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**Lower and Upper Baram Sub-Groups: A Study of
Linguistic Affiliation**

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Abstract

It is not possible to determine the exact number of indigenous languages of Sarawak, one reason being the dialect-language dichotomy, as some isolects has not been ascertained. Ethnic labels may not reflect a linguistically homogenous group. That is to say that the language varieties spoken by an ethnic group may have a dialectal relationship with one another, or they may be heterogeneous, which means they are mutually unintelligible.

This paper reports on the results of a lexicostatistic study that examines linguistic affiliation of a group of languages found along the Tinjar-Baram river basin, namely Berawan, Bakong, Narom, Kiput, Dali, and Miriek, and also their links with Kenyah Long Terawan, Lepo' Tau and Belait in nearby Brunei. The paper also traces their historical past and describes how languages spoken by these ethnolinguistic groups have become affiliated to each other. For some reason or another, e.g. migration in search of greener pastures, internal rivalry or/and conversion to modern religions, these indigenous communities are forced to move away from their original speech communities, and they call themselves by different names in their new localities, usually after the name of a river or a mountain. These factors and categorisation on the basis of similar cultural attributes have caused misinterpretation of the identity of the indigenous groups in the past. The paper will clarify some of the misconceptions regarding the ethnolinguistic groups in the region.

Keywords: Language contact, lexicostatistics, linguistic affiliation, Borneo.

Introduction

The Baram-Tinjar area is one of the linguistically diverse areas in the northern part of Sarawak. Besides Kayan and Kenyah, it is home to a relatively large number of ethnolinguistic communities where most of the languages have not been researched on. There are two main groups to be considered here, and these are the Upper Baram and the Lower Baram.

The Upper Baram group of languages is located in the Tinjar-Tutoh area, and is also known as the Berawan group, where the languages show evidence that they are related to one another. Berawan is one of these. The languages under the label Berawan include languages spoken by communities in Long Terawan, Batu Belah, Long Teru and Long Jegan. Lower Baram consists of a number of languages which

A Note on Methodology

This paper examines historical relationships between the languages in the Baram-Tinjar region. Lexicostatistics is employed to arrive at a historical relationship between the languages in this study. The lexicostatistic tests applied in this study use the Swadesh 100-wordlist (Dyen 1975), and the items in the list (originally in English) are given their correspondences in the languages.

Results and Discussion

The lexicostatistic results presented in this section shows a pre-historic connection between the said languages in the Tinjar-Baram region. On the whole, linguistically, the languages share a common source, i.e. *Proto-Kayan-Kenyah. This proto language branched off to *Proto-Kayan and *Proto-Kenyah.

Lexicostatistics Results of Kenyah Languages

Compared with Kayan, Kenyah appears to be much diversified. This is the impression researchers in the field get when visiting tributaries of the Upper Baram. We have obtained vocabulary lists from informants who call themselves Kenyah, but belong to groups who are known as Lepo' Tau, Kenyah Long Terawan and Berawan. There are also groups who claim to have roots in Kenyah, such as the Narum and the Kiput. This has motivated us into including the latter two as well as Bakong in the cognate counts, to see where they stand in their relationship with one another. The results are as given in Table 1.

Languages	Berawan	Lepo' Tau	Kiput	Narum	Bakong
Kenyah L. Teraw	71	32	46	55	47
Berawan		37	35	36	41
Lepo' Tau			31	38	34
Kiput				70	65
Narum					80

Table 1: *Cognate Counts for the Determination of Kenyah Related Languages*

The table contains the following information:

- (1) There appear to be two subfamilies consisting of: (i) Kenyah of Long Terawan - Berawan (71%); (ii) Kiput – Narum – Bakong (Kip – Nar 70%; Nar – Bak 80%; Kip – Bak 65%).
- (2) Lepo' Tau does not have any pairing above 38%. The percentage it scores with Kayan, which is 49%, is much higher; this means it is more related to Kayan than to Kenyah.² Its connection with Kenyah could have been through a parent language that connects Kayan and Kenyah, i. e. *Proto-Kayan-Kenyah (Diagram 1).
- (3) Kiput, Bakong and Narum show higher percentages with Kenyah of Long Terawan than they do with Berawan or Lepo' Tau.

Pending more information from further research, we propose the following schema (Diagram 1) to show the connection from pre-historical times between these languages.

*Proto-Kayan-Kenyah

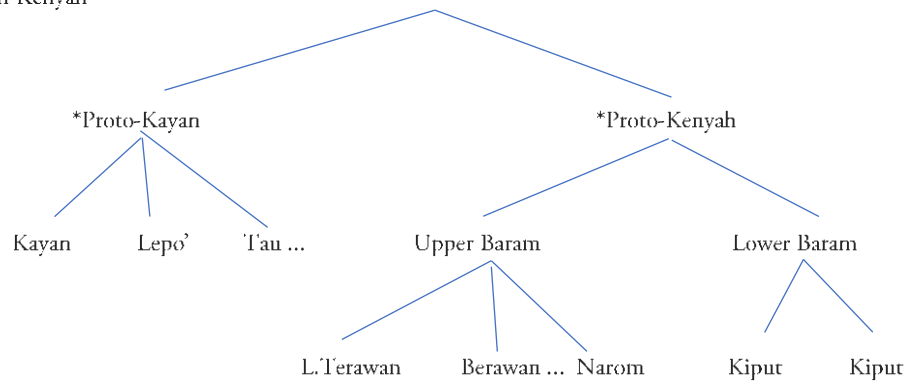


Diagram 1: *Branching of *Proto-Kayan-Kenyah*

Lower Baram Kenyah (Narom-Kiput) Subfamily

Our corpus contains data from six languages. These are Narum, Dalik, Bakong, Kiput, Miriek and Belait. Table 2 gives the cognate percentages of the Lower Baram languages. Looking at the percentage scores between these six languages, there is the possibility of subgrouping them into two sub-subfamilies, which may be labelled as Narum subfamily and Kiput subfamily. These sub-groupings can be further affiliated at a higher level categorisation i.e. Narom-Kiput subfamily.

Languages	Dalik	Miriek	Belait	Kiput	Bakong
Narum	80	73	65	70	80
Dalik		79	66	63	74
Miriek			60	60	67
Belait				74	74
Kiput					65

Table 2: *Cognate Counts between Languages of the Lower Baram*

The subdivision is based on the scores obtained in the lexicostatistic comparison, i.e. by taking 70% as the cut-off point between the high and the low scores, e.g. Narum has four scores above 70%, and only one below. Dalik and Bakong have three of the higher scores, and two of the lower ones. The other three languages – Miriek, Belait and Kiput – all have two of the higher scores and three of the lower ones. The subgrouping is shown in Diagram 2.

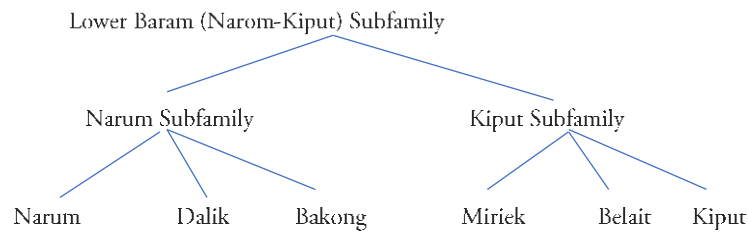


Diagram 2: *Subgroups of the Lower Baram Kenyah Subfamily*

The communities in both subgroups are all Muslim, but this happens to be a coincidence, and religion has never been a criterion for the grouping or subgrouping. Kiput is an exception as its members comprise non-Muslims as well. The informants claim that they originated from Upper Baram, and they became Muslim out of their intermingling with Malays. Most say that they were originally from the Kenyah tribe. But the informant for Bakong said that his people were originally nomadic Penan from Tinjar who moved to Sungai Bakong and finally settled in Beluru, their present habitat, and this migration took place before the Second World War. According to the informant, there are Bakong people in Kuala Belait, Niah and Bekenu as well. Of their conversion to Islam hence have become Malays, the narrative seems to echo what Benedict Sandin has said of the fact of the matter in his writings. All those people in these two subgroups who have become Muslims are considered Malays. This explains why they do not appear with their inherited labels in the list of the national or state population census. Table 3 provides a sample of vocabulary items showing cognates and non-cognates appearing in the comparison of the different lists.

No.	Items	Narom	Dalik	Bakong	Miriek	Belait	Kiput
1.	big	ajaʔ	ajak	ajiɛʔ	ajaʔ	reʃiɛh	daʃʃih
2.	burn	undab, mayah	sukat	ayah	məkuh	tunu, marah	suyap
3.	cloud	awan	awa	bələ	awan	buliew, andraw	awan
4.	cold	sadzʊʔ	ilaw	dəteim	sadzuk	dəʃʃim, tərsai	mələit
5.	ear	təliŋaʔ	təliŋa	tələgah	taliŋah	taliŋa	daleh
6.	fire	Igun	igun	igun	igun	sab	sap
7.	foot	paʔah	fəʔah	paʔah	haʔah	agəm	akəm
8.	give	tukiʔ	tuki	əndʒoʔ	tukej	kih	useah
9.	moon	təka	təka	təka	təka	bulien	bulin
10.	nose	siŋot	siŋaot	seŋot	siŋot	ndroŋ	ɣowah
11.	root	tiyaiʔ	Ramaot	ɣamaot	ɣamot	ramut	tirai
12.	sit	uduəʔ	uRaw	kundauʔ	utauʔ	kuduʔ	kuyauʔ
13.	stand	məʃaŋ	masseəŋ	ʃiʔeŋ	massəŋ	məʃaŋ	massəŋ
14.	swim	məta	məta	pəta	məta	pələŋoj	pələŋoj

Table 3: *Examples of Corresponding Lexical items in Narum-Kiput Subfamily*

Linguistic affiliation – Evidence from the Historical Past

This section traces the historical past of the Baram-Tinjar languages, and describes how the ethnolinguistic groups have become affiliated to each other. Narum, Dalik and Miriek are Muslim communities whereas among the Bakong and Kiput there are Christians as well as Muslims. The informants also recall that their languages are similar to the one spoken in Kuala Belait, a border district between Miri and Brunei. According to our Narom informants, upon conversion to Islam, the speech communities of the Lower Baram moved out from their original tribal groups, and adopted their group name after the name of the new place or river where they formed their new settlement. Their ancestors in the original tribe were said to have intermarried with the Kenyah. In the case of the Dalik, they were from Belait, and they moved out to Sibuti in search of greener pastures. Our Dalik and Miriek informants said that they still had living relatives in Belait. Martin (1992, cited in Kroeger, 1988: 30) reports that the term ‘Belait’ is actually another label for the Lementing language, which is already extinct.

The anthropologist Metcalf (1976: 26) has provided a historical account of the migration of Baram-Tinjar communities in the second half of the 19th century. In tracing the history of the groups, Metcalf states that

during the second half of the 19th century, the Baram was extremely unsettled with large war parties of interior folk often coming downriver to attack the coastal people. During this time, the Kayan and the Kenyah were actively raiding the people along the coast. The Berawan were also raiding on the coasts of Brunei in the 1870's but avoided the Kayan and the Kenyah. The chaotic violence came under control towards the end of the century. Smaller communities then moved to the coastal areas under the protection of Brunei administration, and eventually were assimilated into the Malay culture. This explains the existence of the Baram-Tinjar language group along present-day coastal areas of Miri and Brunei, i.e. the Dalik in Sibuti, the Miriek in Pujut (Miri) and in Bakam and Luak Bay area, the Narom in the coastal town of Marudi, and the Bakong further inland in Beluru. The Lelak, the original settlers of Long Teru, have intermarried with and been assimilated into the Berawan community. The Lelak language has also become extinct, as a consequence.

There are also historical accounts which explain the connection between these groups and the Belait as well as the Tutong in Brunei. Metcalf also shows how the Berawan varieties spoken in Upper Baram and Tinjar have become related (although quite distantly) to Punan Ba and the smaller languages in Upper Rejang and Balui river basins. The Berawan community in Long Jegan built their longhouses in Long Trusan, and thus was in contact with the Punan Ba in the Jelalong River basin, in the Upper Kemena River, and who also came into contact with the Punan Ba when they were in the Balui River in Belaga. Access to Belaga subsequently led to contact with other speech communities in the area, namely those of the Kajang language group.

From his study of secondary treatment of the dead, Metcalf (1978) suggests a link in the form of an arc stretching from the Melanau-Kajang through Punan Ba to Kenyah-Berawan-Lower Baram. He also claims that communities in the Baram area which traditionally practised secondary treatment of the dead represent a cultural substratum which predates the arrival of the Kayan and the Kenyah in the area. He suggests a chain of linguistic connections (between languages in the Baram basin) extending in an arc across northern Sarawak, which he calls the '*nulang* arc' (56). This arc stretches from Belaga, curving north through the inner Baram into the Limbang and Trusan, and ending in the Kelabit Highlands (57). This also indicates that they may have existed long before the arrival of the Kayan and the Kenyah.

Asmah (2017) also reports that the Narum were originally from Madien in Central Baram, an area of concentration of the Kayan and the Kenyah. However, according to the Narum, they were part of the larger Kenyah group. Theirs was a splinter group which migrated downstream to the Lower Baram when they converted to Islam. Since then, they had lived the Malay way of life, dwelling in Malay-type houses and practicing Malay-Muslim customs in birth, marriage and death. Asmah uses a lexico-grammatical approach in her investigation of the linguistic affiliation between Narum and Kenyah. She reckons that while the lexicostatistic comparison is confined to words and their meanings, a lexico-grammatical one which encompasses their morphologies, systems and structures is also important to show a close genetic relationship between the languages. This to some extent supports the claim made by the Narum that they were originally Kenyah. From the data, it can be inferred that the Narum people could have broken away from the Kenyah long before they were converted to Islam. This inference is made after looking at history, which shows that Islam came to the Baram region not too long ago, whereas the divergence between the two as shown by the adverbs, common everyday verbs, human nouns and words referring to the topography of the area, must have occurred long before that (73).

Concluding remarks

Lexicostatistic comparison of the Baram-Tinjar languages suggests the existence of Lower Baram and Upper Baram subgroups whose proto-language may originate from *Proto Kenyah. Generally, the Lepo' Tau community of upper Baram, is referred to as Kenyah. However, linguistically their language is closer to the Kayan. Although Miriek is placed together in a subgroup with Kiput, it is also very closely related to the Narum subgroup. More data (on lexicogrammar and structures) is needed before any conclusive claims can be made on the Miriek. The study shows that, in terms of culture, the lower Baram people has assimilated with the Malays while the upper Baram speakers have assimilated with Berawan.

Endnote

1. We were not able to obtain data for Tutong, hence it is not included in the lexicostatistic comparison. The same label i.e. 'Tutong,' is used to refer to different languages, i.e. a Bisaya dialect, and a Baram-Tinjar dialect most closely related to Lemeting and Kiput (Martin 1992, cited in Kroeger, 1998: 29).
2. We have also conducted a lexicostatistic comparison of Kayan related languages.

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