

THE IDA'AN LANGUAGE

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0. INTRODUCTION

The Ida'an may be the earliest inhabitants in the eastern coastal area of Sabah, but very little has been written about their origins. Pallesen (1977: 175-176) notes that in Central Sulu Sama PHL folklore refers to earlier inhabitants of the Sulu Islands as Iraḡan, who are said to be related to the inland people of North Borneo. Sibutuḡ PHL legends also say that the original inhabitants of the island were Iraḡan or Kadazan from North Borneo. The term Iraḡan could refer to present day Ida'an, or it could be a more general term. Rutter writes "The old Bajau name for all the coast pagans was Ida'an." (1929:30). Several authors state that Ida'an is a general name for Dusun people or all indigenous languages of Sabah (Dunn 1980:29).

The oldest document written in a local Sabah language is the 'Idahan' Origin Myth. Harrisson suggests that this myth is closely related to the origin myths of the Kayans who now live over the Kalimantan border (1969-70:229-232). Though their origin is not clear, the Ida'an are known to have lived around the Lahad Datu area since before the 13th century.

Ownership of large birds' nest caves was a significant aspect of the culture of the 'Idahan' and other 'coastal pagans'. In the mid-1700s the 'Idahans' were threatened by the more powerful Suluks. In order to survive the 'Idahans' became Moslem and intermarried with the Suluks. Other 'pagan groups' may have moved inland at the time as a retreat from the Suluks (Harrisson 1969-70:234).

The Ida'an currently number between 5,000 and 6,000¹ and their main centres are around the city of Lahad Datu, the Ulu Tungku area of Lahad Datu District, the lower Kinabatangan River from Bilit to the mouth of the river (except for Abai), and on the Segaliud and Suanlamba Rivers that flow into Sandakan Bay. There are also Ida'an villages farther east on the north side of the Dent Peninsula at Dagat KN. At least one village is also reported to be located in the Sugut River area far to the north (Figure 1).

The people of this language group use three different autonyms. In the area around the town of Lahad Datu they are generally known as Ida'an, but the non-Muslim communities living in the Tungku LD area call their language Begahak and sometimes refer to themselves as Begahak Kadazan. In the lower Kinabatangan area and in Sandakan they call themselves Sungai, as do a number of Muslim communities belonging to several different language groups. Other spellings for Ida'an found in the literature are Eraan, Idaan, Idahan, Idan and Idayan (Dunn 1980).

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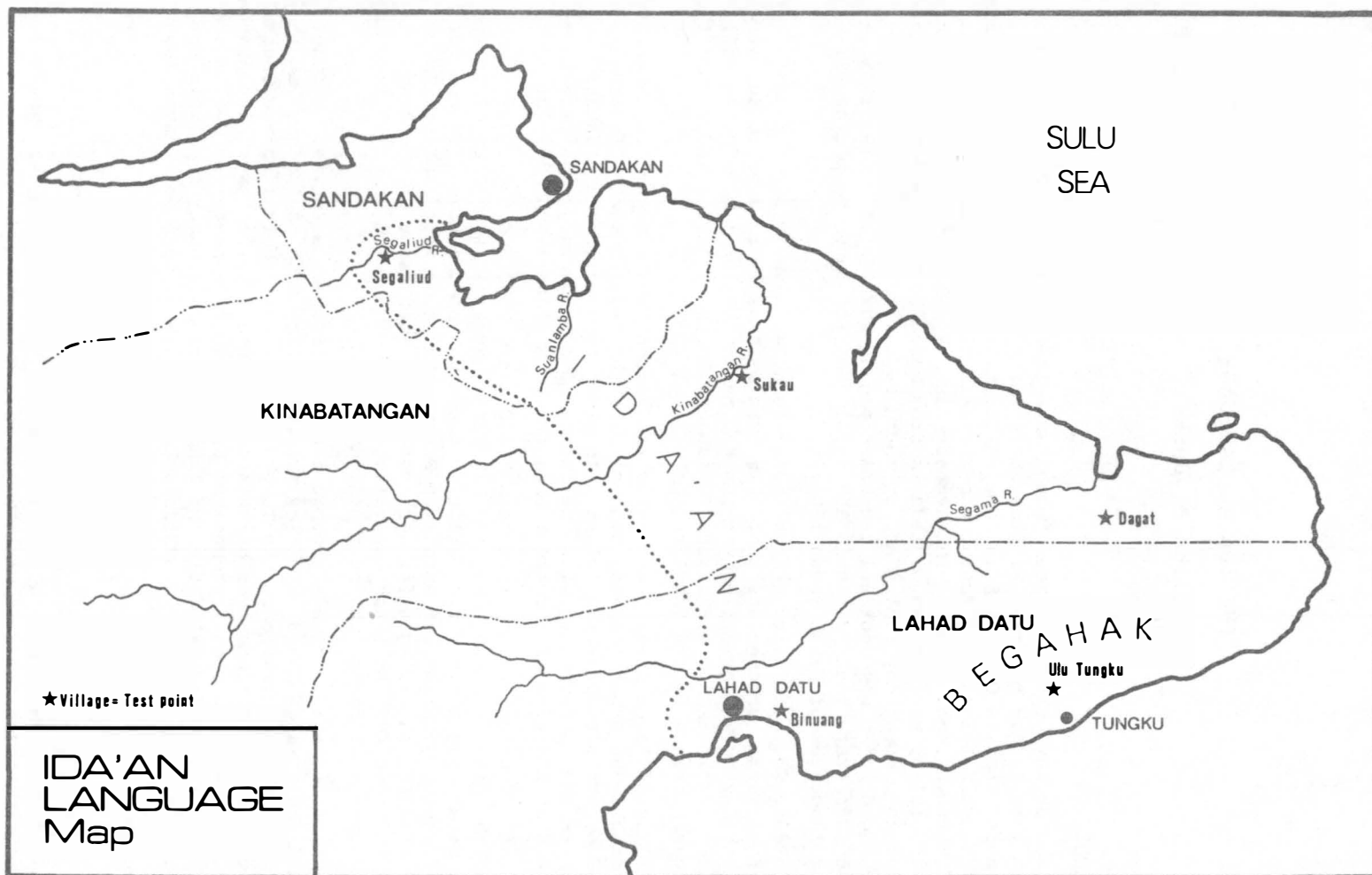


Figure 1: Ida'an language map

Tom and Barbara Harrisson (1969-70) have done extensive research of Ida'an caves and burial sites and have used much of this information as a basis for Sabah prehistory. Roth (1896) includes an Ida'an wordlist compiled by Spenser St. John in 1858 as an Appendix.

1. LEXICOSTATISTICAL CLASSIFICATION

Smith (in this volume) classified Ida'an as a subfamily of the North-western Austronesian superstock. Its closest relation with other Sabah languages is in the range of 41-45 PSC with representatives of the Bornean stock of languages and the Banggi language.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of shared cognates (PSC) between various Ida'an/Begahak and Ida'an Sungai villages. Based on this lexicostatistical data Smith classifies Ida'an/Begahak and Ida'an Sungai as two different languages since no Ida'an Sungai village has more than 80 PSC with the Ida'an/Begahak villages. Smith said, however, that intelligibility testing is needed to clarify this point. The five villages in Lahad Datu District are all closely related to each other (87-95 PSC) and can be considered one homogeneous dialect, while the four Sungai villages show clear dialect distinctions (78-84 PSC).

In this study it will be shown that, based on the results of intelligibility testing, Ida'an, Begahak and Ida'an Sungai can all be classified as one language.

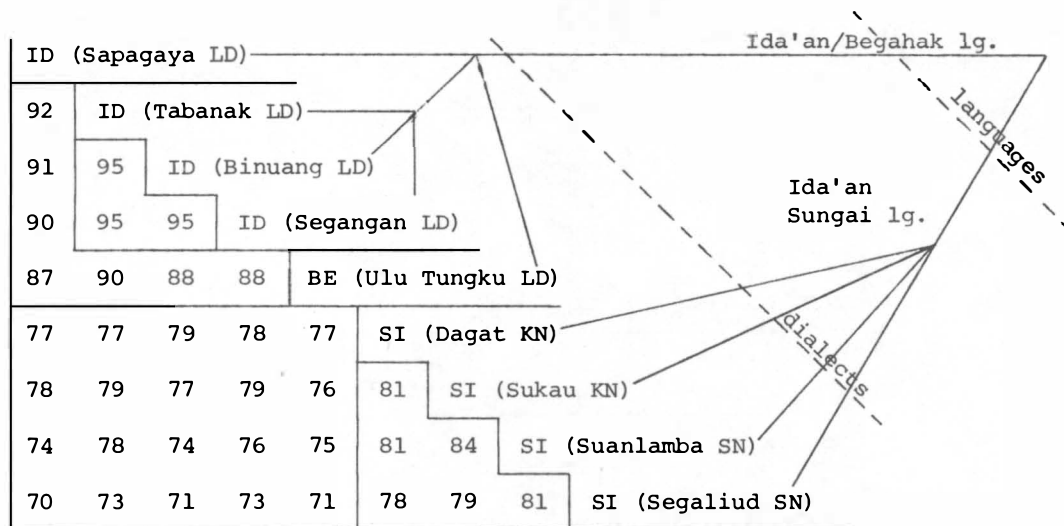


Figure 2: PSC of languages and dialects within the Ida'an subfamily.
(per Smith, in this volume) (ID = Ida'an, BE = Begahak,
SI = Sungai.)

2. TESTING PROCEDURE

Intelligibility testing was conducted in five villages: Binuang LD and Sapagaya LD, representing Ida'an; Ulu Tungku LD representing Begahak; and Sukau KN and Segaliud SN, representing Ida'an Sungai. All of the test sets included a hometown tape and a national language tape as well as reference tapes from Binuang LD, Ulu Tungku LD and Sukau KN.

The reference tapes from Sukau KN and Binuang LD were of good quality. The Sukau hunting story was good and an accurate test of intelligibility. The Binuang LD fishing story had more common terminology than would be desired, but was rated as a fair test. The Ulu Tungku LD tape was of poor quality, so test results from this village were considered unreliable.

3. TEST RESULTS

All five villages showed high intelligibility of Binuang LD and Sukau KN reference tapes (Figure 3). This was expected between the Lahad Datu villages, but the test results also show high intelligibility with Sukau KN even though relations only range 77-79 PSC between the Lahad Datu villages and Sukau KN. Though the results from the Ulu Tungku LD test story are not considered reliable, Ulu Tungku is shown to be clearly within the Ida'an language both by its relation of 87-90 PSC with other Lahad Datu Ida'an villages and its 99% comprehension of the Binuang LD story and 96% comprehension of the Sukau KN story. Intelligibility testing seems to clearly show that Ida'an, Begahak and Ida'an Sungai are all within one language.

REFERENCE TAPES TEST POINTS	Binuang LD	Ulu Tungku LD	Sukau KN
Binuang LD	--	76* (88)	93 (79)
Sapagaya LD	(91)	61* (87)	100 (78)
Ulu Tungku LD	99 (88)	--	96 (76)
Sukau KN	86 (77)	68* (76)	--
Segaliud SN	97 (71)	70* (71)	99 (79)

Figure 3: Results of intelligibility testing in five Ida'an villages. (Scores are given as percentages, PSC relations are in parentheses. * indicates unreliable scores due to a poor test tape.)

That the Ida'an/Begahak language is a homogeneous group with only sub-dialect distinctions is substantiated by intelligibility test results. Since the PSC relations of Ulu Tungku LD with the other four villages are consistently lower than the relations of the villages to each other, and the Ulu Tungku LD test scores were unreliable, that testing needs to be redone. Ulu Tungku LD should also be tested with a Sapagaya LD reference tape as a comparison with the 99% Binuang LD intelligibility score. Also the four Ida'an Sungai dialects should be cross-tested. The one test conducted at Segaliud SN with a Sukau KN reference tape showed 99% intelligibility, but with only one test point no conclusions can be drawn about the homogeneity of the Ida'an Sungai dialects.

Further investigation could be done to determine the validity of the lower PSC relations of Ida'an Sungai dialects with Lahad Datu villages. One example of possible distortion of the wordlists is that the Segaliud SN wordlist was elicited from a teenager studying in Bahasa Malaysia. This could reflect only one person's limited knowledge of Ida'an or it could be indicative of the Ida'an Sungai dialects being heavily influenced by Bahasa Malaysia. Were the latter true, then Sukau KN's low intelligibility of the national language is unexplainable. Either case could cause lower PSC relations with the Lahad Datu villages which are not as heavily influenced by Bahasa Malaysia.

4. NATIONAL LANGUAGE INTELLIGIBILITY

Ida'an understanding of Bahasa Malaysia was tested at each of the five test points. Four villages showed high comprehension (82-92%) of the national language tape, but Sukau KN subjects averaged only 57% (Figure 4). Sukau KN is more remote than the other test points, but showed a somewhat higher PSC relation with Bahasa Malaysia than the Lahad Datu villages.

TEST POINTS	AVG. SCORE	SEX M/F	AGE		EDUCATION		
			AVG.	RANGE	ED.	A.E.R.	A.E.S.
Binuang LD	89	7/3	40	17-67	6	9	5
Sapagaya LD	92	3/2	32	17-50	2	7	3
Ulu Tungku LD	90	6/4	34	17-65	4	6	2
Sukau KN	57	8/2	43	22-65	4	8	3
Segaliud SN	91	6/1	28	18-51	6	7	6

Figure 4: National language intelligibility at five Ida'an test points with sociological data. (Scores are given as percentages. The education data for each village are listed as the number of persons in the test corpus who had received formal education (ED.), the average number of years of education which those subjects received (A.E.R.), and the average number of years of education per subject in the test corpus as a whole (A.E.S.).)

The significant sociological factor in these test results is education using Bahasa Malaysia. Figure 5 displays the average intelligibility scores for the five test points, contrasting subjects with some education with those with no education. Even in Sukau KN where overall scores are low, subjects with some education scored almost twice as high as those with no education. Further investigation into the Sukau KN dialect and comparison with another Ida'an Sungai village's (such as Dagat KN) understanding of Bahasa Malaysia might be useful in clarifying some unanswered questions about national language intelligibility test results.

TEST POINTS	SOME EDUCATION	NO EDUCATION
Binuang LD	100% (6)	73% (4)
Sapagaya LD	95% (2)	90% (3)
Ulu Tungku LD	100% (4)	83% (6)
Sukau KN	75% (4)	38% (6)
Segaliud SN	98% (5)	50% (1)

Figure 5: Ida'an intelligibility of the national language based on education. (The number of test subjects for each case is given in parentheses under the average intelligibility score.)

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the high intelligibility scores registered by those tested from each of the Ida'an, Begahak and Ida'an Sungai villages tested show that Ida'an, Begahak and Ida'an Sungai are one language. All five Ida'an villages in Lahad Datu form one homogeneous dialect, but further testing is needed to clarify the dialect distinctions of the Kinabatangan and Sandakan Ida'an Sungai villages.

NOTE

1. This population figure is an estimate based on a report from the Lahad Datu District Officer (June 15, 1982) listing all villages with their population and the languages spoken in them.