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BIDAYUH ARCHITECTURE: TRADITION, CHANGE, REVIVAL

Robert L. Winzeler

INTRODUCTION

The architectural traditions of the various Dayak peoples are each unique but those of the Bidayuh (Land Dayaks in older usage) are especially distinctive. For one thing, Bidayuh architecture involves an especially well developed tradition of bridges and other structural devices used to gain access to villages and to move between them and forests and fields. For another, Bidayuh domestic architecture shows more variation than does that of other Dayak peoples of Sarawak. Most Dayak groups have or had (in addition perhaps to secondary or more temporary ones) a single characteristic traditional house form. This usually takes the form of a longhouse, that is a symmetrical, rectilinear building consisting of a series of individual apartments built side by side with a continuous covered gallery. The Bidayuh villages described in early accounts consist of such regular longhouses in some instances, houses joined in more irregular ways in others, and separate houses in yet others. While this variation may be partly a matter of regional differences among the several Bidayuh groups it probably cannot be entirely accounted for in this way. Finally, and perhaps most notably, the architecture of the Bidayuh includes a separate men's or ceremonial house commonly referred to in the literature as a "headhouse," because it was used in the past to store head-trophies taken during battles. Such men's (or bachelors' or visitors') houses have been reported for the Modang and other groups in East Kalimantan (cited in Rousseau 1990: 109-110) but in Sarawak and West Kalimantan they are distinctive to the Bidayuh.

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Bidayuh architecture was frequently described in accounts written in the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century but has received relatively little attention in the more recent period – with the important exception of observations of William Geddes which, however, are mainly sociological and limited to the Sadong area. Further, Bidayuh architecture has by now undergone a great deal of change. In most areas much of the older architecture is gone as a result of shifts away from previous village sites and the adoption of other building forms and newer materials. However, the more traditional forms of are still in evidence in some places, especially in the

more rugged and remote regions along the border in Bau and Padawan districts, and in adjacent areas of Indonesia. Finally, modern developments have also focused renewed Bidayuh attention on their traditions. Tourism is one of the bases of this interest, but in addition to this the men's ceremonial house has become an ethnic emblem for present-day Bidayuh who, while seeking modernity and development, also worry about the loss of their customs and distinctiveness.

In this paper I shall discuss the current state of traditional Bidayuh architecture, both in general terms and with regard to several particular villages, and then discuss current developments, including the recent efforts to use older architectural forms in new ways. I shall be mainly concerned with Sarawak and especially with the central Bidayuh area of Bau and Padawan Districts but I shall also make some reference to adjacent areas of Sambas in Indonesia.¹

The Bidayuh of Sarawak are ethnologically complex and include various specific groups, most of which are also found across the border. In terms of older ethnic identification, Dayak groups are commonly associated with (and often named after) particular rivers or tributaries. In the case of the Bidayuh this is so of the Bukar and the Sadong in the eastern part of the region. Elsewhere, however, specific Bidayuh groups are generally associated not with rivers but with particular mountains or hills as, for example, in the case of Gumbang, Jagoi, Singai and Serambu in Bau, although at the present time these groups are more widely dispersed. In terms of newer, more official ethnic distinctions ethnic subgroups of Bidayuh are linked with current administrative districts. From the west to the east, the Selako and Lara are thus associated with Lundu, the Jagoi and related groups with Bau, the Biatah with Padawan and Kuching and the Bukar and Sadong with Serian. In broader geographical terms it is also possible to distinguish a western region including the Lara and Selako, a central one which comprises the Jagoi and Biatah and an eastern one which includes the Bukar and Sadong.

BIDAYUH MOUNTAIN ARCHITECTURE

Bidayuh architectural practices differ in several ways from those of the Iban and the various Orang Ulu peoples. Edmund Leach (1950: 66) observed in his survey of Dayak social organization that Bidayuh villages are often substantially larger than those of the Iban. It is also apparent that Bidayuh settlements tend to be more permanent than is generally the case

among other interior swidden cultivators in Sarawak. In particular, the pattern of frequent and often lengthy migrations associated with the Iban, Kenyah and Kayan has not been found among the Bidayuh. Over time communities dependant upon shifting cultivation will experience land shortages, especially in land close to the village. However, rather than shifting the entire village, as is (or was) often done by other Dayak groups, the Bidayuh practice has been to divide and create "daughter" villages, which in time have their own daughter villages, a process which is sometimes reflected in village names (Grijpstra 1976: 63). Many Bidayuh in Sarawak trace their origins to ancestral villages elsewhere, such as Sunkung in Sambas, but such villages are not very far away as distances go in Borneo. Also, in the past some Bidayuh communities were dispersed as a result of attack and defeat by a more powerful group. But in the absence of such developments villages have been more permanently located than those of the Iban and the Orang Ulu. Some existing villages claim to be very old and a few can be traced in European accounts to the middle of the nineteenth century. Jagoi Gunung, which according to C.T.C. Grant (a Brooke government official who toured the region) was established following the defeat and destruction of Bratak, is one such example (Grant 1886: 99); Gumbang, which at the time of Grant's visit in 1858 had shortly before been moved a few hundred yards to resolve a border dispute with the Dutch in Sambas, is another (Grant 1886: 62). The great majority of existing Bidayuh villages are more newly established but most of them derive in one way or another from older, generally nearby, ancestral villages. The main pattern of movement over more than a century has been from higher, more remote locations to lower, more accessible ones.

The building traditions of the Bidayuh also differ from those of some of the other Dayak groups of Borneo, above all, the Kenyah, Kayan, Melanau and many other Orang Ulu groups which are noted for their massive and durable longhouses, constructed with large posts, heavy timbers and thick plank floors (Jessup 1990; Hose and McDougall 1912, 1: 50; Kelbing 1983; Rousseau 1990: 104-111). While the Bidayuh lived in relatively permanent villages and, when they did move, did not migrate long distances, their longhouses are typically smaller and more lightly constructed. Like the Iban, most of the various Orang Ulu groups are essentially riverain peoples, that is they live along navigable waterways and depend to the greatest extent possible on transportation by water. The Bidayuh, in contrast, placed their villages on steep mountainsides and near hilltops rather than in open lowland areas along navigable watercourses.

Even now relatively few Bidayuh villages in Sarawak are located along the lower sections of rivers that can be used for travel which, in the old First Division (now Kuching and Samarahan Divisions) are occupied for the most part by other ethnic groups, especially Malays and, in some areas, Ibans. This tendency for the Bidayuh to dwell in areas away from navigable rivers and streams may be partly related to the absence of many such waterways in the interior areas of far western Sarawak. However, the nineteenth century accounts indicate that even in the areas where it was possible to travel by boat, Bidayuh villages were located well away from the river, usually several hours walk up a hill or mountain. To be sure, some riverside villages were reported although whether they existed in the pre-Brooke period is uncertain. Alfred Wallace (1962 [1869]: 56) provides an explanation for one that may also apply to others. He reports that upon reaching the village of Senna and inquiring about a boat to take him down river he "was told that the Senna Dyaks, although living on the river-banks never used boats. They were mountaineers who had only come down into the valley about twenty years before, and had not yet gotten into new habits." Wallace goes on to recount that he eventually found several local Dayaks who were willing to take him but who proved inept as boatmen, and that he had to be rescued from a dangerous rapid by a group of passing Malays.

It was known that these and other Bidayuh had been living in higher locations for security, but Wallace's and other nineteenth century accounts which refer to mountain or hilltop villages do not establish how long they had been there. Other Dayak groups such as the Iban and the Kenyah also built villages up on hills and mountains for defensive purposes. These locations were probably temporary, and in any event were associated with a continued orientation towards rivers as modes of transportation and routes of migration. Most or all Iban, including those actively at war with the Brooke state, lived in riverside villages.

It has also been suggested that the Bidayuh occupation of hilltops and mountainsides was a relatively recent development in the precolonial period. Malcolm McDonald, a later high-ranking colonial administrator, has asserted in a popular book on the Dayaks of Sarawak that the Bidayuh preference for high ground was a response to raids by the more numerous and powerful groups including the Iban and Brunei Malays (MacDonald 1985 [1956]: 51). However, the Bidayuh adjustment to mountain life is highly skilled and does not suggest a temporary shift. Further, the linguistic diversity of the Bidayuh (in contrast, for example, to the general homogeneity of the Iban) in terms of which the occupants (or former