

The languages and peoples of the Müller Mountains

A contribution to the study of the origins of Borneo's nomads and their languages

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ABSTRACT

The Müller and northern Schwaner mountain ranges are home to a handful of tiny, isolated groups (Aoheng, Hovongan, Kereho, Semukung, Seputan), altogether totaling about 5,000 persons, which are believed to have been forest hunter-gatherers in a distant or recent past. Linguistic data were collected among these groups and other neighbouring groups between 1975 and 2010, leading to the delineation of two distinct clusters of languages of nomadic or formerly nomadic groups, which are called MSP (Müller-Schwaner Punan) and BBL (Bukat-Beketan-Lisum) clusters. These languages also display lexical affinity to the languages of various major Bornean settled farming groups (Kayan, Ot Danum). Following brief regional and particular historical sketches, their phonological systems and some key features are described and compared within the wider local linguistic setting, which is expected to contribute to an elucidation of the ultimate origins of these people and their languages.

KEYWORDS

Borneo, nomads, hunter-gatherers, languages, history, Müller Mountains, Punan, Bukat, Aoheng.

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INTRODUCTION¹

This paper² presents data on a cluster of little-known ethnic groups of one of the most remote regions of interior Borneo, the Müller and northern Schwaner mountain ranges (see Map 1). The data were collected mainly in the period 1975-1985, during which the first writer spent about three years in that area, with additional data gathered in the course of several visits in more recent years. Among other things, historical and linguistic data were collected and were analysed in the early 1980s (for example, Sellato 1982a, 1986).



Map 1. The island of Borneo and the area of the Müller and Schwaner mountains.

¹ Both authors of this paper have developed a deep interest on the linguistic and cultural diversity of Borneo, a theme of great interest to Hein Steinhauer. In particular Antonia Soriente has learnt the rudiments of morphology, of language and cultural diversity of the Austronesian world from Hein Steinhauer, one of her teachers of linguistics at Universitas Indonesia where she was studying for her Master's program. Since 1992 lectures of morphology of Dawanese, Hein Steinhauer has been an inspiration, a reference point, a guide for Antonia Soriente's development as a scholar.

² This article is derived from a paper delivered by Bernard Sellato at a conference entitled "The languages and literatures of Western Borneo; 144 years of research", held on 31 January - 2 February 2005 at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia, and from further discussions with Antonia Soriente (also a presenter at that conference) and involved in the study of some languages of hunter-gatherers in Borneo.

This corpus provides an interesting case study in which historical and linguistic data can be brought together to shed light on ethno-genetic processes of group formation. That is, beyond the immediate question of current ethnic identity (who are these people?), it allows for an understanding of how groups of people became what they are now (for example, Sellato 1992, 2002: 163-194). In this particular case, it clarifies the origins of the region's extant ethnic groups and their languages. The present paper, however, tries to dwell on preliminary linguistic matters and does not go much into the question of ethno-genesis.

A brief regional historical outline is followed by short sketches of the history of the various groups under scrutiny, based on both the scanty references in the literature and Sellato's extensive ethno-historical reconstructions. Then some features – mainly phonological, and partly lexical – of the languages of the Müller Mountains Groups are presented. These groups all belong to the same local language cluster, called the “Müller-Schwaner Punan” (MSP), Sellato's original labelling (as embraced in Wurm and Hattori 1983) also used in the Ethnologue classification (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013). Finally, possible historical and linguistic links, relevant to the status of these groups are suggested. This constitutes an elaboration of similar suggestions that were put forth earlier (Sellato 1990, 1993a, 2002: 105-135).

REGIONAL HISTORICAL OUTLINE

The literature only provides scattered, second-hand information on the region of Borneo's central water divide (see Map 1) for the period prior to the late nineteenth century, for example, Schwaner (1853-54) on the Barito; Van Lijnden and Groll (1851), Veth (1854-56), and Von Kessel (1849-50) on the Kapuas; and Weddik (1849-50) and, later, Tromp (1889) on the Mahakam. First-hand data appear with the expeditions led by A.W. Nieuwenhuis across the Müller Mountains in the very last years of the nineteenth century (Nieuwenhuis 1900a, 1900b, 1902, 1904-07; Knappert 1905; see also Sellato 1993b), at a time when the identity and distribution of ethnic groups in the region were already firmly established. The sketch below is drawn from historical reconstructions proffered in Sellato's doctoral thesis (for details, see Sellato 1986; for a general overview of the upper Mahakam, see Sellato 1980).

In the early part of the eighteenth century, the upper Mahakam area was home to groups of people collectively referred to as Pin. They probably were cultivators of tubers rather than rice, and part of a broader cluster of peoples of which the Ot Danum (Uut Danum) of West and Central Kalimantan now form the major group. There were also several small groups of forest nomads in the Müller and northern Schwaner mountain ranges. The group now calling itself Kerého (or Punan Kerého, also known as Punan Keriau) lived on the upper tributaries of the Kapuas, the Keriau (or Kerého) River, the Bungan (or Hovongan) River and its major branch, the Bilit (or Hovorit) River, and the upper Mandai River and, in the Mahakam river drainage, on the Kacu (or Kasau) River. Other nomadic groups, known in the oral tradition as Halungé, Acué, and other names, lived on the uppermost course of the Mahakam, near

the border with Sarawak.

Then, the Kayan and Modang, powerful groups of swidden rice farmers, began moving out of the Apo Kayan plateau (to the north of the Mahakam) and spreading around to other, adjacent river drainages. First to move into the upper Mahakam area were the Kayan proper (circa 1760), then came the Long-Gelat (a sub-group of Modang, circa 1800), and the Uma' Suling (now called Busang; circa 1810), a Kayan sub-group that transited through the Baleh River in Sarawak to move into both the upper Kapuas and upper Mahakam drainages.

These incoming groups, speaking Kayanic languages, progressively appropriated the relatively fertile plains of the upper Mahakam, and most Pin communities scattered away. Some went downstream to become part of the Tunjung or Tonyoi groups, others went across the upper Barito to become part of today's Ot Danum and related groups, and others went across to the upper Kapuas and Melawi to become part of the Mandai groups. Some Pin groups were subjugated by the Kayan, later merging with them to become the Kayan Long Blu'u (now Long Kuling). Others were forcibly made to join Long-Gelat villages as affiliated communities like the Uma' Tuan, the Uma' Urut and other sub-groups (Sellato 1980). However, several small runaway Pin groups, loosely vassal to the Kayan and Long-Gelat, lingered to the west of the plains, in the Müller Mountains foothills. Some of these lived on the uppermost course of the Mahakam like the Aséké, the Amué, and the Auva, others like the Piratoran on the Kacu and others yet across the watershed, on the upper Bungan.

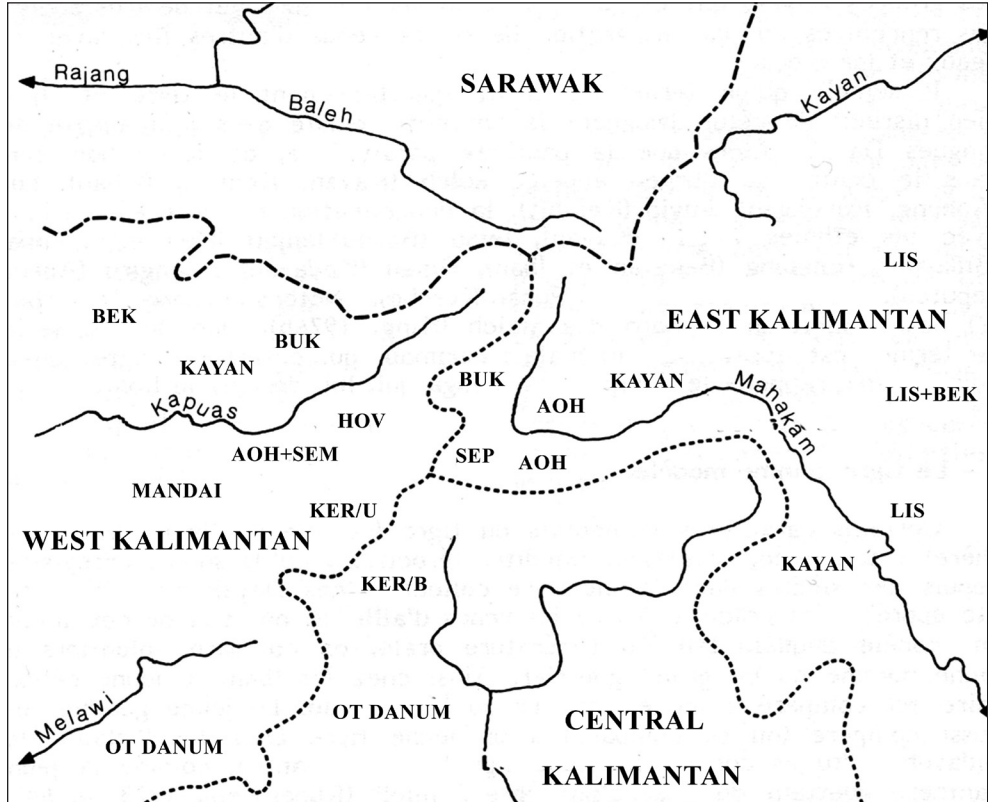
By about 1820, a small group of forest nomads, the Semukung, came across from the Baleh River of Sarawak into the uppermost reaches of the Kapuas, while autochthonous Bukat nomads were occupying the right bank of the upper Kapuas. Two more groups of nomads came from the West to the Müller: the Lugat and the Punan Kohi, both related to the Bektetan of west-central Sarawak and the upper-middle Kapuas.

All these little groups, the Pin farmers and the various nomadic bands, were or came under the control of Kayan groups. About 1830, the Kayan and Long-Gelat of the upper Mahakam were called on to rescue the Kayan of the Kapuas, who were threatened by groups now collectively known as Taman (or Maloh). Under the leadership of Liju Aya' (Liju the Great, the "Dayak Napoleon"; see Bouman 1924), and taking the Kerého nomads and other affiliated groups along with them, they launched a massive war on the Taman groups, which fled down the Kapuas, and they looted the region, leaving the Kayan of the Kapuas in a stronger position.

By 1850, after the Kayan and Long-Gelat had withdrawn to the Mahakam, the situation in the Müller Mountains stabilized, and the minor local groups repositioned themselves, to progressively reach the distribution that we know today. In the process, under the patronage and supervision of these Kayanic groups, most of these groups took up some form of farming, while some, like the Aoheng, eventually became socially stratified, dedicated Kayanized swidden farmers.

THE GROUPS OF THE MÜLLER MOUNTAINS

The following brief summaries derived from detailed ethno-historical reconstructions that were carried out for each individual group. Some appear in earlier publications (for example, Kerého Busang in Sellato 1989, 1994; Aoheng in Sellato 1992, 2002), others are included in Sellato's unpublished thesis (Sellato 1986; over 150 pages are devoted to the Aoheng), and others yet have remained unpublished. Map 2 shows the distribution of the groups in the area of the Müller Mountains in Central Borneo.



Map 2. The Müller-Schwaner Mountains Area (AOH=Aoheng, BEK=Beketan, BUK=Bukat, HOV=Hovongan, KER=Kerého (Busang, Uheng), LIS=Lisum, SEM=Semukung, SEP=Seputan).

The Aoheng as we know them today (about 3,000 people; Sellato 1982a, 1986: 289-453, 1992, 2002: 163-194) consist of six politically autonomous sub-groups (five in East Kalimantan, one in West Kalimantan): The Aoheng Long-Apari result from the congregation of three nomadic bands (Acué, Halungé, and Semukung) and four groups of Pin; the Aoheng Huvung are of Pin stock (Piratoran), with input from Long-Apari and some Bukat nomads, and a fraction of them moved to the upper Kapuas area (West Kalimantan) to become the Aoheng Nanga-Enap; the Aoheng Cihan include a core of Kayan (or Kayanized Pin) nobility, with added Semukung and Pin from Long-

Apari; the Aoheng Long-Kerio' include a core of Lugal and Semukung from the Kapuas, with more Semukung from the upper Mahakam, and some Pin (Piratoran); the Aoheng Tiong-Bu'u consist of Semukung and Aoheng from Huvung, with added Lugal, and they later mixed with Kayan Uma' Suling and Punan Kohi.

Along the years, somehow, all these people amalgamated to become the Aoheng, with a homogeneous common culture (with only minor differences in adat custom) and language (with only minor differences in inflection), and a strong common identity. The first writer has suggested elsewhere (Sellato 1992) that two combined factors allowed for the emergence of an Aoheng entity. First, all Aoheng groups include approximately the same ethnic components, and in similar proportions. Second, their uncomfortable location, squeezed between demanding Kayan and Long-Gelat overlords and frequent wars and headhunting raids waged by Sarawak Iban from the Baleh, led them to aggregate more closely. So, ultimately, all these originally distinctive subgroups were "cooked" together into a single Aoheng ethno-cultural entity, locally known under the exonym Penihing or Panhing.

The Seputan occupied the whole drainage of the Kacu River until they were removed some distance downstream by a government program in the early 1970s. They comprise three autonomous groups: upper Kacu, lower Kacu, and Penané. While the first two groups historically derived from a mix of Kerého nomads and runaway Pin farmers, they report that, in a remote past, the original Penané people were short, dark-skinned, and frizzy-haired, lived in caves, and spoke a completely different language. All these people became true swidden farmers by the turn of the twentieth century. Seputan language (some 500 speakers) is closely related to Aoheng, the main difference being its strong stress on the penultimate syllable.

The Kerého now form two groups, the Kerého Uheng (aka Punan Keriau) in the Kapuas drainage (about 300 people) and the Kerého Busang (aka Punan Busang or Penyabung) in the Barito drainage of Central Kalimantan (about 200 people). Originally, the Kerého nomads occupied vast territories covering the Keriau, Mandai, Bungan, and Kacu, as noted above, and they ranged as far as the upper Melawi and upper Barito. A group moved into the uppermost Barito (Busang River), from which, starting in about 1880, they ousted the Ot Danum (Sellato 1989, 1994). Both Kerého groups began settling down and farming in the first decade of the twentieth century. However, their culture and language now slightly differ, due to later sustained contact of the Kerého Busang's with the Ot Danum.

The Hovongan (aka Punan Bungan), numbering about 700, are now found at the confluence of the Bungan River and in several hamlets nearby (see Ngo 2007). There used to be four groups - the Hovongan proper, the Hovorit, the Hovo'ung, and the Belatung - located in the Bungan drainage and the upper Keriau River. These people originally were Kerého nomads, who mixed with runaway Pin groups in the upper Bungan area in the early nineteenth century, and later with a Semukung group coming down from

the sources of the Kapuas. They have a history of protracted conflicts with the Bukat. Hovongan language is closely related to Kerého, and there is only slight difference in pronunciation between the four Hovongan groups.

The Semukung (aka Hangai) also called themselves Uheng, from the local name of the upper Kapuas River. They came from central Sarawak via the Baleh, and there are reasons to believe that they are related to the Kajang (Punan Bah) of the Balui. They possibly followed the Kayan Uma' Suling in their migration to the Kapuas. They first settled on the Hangai River, at the sources of the Kapuas, then split into three groups in about 1840-1850. One group moved across to the sources of the Mahakam and merged with the local Aoheng; another moved downstream the Kapuas, along with a group of Aoheng Huvung, and settled at Nanga Ira, near these Aoheng; and the remainder settled on the Bungan River, later to mix with Kerého nomads. There are very few Semukung left today, as those in Nanga Ira are heavily mixed with Bukat, Kerého, Mandai, and others; and, while a limited Semukung wordlist could be collected in 1980, there is no Semukung speaker now left among the Aoheng in the Mahakam area.

THE "MÜLLER-SCHWANER PUNAN" LANGUAGES

The lines below are not meant to offer an exhaustive study of the languages of the groups of the Müller and northern Schwaner mountain ranges (henceforth, MSP; see short disconnected lexical corpora in Sellato 1981, 1982b, 1988). Rather, they make use of certain features to help position these languages in the broader setting of the languages of the island's nomadic groups and of those the neighboring farming groups (see Sellato 1990, 1993a, 2002: 105-135; all data collected by Sellato).

Phonological features are used here to establish the distinctiveness of the MSP languages vis-à-vis the languages of other nomadic groups in the region of the broader Kapuas-Mahakam-Barito-Rajang water divide.

Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 give Aoheng, Kerého, Hovongan and Bukat consonants. Phonemic consonants are bolded, rare occurrences are placed between parentheses (phonemes for which only extremely rare occurrences were recorded are viewed as "absent"), and secondary realizations between square brackets.

In Aoheng, /j/, /w/, and /g/ are rare, only occurring in loanwords from Malay or Indonesian (for example, *bayan*, Ind. *bayar*, 'to pay'; *cawan*, Mal.-Ind. *cawan*, 'mug'; *selawan*, Mal. *selawar*, 'pants'; *gula?*, Ind. *gula*, 'sugar'; note the absence of /r/ in final position). /dʒ/ is rare, occurring in loanwords from Malay (for example, *jaga?*, Mal. *jaga*, 'to guard'), as well as from Kayan. The voiced bilabial fricative /β/ occurs in place of /b/ in medial position, and in initial position in the case of sandhi. The consonant /ɽ/ noted as [ř] is a retroflex flap, common in Barito languages, especially Ot Danum, and is certainly inherited from the Pin languages (see Hudson 1967, who

noted it differently). In Aoheng, it occurs only in medial position, where it is phonemically distinct from both /l/ and /r/ (see Table 1).

Labial		Dental		Retroflex	Palatal		Velar		Glottal
p	b	t	d		t̪	(d̪)	k	(g)	ʔ
	m		n		ɲ		ŋ		
		l							
		r		ɽ					
	[β]	s							h
(w)					(j)				

Table 1. Aoheng consonants.

In Kerého, the semi-vowels /j/ and /w/ are absent, and so is /g/. /d̪/ is rare, occurring only in loanwords. /β/ occurs in place of /b/ in medial position. Kerého Busang displays preploded consonants in final position – /^kŋ/, /^pm/, and /ⁿ/ – a feature probably inherited from Pin languages or Ot Danum (see Table 2).

Labial		Dental		Palatal	Velar	Glottal
p	b	t	d		k	ʔ
	m		n	ɲ	ŋ	
	[^p m]		[ⁿ]		[^k ŋ]	
		l				
		r				
	[β]	s				h

Table 2. Kerého consonants (Uhéng and Busang).

In Hovongan, (see Table 3) /g/, /j/, /w/, and /d̪/ are extremely rare, occurring only in loanwords. The phoneme /ɽ/ noted as [ř], common in Aoheng, is rare.

Labial		Dental		Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
p	b	t	d		t̪	k	ʔ
	m		n		ɲ	ŋ	
		l					
		r		(ɽ)			
	[β]	s					h

Table 3. Hovongan consonants.

These three languages of the MSP cluster phonologically contrast with another cluster of nomadic groups' languages, which are called the BBL (Bukat-Beketan-Lisum) cluster.

The following Table 4 provides a description of Bukat consonants. Related to Bukat, the language of a nomadic group located near the MSP groups (upper Kapuas and upper Mahakam), are the languages of the Beketan (in Sarawak, West Kalimantan, and the Tabang area of East Kalimantan), Lisum of the Tabang area, Punan Merah, Punan Kohi, and several more.

In Bukat, /j/ and /w/ are extremely rare, a trait shared with the MSP languages, but /tʃ/ is rare, whereas /g/ and /dʒ/ are common, which strongly contrasts with the MSP languages. Bukat also displays geminate consonants (-ll- and -tt-), which do not occur in the MSP languages (see Table 4.)

Labial		Dental		Palatal		Velar		Glottal
p	b	t	d	(tʃ)	dʒ	k	g	ʔ
m		n		ɲ		ŋ		
		l						
		r						
		s						h

Table 4. Bukat consonants.

It should be noted that none of these languages – MSP and BBL alike – displays any consonant clusters, contrary to the languages of neighboring farming groups.

Table 5 shows the vocalic system of Aoheng as an example of the wide inventory possessed by these languages. /i/ is tense and forward, while /ɪ/ is loose (for example, ɔβɪ, 'loincloth', vs. ɔβi, 'dragon'). Likewise, /u/ is tense and forward, while /ʊ/ is open and loose (for example, tʉkʉ, 'to hit one's head', vs. tʉkʉ, 'tooth'), /ɛ/ is open and loose. The schwa occurs only after a consonant in the first or first two syllables, most commonly in prefixes, in which it can also be realized as /ø/ or /ɔ/.

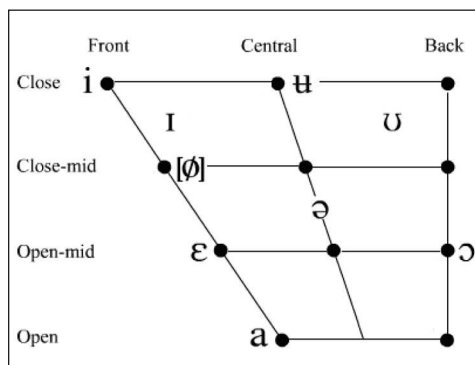


Table 5. The vocalic system of Aoheng.

All these languages – MSP and BBL alike – display six to eight phonemic vowels – while standard Kayan and Iban languages have only five or six. Table 6 shows, in a rather simplistic way, in eight languages spoken by nomadic or formerly nomadic groups of the Müller Mountains wider region, the distribution of some of the features just mentioned: the presence/absence of four distinctive consonants, geminates, and preploded final nasals. The number of phonemic vowels is also given for the record. From the phonological point of view, all five MSP languages and the three BBL languages selected form two contrastive clusters.

	$\overline{d}z$	$\overline{t}j$	g	ɾ	Geminates	Preploded final nasals	Vowels
Aoheng	-	+	-	+		-	8
Seputan	-	+		+		-	8
Hovongan		+		-			6
Kerého	-	+				+ Busang	6 Uhéng 7 Busang
Semukung		+	-				6
Bukat	+	-	+		+		6
Beketan	+	-	+		+		7
Lisum	+	-	+		+		8

Table 6. Key phonological features of MSP and BBL (+: common; -: rare).

To give an example from the lexicon, in Table 7 are displayed numerals for five MSP languages and three BBL languages, to which were added the languages of three geographically closest farming neighbours: Kayan (Busang Uma' Suling, upper Mahakam), Ot Danum (upper Barito), and Mandai (or Ořung Dahan, a former Pin group of the upper Kapuas).

	AOH	SEP	KER	HOV	SEM	BUK	BEK	LIS	KAYAN (U. Suling)	OT DANUM (Mahakam)	MANDAI (Kapuas)
1	ci?	ci?	ci?	ci	ci	ai?	ja?	ai?	ji:?	ico?	ji
2	duo	duo	duo	duoh	duo	due	lugo lagwa?	due	dua?	duo?	duo
3	tou	tou	tou	tou	to ^u	talū	tolu?	talū	telo?	tořu?	tořu
4	opat	opat	opat	pat	pat	apat	apat	apat	pa:t	opat	opat
5	dimo	dimo	dimo	dimo	dimo	lime	limo	limo	lima?	řimo?	limo
6	onom	onom	onom	nom	nom	anem	anom	anem	nam	jahavén	onom
7	ticu?	ticu?	ticu?	tucu	tucu	kilit	kidit	kidit	tusu?	uju?	tuju?
8	héan	héan	héan	héan	héan	tene?a ⁱ	kene?a ⁱ	kene?a ⁱ	saya?	hanya?	hayo
9	ti?an	ti?an	ti?an	ti?an	ti?an	tenulan	kenulan	kenulan	pitan	jeřetién	ti?on
10	puřu?	puřu?	puru?	puu	puu	ai? pulu?	ju? pulu?	ai? pulu?	pulu:?	sepuřuh	puřu?

(Key: é = /e/, /ɛ/; e = /ə/; c = /tʃ/; j = /dʒ/; ř = ʀ)

Table 7. Numerals in MSP, BBL, and neighbouring languages.

A clear contrast between the MSP group and the BBL group appears, not only for the numerals 7, 8, and 9, some of which are not cognates, but also for 3 and 5, which are cognates but display distinct reflexes. The MSP languages here show some affinities with both Kayanic and Barito groups of languages.

It must also be noted that MSP languages display a system of personal pronouns with three gendered forms in the third person singular, which, so far, has never been reported elsewhere in Borneo (see Sellato 1981) or even in Western Indonesia (see Schapper 2010: 413), although the historical significance of this particular feature is unclear.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By stressing both distinctive and shared linguistic features, two distinct clusters of languages of nomadic or formerly nomadic groups, which are called here the MSP and BBL clusters are preliminarily proposed. Further work on BBL languages is in progress. These two clusters, in turn, are related to each other, and contrast with other languages of nomadic groups elsewhere in Borneo. This is confirmed by converging conclusions drawn from ethno-historical investigations, which, unfortunately, can only take us back in time less than three centuries.

Studies of a number of other minor nomadic or formerly nomadic groups in East Kalimantan show that most of those for which it was possible to reconstruct history over at least a couple of centuries did indeed originate in western Sarawak. Notable exceptions, so far as is known today, are the Punan of the Mentarang, Malinau, and Tubu rivers (see Kaskija 1995, 1998, 2002, 2012; Sellato 2001, 2007; Césard 2009,) and the Punan of the Kelai and Segah rivers (see Fidy Finandar 1979; Guerreiro 1985; Holmsen 2006; Soriente 2012).

It should also be noted that Hudson (1978) stressed the genetic relationship of the language group that he called the Rejang-Baram Group, which includes the Kajang, Berawan, and Melanau languages of Sarawak, with his Land Dayak Group – however, Punan languages, or at least most of them, were classified with his Kayan-Kenyah Group. The Punan languages of Borneo represent a very fluid entity where most of the groups are very distantly related to each other and within which, like elsewhere in the world when dealing with languages of nomadic populations, problems of classification arise due mostly to protracted contact with settled populations (see Soriente 2014, Forthcoming). This contact has left traces in the language, in the culture and in the oral literature of these people (see for instance Soriente 2013). The Punan languages of Borneo, as a whole, may then well be viewed as ultimately rooted in an old Western Borneo linguistic substratum. These groups later history of protracted contact with Kayanic groups has determined such deep, mainly lexical, alterations that led Hudson to classify their languages with those of the Kayan-Kenyah Group.

Most of the languages of Borneo's nomadic or formerly nomadic groups, as well as several languages of Hudson's Rejang-Baram Group, do display lexical features of an ancient linguistic substratum, which seem to confirm Hudson's

insight into a genetic relationship of the Rejang-Baram Group with his Land Dayak Group (now called Bidayuh; see Sellato 1993a for a review). These languages include those of the Punan of the Mentarang, Malinau, and Tubu (see Soriente 2014; Soriente, Césard, and Guerreiro Forthcoming) but, so far as can now be assessed, not those of the Punan of the Kelai and Segah (Soriente 2012, 2014) nor those of the Penan of Eastern Sarawak and the Penan Benalui (Soriente Forthcoming), a point that strongly calls for further investigation into these last two groups' history and languages. This Punan-Rejang-Baram-Bidayuh linguistic substratum also point at links, beyond Borneo, with similar ancient features in some Aslian languages of the Malay Peninsula (see Adelaar 1995; Sellato 1990, 1993a). This complex situation, yet hardly explored, may lead to a dramatic reassessment of Borneo's population history. Further studies carried out with the methodology of historical linguistics will shed light on the classification of these languages and clarify their level of relationship.

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