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**Moribund Language Documentation and
Preservation: A Preliminary Study on Punan
Language**

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Moribund Language Documentation and Preservation: A Preliminary Study on the Punan Language

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Abstract

This study focuses on the Punan language in Punan Bah, Belaga, Sarawak. The Punan language is a language spoken by the Punan people, one of the minority ethnic groups in Sarawak. This study is a preliminary study of the language and acts as an early step in the effort to document and preserve the language. This preliminary study is pivotal in preventing the language from falling into an endangered phase or becoming moribund. This study also aims to resolve confusion over some terms used to refer to the Punan ethnicity and Punan language.

This study was conducted as field-oriented research. The respondents were selected based on several criteria and were native speakers of the Punan language, aged forty and above, and living in the Punan Bah area. Data were collected through interviews and voice recordings. The data include the history and the background of the Punan ethnicity.

The outcome of the study shows that the Punan language and ethnicity are different from the Penan language and ethnicity, and these ethnicities belong to two different categories with their own respective identities. From historical and background aspects, the Punan language is spoken in eight long houses, namely Punan Pandan, Punan Jelalong, Punan Mina, Punan Meluyou, Punan Bah, Punan Biau, Punan Sama and Punan Kakus. From a linguistics aspect, it is found that the Punan language has four main variations; daily spoken language, ukiet (folklore), u'a and setuo. Hence, this study will explore the diversity of indigenous languages in Sarawak.

Keywords: Moribund, Language Preservation and Documentation

Introduction

The Punan language is one of the minority indigenous languages in Sarawak. Only few academic studies focusing on the linguistics aspect of the language have been conducted, unlike with other indigenous languages in Sarawak such as Iban, Bidayuh, Kayan and Kenyah. Its existence has always been regarded as the same as the Penan ethnicity, which is another minority ethnicity in Sarawak. According to the estimation by the Punan National Association (2017), the population of Punan throughout the whole Sarawak from the Bintulu district to Kapit is 6450. This figure is considered small as compared to other languages in Sarawak. The small number of its speakers forces it to compete with other languages in order to exist. Asmah Haji

Omar (2017, 22) stated that the Punan language is categorised as a survival language but at an unsafe level. She also noted intermarriage and education as factors for the decreasing number of its speakers. Table 1 shows the classification of minority languages by Asmah Haji Omar *(2017). Previous studies on Punan language focus more on sociocultural and anthropological aspects and only few focused on its linguistics aspect. Therefore, a lack of studies to document the language will contribute to its moribund status.

In early efforts to prevent the Punan language from extinction, researchers may focus on a study of its basic linguistics components (i.e. phonology) as it could function as a reference to forming a standardized language system. This will assist in the preservation and documentation of the language.

Table 1: Minor Indigenous Languages of Malaysia: Categories of Survival
(adapted from Asmah Haji Omar, 2017)

Categories	Languages in Sabah	Languages in Sarawak	Languages in West Malaysia
Very safe	Kadazandusun	Iban	
Safe	Bajau darat, Bajau laut, Murut	Bidayuh, Melanau, Kayan, Kenyah	
Endangered	Paitan, Bisayah	Kelabit, Lun Bawang	Orang Asli languages: Temiar, Semai
Unsafe	Timugon, Lun Dayeh	Vaie, Punan Ba, Selakau	
Moribund	Orang Sungai, Ida'an, Tambuwono	Tatau, Lugat, Mirek, Vaie, Ukit, Kajang, Kejaman	Orang Asli languages: Mah Meri, Che Wong, Kintakbong, Lanoh

This study thus aims to:

1. Clarify confusion in references and terms of the Punan ethnicity and its language.
2. Preserve and document the Punan language.

Methodology

To achieve the first objective of the study, that is, to clarify the confusion in references and terms of the Punan ethnicity and language, interviews were conducted to obtain information from the respondents. This information was transcribed, and includes the history and background of the Punan community. The respondents were the older generation of the community who were aware of its history and background, as compared to the younger generation. To achieve the second objective, the recorded interviews from the respondents, especially those related to the variation of the Punan language, will be transcribed.

Punan References and Terms

There are many references about the Punan ethnicity and language. The variation of these references often confuses local and non-local communities. For example, there are three

commonly argued confusions or misunderstandings regarding Punan terms. Firstly, Punan Bah refers to all the Punan ethnic groups in Sarawak yet they speak the same language. Secondly, do Punans and Penans refer to the same ethnicity? Thirdly, do Punans still practice a nomadic lifestyle or did they live the nomadic lifestyle in the past? The first confusion can be clearly seen in the studies of western researchers such as Ling-Roth (1986) and Nicolaisen (1976, 1977, 1983) where the use of the term Punan Ba referred to the Punan ethnicity as whole. Needham (1954, 81) in his study “Punan Ba”, classified Punan Bah, Nomadic Punan and Penan based on the following criteria: -

Punan Ba (or sometimes referred as ‘Punan Bah’)

This tribe lives at a permanent longhouse area and is categorized as the Kajang ethnicity which also consists of Punan Biau and Tepaleng, situated at the Rejang river area, as well as other villagers who live at upstream from the Tatau and Kemena rivers. Clayre (1972) stated that the Siteng tribe upstream from the Mukah river speak the language or dialect which is closely related to the Punan Ba language. Needham also stated that there was no proof of this Punan tribe having ever lived a nomadic life in the past.

Nomadic Punan

This group collects jungle produce and were hunters who ate sago instead of rice as their staple food. Other tribes belonging to this group are Punan Aput, Punan Batu and Punan Busang (in the Indonesia regions).

Penan

This group is sometimes categorized as the jungle Punan. In a census conducted in Sarawak, this ethnicity was found to have lived in a static settlement, although a very small number of the people lived nomadically.

Needham’s classification of the three groups showed that they were regarded as three different ethnic groups. The history of Punan Ba has never indicated that this group has lived nomadically, like the Nomadic Punan and Penan. Furthermore, Needham also used the term ‘Punan Ba’ to refer to the other Punan groups who lived in the Punan Biau and Tepalang areas. The term ‘Bah’ in its etymology refers to the small Rejang stream, where the Punan Bah longhouse is situated. The exonym term or the terms given by the non-local community based on geography, ethnicity, dialect or language must be re-reviewed to avoid semantic confusion and vagueness.

Rejang-Sajau Linguistics Group

The Punan language is not only vague and confusing in its terminology but also in its linguistics. According to Needham (1954), this is considered a major issue in ethnography, particularly in Southeast Asia. Based on the language classification in “Ethnologue languages of the World,” the Punan language belongs to the Austronesian language family, which is part of the Rejang-Sajau language group. Other languages in this group are as shown in Table 2: -

Table 2: Rejang-Sajau Language Group in Ethnologue Languages of the Worlds.

Language	Country/Location
Basap	Indonesia
Burusu	Indonesia
Penan, Puan Bah-Biau	Malaysia
Punan Merap	Indonesia
Sajau Basap	Indonesia

According to the category, the Punan language is classified together with other Penan sub-language groups. However, the Punan language is always associated with Kajang (Kejaman, Lahanan, and Sekapan). Clayre (1971, 1972a) in Kroeger (1998) supported this. Most researchers have agreed that the Punan language is associated with Kajang due to both a strong commonality between the cultures and extensive intermarriage between group leaders from both ethnicities (Kroeger 1998). However, Hudson (1978) classified Punan Bah as a Rejang-Baram language family, which is different from Kajang languages. Hudson (1978) also classified the Punan language into three different dialects – two dialects in the Rejang-Baram family and one dialect in the Kayan-Kenyah (Punan Nibong) family. The below presents dialect distribution by Hudson:-

- a) Rejang-Bintulu
 - Bintulu
 - Lahanan
 - Kejaman, Sekapan
 - Bukitan, Ukit, Bukut, Sru, Punan Busang, Punan Batu and others.
- b) Rejang-Sajau
 - Punan Bah, Punan Biau
 - Punan Merap
 - Sajau Basap
- c) Punan Nibong
 - Bok, Nibong, Punan Gang, Punan Lusong, Punan Silat, Speng.

Hudson (1978) also stated that the languages in the Rejang-Sajau group have 72% cognate relationship with each other. Clyre (1971, 1972) agreed and stated that the Kajang-Bintulu group has close language relationship with Sekapan and Punan (Punan Bah). The statements from these researchers complicate Punan language classification. Kroeger (1998) stated that, among the issues in Punan language classification is that the same groups are often referred by different names in different areas.

Punan Language Variation

The Punan language can be categorized into four variation as follows:

Verbal conversation (daily)

This refers to the language used in formal and non-formal daily conversation. The Punan language has had no standardized writing system until today. Undeniably, the language in this context is highly influenced by other languages such as Malay, English and others. This is due to factors such as education and the economy, where youngsters migrate to urbanity, and through indirect influences to the spoken language.

Table3: Examples of lexical differences in daily language and ukiet

No.	Punan language (origin)	Daily language (as influenced by sounds in Malay)	Meaning in Malay language
1	Ikiang [iki ⁱ an]	Bajou [badʒu ^w o]	Baju (attire)
2	Gaduong [gadu ^w uŋ]	Ijau [idʒau]	Hijau (green)
3	Owi [owi]	Binatiang [binati ⁱ an]	Binatang (animal)

The word examples 1-3 in Table 3 evidence the effects of Malay language immersion resulting in borrowed lexis, although there are original words which have the same meaning.

Ukiet (folklore)

Folklore is the literature component which portrays the use of poetic language, and which may not be commonly used in daily conversation. This is almost similar in the case of the differences between the classic Malay language and the modern Malay language. For example, classic Malay language was a dominant palace language and exhibits some archaic terms which are no longer used in current Malay. The language used in folklore has a high level of authenticity as compared to language used in daily conversation. There are various traditional lexis which are not commonly used in daily conversation, as shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Examples of lexical differences between daily language and ukiet

No.	Ukiet language	Daily language	Meaning in Malay
1	Ipin [ipin]	Oput [oput]	Kain sarung
2	Bekaweang [bekawian]	Te'luo pigiang [teʔluo ^w pigian]	Tali pinggang (belt)
3	Batuok [batu ^w uk]	Tupi [tupi]	Topi (cap, hat)

Based on Table 4, examples 2 and 3 illustrate the influence of Malay. This shows that the language has different elements and needs to be properly reviewed in the analysis.

U'a

U'a is another literature component in the Punan language which has its own language and has no similarities with daily language and ukiet. The younger generation today are unable to understand the meaning of this language. This language is different from its normal language in terms of intonation, vocabulary, meaning and grammar. U'a can also be categorized as poetry

and can be delivered in rhythm with an intonation which is similar to its songs. U'a is usually performed during specific events and festivals to create a joyful atmosphere. It is performed to convey positive messages, praise and advice to specific individuals being celebrated in a particular occasion. Furthermore, folklore can also be performed through u'a, especially by those who still understand the language.

Setuo

Setuo is a language used to perform mantra during funerals. The mantra is used to send the soul of the dead to the Kelima river (danum keliman), the world of the dead. In the Punan community, the deceased will be kept at home for seven days where family members and relatives can prepare the burial place and can pay their last respects. Setuo will be performed throughout these seven days, usually at night. The Punans believe that the setuo recital will guide the soul correctly in life after death.

Conclusion

The variation of references and terms of Punan ethnicities and languages is the main factor in the confusion in their ethnic classification. An explanation of the history, background, and linguistics will provide a clearer picture of how the Punan ethnicity is different from the Penan, and that the term for the language is 'Punan' and not Punan Ba. Punan Ba refers to the name of a Punan longhouse, which was the earliest settlement of the Punans before they migrated to other settlements, including Tatau, Bintulu. The existence of Punan language variation proves that the ethnicity has a sophisticated of civilization and thought as they are able to use different forms of the language for different purposes. These variations must be documented and preserved to ensure their sustainability and to enable these to be passed down to future generations. Each language and culture has its own value, knowledge and local wisdom which might not exist in other ethnicities.

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