



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XLIII No. 64

December 1992



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Allen R. Maxwell. (1992). Balui Reconnaissances: The Sihan of the Menamang River. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XLIII (64): 1-46

BALUI RECONNAISSANCES: THE SIHAN OF THE MENAMANG RIVER

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INTRODUCTION

The Sihan now live mainly in a single longhouse on the Menamang River, a tributary of the Balui River, in the Seventh Division of Sarawak.¹ It is just a few hours walk overland from the district seat of Belaga (that is to the inexperienced, to the experienced, an hour's walk), on the opposite bank of the Balui River. The village of Rumah Sihan lies at the bottom of a small valley just a few score meters from the river. The present longhouse was built sometime around 1980. Before this the Sihan lived in individual houses and one or two smaller longhouses on the same site. The current longhouse is built in the Balui style with two living stories above ground level.² Clumps of banana plants and citrus trees are growing close by, and a number of stands of sago palms can be seen in the vegetation on the low hill immediately in front of the longhouse. The track from the village to the bathing and washing area on the Menamang leads along a well-beaten path through secondary vegetation and more sago to a beautiful shaded section of the stream. The river traverses under the overhanging forest canopy which shelters the water and diffuses the bright tropical sunlight to provide a cool shaded refuge from the heat of the midday sun.

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Life at Rumah Sihan

There is a vibrancy to daily life in the longhouse. During our visit activities commenced around 6 a.m. or shortly thereafter. The chickens are joined by the dogs and the people in the noises of the early morning. Children cry, mothers shout admonitions and encouragement to them, and the routine of the day begins. After the men have left to work in their swiddens – begun only a week earlier and located about an hour's walk upstream on the Menamang River – children begin their play, running up and down on the verandah. Women and children walk down to the bathing area at the stream, carrying loads of wash to be done along with taking the morning bath. After returning and hanging up the wash on lines at the front edge of the verandah under the eaves, women and girls set out the mats on which to dry the rice which will be needed later. They are placed on the ground just in front of the longhouse. Chickens will have to be constantly chased away from the drying rice, but they manage to obtain some of the tasty morsels anyway. Some women place their mats some 30 m away on the helicopter landing zone located down a short slope from one end of the longhouse. By late morning the rice should be dry and is taken in.

In the early afternoon there begins the noisy but rhythmic process of pounding the rice to remove the hulls from the rice grains. Each woman seems to begin when she is ready, sometimes sharing the other bowl in the large heavy mortar made of wood with a friend, each pounding their own rice, and brushing the overflow back into the bowl with a foot deftly balanced on the upper surface

of the mortar. The dull thuds of the long wooden pestles ring out through the longhouse, shaking the beams and rafters and causing the corrugated metal roof to vibrate slightly in the vicinity of the activity. Later on in the afternoon bathing begins and seems to go on for a couple of hours, although some women and children have been bathing and doing laundry intermittently throughout the day.

Men and boys later congregate on the verandah for some talk, smoking, banter, or just sitting. If there is a soccer ball available some of the younger men and boys may organize a pick-up game in the large yard in front of the longhouse. Women may involve themselves in mat or basket making on the verandah just in front of their apartments, or just stroll about with their babies, chatting with their friends and smoking a local cigarette or two. The children are bright, lively, and very attractive, rarely crying except for babies who are occasionally disciplined by their mothers for misbehaving. People retire into their apartments when it is time for the evening meal. After dark adults may return to converse and smoke on the long bench which runs the full length of the verandah before retiring for the evening.

A constant feature of life at Rumah Sihan, as at many villages in the Balui Valley, is the omnipresence of the hunting dogs. There seem to be several dozen here. While left free to run about, the dogs seem to spend most of their time on the longhouse verandah. They can descend the steps to the ground and return whenever they wish. They spend much of the time sleeping, scratching, and just walking back and forth on the verandah. Numerous fights break out, first between two dogs, and then with the others racing to watch or join the fray. Sometimes an individual will take a favourite dog into the living quarters to sleep for the night. At numerous times during both the day and the night one or more dogs will begin to howl, which soon triggers a cacophonous din as all the dogs in the village wail together. Their cries only barely resemble a growl or a bark. They sometimes squeal, sometimes whine, and at full voice make an eerie sounding wail.

Population

This longhouse contains an estimated 16 "doors", or family apartments, and over a hundred inhabitants. There are also, reportedly, a few Sihan living together with a number of Baketan, Sekapan, and Malay at Metah, downriver from Belaga. The Belaga District Office puts the population of Sihan in the district at 117, or 0.8% of the district total (Sarawak 1986:4). Ian Urquhart, a District Officer at Kapit during the postwar period, gives a figure of 80 for that era (1951: 496). Informants indicated that there are supposed to be some Sihah living in Kalimantan, and that they had learned of them from a timber worker who had visited there. They reported that he said the language was about the same (*cakap sarupa*) as the speech of Sihan living in Belaga District. Aside from this report they indicated they had no other knowledge of other Sihan living in Indonesian Borneo (but cf. Sandin 1985: 72).

Among the Sihan at Menamang, three families still maintain traditional Bungan (pre-Christian) ritual practices. Ten families are Roman Catholic and three families are Sidang Injil Borneo (Borneo Evangelical Mission). As is commonly the case