

Is Penan Benalui a Kenyah language? On the classification of the languages of some hunter-gatherer populations in Borneo

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Penan Benalui is the language spoken by a small group of hunter-gatherers living in three scattered villages, Long Belaka and Long Sei Bawang on the Lurah River, and in Long Bena on the Bahau River in East Kalimantan. They are considered to be related to the Penan Gang in Sarawak (Brosius 1992) and belonging to the Western Penan subgroup (Puri 1997). Traditional language classifications in Borneo list Penan languages within the Kenyah subgroup (Needham 1972, Blust 1974, Hudson 1978, Sercombe 2002) though such classifications have never attempted to make a clear distinction between borrowed material and inherited one. If Penan are defined as forest dwelling hunter-gatherers, the Kenyah broad ethnic label applies to a number of groups of sedentarized or earlier sedentarized people to which very often the Penan people are associated. The term Penan and its variant Punan is used to refer to a number of different nomadic groups spread in Kalimantan and Sarawak. They do not represent a coherent linguistic grouping (Sellato 1993). Penan is traditionally used to refer to the languages of these nomadic people living in Sarawak. Penan are generally classified in Sarawak into Eastern and Western Penan. Eastern Penan is spoken in the Baram District and in one village in Brunei (Sercombe 2002), while Western Penan in the Belaga and Tinjar rivers. But this terminology applies also to groups spread in Kalimantan like the Penan Benalui. Punan is used today to refer to a number of small groups whose languages are allegedly unintelligible to the other Penan languages in both Kalimantan and Sarawak.

This paper will only deal with the case of the Penan Benalui as compared to one or more of the closest Kenyah languages. From the observation of phonological and lexical systems, especially in the field of ethnobiology, it demonstrates what kind of relationship is shared between Penan Benalui and Kenyah dialects and what kind of

language contact has derived from the long social relationship of these groups (Soriente 2004). This kind of working hypothesis will be then applied in the future to other Punan/Penan languages to solve the problem of their affiliation and whether at all they have to be listed as belonging to the same ethnolinguistic group or they are indeed different linguistic realities just sharing the same ethnic label as a consequence of shared cultural and social practices.

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