Rhythm in Bidayuh

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The approximately 25 dialects of Bidayuh (Land Dayak) spoken in Sarawak, Malaysia, can be grouped into four clusters of generally intelligible dialects: Eastern Bidayuh (Bukar-Sadung), Central (Biatah-Penrissen-Lower Padawan), Highland (Tringgus-Sembaan-Upper Padawan) and Western (Singai-Jagoi).

In both the ultima and penult of the word, there are differences of vowel duration that create contrasting rhythm patterns.

Six vowels contrast in the ultima: i, u, ǝ, e, o, a. Each of them can occur as normal or as lengthened (V)\(^1\):

- pu’an ‘know (person)’ Eastern, Central, Highland, Western.
- tu’an ‘primary forest’ Eastern, Central, Highland, tu’an Western.

Only four vowels contrast in the penult: i, u, ǝ, a. In Eastern, Central and Highland (but not Western) dialects there are two types of penult vowels, full (V)\(^2\) and reduced (V).

- bâ’uh ‘new’ Eastern, Central, Highland, ba’uh Western.
- bâ’uh ‘eagle’ Eastern, Central, Highland, bə’uh Western.
- būkut ‘to punch’ Eastern, Highland, mūkut Central, bukut Western.
- būkoʔ ‘bush knife’ Eastern, Central, Highland, bukoʔ Western.

A full penult vowel is sustained and has consistent quality. Although no single phonetic feature is present in every instance of a reduced vowel, the following features most commonly characterize this type of vowel:

- quick, not-sustainable articulation
- lengthening of a following consonant
- devoicing before a voiceless stop
- deletion, in at least some utterances
- lax vowel quality, e.g., i > i
- lowering of high vowels, e.g., i > e
- exchange of vowel quality, especially among high vowels, e.g., i > u

\(^1\) Western Bidayuh has sequences of rearticulated vowels ([ta.’as] ‘ironwood’, [ti.’ʔ] ‘itchy’), but, otherwise, there are no lengthened vowels.

\(^2\) In some varieties of Eastern and Central Bidayuh there seems to be no distinction between full and reduced vowels, and in still others the distinction operates only in the low vowel ǝ.
The lengthened vowels in the ultima seem to have had two historical sources:

1) Some lengthened vowels in Central Bidayuh and rearticulated vowels in Western Bidayuh have developed where a medial *h of Proto Bidayuh has dropped out.

Proto Bidayuh *tahas > Eastern, Highland tahas, Central tas:,
Western tas: ‘ironwood’.

Proto Bidayuh *muhun > Eastern, Highland muhun, Central mu:n, Western muun ‘descend’.

2) Some Proto Bidayuh lengthened vowels have developed where an Austronesian (or PMP) medial laryngeal has dropped out.

PAN *bu Sek > Proto Bidayuh *bok > Central ubok, Highland bok, Western bok ‘hair (of head)’.

PMP *bo[n]ti\#is > Proto Bidayuh *bite:s > Eastern bite:s, Central bite:s, Western bites ‘calf (of leg)’.

The full vs. reduced vowel contrast in the penult seems to be related to differences in accentual pattern in some other AN languages and, apparently, developed from accentual differences in PAN. Specifically, a Bidayuh form with a full vowel developed from an earlier form with final stress while a Bidayuh form with a reduced vowel developed from an earlier form with penultimate stress.

PAN *batú > Proto Bidayuh *båtuh ‘stone’.
PAN *telúr > Proto Bidayuh *tålo: ‘egg’.
PMP *lu\#áq > Proto Bidayuh *\#-ir-úja? ‘spit’.
PAN *búlan > Proto Bidayuh *bårån ‘moon’.
PAN *kåyuH > Proto Bidayuh *kåyu ‘wood’.
PAN *si+kuH > Proto Bidayuh *såkåuh, etc. ‘elbow’.