

## CHAPTER 2

### ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an ethnographic description of the Bidayuh people which encompasses demographic and historical background, social, cultural, economic and political background of the community. It highlights some aspects of its culture and past practices which have become eroded due to urbanisation, and the impact of social and cultural transformation of the community.

#### 2.2 Demography and historical background

Tracing their past history, the Bidayuh is believed to be among the earliest inhabitants of Sarawak. Generally, the Bidayuh believe that their ancestors originated from a place called Sungkung in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. According to a Bidayuh legend, about twenty generations before the volcanic eruption at Karakatao, a group of people led by Bidayuh chiefs, Tirauh and Padat, made their way out from Sungkung in a north-westerly direction towards the tip of Borneo Island and settled in a place called Rabak Mikabuh. If there is truth in this legend, it is estimated that the Bidayuh came to Sarawak around 483 AD, as the Karakatao eruption took place on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1883. They called themselves “Dayak Puruh” and their dialect then was called “Pimiyu Puruh” meaning “Puruh dialect”, as it is known until today (William Nais, 1989: 367). Population increase and internal disputes caused these earlier groups to split and settle

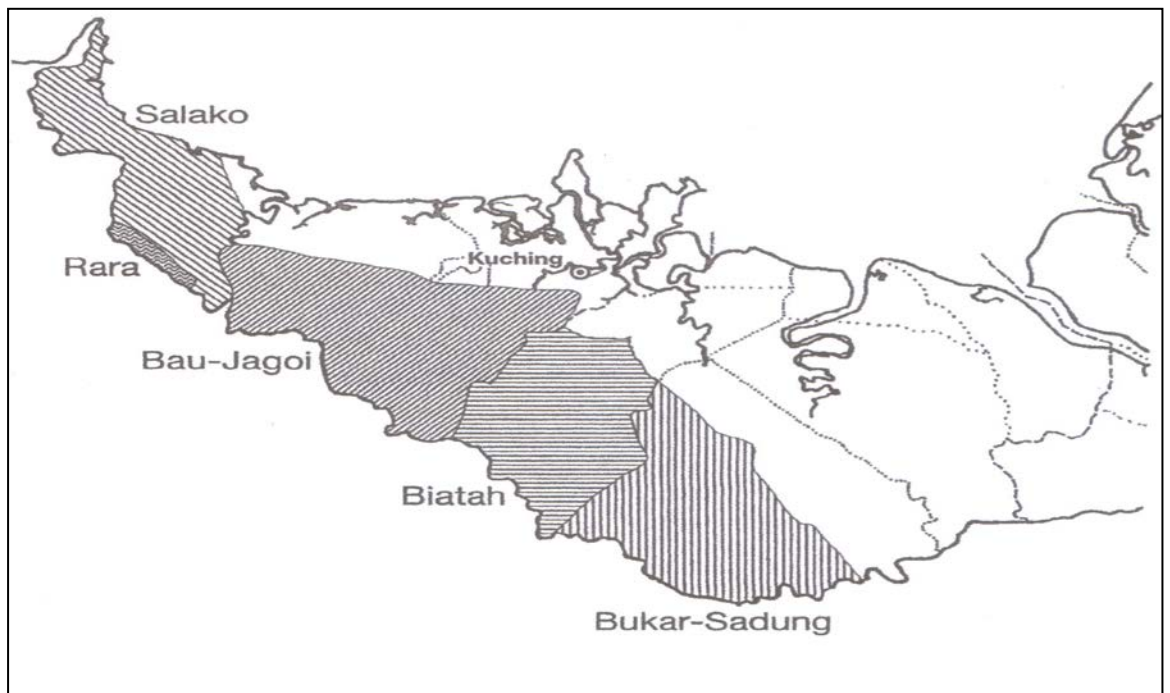
in different directions. (See Michael Aman, 1989 for an account of how the splits came about).

There is much misconception about the identity of the group “Bidayuh” formerly known as “Land Dayak”, which literally means “the people of the hinterland”. The term “Bidayuh” does not denote homogeneity in the languages spoken. There are at least 25 sub-dialects which constitute four major dialect clusters within the Bidayuh speech community (Rensch, et al., 2006). However, mutual intelligibility between these so-called dialects can be very far apart to the extent that they may be called different languages rather than dialects of the Bidayuh language. As Asmah (1982:5) writes, each group has its own language but related to those of the other groups. By that, she argues that the so-called dialects of Bidayuh are in actual fact languages of a sub-family. For that reason, the neutral term “isolects” (Hudson, 1970:314) is used in this thesis.

The term, “Land Dayak” was a convenient label used since colonial times to refer to a group of people who settled in the western end of Sarawak on the basis of similar cultural characteristic, namely “those communities of the First Division of Sarawak, whatever their dialect, which possess, or recently possessed a “head-house” as a feature of their village organisation” (Leach, 1950, as cited in Rensch, et.al. 2006:8). The basis for the categorisation then was purely cultural attributes. As a result, the Selako people of Lundu who possess similar characteristics to the Land Dayaks are categorised as Bidayuh though linguistically they belong to the “Malayic” group. (Also see section 3.2). Asmah (1982:4) states that such labeling by natives themselves and by outsiders naturally lead to a misconception that the group in question is linguistically homogenous in nature. She reckons linguistic features to be more basic than cultural

features in determining groupings because it is harder for linguistic transformation to take place than cultural assimilation.

The Bidayuh speech community which represents the fourth largest ethnic group in Sarawak settled mostly in four major districts, namely Lundu, Bau, Kuching and Serian, a region known as the “Bidayuh Belt” situated at the western tip of Sarawak. The Bidayuh people with a total population of approximately 170,000 inhabit 335 villages in the year 2002 (*Jabatan Statistik Sarawak* 2002). Figure 2.1 below shows distribution of the major sub-groups of Bidayuh (Rensch, et al. 2006:6).



**Fig. 2.1: Distribution of major sub-groups of Bidayuh**

(Source: Rensch, et al. 2006:6).

These major sub-groups and the isolects they speak roughly correspond to four major districts within the “Bidayuh Belt”. The Bukar-Sadong is in the Serian District, the Biatah group in the Kuching District, Jagoi group in the Bau and Kuching District,

and the Lara group in the Lundu District. The Selako of Lundu is excluded here from the linguistic groupings because they speak a language closely related to the Malayic group. (Also see section 3.3).

### **2.3 Life in the *kupuo* (Bidayuh term for “village”)**

A characteristic of the indigenous groups labelled as “Dayak” of Borneo is that they all lived in longhouses (Leach, 1950, as cited in King, 1994: 6). A Bidayuh village normally consists of two or three long houses, which are built closely together, comprising 30-40 families. A typical Bidayuh longhouse, as one described by Geddes (1957:29) at Mentu Tapah, is raised about sixteen feet off the ground on hardwood piles, and surrounded by a stout fence with entrances only at either end. It is built from bamboo and leaves of sago and nipah palm for roofing; the floors and the verandahs are all of split bamboos. Two verandahs run along its entire length, the outer one an uncovered platform used for drying paddy in the sun; the inner one, beneath the roof, serve as a workplace for the women to pound their paddy into rice and as a social meeting place. Each household has its own living room separated by a wall of bark or wooden planks. There are no partitions in each room and family members sleep on mats on the floor. The room is where family properties and goods such as mats, jars etc. are kept and where cooking are done. There is also separation of male and female with regard to sleeping arrangements in the longhouse. A boy on reaching the age of puberty moves out from his parents’ room to join the other unmarried men in the guest house or “baloi”. The household comprises of grandparents, parents, a few children, and one or two odd relatives. Normally only one married child may remain in their parents’ household after marriage.

In the olden days, the Bidayuh means of livelihood was entirely dependent on subsistence agriculture, namely hill paddy cultivation for immediate household consumption. Besides practising shifting cultivation, the Bidayuh also grew fruit trees and vegetables, collected jungle fruits and honey for food, and hunted and fished as well. In times of bad harvest, the Bidayuh borrowed rice from each other, which was paid back in terms of rice itself, and with an interest. The daily life of the Bidayuh in the *kupuo* was mainly centred on paddy cultivation and cultural activities and past practices associated with this main occupation. Normally, work on the paddy fields is done with the help of other household units via a labour exchange system known as *pengirih*. The head of a household, through mutual agreement with other households is free to pick, choose and arrange to have 20-40 people (depending on the stage of the padi cultivation) to work on his field. He owes a day's labour to each person who does work on his fields. He and his other household members in return work for others to counter the debts (Geddes, 1954; 1957). Rights to farm on a piece of land at a given time is regulated based on a "descent group" or *turun* system. The *turun* comprises all the descendants, both male and female of a common ancestor who first cleared primary forest and established rights in an area of land" (King, 1993:208).

In the *kupuo*, social order is maintained through the regulation of the *adat* (customs and traditions), ritual sanctions and Bidayuh notions of shame and loss of public esteem (King, 1993:205). The headman also called the *Orang Kaya Pemanca* is a "custodian of *adat*" and he settles disputes in the villages and has power to inflict fines in accordance with the Land Dayak customs.

Geddes (1957:33) describes Bidayuh as a "free and open" society in the sense that "anyone may marry into it or be admitted through the charity or goodwill of those

already there". The Bidayuh are less concerned with kinship ties that form part of the social structure or organisation in societies. Their kinship ties generally embrace only first cousins and with close neighbours. Remote ancestral connections are not much remembered except those that have claims of rights to land inherited. Nevertheless, they place a greater value upon ties through marriage, on relationships with parents-in-law and brothers- and sisters-in-law. In the village community in those days, intimacies and close relations with non-kinsmen were also significant for they depended on each other for companionship and labour (c.f. Geddes, 1957:33).

At the present time, much of these cultural practices are still maintained in Bidayuh villages, although some practices such as the labour exchange system have been adjusted in tandem with current situations. For instance, a day's labour owed may be paid in cash if a person is not able to recompensate in kind.

One of the cultural features that are still very much practiced in Bidayuh community is their naming system. The Bidayuh have a naming system similar to *teknonymy* (Geddes, 1957:35) which creates a bond that links generation to generation and one family group to another whereby parents and grandparents are called by an infant's name. The uniqueness of this system is that the child whose name is taken need not be an actual child of the taker of its name, and a person's name changes in various stages of his life - infant, boy, young man, parent, and grandparents. The system is practiced to show respect for individuals irrespective of age, and is considerate to each other.

To sum up, longhouse living is thus part of the whole mode of social life of the Bidayuh in the olden days. The villagers lead an "individualistic" life (i.e. each

household is regarded as a social unit and is autonomous), yet they are bonded by “common interests, by belief in common fate, by mutual need, and by many diverse ties of blood and friendship, and debt and credit”. (Geddes, 1957:32). This gives members a personal attachment to the whole village territory, which they jointly defend against outsiders.

#### **2.4 The impact of “modern religions” on the Bidayuh community**

Before their acceptance of Christianity, the Bidayuh were firm believers of spirits and omens. They believed in the existence of evil and good spirits. The evil spirit was believed to cause sickness or misfortune, hence care was taken not to provoke them by laying down various rules and observing a period of restrictions, normally after a *Gawai* ceremony or after a death. Apart from this, they also believed in the existence of forces or ‘soul’ in things and nature. The objects that are believed to be *Guna* (supernatural power) were usually kept concealed and only seen during special ceremonies. During festivals, the Bidayuh gave offerings to appease the life forces in things and nature, which might be “resentful” towards the crops planted in their stead. As they consider the vital force of the paddy itself, it is handled with especial tenderness, nursing it with rituals at every stage of its cultivation (c.f. Geddes, 1957; Elam, 1937).

Much of the Bidayuh past practices also concern omen which was observed from the surrounding environment, the behaviour of animals especially various species of birds, and in dreams. Omen was observed in various daily activities such as choosing a site for paddy cultivation, building a longhouse, hunting expeditions, etc. Before embarking on an endeavour, omen was observed to avoid inflicting misfortunes on the

doer. For instance, before a new house is built, the *penchar* or wise man of the village was called to take the omens, first finding a suitable site to which the villagers agreed on and then telling them the result of the omens. If the dreams were bad omens, then the idea was abandoned despite location being a suitable site to build the village (c.f. Elam, 1937; Asmah, 1983). When it was impractical to abandon nearly completed projects, such as in the building of longhouses, then the most usual way to deal with the matter was to give offerings to appease the spirits. These past practices gradually disappeared due to the abandonment of traditional occupation and the adoption of a new religion.

The advent of Christianity and the work of the Christian missionaries indisputably have acted as an impetus to social changes within the Bidayuh community. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian missionaries, at the invitation of the ruling government, came to spread the Christian faith to the Bidayuh. Since then, it has become the most influential religion among the Bidayuh population. In the Serian and Samarahan Divisions, about 92% of the Bidayuh population in the 135 Bidayuh villages are Christians (Chang, 2002). The three major groups of the Christian's faith are the Roman Catholic, Anglicans and Seventh Day Adventists (SDA).

The Christian missionaries established schools, churches and even built clinics in various Bidayuh villages that had accepted Christianity, and for this reason, the missionaries have been very successful in their quest. They believed that by educating the Bidayuh, they would be able to infiltrate the minds of the people to accept Christianity, a modern religion, which would change their general outlook and lead them towards a better life. Their perseverance in spreading Christianity took them to remote Bidayuh villages. The missionaries introduced literacy to Bidayuh children, and taught them basic hygiene and Christian teachings.



The acceptance of Christian teachings was nevertheless slow. Initial attempts to convert the Bidayuh to Christianity were not so successful largely because the Bidayuh could not see its relevance to their lives. Instead, by allowing their children to attend school, this would mean preventing them from assisting in the fields. So, labour was their utmost priority. An informant states that the initial attempt made by Rev. Howe, an Anglican priest to convert the *Pinyawa*' community in Padawan met with failure due to the aforementioned attitude (Patricia Nayoi, personal communication October 2007). The priest then went further up to a Bidayuh community in a village called *Annah Rais*, where the first people from Padawan were converted. It was only when the *Pinyawa*' community could see the impact of literacy on their lives that they began to believe in the values of education. And through education, Christianity managed to penetrate into the Bidayuh community. Some village headmen were among the last people to be converted although they initially invited missionaries to build schools in their respective villages. By the 1960's, many Bidayuh parents were convinced of the benefits of education and there was no further need to persuade them to send their children to school (Patrick Rigepp, 2005).

Apart from Christianity, there are also Bidayuh who have converted to Islam, normally through intermarriage. It is estimated about 3% of the Bidayuh in the Serian-Samarahan area are Muslims. Since the 1980's, some families from villages in Tebedu-Temong areas, Mentu Tapu, Muara Mongkos and villages in Serian district were converted to the Islamic faith (Chang, 2004), and about 3% of the Bidayuh population in Kuching Division are Muslims. The Bahai believers are also on an increase particularly in Serian. Based on 2002 survey, about 3% of the Bidayuh population has embraced the Bahai faith (Chang, 2002).

Taking the Christian or Islamic faith has changed the way of life of the Bidayuh. The “head-house”, which was formerly a place where symbolic activities took place, is now transformed into community halls. Past practices associated with paganism are abandoned. The newly acquired religions also change perceptions towards past practices. Christianity in particular, is associated with modernisation and the attainment of education. On the other hand, pagan believers and paganism are seen as a hindrance to development and progress.

Asmah (1983:439) notes that the impact of conversion into Christianity is less disruptive to longhouse life than the conversion to Islam. To this, she highlights the fact that most of the restriction and discipline imposed on the life of the Christian converts do not affect certain mores that are basic in their daily life, e.g. restriction concerning food and the keeping of certain animals. The conversion to Islam of the Bidayuh (and the native Dayak population for that matter) means a gradual abandonment of former traditions, and this ultimately lead to the adoption of Malay culture and way of life, e.g. the abandonment of longhouse domicile for single-unit houses (Ave and King, 1986:103).

When Christianity was first introduced into the Bidayuh community, the conversion to the new religion caused splits within the community, where eventually the Christians had to leave the main *kupuo* to avoid further disputes with the pagan leaders. However, the Bidayuh are now more tolerant of each other’s beliefs (Patrica Nayoi, Jonas Noeb, personal communication, October 2005). This factor, to some extent has encouraged social acceptance of inter-faith marriages among the Bidayuh. Nowadays, it is common for pagan practitioners to attend thanksgivings to celebrate the harvesting season conducted in churches of the Roman Catholic faith. It is also common

for Christian and Muslim Bidayuh to live side by side in a Bidayuh area. Farming is an integral part of the culture and life of the Bidayuh. The Roman Catholic faith has accommodated the need for rituals in agriculture; the traditional rites and rituals related to paddy cultivation are replaced by Roman Catholic ceremonies. At certain stages of the paddy-cycle, candles are lit, crucifixes are erected in the fields and Catholic prayers are said. Through acculturation, the followers of the Catholic faith are able to practice some of the rituals associated with paddy cultivation which have held sacred meaning to the community. In this way, it has attracted more Bidayuh to the religion. Today, about 60% of the Bidayuh Christians are Roman Catholics (Patrica Nayoi, personal communication, October 2005).

## **2.5 Socio-cultural transformations of the Bidayuh community**

In the past, the Bidayuh community lacked behind in terms of economy, and was a community dependent on subsistence agriculture and minimal or negligible monetary exchanges. During the Brooke Administration, they were left completely to their own devices. Patrick Rigep (2005:94) describes the Bidayuh Singgai situation during the time as follows:

Despite being geographically close to Kuching...*Kupuo Singgai* (Singai settlement) was physically isolated from the capital (Kuching) in the pre- and even post-World War II period, and almost completely untouched by modern development. The policy of the government during the time of the Brooke Rajahs had been one of deliberate non-interference in the way of life of the various Dayak groups throughout Sarawak, and there had been no attempt to bring infrastructure, education or medical facilities to the interior. Simply put, there were no roads, no electric power, no piped water, no telephones, and eventually just one radio for the entire *kupuo*. The day-to-day life of the Bisngai was spent in and around the *kupuo*, with almost no contact with or directives from government officials, and contact with the Chinese and Malays from the nearby bazaars and towns limited to commercial transactions at infrequent intervals. The only real outside influence at the time was that of determined band of Dutch missionaries

struggling to convert the *kupuo* to Catholicism, and to bring education in its wake ...

Over time, there has been a transition from the traditional to the modern economy and contemporary lifestyle. The Bidayuh, once a “remote” community has been gradually transformed to a people who embrace modernisation. Because of their accommodative character, cultural and linguistic assimilation with other ethnic groups comes naturally to them particularly among those in urban areas. Today, the Bidayuh are more mobile. They have ventured beyond their villages, abandoning the traditional occupation previously employed by their ancestors. The latest statistics on migration in Sarawak has shown an increase in the number of Bidayuh in urban centres of Miri and Bintulu. Accessibility to the Bidayuh villages has improved tremendously over the years; consequently, admitting outside influences. Although paddy cultivation is still one of the main activities, the production of cash crop has become a widespread practice among rural dwellers. Generally, the Bidayuh practise a policy of self-sufficiency in agricultural production, where a mixture of cash crops are grown on native lands, which include perennials (e.g. rubber and pepper) as well as other types of crops such as cocoa and vegetables. This form of agricultural practice is preferred in order to pre-empt the risks of uncertainties of market condition and the constant fluctuation in prices of commodities (Robert Jacob Ridu, 1989:383).

In traditional culture, possession of land and agricultural pursuits are pivotal in the daily life of the Bidayuh. The customs, traditions and past practices are bound to their economic activities (Robert Jacob Ridu, 1989). Now, with the shift to other types of occupation, this has implicated cultural change as well. For example, in the Singgai community, there are eight Gawai rituals that follow each stage of paddy cultivation - from the initial stage of choosing the site, clearing the jungle, to the planting stage and

the harvesting season. These cultural practices are rapidly diminishing when paddy cultivation ceased to be vital for economic survival and upon conversion to Christianity (Patrick Rigepp, 2005). Cultural loss also implicates the loss of linguistic heritage. The “richness” of the Bidayuh language is entrenched in its culture. Many of its lexical items relate to nature and to the traditional way of life and beliefs have fallen into disuse or become obsolescent because of deterioration in culture.

Perhaps the greatest impact of the transformation on the Bidayuh community is the abandonment of past practices and beliefs. Upon conversion to “modern religion”, the beliefs in spirits and souls became the thing of the past. Bidayuh converts are forbidden to conduct ceremonies and rituals related to the traditional beliefs. The Gawai celebration, which marks the different stages of paddy cultivation, has ceased to be a culturally spiritual celebration.

A prominent feature of the Bidayuh villages in the olden days is the existence of the *Baruk* or a head-house, a round community house which was the centre of social-cultural-religious activities of the Bidayuh people. It played a vital role in community life in those days. Traditional rituals connected with paddy farming and pagan practices such as reverence towards the spirits were held in the *Baruk*. One such ritual ceremony is the *Gawai Mukah* or the Dried Skull Festival. The ritual which was performed to pray for an abundant supply of food and better yields from agricultural activities, and for protection and blessings from the spirits upon the people. The *Baruk* also functions as a meeting place for the community, and a place where human heads and religious properties are kept. With Christianity, the *Baruk* has ceased to function in villages as past practices have been abandoned by the converts. At the present time, it is only utilised in villages which still observe traditional festivals related to paganism. In the

Kuching District, about 30% of the Bidayuh are still pagans and only one village in the Bau District still observes these past practices, i.e. Kampung Opar (See Chang, 2002: 275 for a list of kampongs that still practice paganism).

## **2.6 The present day Bidayuh**

This sub-section gives a brief account of the achievements of the Bidayuh community in aspects of social, economic, educational and political development at the present time.

### **2.6.1 Socio-economic development in Bidayuh areas**

For the past twenty years, developments in the Bidayuh areas have steadily increased and have transformed the rural Bidayuh community into a modern socio-economic entity. Urbanisation and recent government development projects, such as the opening of Bidayuh native lands for large-scale agricultural pursuits since the 1960's have transformed some of these villages into suburban areas and districts. Beginning 1980's, the Sarawak government, through its various agencies such as the Sarawak Land Development Board (SLDB), the Sarawak Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (SALCRA) etc. have embarked upon land development schemes in Bidayuh areas (e.g. cocoa schemes in Lundu and District Serian) in an attempt to shift the dependence on subsistence farming to estate agriculture and cash crops, and to tackle the problem of environmental deterioration and economic consequences of prolonged practice of shifting cultivation among the rural dwellers. These schemes are implemented nation-wide and include provision of basic infrastructure and amenities.

The primary aim of the schemes is to improve the living standards of the rural dwellers and to eradicate poverty. (c.f. Ave & King, 1986; Chang, 2002).

In recent years, these socio-economic and community projects, coupled with the development of tourism and some light industries in the rural areas, have slowed down rural-urban migration and have attracted urban Bidayuh back to work on their lands. With the development of rural access roads, the once inaccessible Bidayuh villages are now within reach of the city. Now, more and more Bidayuh decide to live in the villages and commute to the city as the journey takes only an hour or two. There are about 200 Bidayuh villages in the Kuching Division, 185 are accessible by tar-sealed and gravel roads and with only 15 accessible by well-maintained footpaths. There is hardly any village that depends on riverine transport anymore. The villages are equipped with modern facilities. To enable easy access to bazaars and schools, new Bidayuh settlements have emerged along major roads such as Kuching/Bau/Lundu Road, Kuching/Serian/Tebedu Road, Padawan/Tebedu Link Road and Penrissen/Padawan Road. (Chang, 2002)

### **2.6.2 Education and socio-economic level**

Despite socio-economic progress, the population remains largely in the rural areas. Only about 5-10% of the population has received college and university education (Ik Pahon Joyik, personal communication, February 2009). They are in the higher income group, working in various government agencies and private sectors throughout Sarawak. Most Bidayuh with primary, lower and secondary education are working in various private businesses in the state but are within the lower income group with a few years of working experience in the supervisory and managerial sectors. It has

also been noted that there is hardly any Bidayuh who has penetrated the modern business world. (Chang, 2002; Peter Minos, 2000).

### **2.6.3 Political unity and aspiration**

The Dayak Bidayuh National Association (DBNA) was formed in 1955 with the main aim to unite the Bidayuh people, who were then separated by dialects, distance and religion, and to improve their socio-economic status. DBNA was responsible for organising various groups of Bidayuh together and providing a platform for the synthesis of ideas for the betterment of the community as a whole. In the year 2001, the Bidayuh Millennium Forum materialised. It was attended by about 350 Bidayuh politicians, academicians, professionals, entrepreneurs and community leaders.

At the present time, some of the challenges mentioned above have been resolved. Bidayuh representatives in Parliament and State Legislative Assembly who some time ago were affiliated with various political groups are now united under the same coalition party, the Barisan Nasional. This represents a stronger united front in the mainstream political arena. (Peter Minos, 2000). While in the past, the Bidayuh in the longhouses were united by a “common possession, common work, common fear and common means of protection”, today cohesiveness in the group is nurtured by the “convergence of common interests: economic interest and political ideology and aspiration” (James Dawos Mamit, 2003: 27). As part of the agenda for unity, the *Bidayuh Development Project* has come into being since 2001, with the main aim to develop a standardised Bidayuh language and to promote it as a symbol of group identity. (Also see subsection 3.6.3).



## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has described the situation of the Bidayuh community before and after its socio-cultural transformation. Education and urbanisation in Bidayuh areas have acted as mechanisms for social-cultural changes within the community. Education has opened up new opportunities for the Bidayuh to venture beyond their villages and has initiated change in the mindset and value orientation of the people towards a more progressive community. To this, the Bidayuh community owes much gratitude to the work of the Christian missionaries who introduce school to the Bidayuh. New jobs, new contacts, new roles, and new identities which the Bidayuh have assumed in the larger urban community causes a reorientation in priority, which in turn has motivated changes in language choice patterns of the speakers. The impact of socio-cultural changes on the language choice patterns of urban educated Bidayuh is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 9 of this thesis.