ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Immigration and adaptation of the Iban from rural to urban outskirts in Sarawak, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT This paper aims at clarifying how immigrants from rural areas use the outskirts of Bintulu City in Sarawak, Malaysia and form places of residence there. The area under tropical rain forest climate conditions in Southeast Asia generally has a sparse population. In recent decades, urban areas have started to grow rapidly. In the state of Sarawak, urban areas have developed, and the formation of squatter areas by immigrants from rural areas has been reported. Until a few decades ago, after leaving urban areas, the landscape immediately changed from an urban landscape into a rural one consisting mainly of forests, dotted with swidden farms and longhouses. Recently, however, in areas such as those after leaving the urban area (urban outskirts) of Bintulu City, in addition to shops and offices managed by the Chinese, longhouse communities (LHCs) formed by immigrants from rural areas are densely dotted. In such LHCs, dwellings and ways of living are observed to have different characteristics from those in rural LHCs and squatter areas in urban areas. Characteristics of LHCs in urban outskirts are shown below. Regarding land acquisition, the land was in most cases purchased from former occupants. Regarding members of the LHCs, in LHCs formed before the 1960s, many males married in and households moved in around the 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand, in newly formed LHCs, in many cases no kinship links or very weak kinship links between households are observed. Regarding livelihoods, many members of LHCs work in the urban area, while some who own land cultivate cash crops such as oil palm. Suburban formation has begun as a mix of such LHCs, Chinese shops and offices, and forests in the study area.

Key words: rural-urban migration, Iban, Penan, longhouse, squatter, Bintulu

INTRODUCTION

Background of the paper

The objective of this paper is to clarify how immigrants from rural areas use the outskirts of Bintulu City in Sarawak, Malaysia and form places of residence there. In insular Southeast Asia, in tropical rain forest climates that are predominately forest and sparsely populated1 (Tsubouchi 1986), urban areas have begun to emerge for the last decades. Sarawak is a Malaysian state on the northwest portion of the island of Borneo. Historically, the people of Sarawak congregated along its rivers, particularly at river junctions, to trade. Chinese merchants opened shops where they sold sundries and bought forest products from the native people who collected them from the upriver forests (Chew 1990). Beginning in the mid-20th century, relatively large towns began to form around these shops. However, until recently, forests continued to dominate the areas on the outskirts of towns or city settlements, characterized by numbers of small plots of swidden farming (Fukui 1980). A place where such landscape is seen is called a rural area in this paper.

However, particularly since the 1980s, urban areas with populations greater than 100,000, such as Kuching, Miri, Bintulu, and Sibu, have been developing in response to political and/or economic advancements2. Attracted to this growth, large numbers of rural people have migrated to urban areas, which has fueled continued expansion3. The urban population now exceeds the rural population in

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1 The population density of Sarawak State in 1970 was seven persons/km². Although the population has increased in recent years, it remains sparse at 20 persons/km² in 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak 2015).
2 Kuching developed as the center of Sarawak’s government in the second half of the 19th century. Miri became an oil-producing base in the early 20th century. Bintulu grew as an industrial area at the end of the 1970s and Sibu became a base of the logging industry in the 1980s.
3 See Ichikawa 2011; Morrison 1996; Sutlive 1992; and Soda 2007.
Sarawak (Fig. 1). Understanding the process by which rural people immigrate and form residential areas in urban areas is an important research topic, particularly in regions where the immigrant population has dramatically increased.

Some research studies have investigated immigrants’ residential areas in Sarawak, particularly those of squatters from rural areas who illegally settled in and around the urban areas or used the government’s resettlement schemes (Soda 2007, Sutlive 1992) and those studies have reported on the living conditions and strategies of immigrants. The Land and Survey Department, Sarawak has conducted a periodic census of urban squatters.

Immigrants do not live only in urban areas, but in also on their outskirts. In recent research, the urban periphery where the characteristics of urban and rural land use are mixed has been focused on as an area for dwellings of immigrants, agriculture and also industries (McGee 2008). The results of these studies suggest that urban outskirts will continue to be transformed into residential areas by rural immigrants.

This study focuses on an area around Bintulu City that has been rapidly developing over the past several decades (Fig. 2). Along the trunk roads as far as about 20 km from the city, the historical forests dotted with swidden farms can be observed; however, now there are Chinese workshops and small factories, and there are the residential areas of native people’s longhouses with high density (Fig. 3). The lives of the immigrants who live in the outskirts have not been a topic of research. Therefore, this paper focuses on the urban outskirts.

The majority of the native people in this area are likely of the Iban, a branch of the Dayak peoples of Borneo, who immigrated from rural areas. The study first describes the Iban people who dominate the study area. Although there are other ethnic groups living in Sarawak, the Iban is the majority group and its population is widely distributed along the lower and middle portions of Sarawak’s river basins.

Basic characteristics of the Iban

The Iban migrated into the river basins near the study area from the western part of Sarawak at the beginning of the 20th century (Pringle 1970). Today, they occupy the lower and middle basins of the Kemena River and Tatau River that run through Bintulu Division (Kato et al. 2014). The Iban living in rural areas hold large plots of land, including several forest fallow areas related to the swidden farming
that they actively practice as a primary means of livelihood. Therefore, their rural population and longhouses are sparsely distributed to accommodate these plots. Although the Iban originally settled along the riverbanks, many Iban now build their longhouses along the roadsides because the road infrastructure has become well developed throughout Sarawak.

The Iban’s usual dwellings are longhouses. Longhouses consist of ten to dozens of bilek (family units) that have, for example, gallery, living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens. Each bilek has a tuai bilek (family head), who, along with the spouse, their children, and, sometimes, an adult offspring successor of the bilek with his or her spouse and children, lives in the longhouse. Each longhouse has a tuai rumah (longhouse head). Strong kinship ties through blood or marriage relations among the bilek of a longhouse is usually observed. Thus, a longhouse is a residential communal unit.

An individual Iban often joins a longhouse bilek by marriage to a member of a bilek. After the marriage, it is common that the individual and the new spouse temporarily live with the spouse’s parents in their bilek. After some time, he or she succeeds to the bilek or builds a new independent bilek in the longhouse. Although an Iban can move into the longhouse through her or his connection to relatives who live in the longhouse, the longhouse head must approve first. This study uses the abbreviation “LHC” to denote these longhouse communities. There is some evidence that some LHCs live in clustered individual houses instead of longhouses. Some longhouses today have families of other ethnic groups living there in addition to Iban families. This study identifies those communities as LHC as well.

RESULTS

Formation of the urban areas of Bintulu City and its outskirts

Bintulu City, a coastal town, is the capital of Bintulu District of Bintulu Division located in the middle of Sarawak. Originally, it was a tiny fishing village located near the mouth of the Kemena River. As recently as 1970, according to some people who immigrated at that time, there were just four wooden shops run by Chinese merchants with small Malay villages nearby. However, all that changed because natural gas reserves were discovered offshore of Bintulu in 1969. By the latter part of the 1970s, Bintulu had grown, because of the natural gas industry, the construction of nearby Tanjung Kidurong as Sarawak’s first deep-water port, a variety of other industries, and its attraction of immigrants from the outlying rural areas. Development continues today and, recently, a new industrial area was developed in Samalaju, about 50 km northeast of Bintulu City.

According to a land-use map drawn from aerial photographs (Fig. 4), in 1963, Bintulu was a small town surrounded by large areas of primary and secondary forests. The Tanjung Kidurong industrial area in northern Bintulu City first appeared in aerial photographs in 1982. The subsequent maps of 1996 and 2008 show the residential areas of the city and the rapidly expanding industrial areas. The center of Bintulu City in 2014 when the fieldwork was conducted is flourishing, with large-scale shopping malls, government offices, and enterprises. Many large residential complexes are being constructed around this central area.

The trunk roads that connect Bintulu to nearby cities, such as Miri and Sibu, were first constructed in the latter part of 1960s. New trunk roads are being built; for example, a coastal road is being constructed to connect Bintulu and Miri. In addition, many smaller roads branch off from the

METHODS

First, to understand the process of urbanization of Bintulu City and its effects on the land uses of its surrounding areas, the land-use changes in and around Bintulu City were studied using documents, interviews with local people, and aerial photographs. Second, interviews were conducted, mainly with people living in all of the LHCs and other residential areas along the Miri-Bintulu Road (a trunk road) in the outskirts of Bintulu City. The interview questions were about the subjects’ birthplaces (district name), personal migration histories and social backgrounds, kinship ties among the bilek in a LHC, and economic activities (e.g. farming or employment). Interviews with people who lived along trunk roads other than the Miri-Bintulu Road were also conducted. The field study was conducted in November of 2013 and in March and September of 2014.

In the 16th century, the Iban migrated into Sarawak from what is today known as West Kalimantan, Indonesia (Pringle 1970). Particularly after the mid-19th century, following the expansion of the Sarawak territory, they expanded their residential areas into the lower and middle basins of Sarawak’s rivers (ibid.).

Metcalf (2010) adopted the term “longhouse community” for communities with similar conditions and backgrounds to those observed in the study area of this paper.
trunk roads and lead into the interior areas of Sarawak. Commercial logging began in the early 1980s in the forests along the lower and middle parts of the river basins of Bintulu Division and, after the 1980s, productive oil palm plantations were developed in the clear-cut areas that remained. Those developments helped to drive the urbanization of Bintulu City, although the main driver for development of Bintulu City was industries relating to natural gas.

The population of Bintulu City increased apace its expansion of the urban and industrial areas. In 1980, the population of Bintulu District was about 42,000. By 1991, it was about 86,000 and, in 2000, it was 138,000. Most recently, in 2010, the population was 183,000. Although the populations continued to increase in Bintulu and in Sarawak overall, Bintulu’s rate of population increase was 3.8% higher than in Sarawak overall between 1980 and 1991, 3.0% higher between 1991 and 2000, and 0.9% higher between 2000 and 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak 2015). The population of Bintulu’s urban area in 2010 was about 114,000 (62% of the population of Bintulu District) (ibid.). This population increase in the city was mainly caused by immigration from the rural areas (Sutlive 1992).

**Formation of residential areas along the trunk roads in the outskirts of Bintulu**

**Many LHCs formed after the mid-1960s**

Outside of Bintulu city, traveling toward Miri along the Miri-Bintulu Road (MB Road) for about 20 km, workshops and stockyards of construction materials managed by the Chinese and (primarily) Iban longhouses and individual houses are denser than they are beyond that point (Fig. 5). Interviews were conducted for this study with people living in all of these dwellings, totalling 16 places, including LHCs and other residential communities.

Most of the dwellings along the MB Road are Iban, some of which the Iban constructed along the Sebiew River (that runs alongside the MB Road) when they immigrated during the early 20th century. After the road was built, they shifted their longhouses to the roadside. The Iban who emigrated from other rural areas after the mid-1960s constructed the other dwellings. Before the Iban, this area was the territory of the Penan, a native ethnic group of Sarawak. The Iban immigrants built their dwellings on land they obtained from the Penan and many of the Iban apparently believed that they legally obtained and lived on the land in accord with the native *adat* (local customary practices and traditions). The descendants of the Penan who

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6 According to the head of village 10, shown in Fig. 5, the Penan claimed the western part from the junction of today’s MB Road to Sebauh as their territory.

7 The Sarawak land code prescribes types of land that the natives have a right to occupy and use. The type with the largest land area is Native Customary Land (NCL), to which the natives have usufruct rights according to the natives’ *adat* by cutting the primeval forest. The land code, however, limits their rights to areas that were first cut before 1958. In the NCL, the land is managed following the native *adat*. 
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Fig. 5. Distribution of dwellings along the MB road and background of migration.

| No. | Ethnic group | No of bilek | History of LHC formation, remarks |
|-----|--------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1   | Penan and Iban | 8           | 4 bilek of Penans built their houses in 2009, and after then the Iban started migrating in. They admit living illegally on state land. |
| 2   | Iban         | 13          | Before World War II, their ancestors migrated from Lubok Antu to live along the Sebiew River. In the 1960s, they moved alongside the Miri-Bintulu road (MB road). |
| 3   | Iban         | 34          | In the 1950s, they migrated from Lubok Antu to live along the Sebiew River. In 1968, they moved alongside the MB road. |
| 4   | Iban         | 25          | Split from LHC No 3 |
| 5   | Iban         | 20          | Split from LHC No 3 |
| 6   | Iban         | 23          | An Iban who migrated in from Kapit in 1978 purchased land from Penans and sold it in lots. |
| 7   | Penan, Melanau, Malay | 210    | Original people are Penans. Malays and Melanaus who migrated from Bintulu and other areas, and who purchased lands and lived there. Almost all of them are Muslim. |
| 8   | Iban         | 27          | In the 1920s, they migrated from Sarikae to live along the Sebiew River. In 1968, they moved alongside the MB road. In the early 1970s, a number of bilek joined the longhouse. |
| 9   | Iban         | 9           | In 1990, Iban who lived along the Anap River, a tributary of the Tatau River, immigrated to the current location. |
| 10  | Iban         | 19          | An Iban from Pandan, upstream along the Kemena River, purchased land from Penans in the beginning of 1970s and formed a LHC, inviting several Ibans who immigrated in those days. |
| 11  | Iban         | 12          | An Iban who moved from Sarikai in 1970 purchased land from Penans and formed a LHC, inviting several Ibans who immigrated in that area in those days. |
| 12  | Iban         | 38          | In the middle of the 1960s, they migrated from the Binyo River, a tributary of the Kemena River, to live along the Sebiew River. In 1980, they moved alongside the MB road. |
| 13  | Iban         | 32          | In the middle of the 1960s, when the MB road was under construction, they migrated to the current location. The land was purchased from Penans. |
| 14  | Iban         | 18          | In the middle of the 1960s, they migrated from Pandan, upstream along the Kemena River, to the current location. |
| 15  | Iban         | 39          | In 1970 Ibans in a LHC located along the Tatau River migrated to a place near Bintulu City, and moved again to the current location in 2002. |
| 16  | Iban         | 15          | In around 1920, Ibans living in a LHC in Lubok Antu migrated to live along the Sebiew River. In 1980, they moved alongside the MB road. |

Source: Fieldwork by the author
had historical residence there and the Melanau and Malay, who believe in Islam same as the Penan, settled in village 10 (Fig. 5). People can formally obtain tenure to live in village 10 because it is located in the Community Reserve designated by the Land and Survey Department of Sarawak8. The people living there are primarily Muslims, but there are a few non-Muslims, such as the Iban.

In the latter half of the 1960s, roads, including logging roads and trunk roads, such as the MB Road, were under active construction. The advent of roads triggered the Iban migration into this area and attracted them away from the rivers where they had previously settled to use the rivers for transportation. Throughout Sarawak, wherever a road was constructed, the Iban have followed, tending to relocate their longhouses at the roadside. For example, the Iban who were living along the Sebiew River moved to the MB Road roadside in the late 1960s and built their dwellings there (see LHCs 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, and 16 in Fig. 5). The Iban living in the other LHCs (1 and 9 through 15) are first-generation immigrants or their descendants from Sarawak’s other river basins. They moved into the area between the mid-1960s and about 1990, especially between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s.

**Post-1970s bilek immigration and marriage into LHCs**

Even in the LHCs with relatively long histories, there may be several bilek with very weak or no kinship ties9 to other bilek in the LHC. For example, LHC 8 was settled in 1926 by the Iban of five bilek that immigrated along the Sebiew River from Sarikei. LHC 8 was eventually moved (in 1968) from that location to today’s roadside location after the road was constructed. In 2014, 27 bilek were observed in LHC 8, in which the heads of the bilek and/or the heads’ spouses were related by blood among 16 bilek. Of those 16 bilek, the heads and heads’ spouses of five bilek had blood ties. The 11 other bilek heads had married into the bilek from other LHCs. Six of the bilek, because they joined the LHC in the latter part of the 1960s, have very weak or no kinship ties with the other bilek of the LHC. In fact, their children married people from outside the LHC and formed five independent bilek (Table 1). In short, people in 11 bilek (41% of the total bilek), despite the very weak or no kinship ties with the other LHC bilek, became members of the LHC after the 1960s.

When those who immigrated after the mid-1960s requested membership in the LHC, they asked the head. They could become members of the LHC only after obtaining the head’s permission and participating in a ritual. The location of the LHC 8 longhouse near Bintulu City was a primary reason for people’s interest in becoming members of the LHC. Bintulu City was rapidly developing at that time and, when these people joined the LHC, some of them already were working in Bintulu City and others were actively looking for work there.

However, regarding LHC 8, one reason for approving membership was (as explained by an interviewee) that new bilek were necessary at that time so that the LHC would be large enough to obtain formal recognition from the state government, which required a certain number of bilek to qualify as a formal LHC. This reason for accepting new members was stated by interviewed people in several LHCs in the study area. For example, they stated that, during the period when a new longhouse was being established in a new location, if the number of bilek was small and there was adequate land to construct a new structure or addition for a bilek, the LHC would sometimes accept new immigrant families into the LHC. However, after securing enough bilek and if space for constructing new bilek structures became limited, the LHC stopped accepting new families.

Other LHCs were similar to LHC 8, with relatively long histories after initial settlement, and the acceptance of new members after the mid-1960s. LHC 18 is one example, which is located on the Kuala-Tatau Road about 8 km southwest of LHC 17 in Fig. 4. The Kuala-Tatau Road was constructed in the early 2000s. The original longhouse, located along a branch of the Tatau River, was built before World War II (1940–1945). At some point after the mid-1960s, the LHC split into its present seven distinct LHCs, three of which are located along the Tatau-Bintulu Road and four of which are located along the Kuala-Tatau Road. In the 1970s, the longhouse had been constructed along at the seaside, near its present location, which was convenient for travel to Bintulu City by boat before the road was built.

In LHC 18, the total number of bilek was 24. The heads and spouses of five of the bilek had very weak or no kinship ties with the other bilek in the LHC. Among those five bilek, one of the heads or the spouse was the child of a family that had immigrated in the 1970s and the spouse had married into the LHC from another LHC (Table 1). LHC 18 had not accepted new families after the 1980s because there was no

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8 According to the Land Code of Sarawak, lands cleared later than 1958 are not recognized as NCL. Even if not recognized as NCL, native people can build houses on the land designated as Community Reserve.

9 Some Iban who seek their kin by trying to trace blood and marriage bonds may find a relative, even a very weak one. The Iban are usually happy to have found their kin when they meet for the first time.
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Table 1. Blood relationships between the married couple of each family and the original residents of the LHC (unit: couples).

| Blood relationships | LHC 8 | LHC 18 |
|---------------------|-------|--------|
| Both of the couple   | 5     | 2      |
| One of the couple    | 11    | 17     |
| No blood relations   | 11 (41%) | 5 (21%) |

Source: fieldwork by the author

more land to use to expand the bilek building.

In LHC 18, the number of bilek in which the head and the spouse of a bilek were born in the LHC was two. Of the other 17 bilek, a husband or a wife had married into the LHC (in 10 bilek, the husband married into the LHC and, in seven bilek, the wife married into the LHC). All of the husbands who married into the LHC had emigrated from other districts to work in Bintulu City. These men then married women in LHC 18 and decided to settle in this LHC because of its proximity to Bintulu City.

According to the LHC 18 people who were interviewed, in the 1970s, large tracts of primeval forests had existed around their longhouse that they could clear for farming and building houses; but, by the 1980s, the area had considerably shrunk. They stated that there are no more forests for reclamation because the land that was originally forested around the longhouse has been transformed into oil palm plantations. In LHC 18, at least one person in each bilek engages in wage labor in or around Bintulu City. Few bilek practice paddy farming today and most of them must purchase their rice, although all bilek historically engaged in paddy farming. Recently, two or three bilek have cultivated oil palm gardens and a few families grow vegetables to sell in Bintulu City and/or at stands along the Kuala-Tatau Road.

In the study area, land may be acquired in one of two ways: clearing unclaimed and unused primeval forests or buying land from people who have usufruct. According to the interviews with the people living in the LHCs along the Bintulu-Sibu Road, almost all of the land in use along the road is owned and no unclaimed land is left.

**LHCs formed by diverse groups of people from various regions**

The residential situation described above was observed in the LHCs that had settled in or around the study area before the mid-1960s. However, several LHCs (6 and 9 through 15) were formed by the Iban after the mid-1960s. The Iban who immigrated from the same LHCs in other districts formed four of those LHCs (9, 12, 14, and 15). The other four LHCs (6, 10, 11, and 13) were primarily formed by the Iban from various districts and/or LHCs in which they had very weak or no kinship ties with the bilek there (with the exception of two or three bilek). The heads of the LHCs each immigrated to the area between the late 1960s and the early 1970s and purchased land from the Penan who had historically settled the land. The heads then each gathered various families that had immigrated into the area at about the same time and used these diverse groups to form their LHCs.

For example, LHC 11 consists of 10 bilek. Eight of the bilek originally migrated from various districts and/or LHCs and there are no kinship ties among them. Only two bilek have kinship ties and that is the relationship of parents with their children. The head of LHC 11 arrived in about 1970, was employed at a governmental office, and purchased land from the Penan. He became the head upon forming LHC 11 in 1980 and the longhouse was built in 2008. The origins of each bilek are primarily districts in Bintulu Division, such as Sebauh District (6 persons) and Tatau District (4 persons). None of the LHC 11 bilek is presently engaged in paddy farming, although all of them were until the 1980s. Three bilek own oil palm gardens. Three heads of bilek are construction workers in Bintulu City; three others work for private companies, such as in a factory, or as a driver of a truck or bus; one head works in a governmental office; and two others are retired.

In LHC 6, an Iban immigrated at the beginning of the 1970s from the Kapit District, purchased land from the Penan, sold some of the land as smaller lots, and used another portion of the land to build rental houses. In 2014, a group of Iban families purchased a lot from him and built 15 houses on it. Although they have individual houses instead of a longhouse, the Iban head applied to the district office for formal recognition as a LHC. LHC 6 consisted of a diverse group of people with very weak or no kinship ties to each other, except for two bilek whose heads are related as uncle and nephew. According to an interview with an Iban who purchased a lot in about 1990 and then, in 1995, built a house and relocated there, five families built houses on that lot in 1995 and lived in them.

After 2000, houses and costs of living started to increase and the price of land in 2014 was three times its 1990 price. Each bilek of LHC 6 head works for pay at oil palm cultivation, after retirement of wage labor, for three persons. Other jobs are primarily in Bintulu City, such as carpenter, watchman, lorry driver, or employee in an office of a private company for which respectively two persons engaged. Two people were workers on the platform of a submarine oil drill. The primary places of origin of the heads and the heads’ spouses were Sebauh District (15 persons) and Kapit District.
Regarding rental houses in LHC 6, 12 wooden units were built in 2000. The dwellings are rented by the month for MYR 150. In 2013, 15 new houses made of concrete blocks were built and rented for MYR 350/month and 35 more houses were in construction in 2014 during the fieldwork period. The owner stated, in essence, that it is easy to find tenants because many people have immigrated to the area. He went on to state that many tenants presently work in Bintulu City or on the platform of the submarine oil drill.

Aside from along the MB Road, LHCs formed by diverse groups of people were observed in the outskirts of Bintulu City. For example, LHC 17, located along the Kuala-Tatau Road west of Bintulu City, consists of 33 bilek. These are primarily Iban, except for 10 bilek that are of the Kayan family. In the LHC 17 area, private commercial logging companies have operated since about 1960. Originally, in the early 1970s, a group of logging company workers came together from various regions of Sarawak and built a longhouse along the seaside. They stated that the land on which the longhouse was built was given to them by people in the nearby Malay village of Jepak. At that time, it took about 30 minutes by motorboat or 1.5 hours on foot to reach Bintulu City. When the Kuala-Tatau Road was constructed in the early 2000s, they built a new longhouse along the road at its present location.

In the 1970s, logging was an active industry and there were about 50 bilek in LHC 17. Then, the number declined when logging shut down. Many of the Iban that presently are in LHC 17 joined it in the 1980s. The Kayan (10 bilek) originally came from three LHCs located in the upper basin of the Tubau River. They have relatively strong kinship ties among them. Originally, some of them made friends with the Iban of the LHCs in Bintulu City, after which the first Kayan family immigrated and made a bilek in LHC 17. They were followed by the other Kayan families, who moved into the LHC one after another. Regarding farming, paddy farming is now conducted by three bilek, although all of bilek paddy farmed in the past. Two bilek are engaged in oil palm cultivation. At least one person of every bilek is engaged in wage labor in Bintulu City or on the offshore platforms.

### Small-scale squatters

Dwelling place 1 is located near the foot of a bridge that spans the Sebiew River that is not observed as a clear-cut community. There were four Penan, three Iban, and one Bidayuh families in 2014 when I visited, although the actual residents shifted as people temporarily moved in and out. There was no head among them. The Penan immigrated in 2009 from the Jularon River, a tributary of the Tubau River, after their longhouse was destroyed by fire. They said that, when they joined, there was one Iban family. They acknowledged that they had settled stingan (illegally) on state land. They stated that they often suffer over the course of a year from flooding because they are located close to the river. However, they stated that they wanted to stay there because there is no more free land along the MB Road and the prices of rental houses near Bintulu City were too expensive for them. Many of them were working in general construction in Bintulu City.
Concluding remarks: Formation of suburban areas

In this study, I described the formation of residential areas by immigrants from rural areas to locations alongside the MB Road and other trunk roads around Bintulu City where urbanization has rapidly progressed since the 1970s. In the study area, the LHCs that were observed were predominantly Iban. A similar situation can be observed in the other areas of Sarawak, such as along the trunk roads near Miri and Sibu. In the study area, it was observed that, only with respect to the dwelling place 1, did people acknowledge that they were illegally squatting on state land. However, since the land along the trunk roads, including the MB Road in the outskirts of Bintulu City, is recognized as belonging to the people who live there, large squatter areas, such as areas expanded in Bintulu City, would not be formed along the trunk roads.

Because an Iban LHC in a rural area usually has a large territory that includes large fallow forest areas, the density of distribution of longhouses is low. To the contrary, the density was relatively high along the trunk roads in the outskirts of Bintulu City. In the LHCs that were settled before the mid-1960s along the Sebiew River and then moved to the roadsides after road construction, there were several post-1960s immigrated bilek and men who had married into existing bilek in addition to the bilek (and their descendants) who had been there since the beginning. On the other hand, there were several relatively new LHCs that had been built by Iban who had immigrated from other districts and/or other river basins after the mid-1960s. Some of those LHCs consisted of diverse bilek with very weak or no kinship ties among them. Finally, there were immigrants who had built their own separate houses or who had built rental houses and/or were selling lots to new immigrants from rural areas.

Most of the immigrants who were living along the roads did not engage in paddy farming, which had been the primary subsistence activity of the Iban in the past. Oil palm growing has recently become popular among small farmers in the overall Sarawak region. In the study area, a few people who had land in territory where they had been settled for relatively long periods and who, even after immigration in the mid-1960s, had the means to purchase land, had recently started growing oil palm. Although they are engaged in agriculture, some family members, in most bilek, were engaged in wage labor in Bintulu City.

Previous studies on the immigrants to the urban areas of Sarawak have studied the people living as urban squatters. This study takes the position that stable residential areas of immigrants, particularly the Iban, who live along the trunk roads located in the outskirts of Bintulu City, have begun to appear. This is the beginning of suburban formation. The characteristics of LHCs located in these suburban areas are that immigrants relocate from rural to urban areas, they marry into pre-existing and stable LHCs, they build dwellings on purchased land or they rent houses, and they mainly engage in wage labor in Bintulu City. New LHCs are, in many cases, formed by diverse groups of people who immigrated from various regions and/or LHCs who have very weak or no kinship ties among them. As shown in Table 2, the styles of living in suburban areas (along the roadsides in the outskirts) are different from the rural and urban squatter styles of living.

It is reasonable to expect that the suburban areas described in this study will continue to develop into the future as urbanization progresses in response to new industrial development and the emergence of development policies on energy-related industries. This study did not address the relationship between natives’ land acquisition and Sarawak’s land code. According to the land code, native people’s land rights to the Native Costmary Land (NCL) are recognized under certain conditions. In the study area, it is possible that large regions are not legally recognized under the NCL. Land acquisitions by immigrants in suburban areas have not yet generated serious social issues, perhaps because the populations in these areas are presently relatively small. However, as the immigrant population continues to increase, adjustments between suburban formation and the legal regulation of the land will become an administrative issue.

In sparsely populated insular Southeast Asia outside Sarawak, urbanization has also been progressing recently, with population increase and migration from rural to urban areas. In the case of the MB Road area north of Bintulu City that is observed in this study, many immigrant Iban purchased land from the Penan, the earlier resident people, to create their residential areas. This method of obtaining land is characteristic of this area. The Penan tend to easily sell their land (personal communication, Mr. Jayl Langub, UNIMAS); but, there are not many cases in which the Penan settle near urban areas.

10 In the case of the MB Road area north of Bintulu City that is observed in this study, many immigrant Iban purchased land from the Penan, the earlier resident people, to create their residential areas. This method of obtaining land is characteristic of this area. The Penan tend to easily sell their land (personal communication, Mr. Jayl Langub, UNIMAS); but, there are not many cases in which the Penan settle near urban areas.
11 The Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) national development project is under way in Sarawak.
12 There would be large areas of NCL along the rivers where natives had previously lived; along the roadsides, there are many areas that opened up after the primeval forests were cut after 1958.
13 See https://sedac.ciesin.columbia.edu/data/collection/gpw-v4.
Suburban formation by immigrants from rural areas would also be observed in wider areas outside the study area of this paper. Immigrants to suburban areas would have different adaptation strategies depending on the social and cultural backgrounds of their areas. Further research regarding this point is expected.

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