

Rivers and the Penan Landscape¹

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ABSTRACT

Keeping clear of polemology or irenology theories and the various explanations tendered about religious reasons for tribal war and headhunting practices, as well as of recent international conflicts, this essay describes the general Borneo setting and the particular situation of the Kapit-and-Baleh region as the meeting point of five of the island's major river basins. In an attempt to uncover features common to the island as a whole, it first focuses on its heartland, and examines the customs or adat relative to waging war and restoring peace among traditional peoples of the interior. Then, in a diachronic perspective, it tries to figure out how these peoples' assumed autochthonous methods of conflict prevention and resolution changed across historical periods, from pre-colonial times, insofar as they can be properly identified from both interviews with local people and data from the extant literature; via innovations progressively introduced by contact with and influences from coastal ("Malay") societies; to the sweeping effect of the colonial states' administrative policies; and the subsequent powerful impact of modern national (or State) societal practices and legal procedures. While the last phase has led to the local development of new forms of written adat corpuses, this essay also points to some other post-independence developments, and to what may remain today of ancient patterns regarding conflicts, their prevention, and their resolution.

Keywords: *Pena; Belaga; Baram; rivers; narrative*

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INTRODUCTION

No Penan community underestimates the importance of rivers and that this extends beyond essential ecosystem services. Rivers provide them the framework upon which they organize their knowledge of the geography of the landscape, and the location and identity of their settlements. A place where one was born or where one's parents and grandparents were born is referred to as *oko bu'un* (place of origin), conferring one with an identity and rights to the place and access to its resources. It also helps connect one to kinfolks living far away or in different parts of the landscape. After providing succinct background information on the colonial and post-

colonial history of Kalimantan (see fig. 1), this essay reviews the development of second-generation museums (state museums) in independent Indonesia, and the state's policies regarding culture and museums.

Describing the Penan Gang landscape in Belaga District, Brosius (1976:174-5) says that "a conspicuous feature of the Penan environment is rivers". He further points out that:

The importance of rivers to the Penan can scarcely be underestimated. In an environment where visibility seldom exceeds 200 [feet], these rivers and streams form the skeleton around which environmental knowledge is organized...When travelling in the forest, Penan are always cognizant of their precise location relative to various rivers. This keen sense of spatial relationships derives from an awareness of the relative size of rivers, the angle of flow from one river to another, topography between particular rivers, the proximity of headwaters of different rivers, and other sorts of environment cues.

Numbering 21,367 people, the Penan occupy largely the remote headwaters of Sarawak's large rivers, such as the Rejang, Baram, Limbang, Kemana and Jelalong, in the deep interior of the Borneo rainforest.² What follows is a narrative of the cultural significance of rivers to Penan society.

Navigating the landscape

The Penan frequently travel into the deep forest to hunt, collect rattan, process sago, or in search of essential resources such as agarwood (gaharu) or medicinal plants. Weaving their way through the forest, Penan would use the river system to determine their precise location relative to hills and other landmarks. It should be noted that Penan knowledge of rivers and streams is phenomenal (Brosius 1986: 174-175). Practically all rivers and streams, big and small, found within the area they live in is known to them and given names. They know which rivers and streams share watersheds, and the direction they flow into bigger rivers. Rivers are akin to streets in the urban setting, and when an individual gets disoriented in the forest, the first thing he does is walk to the nearest river or stream and work out his location, utilizing his knowledge of the orientation of the river, its flow into another river, and the proximity of the watershed it shares with yet another river. This anecdote show how important rivers are to Penan in determining locations. I had, in the early 1980s, two Penan guests staying with me in Kuching for about two weeks. The older of them was appalled to find out there were no streams cutting through the city and wondered how city dwellers find their way from one place to another.

Identity and settlements

Some groups of Penan identify themselves with the name of the river they reside. For example, the Penan Selungo and Penan Silat in Baram District, Penan Geng in Belaga District, Penan Jelalong in Sebauh District refer to themselves by the respective rivers they live in.

Around 1898 some families of Penan from Belaga District moved to the Silat River in Baram District and identified themselves as Penan Silat (Needham 1953:74-5). Today there are four Penan Silat settlements in the Silat River: Long Jekitan, Long Tikan, Long Bee, and Ba Purau. Each of these groups have exclusive rights to the land in the area they occupy. As an example, the Penan of Long Jekitan have exclusive rights to land along the Jekitan as well as around its confluence with the Silat. Identification with a particular river system gives the community rights to the land and the resources found in it.

Rivers are not merely rivers; they have stories to tell, and they record historical events. Asai Beret, the headman of Long Siang on the Tutoh, Baram District, mentioned that two right bank tributaries of the Marong, itself a left bank tributary of the Tutoh, not far downriver to the settlement of Long Siang were

named after historical events of inconsequential weight. For instance, Ba Pepak Telo (Broken Quiver River) got its name after a hunter whose quiver mysteriously disintegrated while on a hunting trip. While Ba Bavui Megu (Hairless Wild Boar River) was named after a hunting party caught a hairless wild boar.

A river or a stream may be named after the feature of the landscape, for example, a species of tree or plant that grows along its bank, a particular type of animal or bird found along its course. Asik Nyalit, the former headman of a band of nomadic Penan on the Ubong, a true right bank tributary of Tutoh, said that a tributary of the Ubong that his band frequently camped in is named Ba Bateu Bala or Red Stones River due to the red color of numerous stones found along its bank. Back to the Marong River, Asai Beret, said that a true left bank tributary of the Marong is named Ba Jakah as jakah palm (*Arenga undulatifolia*) grow abundantly along its banks. A right bank tributary of the same river is named Ba Tevaun, after the numbers of helmeted hornbills (*tevaun*) which frequent the area.

The Penan of Long Belok in the upper Apoh River named a tributary below their longhouse Ba Adin³ or Hudden River, after Donald Hudden,⁴ a popular District Officer, Baram, during the reign of Vynner Brooke, the Third Brooke Rajah of Sarawak. Ancestors of the Penan of Long Belok were camped at that river when Hudden paid an official visit. Oral narratives suggest that it was an ordinary visit by a government official, but because of Hudden's reputation, their ancestors decided to name the river after him. Years later, that visit of the District Officer was used by the Penan to assert territorial rights to the area in a land dispute with a neighboring longhouse.

Parts of rivers such as rapids (*diham*), pools (*levahau*) and so on are also named. Just below the confluence of Kuba'an and Tutoh is a lovely pool with lots of fish. The Penan in the area call it Levahau Jabu (Jabu's Pool) as they chanced to see the high-ranking government official cast his net there, while on an official visit to the area.

The Penan have a strong prohibition against mentioning the names of recently deceased persons. When an individual dies, he or she is designated with a name of the river where he or she died and buried. His or her name is then prefaced with either Lake' (male) or Redu (female). In 2017 Tabaran Agut, the highly respected headman of a band of nomadic Penan living in the Tepen River, a true right bank tributary of Tutoh died in Limbang Hospital, and he was buried in the Kelabit cemetery at Long Seridan. Tabaran was born in the Tepen River and lived all his life there, and although he was not buried in the Tepen River, the Penan community in the area remember him as Lake' Ba Tepen or the gentleman of the Tepen River.

In the second half of the 1980s and the whole of 1990s he led his band of nomads to erect a series of blockades along the logging roads leading to the Tepen River to prevent timber companies from encroaching into the Tepen area. Although his anti-logging blockades did not completely save the Tepen from environmental damage, it reduced the extent of destruction. In 2018 while accompanying the head of the WWF-Malaysia Kuba'an-Puak Green Corridor project to look at the condition of the bridge crossing the Tepen River, Asai Beret, the Penan headman of Long Siang, looked at me as I fixed my eyes to the river for a long time. He asked what was in my mind. I replied, "a great friend, Lake' Ba Tepen, who is no longer with us". Asai said he missed Lake' Ba Tepen a lot, his smile, his wit, his friendship. In Asai's numerous travels in the area searching for gaharu (agarwood), Lake' Ba Tepen and his band had shared many meals with Asai and given him shelter while passing the Tepen River. The site of the Tepen River also reminded Asai of the years he and Tabaran worked together to lead the Penan to erect barricades across the logging roads to stop logging activities in the upper Tutoh.

Oko bu'un (place of origin)

The Eastern Penan have a term *oko bu'un* or place of origin, from the word *oko*=place, and *bu'un*=beginning which they use in a variety of ways (Langub 2011:98). Rivers or river systems are referred

to as *oko bu'un* or place of origin. For instance, an individual can say that: “*oko bu'un ki tong Ba Puak*,” or “my place of origin is the Puak River,” a tributary of the Tutoh River. Such a statement is made to assert one’s rights to one’s birthplace. One can also asserts one’s rights to places where one’s parents or grandparents were born in and connect relationships and kin ties. For instance, Asik Nyalit of Ba Ubong, Michael Ayu of the Lower Magoh, Sabin Libak of Upper Kuba’an, Igu Agan of Upper Magoh, and Jeffrey Moyong of Ba Puak can say that the area around Batu Lulau on the Tutoh River is *oko bu'un* of each of them since their great grandparents, Kei and Woh (see Figure 1) were born there.

Asik Nyalit of Ba Ubong (#1), Michael Ayu of Long Leng (#9), Sabin Libak of Ba Medamut (#12), Igu Agan of Long Tarum (#5), and Jeffrey Moyong of Ba Puak (#3) are either first or second cousins (see Figure 1), being descendants of three brothers, Ta’ang, Usai and Tring. They are spread across the length and breadth of the land between Kuban River on the west, and Ubong River on the east bordering with the Mulu National Park. They are far from each other.

Ta’ang and his wife Buring had several children, one of whom was Ayu, father of Michael. Ta’ang who died in what is now the Mulu National Park, and was buried at Batu Kejau, below the confluence of the Tutoh and Ubong. His grandson Michael lives at Long Leng in the Lower Magoh.

Usai and his wife Ludang had several children, including the three shown in Figure 1, two daughters, Ulau and Seling, and a son Moyong. Usai died at Batu Lulau, located on the true left bank of the Tutoh, across from the confluence with Kuba’an, and was buried there. Ulau moved to the upper Kuba’an upon her marriage to Libak Usang. They have several children, and a son, Sabin, who is currently the headman of Ba Medamut (#12). Moyong remained in the Tutoh, establishing a settlement at the confluence of the Puak and Selulong. He married Pengiran Jeluran, and they have several children, one, Jeffrey, is the current headman of Ba Puak (#3).

Tring and his wife Tilung had several children, one of whom was Re’. Tring died at the headwaters of Ba Puak and was buried there. Re’ moved to Ba Ubong upon her marriage to Nyalit. They have several children, one of them Asik, who used to be the headman of Ba Ubong (#1), but now in old age living at Ba Mera’an on the Magoh to be close to the government rural clinic at the Kelabit village of Long Seridan.

As can be seen in the Map (Figure 1), descendants of the three siblings, Ta’ang, Usai, and Tring, are spread across the length and breadth of the area between Mulu National Park on the west and Pulong Tau National Park on the east: Sabin in the east, Asik in the west, Igu north, Jeffrey south, and Michael in the middle. Their parents and grandparents used to meet each other quite often at the government supervised *tamu* (barter trade) meetings between the Penan and longhouse dwelling traders at two locations on the Tutoh, Long Melinau, in the vicinity of the Mulu National Park and at Long Mutan an upriver tributary of Tutoh.⁵ Today, the descendants of the three siblings continue to build relationships and kin ties between themselves largely through their shared *oko bu'un* in their great grandparents, Kei and Woh.

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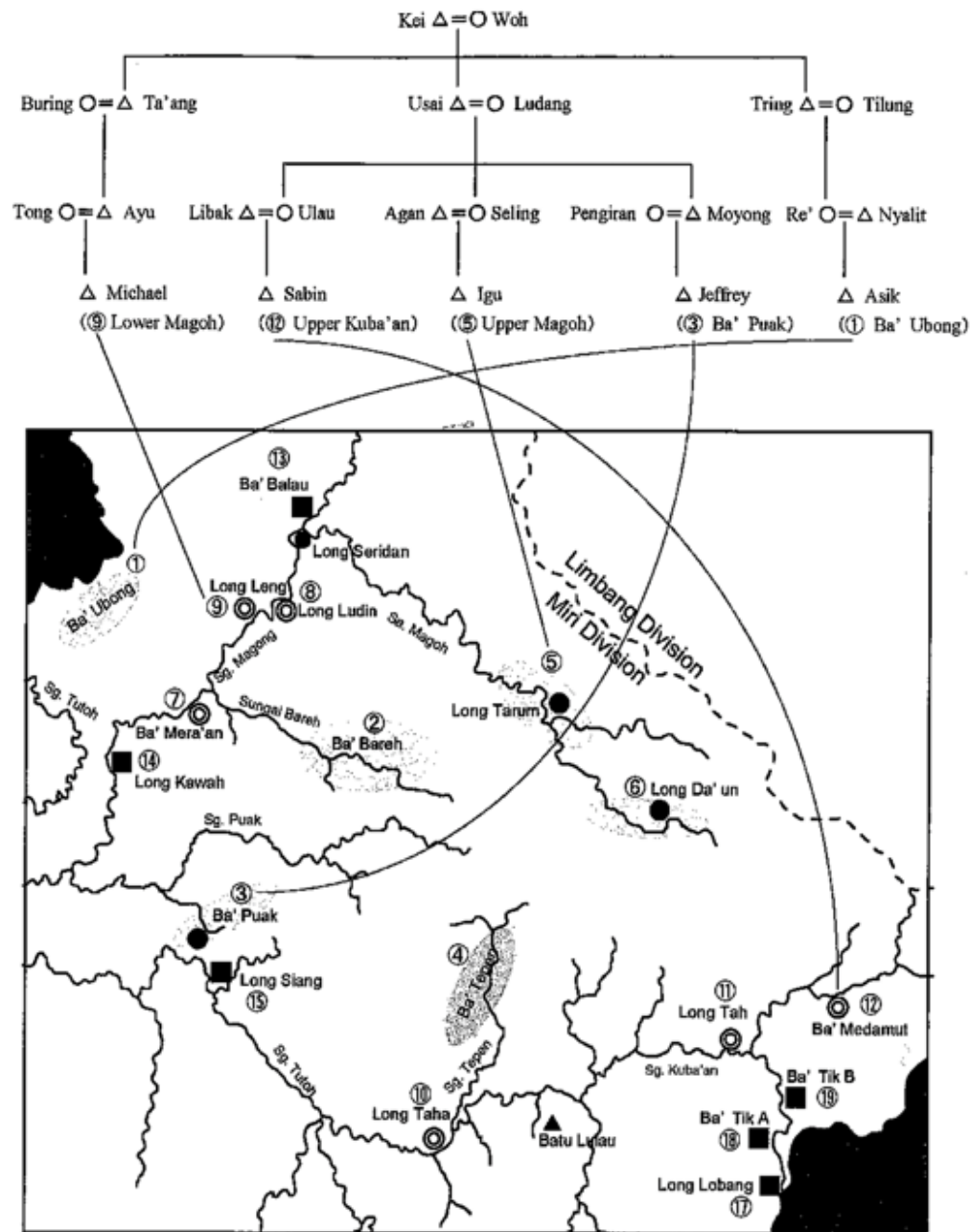


FIGURE 1: Kinship across river systems in Baram District. (Taken from Langub 2011.)

Wild sago and water resources

Wild sago, especially the species called *uvut* (*Eugeissona utilis*) is an important food resource for the Penan. In fact, it is still the staple food for Penan who have settled down as far back as the 1970s. Wild sago is a palm tree and grows in clump. The Penan have a tradition of laying claims to all sorts of resources in the forest they live in. This practice is known as *molong*. *Molong* not only lays claim to a resource, but most importantly it is a means to foster it for the future. For example, when an individual *molong* a wild sago clump, he will extract the mature sago and conserve the bud for the future. Sago palm and land-based resources, such as rattan, are owned and managed through the system of *molong*. This system of stewardship

can be done individually or communally, but the underlying principle is the same, sustainable utilization and management.

To process wild sago into food, the palm trunk is cut into sections and the pith is removed (see Figure 2). This is transferred to a rattan mat and clean river water is added to separate the starch from the pith (see Figure 3). This is left for 30 minutes while the water drains through the rattan mat, leaving behind the starch residue (WWF-Malaysia 2018: 73-75). Clean water is necessary to ensure that impurities are not left behind in the starch that is the staple food for the Penan.

Logging of the upland dipterocarp rainforests reached the Penan communities in the late 1980s and continued through the 1990s. Prior to this, the isolated Penan communities lived within and in balance with the resource-rich forests. The arrival of logging companies brought with them numerous problems, particularly soil erosion and pollution of rivers and stream.



FIGURE 2: Splitting the sago palm trunk and chipping the pith out of the trunk. Photo credit: Henry Chan



FIGURE 3: Trampling the sago fiber to separate the starch from it. (Note: The river that is providing the water for processing the sago must be clear and running to ensure that the flour is no contaminated.) Photo credit: Henry Chan

Communities decided to use blockades of logging to draw the attention of the outside world, especially owners of timber companies and the government authorities the importance of clear, clean river to process their staple food, wild sago. This was highlighted in a dialogue in April 1987 with a group of Penan manning a timber blockade at Sungai Layun in Baram District. One of the Penan elders told the Resident of Miri Division and a group of senior civil servants accompanying him, that one cannot process sago in polluted water as mud particles get into the flour.⁶

A month after the meeting with the Penan at the logging road blockade at Layun River, in May 1987, Gary Tay, the Divisional Development Officer for Miri Division, David Kala, a Sarawak Administrative Officer attached to the District Office Marudi, and I visited four nomadic bands of Penan manning a logging road blockade at Long Kidah on the Magoh River, a tributary of the Tutoh. The four bands comprised the Penan of Long Lesuan under the leadership of Kurau Kusin who gave a moving speech at the blockade site on the Layun River a month earlier; the Penan of Long Lesuan under the leadership of Wee Salau; the Penan of Ba Ubong under the leadership of Asik Nyalit; and the Penan of Ba Tepen, under the leadership of Tabaran Agut.

When we reached the blockade camp at Long Kidah, a few of the lean-tos were empty as the families who owned them were out in the distant hills processing sago to feed the people manning the blockade. We were accommodated in one of the empty huts.

The following day, one of the band leaders, Kurau Kusin brought us to see the people processing sago in one of the hills some distance from the blockade camp. The journey was quite challenging along the footpath where logging activities had taken place. The footpath was blocked with fallen tree branches felled into logs. All the streams along the footpath in the logged area were polluted. As we got into the area where logging had not taken place the walk became pleasant and smooth going. We climbed another hill and reached the camp where a small group of families was processing sago. There were probably about three lean-tos, to accommodate the workers. Kurau Kusin reminded us again that sago had to be processed in clean water; one could not process it with polluted water as mud particles would get into the sago flour. As the Magoh area was under logging license Penan had to go deep into the forest where logging had not taken place to find clear running water to process sago. This is the reason why this small group of families had to go far from the blockade campsite to look for a clear stream. Our trip to observe the processing of sago was much appreciated, because we could confirm the two major points made by community leaders with respect to the need for clean rivers. It was difficult for the communities to find unpolluted rivers and streams in logging operation area, but that clean running water is essential when processing sago

Rivers and streams: source of fish protein

Rivers and streams are an important source of fish protein. The Iban have a system *tagag* (which literally means to restrain, to hold back or prevent) of conserving fish resources in the rivers (Department of Agriculture 2020). Traditionally *molong* is the Penan term applied to sustainable utilization of land resources, but not for rivers because of the abundant stock of fish. Currently the Penan communities, under the WWF-Malaysia Kuba'an-Puak Green Corridor, are applying the *molong* management system to rivers and streams, especially sizable pools, *levahau*. The word *molong* carries the idea of respect and adherence.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To say rivers are important to the Penan communities is an understatement. They are part of life providing the landmarks to signpost journeys through their territories when they are in search of food. They are needed to process their staple food, sago and to provide the much need protein source. They remember their history and kinfolks via the rivers as these events are embedded in the landscape. One can say that rivers connect the communities to each other and their past.

ENDNOTE

1. My understanding of the cultural significance of rivers to the Penan is derived from numerous conversations with a number of Penan since the early 1970s. I owe a great debt to the following individuals, some of whom have passed away: Usang Japi of Long Urun, Belaga; Kurau Kusin of Long Lesuan, Magoh River, Baram; Wee Salau of Long Ludin, Magoh River, Baram; Asik Nalit of Ubong River a tributary of the Tutoh River, Baram; Tabaran Agut of Tepen River, a tributary of Tutoh River, Baram; and Asai Baret of Long Siang, Tutoh Baram.

2. Information on Penan population provided by Ezra Uda, Principal Assistant Director, Economic Planning Unit, Sarawak vide his email dated July 15, 2020.

3. The Penan pronounce Hudden's names as 'Adin', hence 'Ba Adin' or Hudden River.

4. Alastair Morrison (1993) in his *Fair land Sarawak: some reflections of an expatriate official*, Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, Studies on Southeast Asia No. 13, pp. 82-3 describe Donald Hudden as “the best DO [Baram] District ever had”.
5. See Jayl Langub 2013:178-92 “*Tamu*: institutionalized barter trade, the Penan and their encounter with the colonial and post-colonial state” for a detailed description of *tamu* of barter trade.
6. We were at the blockade site from April 29 to May 2, 1987, listening to Penan expressing their grievances and frustration over logging activities causing landslides and polluting streams and rivers. The blockade at Layun River, a true left bank tributary of Tutoh, was the biggest in Baram District. Ten Penan settlements from Tutoh, Patah, Akah, Magoh and Kuba’an Rivers built temporary huts around the blockade.

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