

Chapter 2. The Lahanan Longhouse

Jennifer Alexander

Longhouses are the archetypical form of Bornean domicile, although this form of dwelling is also found in other parts of the world.¹ Much larger than most visitors expect, longhouses are built on piles and comprise a row of individual domestic units accommodated under one roof. This unusual form of architecture has provoked considerable speculation concerning the reasons for its development and for its persistence in contemporary societies which are otherwise rapidly changing.

A functional explanation for the siting of the longhouse on piles has been sought in the protection it provides from flood and heat in a tropical monsoon climate. It is also ecologically effective in that household waste ends up beneath the longhouse where it is disposed of by foraging pigs and poultry; and economical because a longhouse requires less time and material to construct than separate dwellings (Avé and King 1986:56).

A second and perhaps more compelling argument lies in the defensive and security aspects of the structure. Numerous ethnographers (Kelbling 1983:149; MacDonald 1956:103; Rousseau 1978; Sutlive 1978:183) have pointed to the importance of the length of the longhouse in providing protection against enemy attacks. According to MacDonald,

the bigger the house the stouter its walls. The more numerous its inmates, the more plentiful its guard. That is the simple explanation of the remarkable size of Bornean residences (1956:103).

Kelbling (1983:149-150), in less declamatory terms, states that head-hunting and incessant clashes between indigenous groups made it 'sensible' to accommodate the village under one roof. He also notes two features of the longhouse, apart from its length and unity, which are designed for security purposes: the removable notched ladder by which people gain access from the compound to the gallery, and the doors of apartments which are raised some 50 centimetres above the floor to restrict entry. Avé and King (1986:56) remark on the defensive effectiveness of houses raised high above the ground on massive posts, as well as other features including hidden trenches, man traps and palisades.

But while all these writers stress the fortress-like nature of the longhouse they also see it as facilitating interpersonal relations and contacts between households (see also Rousseau 1978:80). This final point seems the most convincing argument for the persistence of the longhouse form in contemporary Borneo societies, for all appear to place a very high value on sociability. While

they rely on the jungle for their livelihood, many members of these societies regard the longhouse as a domestic haven in a dangerous and hostile environment. The individual apartments afford sufficient privacy for domestic life, but the permeability of the adjoining walls, the close proximity of neighbours and the communal veranda provide the opportunities for highly valued social interaction.

Balui Longhouses

The Lahanan are one of the core groups of the Kajang² who regard themselves as the original settlers of the Belaga region in Sarawak's Seventh Division. Their position has been usurped by two main groups of later arrivals. The Kayan, who left the Apau Kayan in Kalimantan more than 200 years ago, pushed all of the Kajang, apart from the Lahanan, downriver to the lower Balui and 'imposed' Kayan wives on Kajang chiefs. The Kenyah also originated from the Apau Kayan and began migrating in waves either prior to or at the same time as the Kayan. One of the earliest Kenyah groups to arrive was the Uma Kelap Kenyah now located immediately downriver from the Lahanan longhouse in the middle Balui, but Kenyah migration has continued until recent times. Both groups have a record of disputes and armed conflict with the Lahanan (Guerreiro 1987).

Interethnic conflicts, head-hunting and war are part and parcel of the early settlement in the Balui region, but the Kayan were largely subdued and their expansion halted by a punitive expedition organized in 1863 by Charles Brooke, the second Rajah of Sarawak (de Martinoir 1974:267). Early this century the Iban started raiding the Balui region, and the Kayan, Kenyah and Kajang joined forces to repel the invader, although the Lahanan at times apparently acted as mediators.³ The Iban raids continued until the early 1920s — at times restricting farming and trade in jungle produce. In 1924 armed conflict came to an end with a peacemaking ceremony in Kapit (Runciman 1960:238).

Over the past 350 years the Lahanan have established a great many longhouses over a wide area. Settlement patterns have largely been a response to the demands of swidden agriculture, but head-hunting and warfare have also played a part. Early this century Balui Kayan and their Lahanan allies established a group of longhouses near the mouth of the Linau River in response to the Iban attacks. These settlements later dispersed when land suitable for agriculture was exhausted. Demands on land and the establishment of boundaries around longhouse communities and their lands have led to the increasing sedentarization of the Balui ethnic groups, while the introduction of fertilizers, weedicides and cash crops have enabled them to cope with restrictions on expansion into new territory.

In the Belaga district, the Kayan, Kenyah and Kajang peoples all build substantial dwellings of ironwood. The Balui longhouse is frequently, but not universally, conterminous with the village. Most Kayan and Kajang communities

consist of one longhouse, but the Kenyah usually build two or three longhouses within the one village.⁴

The massive nature of these longhouses has been attributed to the hierarchical social structure of the Kayan, Kenyah and Kajang and also, in comparison with the Iban, their less predatory agricultural practices (Avé and King 1985:56). These societies, in contrast to the Iban, were stratified into four ranks or hereditary strata. The *laja/maren*, commonly glossed as 'aristocrats', belong to the ruling family's apartment. The *hipui* are 'minor aristocrats' with kinship relations to the *laja*. The *panyin* or 'commoners' form the bulk of the longhouse community. The fourth rank were 'slaves' (*lippen/dipen*) commonly captives of war. The substantial nature of the longhouse structure has been linked to the aristocrats' vested interest in maintaining control. Not only is the apartment of the *laja* much larger than others but, under traditional *adat*, *panyin* could not secede from their natal longhouse to form a new longhouse unless they were accompanied by a member of the aristocratic group.⁵ This, in conjunction with the absence of a preference for farming primary jungle, is seen as inhibiting resettlement and favouring solid, enduring buildings.

The *Levu*

The Lahanan distinguish between a *levu larun*, a longhouse containing a number of individual apartments, and a *levu karep*, a detached dwelling occupied by a single domestic group. But the word *levu* usually refers to the longhouse, and is also the term for the communal veranda or gallery. The veranda side of the longhouse faces the river and the longhouse itself runs parallel to the river or stream on which it is located. Longhouse people orientate themselves in relation to the river. *Naju* refers to 'upriver' and *nava* to 'downriver', and many activities are also viewed in terms of the river and longhouse: one 'goes up' (*baguai*) to the longhouse but 'down to work' (*ba'ai nyadui*); that is, down to the river to paddle the canoe to the fields. Unlike the Iban longhouse described by Sather (this volume), the Lahanan longhouse, as with most other longhouses on the Balui River, is not orientated in terms of the sunrise and sunset.

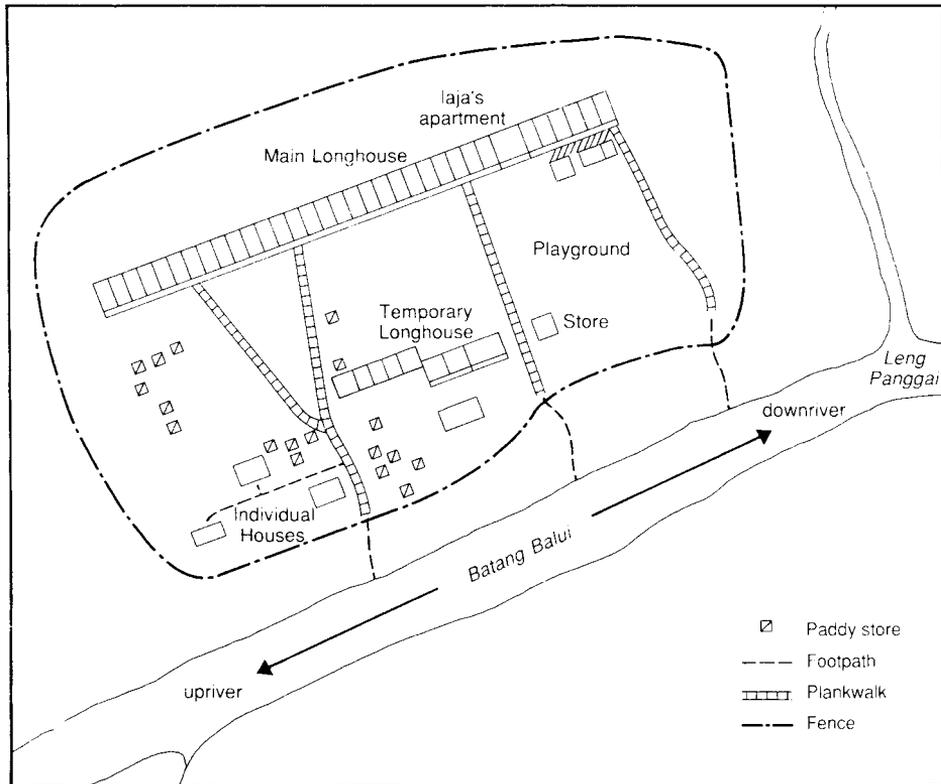


Figure 1. Levu Lahanan, Leng Panggai

The Lahanan *levu* is located on a river bank near the confluence (*leng*) of the main river (*batang*) with a smaller stream (*hungei*). Their current longhouse on the Balui River is about 50 metres from the river up a steep slippery incline, although of course, the river rises and falls dramatically according to the season and weather. It is located just upriver from Leng Panggai hence the name Levu Lahanan, Leng Panggai (see Figure 1).

The Lahanan build massive dwellings of hardwoods — the exceptionally durable *belian* (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*), *meranti* (*Shorea* spp.) and *berangan* (*Castanopsis* spp.) — supported by a number of vertical posts some 3 metres in height. The main posts are sunk 1.5 metres into the ground and pass through the floor to support the roof and rafters above. The structure consists of a front section forming a long gallery extending the entire length of the longhouse and a rear section containing individual household apartments. Each apartment (*tilung*) comprises sleeping quarters, a hearth and living area. Access is through a door (*bah tilung*), literally the mouth of the *tilung*, to the common gallery. The gallery not only provides access to each apartment, but also serves as a playground, workplace and relaxation centre. Each apartment 'owns' and is responsible for the upkeep of the gallery in front of it. The rice mortar (*lesung*),

frequently many years older than the longhouse itself, is placed in the front of the apartment on the gallery, and other goods such as paddles, spears and fishing nets are stored in the rafters of the *levu*. Before the introduction of the Bungan cult⁶ in the early 1950s, the skulls of victims of head-hunting raids were also hung here.

Each apartment also has a rear entrance reached by a notched log, and, in the past, access to the gallery was gained by means of removable notched logs. It is not uncommon to have open doorways between contiguous *tilung* belonging to close friends and relatives. Neighbouring apartments may also be entered via the drying platform located in the centre of many apartments. Most are blocked off by a low fence, which does not hinder conversation between neighbours working in the area.

In the past the Lahanan sometimes built longhouses of two storeys with sleeping quarters on the second one, but their current longhouse is a single-storeyed dwelling place. *Belian* shingles were the ideal roofing material, but these have now largely been replaced by zinc roofing, which has inferior insulation properties.

Longhouses may also be identified in terms of their *laja* (headman), and the aristocrats (*linau laja*) have been referred to as the 'house-owning' group (Leach 1950:61). Political authority is vested in the *linau laja*, the only longhouse people to trace a direct genealogical link to a founding ancestor. In the case of the Lahanan, a quasi-mythical ancestor called Laké Galo legitimates the *laja's* authority.

The present headman's (*laja's*) apartment is considerably bigger than most others, but does not have the raised roof, extended gallery or elaborate paintings decorating the front wall as in many Kayan and Kenyah longhouses, although these may have been present in earlier Lahanan structures. The gallery in front of the headman's apartment is a locus of religious and social activity. During the period of the old religion and also Adat Bungan, the *levu* (veranda) of the *tilung baken* (literally 'big apartment', denoting the headman's living quarters) was the setting for most of the important communal religious ceremonies. The longhouse was formerly split into two for minor ceremonies with downriver apartments following ceremonies at the headman's *tilung* and the upriver apartments at the *dayong's* (ritual expert). With the introduction of Christianity and the headman's conversion to Catholicism, Sunday services are now conducted on the *levu* of the *tilung baken* and all public Bungan ceremonies take place in front of the *tilung* of the *dayong*. Representatives from each *tilung* attend longhouse meetings to discuss matters of common interest — the building of a new longhouse, the visit of a distinguished guest and communal clean-ups of the longhouse compound — on the *levu* of the *tilung baken*. The headman, deputy

headman and the working committee usually dominate proceedings, but also adult men and women make their views known.

When a new longhouse is built the headman's apartment is the first erected and most adults perform *corvée* work (*mahap*) to construct the dwelling. In the past elaborate rituals were held before the erection of the house posts but there is no evidence to suggest that the Lahanan, like the Kayan, sacrificed a slave at this time (see Avé and King 1986:61). While the headman's *tilung* is twice as large as any other apartment, it has little else to differentiate it other than a wooden fence at either end of the front gallery designed to keep out the hunting dogs which roam around.

Although the Lahanan build durable longhouses, they have moved fairly frequently over the last twenty years, living in two different *levu larun* and two temporary longhouses or *luvung*. This appears to have been a common pattern. Some moves can be attributed to epidemics, bad omens or natural disasters. Flood and fire are not infrequent hazards and the Lahanan have been victims of both. In 1942 their longhouse was swept away by floods, fortunately with no loss of life. More recently an elaborate two-storeyed longhouse consisting of twenty-five apartments, which was located across river from the present site, was destroyed by fire, a mere seven years after it had been built. Many heirlooms and the long ritual drum (*tuvung*) were destroyed in the blaze. At the time most households were living in their field huts (*lepau*) and the Lahanan now cite this fire as a reason for their reluctance to stay in the farmhouses for long periods and for keeping heirlooms in separate storehouses. Gongs and other valuables are now placed on display only during important ritual occasions, such as marriage ceremonies, and the most common form of decorative display is the sunhat (*siung*) decorated with beadwork, embroidery and cloth inserts.

The current community at Leng Panggai consists of two longhouses plus associated detached houses and storage huts sited within a fenced compound. The original longhouse contains twenty-nine apartments. When there was no longer room to expand lengthwise, three semi-attached *tilung* were built onto the front. Four detached houses and a further haphazardly constructed longhouse consisting of eight apartments have recently been built. This longhouse is usually termed a temporary structure (*luvung*) rather than a *levu*, and replaces a similar structure which was dismantled. One of the reasons for the Lahanan's strong desire to build a new longhouse, cited in their application for government assistance to prepare and level a site, is that the people wish to be housed under one roof again. Most longhouse people wish to retain their life-style, with only a few 'dissidents' seeing an attraction in independent dwellings within separate household compounds.⁷

The Kayan, Kenyah and Kajang have a dual mode of residence: most households spend at least some periods residing in their farmhouses (*lepau*). For

some households the *lepau*, where they prepare the midday meal and relax, is a simple shelter, but for most it is a small, but solid, dwelling where they may spend up to a month during peaks in the swidden rice-cultivation cycle. People anxious to escape the restrictions of the longhouse actively enjoy the more intimate and relaxed atmosphere of family life in the *lepau*, but others find the isolation in the jungle environment too intimidating and are only too willing to return to the security of the longhouse.

The *Tilung*

Apartments consist of the *tilung* proper, which is located at the front and is where people sit and entertain, and the *baleh* (kitchen), usually linked by a *sepatah* (drying platform). The barest apartments contain merely some form of covering for the wooden flooring — a traditional rattan mat (*layang guai*) and/or cheap plastic. Most households have at least one wardrobe and this is usually placed in the *tilung*. More elaborate *tilung* contain a table and chairs as well as cupboards. Separate cramped sleeping quarters (*siluk*) are usually constructed at the front or side of the the main room, but the *siluk* may consist of a curtained-off, raised platform. The *tilung* is used as a sleeping area in more crowded apartments and guests commonly sleep in the *tilung* on rattan mats provided by the hosts. Further sleeping quarters are sometimes located at the rear of the kitchen (see Figure 2).

The *baleh* is usually separated from the *tilung* by a washing and drying platform (*sepatah*). Piped water runs from one end of the main longhouse to the other and each household has one tap. A latrine is located on the platform or in some cases at the rear of the apartment. The kitchens themselves are simple and consist of a raised fireplace (*benun*) boarded up with planks and filled with clay. Wood fuel is stored both below the fireplace and above it on drying racks. Other furniture includes cupboards for food storage and a dish rack, as well as a table — all recent innovations. The *baleh* are dark and gloomy with only narrow openings high on the walls allowing a little light to filter through. People often seek the light and fresh air of the gallery to work in.

New *tilung* are built on a reciprocal labour basis, each household supplying one-person day per *tilung*. Apartments vary slightly in size and construction as wealthier persons build roomier and more elaborate dwellings. The adjoining walls are flimsy and afford little privacy. Numerous slits and holes provide opportunities to observe whatever is happening in a neighbour's household and this curiosity is in no way restrained. Access to *tilung* is also relatively unrestrained and people move freely in and out of the apartments of others, but it is regarded as impolite to enter the sleeping quarters, or the kitchen when a household is having a meal.

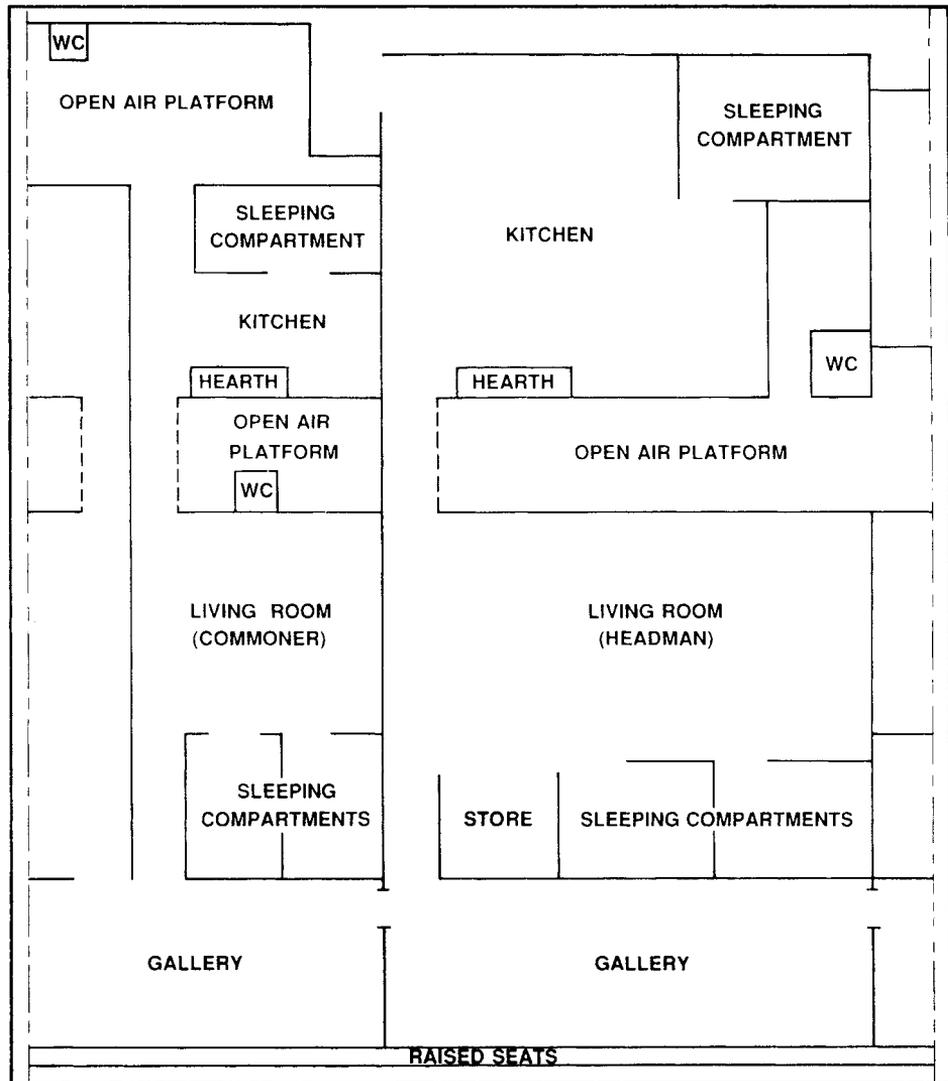


Figure 2. Floor plan of longhouse

The *tilung* is the crucial unit for the organization of labour. The women of each *tilung* are responsible for the maintenance of vegetable and tobacco gardens where they work on their own (*nyadui karep*). But much agricultural work, including swidden rice and cash-crop cultivation, is organized on the basis of exchange labour (*pelado*). *Pelado* is calculated in terms of the exchange of work days between *tilung*. Membership of the work team is usually based on the proximity of swiddens or gardens, but workers are also recruited on the basis of friendship, kinship and/or residential proximity. Each individual or, if they are unavailable, another member of the *tilung* provides one day's labour for each team member who works on their land.

While exchange labour is not regarded as essential for the cultivation of either hill rice or cash crops such as cocoa or pepper, almost everyone, but the young in particular, prefer working in a group to working on their own. Despite the admission that there are positive economic benefits in cultivating pepper and cocoa using household labour alone, exchange labour persists because of the high value placed on sociability. People enjoy working in a group, time appears to pass more quickly, and they enjoy a communal meal. Even women who are working alone in their tobacco and vegetable gardens try to ensure that there are female companions nearby so that they can gather together for snacks and a communal meal.

***Tilung* Composition**

Each apartment contains either a nuclear, a stem or an extended family, although it is desirable and prestigious to maintain as large a *tilung* as possible. However, limitations of space and the splitting off of domestic groups create cyclic fluctuations in *tilung* size.

Most apartments contain a single household — the consumption and production unit; for those which have split into two households will normally establish a new apartment (*tilung karep*, literally ‘own separate apartment’) when circumstances permit. Of the forty-one occupied apartments at Levu Lahanan, thirty-two (78 per cent) form a single production and consumption unit, but nine (22 per cent) are split into ‘two cooking pots’ (*legua buyun*). This implies not only separate cooking arrangements but also separate production and consumption units. All nine of these apartments house more than the average of six members, ranging from seven to sixteen members with the majority containing nine or ten persons.

The most common form of *tilung* organization is a stem family with parents and unmarried children, plus a married daughter, her husband and their children. Twenty apartments (49 per cent) contain stem families. Extended households usually contain more than one married child — usually two married daughters — but this is always a transitory form as the expectation is that all but one married daughter will eventually establish their own apartments. Extended households number six (14 per cent). Only fifteen households (37 per cent) consist of a single nuclear family, in two cases a surviving spouse and child. Eight of these nuclear families have established their own *tilung* within the last five years, all of them splitting from the wife’s natal apartment. The remaining five nuclear families are the surviving members of a *tilung* in which previous members have died or moved to another apartment. Twenty-one apartments have a genealogical depth of three generations and five have a genealogical depth of four.

Continuity of the *Tilung*

In a narrow sense *tilung* refers to the physical longhouse apartment. The occupants of an apartment, who comprise a single unit for routine social, political and religious activities, may also be referred to as a *tilung*, although this social group is more commonly termed *linau tilung* (people of the *tilung*). While the *linau tilung* has a consanguineal core, it also includes affines, adopted and foster children, and any others living in the apartment and taking part in its activities.

Ownership of the dwelling and its contents, heirlooms and rights to land, however, are not vested in the *linau tilung* but in the *tilung pu'un* or *tilung asen* (*tilung* of origin). This is a kinship group comprising all persons with consanguineal links to the *tilung*, irrespective of where they may be living. The *tilung pu'un* is a continuing entity in that at least one child remains in the 'natal apartment', although the apartment may be rebuilt and the longhouse relocated. Childless couples adopt children, commonly from siblings, and parents of a sole surviving son insist on virilocal post-marital residence, to ensure survival of the *tilung pu'un*.

Heirlooms (*laven pusaka*), including beads, gongs and brass jars, provide a symbolic focus for the *tilung pu'un*. Rights to heirlooms are held by all members of the *tilung pu'un*, including those living elsewhere, but custody is entrusted to the senior member of the *linau tilung*. This person also allocates land to members of the *tilung pu'un* returning to live in the longhouse. Despite the custodial role of the senior member of the *linau tilung*, however, all important decisions are based on extensive consultation.

Lahanan, other than the *laja*, have a strong preference for uxorilocal residence after marriage, which is compulsory for the initial period following the marriage ceremony; 90 per cent of currently married couples at Leng Panggai are living in the wife's *tilung* or in an apartment which has split from it. Consequently, *tilung* continuity is usually achieved through female lines, and most custodians of *tilung* property are women. This has important implications for gender relations which are characterized by a strong egalitarian ethic. Lahanan women are prominent in social and political discussion and carry out a large part of the agricultural work.

In some respects it might be claimed that men are peripheral to the *tilung pu'un*. Thirty-five per cent of Leng Panggai married women have husbands from other ethnic groups, mainly Kayan, but also Kenyah and Iban. Conflicts within the longhouse are not infrequently couched in ethnic terms and divorce is more common in inter-ethnic marriages. But despite their initially marginal position, inmarrying men with established families adopt the *levu* and *tilung* affiliation of their spouses and may have a prominent role in longhouse affairs.

The *pu'un* concept is also of considerable significance regarding the continuity of the longhouse as a distinct community. Lahanan retain strong emotional ties to their natal *levu* and its ancestral lands (*daleh Lahanan*); people residing elsewhere return, if they are in a position to do so, at least once a year, particularly during the harvest festival. Even persons who have had an advanced education or have worked in the city for a number of years maintain a strong attachment to their place of origin and enjoy the traditional activities of the longhouse when they return. While the Sarawak government has been responsible for many innovations in longhouse life, the high value Lahanan place on sociability has maintained the longhouse as an enduring form.

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Notes

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¹ The longhouse form is also found among many of the hill tribes of Burma and Assam and the South Sea Islands of the Pacific (Hose 1926:71). See also Satyawadhna on the Lua longhouse (1991).

² The core group of the Kajang — the Lahanan, the Kejaman and Sekapan — are regarded as the original settlers of the Belaga region where they have lived for several centuries. Other groups linked with the

Kajang include the Punan Bah, Sihan and Bah Mali, but these links appear to have a political rather than a cultural basis (Alexander 1989; Nicolaisen 1977–78:191–192; Rousseau 1975:39).

³ The Kajang were frequently victims of the endemic warfare between Iban and Kayan (Guerreiro 1987:22).

⁴ According to Hose (1926:74) and Hose and McDougall (1912, 1:54), the Kayan villages consisted of several longhouses, whereas Kenyah villages consisted of only one. In contrast Whittier (1978:99) argues that Kenyah communities commonly have more than one longhouse and Rousseau (1978:80) that the Kayan have only one.

⁵ The Lahanan split into two communities five generations — perhaps 125 years — ago when a conflict over the leadership of the longhouse led to the loser and the occupants of two apartments (*tilung*) establishing a new longhouse at Sungei Murum with ten Punan households. By the 1880s they had moved to Sungei Belepeh, a tributary of the Murum, and adopted the name Lahanan Belepeh. Between 1896 and 1904 the Lahanan Belepeh were involved in disputes with the Kenyah Badeng and subsequently the Iban. As a result they changed places of residence several times, but by 1940 they had moved to the lower Balui and their current place of settlement at Long Semuang (Alexander 1990). See also Freeman (1970) and Metcalf (1983) for discussions of the process of longhouse fission and fusion.

⁶ The Bungan cult abandoned the burdensome taboos and auguries associated with the old religion in response to religious and economic changes. In the Middle Balui the cult is still active, but declining, with 70 per cent of the population at Levu Lahanan, for example, still belonging to the cult.

⁷ This calls to mind Leach's (1950) statement: 'The inference is very strong that the house, as such, is a very strong element of cohesion and that long-house domicile is not abandoned until the traditional social system has already suffered irreparable damage' (p.63). Cf. Metcalf 1983.