Melilas, people wouldn’t want to come back to the Ulu,” said Bu Hajah. “The jungle, the river, the land and the animals - oh I love so dearly. When I wash the dishes at the back (in the kitchen), many rare animals can be sighted such as the *keruai* (The Crested Fireback). I take care of the rainforest with my husband, we volunteer to accompany the researchers to study the rainforest. We even stayed in the thick jungle for two weeks eating canned food every day!”

Azlin told me how the rare animals barely show up anymore. “Sometimes I feel like the animals are running away. Their natural habitat is disturbed way too much by human activity. I feel sad for our jungle that sometimes when I catch a wild chicken or any other animals I would feel sad and let them go instead. I’m worried that my great grandchildren won’t be able to see these animals in Melilas again.”

Even up until today, the Iban of Melilas are still connected emotionally to the jungle and they put high sentimental value to it. Other than the longhouse, it is the jungle that witnessed the changes they had gone through and provided all the necessities for their survival since they first came into Brunei. The surrounding environment is indeed their home.

The head of the longhouse emphasised how the younger generation should always come back to Melilas every week and never leave it empty. “I always advise the children of Melilas to come back, the Sultan had given us a comfortable home and we should not leave it empty. That’s why during weekends and holidays the number can reach over a hundred.”

Other than the sentimental value of the longhouse for these people, it is also a sign of gratitude to the Sultan. Bu Hajah said, “The Sultan sponsored this house using his ‘pocket money’, if it was up to us (to reconstruct), we were not able to pay for it. The elders are all ‘*pencen*’ (retired), our children also have other commitments with their family. So, we are thankful for the reconstruction.”

When His Majesty the Sultan directed the reconstruction of the BND\$2 Million budget longhouse, it was reconstructed without the approval of the Ministry of Development. What was important is the safety and welfare of the people of Melilas. But there were other reasons why the longhouse was reconstructed on the same land and in the area, instead of moving the residents out of the Ulu into towns. According to Aji and Azlin, the reconstruction was made for security purposes. Melilas is 30km away from the southern Brunei-Malaysian border. With increasing activity of logging around Mulu in Sarawak, illegal crossover into Ulu Belait are bound to happen. “Sometimes we can hear gunshots in the jungle and whenever I go for a short stroll I usually can pick up one or two empty bullet shells along the way,” said Azlin.

“The Sultan didn’t want the Ulu area to be deserted,” Aji explained. “Our green jewel and the border needs to be protected. The army is always here too,”



Photo 12 above shows the Royal Brunei Land Force visiting the Melilas Longhouse in 2018.

Conclusion

Researchers who have written about indigenous communities in Sarawak and Brunei, which have come under British colonial influence, have invariably resorted to classifications and census categories that have colonial origins. More often than not, official categories do not reflect the reality on the ground. The consequence of such aggregation is to essentialize the indigenous populations. Hence in the past, the Iban were referred to as the Dayak population by the colonial administration. When Sarawak was incorporated into Malaysia in 1963, the politics of ethnicity practised by the central government encouraged the Iban to distinguish itself from other indigenes and led to its ethnic formation. Being late arrivals to Brunei just before the War, the Iban have retained their identity.

However the common reference to Iban-ness in Brunei as if it is a homogenous community belies differences and nuances that exist below the surface. In the absence of documented research of the Iban in Brunei, it is difficult to make sense of how the Iban communities have responded and adapted to the assimilationist policies implicit in how the

government manages indigenous minorities in the state. This study of the Iban in Melilas is one step in demonstrating that Iban communities, usually identified with their symbolic attachment to the longhouse, do not always respond uniformly as they strive to settle in the Sultanate over time.

From the 1940s when they first entered Brunei through its porous borders until 1990s when they converted to Islam, the community had gone through much economic and social change. Although located in one of the more remote parts of Brunei, they were impressed by the benefits of education for their Iban relatives in Sibuhaj and the leaders took it upon themselves to build a primary school. Their exposure to a bilingual education of Malay and English and their proximity to the oil and gas industry of Seria – the power house of Brunei's economy – have modernised their outlook. As a community known for their strong belief in their folk religion and pride in their identity, the Iban of Melilas were the first to convert to Islam in significant numbers, yet were able to retain their Iban-ness. Their openness to change have brought positive benefits to the community, transiting from an agricultural community to an educated, commercially oriented Bruneian Iban Muslims.

One of the more visible milestones of the development of the community was the construction of the concrete longhouse with modern amenities in 2017, supported by His Majesty the Sultan, to replace the older wooden traditional structures that had deteriorated over the years as a result of floods. This was a notable departure from the temporary structures of the past and over the years – preceded by conversion to Islam and full citizenship - marked the milestone that the Iban of Melilas had finally found a permanent home in Brunei. Some of the local Iban had also found employment in the Brunei army. It was fortuitous that Melilas is located close to the southern Brunei-Malaysia border and for security purpose, it was strategic to have a military presence there.

The Iban of Melilas, despite their conversion to Islam, have been able to maintain their identity separate from the Malays. This research has shown their remarkable ability to adapt their traditional practices to the demands of *Shariah* and enjoy the benefits of citizenship available to the other *puak* communities. In the process they have come a long way in transforming their status as migrants to Brunei citizens.

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