

## BORNEAN JUNGLE FORAGERS: THE SIHAN OF SARAWAK.

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*Bornean jungle foragers have mainly been identified with the Punan or Penan. In Sarawak, even though the Penan are the main jungle nomads, there are other communities such as the Lisum, Ukit and Sihan who practice this lifestyle. This paper discusses the Sihan community, giving details of their ethnohistory and settlement, their economic system and their ethnicity.*

In discussing Sihan ethnography this paper hopes to show that Bornean foragers like the Sihan can lead both a semi-nomadic life and yet still in some respects be sedentary. Even though they depend on hunting and gathering in the main, they have a wide range of other economic activities. They maintain a strong ethnic identity, despite settling in proximity with other dominant and larger ethnic groups.

### ETHNOHISTORY AND SETTLEMENT

Sihan ethnohistory tells of an ancient time when most of mankind lived along the Kajang river or in the Balui head-waters. All the main ethnic groups found living in the Belaga district today are said to originate from the Kajang. When their leaders wanted to look for a better place to settle they decided to cross the Kajang, but since they did not know how to swim they made a bridge of rattan. Some of them had already started to cross when the bridge broke. Those who fell into the river flowed downstream - the Kejaman, Sekapan, Lahanan and Kayan. Those who had not started crossing the bridge were left stranded on the Kajang river bank - the Sihan, Lisum, Penan Lusong, Penan Gang and other nomads. Those who fell in the river settled downriver at Belaga, while the nomads have remained to this day in the headwaters (Sandin 1985:67).

Sihan ethnohistory continues with the story that the Sihan and the Lisum moved to the Mahakam in Kalimantan. Then the Sihan moved back to Sarawak via the Mujong headwaters to the Rejang, and from there upriver to the mouth of the Pila River. It was there that they were invaded by the Iban and their communities became fragmented. They were harassed by the warring Iban and moved from the Pila upriver towards the Balui. One group remained at Pila and settled with the Bukitan. The main group went upriver to take refuge with other dominant interior groups such as the Kejaman, Sekapan

and Kayan. From their contacts with these sedentary communities they learned to cultivate, planting food crops such as banana, tapioca and sugar-cane and then taking up the cultivation of rice.

This Sihan ethnohistorical account is supported by a report written by Hugh Low, when he wrote in his diary on Sunday, November 18th, 1883:

The Sihan houses are built on hill-sides, and are mere sheds with leaf roofing and bark flooring....The Sihans do not pretend to be farmers; they grow nothing neither corn nor rice as a rule, but they are beginning to learn, and their paddy this year is looking well. Their usual food is the produce both vegetable and animal of the forest. (A. Maxwell 1987:42).

That was more than 100 years ago. When I did my fieldwork in 1983 I had to cross the Balui River from Belaga Bazaar and walk about one hour to reach the Sihan longhouse by the bank of the Ameng River. The leader of the community of 16 families said that they had built their longhouse only two years before.

#### MIXED ECONOMIES

##### Hunting and Fishing

Wild boar hunting is the main occupation of the Sihan, after rice planting. Even during the farming season they allot time to family members to go hunting. In the past hunting was done with blowpipes and spears, using dogs in the chase. Today, the shotgun has replaced the blowpipe, but dogs and spears are still used by those without guns. The kill is usually taken to Belaga to be sold to wholesalers who own freezers, for transportation to urban centres. On average a family may kill one or two animals per week, and when sold at M\$2.00 per kilo they earn around M\$100 per carcass. Heads and offal are usually not sold, but shared between the hunters.

Hunting for wild boar is usually done in the daytime. The hunters start off with their dogs around 6 a.m. and return with the kill by noon. They then send the meat to Belaga in the afternoon. Other animals are hunted at night, such as the deer (*rusah*), mousedeer and wild cat (*musang*). Fishing is also done in the Segaham river about two hours walk inland towards the hills. Here the Sihan have built a base camp hut where they can stay for periods from one or two nights to a month. During such times they work collecting rattan or wild sago. Should they go further afield to forage they have several smaller camps where they can work for a few days before returning to the base camp at Segaham. At Sungei Segaham the Sihan used several fishing methods: the floating net (*pukat*), casting net, line, or diving using homemade spear guns. Large catches are usually brought to Belaga for sale.

##### Jungle Foraging

The Sihan say they resort to eating wild sago when their harvest fails or when they have no cash to buy rice. A few sago palms (*Metroxylon sago*) grow within the longhouse compound but these are insufficient for all the families. In times of need they usually stay

overnight at their Segaham hunting hut and surrounding camps where *sago pantu* (*Eugeissona utilis*) grow in abundance. According to the Sihan the older generation prefer sago to rice. In 1984, the Sihan had a bad harvest when only five families managed to obtain sufficient yield due to bad firing of their hill plots. From field observations the Sihan do not give much attention to their rice fields; they seem to prefer to hunt or collect jungle produce such as rattan for trading in the bazaar in order to buy rice.

The Sihan also make and trade mats and baskets of rattan, which are in demand by the Kayan and Chinese traders in Belaga. It takes about three weeks to make a 6 by 12 foot mat from the rattan collection stage. Rattan baskets can be made within a week. In addition, rattans are collected and sold directly to the bazaar.

The Sihan also collect wild fruit and vegetables for their daily consumption. They can name 21 types of edible mushrooms. There are also other jungle plants for medicinal use which they resort to when modern medicines are not available.

#### Rice Cultivation

As with other hill rice cultivators, the Sihan work their fields according to seasons. Beginning in early June they prepare the fields and work until the harvest at the beginning of the following year. However, as mentioned earlier the Sihan pay less attention on their rice plots than other neighbouring populations, because of the time they spend in other activities. It is maybe for this reason that they seldom get good harvests. It seems that they are caught in a vicious circle of having to spend time to earn cash in order to pay for rice bought from the Kayan or the Chinese at Belaga, which in turn, leads them to neglect their rice fields. Thus, the Sihan still maintain their hunting and foraging activities, at the expense of rice growing, to support their sedentary lifestyle.

#### Wage Labour

The Sihan find employment in Belaga as daily wage labourers with small building contractors, and as cleaners with the local council. They find employment in nearby timber camps working for a daily wage, assisting to transport logs to the mills. Some work for the secondary school at Belaga collecting firewood. Some of the Sihan also grow cash crops such as rubber, and recently pepper and cocoa. But this is still on a small scale.

#### SIHAN ETHNICITY

In 1978 there were an estimated 120 Sihans in Sarawak. Even though they live among larger ethnic groups such as the Kayan, Kejaman, Sekapan, Lahanan, and other Penan semi-nomadic communities, the Sihan manage to keep a strong ethnic identity. The leader of the Sihan said this was because they keep to their old ways and that any people joining the group through marriage or any other reason would have to follow their Sihan *adat*, and hence identify themselves as Sihan. Among the 16 families living in the Sihan longhouse, there are in-married Kayan, Kejaman, Iban, Bukitan, Penan Talun (a semi-nomadic Penan group living about one day on foot upstream from the Sihan settlement) and Penan Lusong.

Amongst their neighbours the Sihan have interacted and intermarried with the Penan Talun more than the other groups. Maybe this is because the Penan Talun are also foragers and a new sedentary community. In fact, there are two cases where Sihan and Penan Talun keep two homes in their respective longhouses, moving to and fro between them. With other groups such as the Kayan, Kejaman and Sekapan they have historical links of alliance against attacks by the Iban. They also trade with these groups and have learned farming technology from them. Sihan oral history states that before they left the Pila, because of Iban harassments, they had at least 70 able fighting men. The population has been much reduced because of epidemics, such as dysentery.

The Sihan's success in interacting with other groups while keeping their own identity intact is probably due to their ability to speak many of the languages found in Belaga. For example, the Sihan leader is able to communicate in Kayan, Kejaman, Sekapan, Lahanan, Penan Talun, Kenyah, Malay, Bukitan and Iban - a total of 9 languages, not including Sihan. Other adult men are also able to speak other languages, but the women know fewer. The reason why these men are multilingual is probably due to their mobility and exposure to other peoples.

#### CONCLUSION

The Sihan, even though they have been cultivating rice and other food crops for over 100 years, have still maintained essentially a foraging and hunting lifestyle. They move from their longhouse in search of wild sago, fish, wild boar, rattan and other jungle products. They seem to have adapted now to a mixed economy of rice cultivation, hunting, foraging for jungle products and wage labour. In short, they are both jungle foragers as well as sedentary farmers. Their oral history and their ability to interact and absorb those who settle with them give them the resilience to maintain their identity and ethnicity, despite their small population.

#### REFERENCES

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