

Between Development and Deforestation: Negotiating Citizenship in a Commodified Landscape

J. PETER BROSIUS

ABSTRACT

In recent years logging companies have moved into areas occupied by Penan hunter-gatherers of Sarawak. Since 1987 the Penan have resisted the activities of those companies by erecting blockades and engaging in other acts of civil disobedience. In the process they have become something of a cause celebre within the international tropical rainforest conservation movement, representatives of which have attempted to intervene on their behalf. Such foreign intervention, though welcomed by the Penan, is resented by government officials. This article examines the forms of rhetoric employed by three parties involved in this debate: (1) the Penan themselves, (2) Western environmentalists, and (3) the Sarawak state and Malaysian federal governments. Each has constructed the Penan, and the rainforest, in particular ways. It is in part because of differences in these constructions, and because of the contested meanings of concepts such as "conservation" and "development", that efforts to resolve this conflict have been unsuccessful. Finally, I consider the implications of this debate for Penan participation as citizens in Malaysian society.

ABSTRAK

Di tahun-tahun kebelakangan ini syarikat-syarikat balak telah pun memasuki kawasan yang didiami oleh kaum Penan Sarawak. Sejak tahun 1987 kaum Penan telah menentang aktiviti syarikat-syarikat dengan mendirikan penghalang-penghalang dan melibatkan diri dalam kegiatan-kegiatan di luar undang-undang awam. Dalam proses tersebut mereka telah menjadi seolah-olah cause celebre dikalangan pergerakan-pergerakan pemuliharaan hutan hujan tropika antarabangsa dan cuba campur tangan bagi pihak mereka. Campur tangan luar seperti ini, walaupun dialu-alukan oleh kaum Penan, tidak digemari oleh pegawai-pegawai Kerajaan. Makalah ini mengkaji bentuk retorik yang digunakan oleh tiga kelompok yang terlibat dalam perdebatan ini: (1) Kaum Penan itu sendiri, (2) pencinta alam barat, dan (3) Kerajaan Sarawak dan Kerajaan Persekutuan Malaysia. Tiap satunya telah 'mentafsir' kaum Penan, hutan hujan tropika tersebut dengan caranya yang tersendiri. Oleh kerana perbezaan dalam 'pentafsiran' ini dan perbezaan

pendapat tentang maksud konsep seperti 'pemuliharaan' dan 'pembangunan'lah, pada sebahagiannya, maka usaha untuk menyelesaikan konflik ini tidak berjaya. Akhirnya, saya membincangkan implikasi perdebatan ini terhadap penglibatan kaum Penan sebagai warga dalam masyarakat Malaysia.

PREFATORY COMMENTS

The state of Sarawak is today experiencing the highest rate of deforestation in the world. In recent years, logging companies have moved into areas occupied by Penan hunter-gatherers in Sarawak. Since 1987 the Penans have resisted the activities of these companies by erecting blockades and engaging in other acts of civil disobedience. In the process they have become something of a *cause célèbre* within the international tropical rainforest conservation movement, representatives of which have attempted to intervene on their behalf. As a result the Penans have achieved a great deal of international renown. In the U.S. alone, their story has received coverage in *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Rolling Stone*; they have been featured on National Public Radio, NBC Evening News, CNN, and on the programs *National Geographic Explorer* and *Primetime Live*; in 1991 then Senator Albert Gore held a press conference on the Penan issue, and members of the rock group The Grateful Dead have testified before the U.S. Congress on their behalf; a Penan was recently awarded the Reebok Human Rights Award; and both Warner Brothers and Universal Studios are developing films which address the Penan issue.

The attention that the Penans have received, and the attempts by environmentalists to come to their aid, is deeply resented by the state and federal governments, who view this as foreign intervention into their internal affairs. In response to the international campaign on behalf of the Penans, the Malaysian government has mounted a vigorous rhetorical offensive, sending delegations to the United States and Europe to answer it's critics head on. In the process of formulating their response to Western critics, Malaysia has come to play an increasingly visible role on the world diplomatic stage, emerging as a leader among the nonaligned countries, and playing a key role in directing the shift in the North/South debate toward being an explicit critique of Western environmentalism. This was most clearly seen in the highly visible role played by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad at the recent Earth Summit in Rio de Janiero. Much of Dr. Mahathir's rhetoric was formulated as an explicit response to critics of the Malaysian government's policy on logging and the effects of that policy on the welfare of the Penan. It is a remarkable state of affairs that a small group of forest nomads living in a remote part of Sarawak should have become a central focus in a debate that has global repercussions.

In work still in progress, I have been looking at the debate that has emerged *about* the Penan, in particular examining the forms of rhetoric employed by each of the parties involved: (1) the Penan themselves, (2) environmentalists, both Malaysian and Western,¹ and (3) the Sarawak state and Malaysian federal governments.² Each has constructed the Penan, and the rainforest, in particular ways. It is in part because of differences in these constructions, and because of the contested meanings of concepts such as "conservation" and "development", that efforts to resolve this conflict have been unsuccessful.

In the present discussion, I would like to examine this situation in order to consider what I believe some of the implications to be for fuller Penan participation in Malaysian society. In order to do so, it is necessary to say something very briefly about the perspectives that each of these parties have brought to the issue.

The following comments on the Penan are based on research carried out over a period of somewhat more than three years. From 1984 to 1987 I conducted research among semi-settled Penan in the Belaga District, and from June to August 1992 among nomadic Penan in the Baram District. One of my research goals was to collect information on Penan conceptions of development, perceptions of agents of change, desires for particular types of development, and views of settlement. In attempting to assess Penan attitudes toward development and agents of change, I paid particular attention to how they were formulating their views and arguments, the kinds of principles that underlie these views, and the values that were being expressed. In the following, I present in some detail the views expressed to me by Penan, and these are often quite critical of the government. I must stress that my providing these views should not be construed as criticism on my part. I offer the following merely in the hope that by providing information on their current perceptions, it may help foster a more effective dialogue between Penan and the government.

THE PENAN PERSPECTIVE

In speaking about "the Penan", we are in fact referring to two distinct populations. These have been termed Eastern and Western Penan (Needham 1972). The Eastern Penan are all those groups living in the Baram and Limbang Districts,³ while the Western Penan are those living in the Belaga District and in the Silat tributary of the Baram.⁴ Though having similar subsistence systems and speaking mutually intelligible subdialects of the same language, there are considerable differences in social and political organization between the Eastern and Western Penan populations.⁵ Today the Eastern Penan number some 4300 persons, while Western Penan number approximately 2300 persons.⁶

Penan today live in a diversity of ways, from fully nomadic groups to groups that have been settled for several generations.⁷ The great majority, however, have taken up agriculture and settled for at least part of the year. At present only about 6%, some 360-380 Eastern Penan in the Tutoh and Limbang watersheds, remain fully nomadic. It is these groups which have received the most attention in the international media. The point I wish to stress is that the Penan have been subjected to a diversity of acculturative experiences over varying amounts of time. Thus, when we speak about "the Penan" we must keep this source of diversity in mind as well. Despite such cultural and acculturative diversity, the Penan perspective on current affairs is remarkably uniform, even while their responses to these affairs are variable.

In their complaints against the government and logging companies, Penan most often frame these as violations of their rights to land. It is therefore useful to understand Penan notions of landscape, which form the basis of those claims.

Though to all appearances a complete wilderness, the landscape is instead one which for Penan is imbued with cultural significance. Throughout the forest are places that for one reason or another have meaning. In an environment where visibility seldom exceeds 200 feet, it is rivers which form the skeleton around which Penan organize environmental knowledge. The knowledge which Penan have of rivers, and of the landscape in general, is phenomenal. When traveling in the forest, Penan are always cognizant of their precise location relative to various rivers. A great deal of information is contained in river names themselves. The sources of river names are many and varied. One important source of river names for Penan are those which refer to ecological or geographical features. Another common source of river names are those that refer to locations where memorable events occurred. Finally, one of the most significant sources of river names are those named for individuals, both living and dead. This relationship between individuals and river names works in the opposite direction as well. When individuals die, they are thereafter referred to by the name of the river nearest to which they died. In this way the memories of the burial sites of long-dead ancestors is preserved. These names form a sort of charter for each band. The result is that among Penan there is a close link between the physical landscape, the memory of historical events, and the maintenance of genealogical knowledge. For Penan, the landscape is more than simply a reservoir of detailed ecological knowledge or a setting in which they satisfy their caloric and nutritional needs. There exists for them a strong coherence between the physical landscape, history, genealogy, and the identities of individuals and communities. The landscape is a repository for the memory of past events, and thus a vast mnemonic representation of social relationships and of society. Logging erases much of this. To the extent that logging fells the

forest and churns up the land itself, it obliterates those very things that are iconic of their existence as a society. Let me now turn to a consideration of the Penan response to logging.

If I were to briefly characterize the mindset of nomadic Penan today, it is that they are extremely worried: worried by the activities of logging companies and by what they see as a lack of concern on the part of the government. They express a sense of being increasingly surrounded or closed in by logging roads, and feelings of helplessness at being unable to do anything about their current situation.

Whether they are actively engaged in resistance or not, Penan everywhere are uniformly opposed to logging, which for them represents the destruction of their livelihood and, to the extent that it is embedded in the landscape, their very history. They find it just simply inconceivable — that is the main theme in their complaints — that people could actually be so unfeeling about creating such hardship and so disregard their concerns. In speaking about this, Penan are fond of making analogies, in trying to explain to outsiders why they feel as they do about logging. They are always looking for just the right analogy, as if the problems confronting them are the result of people simply not understanding what is happening. On one occasion Penan explained to me that for them, the forest was like their rice field:

How would it be if someone drove through your rice field with a bulldozer: don't you think you would have the right to be upset. How is it that the government cannot see this?

One Penan explained patiently to me that the forest was like their office.

Civil servants go to the office every day, and that is how they make their living. And then they get paid. We Penan, we go to the forest every day: the forest is our office. But our money is not there waiting for us. We must get things in the forest to make our living.

The litany of Penan complaints about their current situation is very consistent: they complain (1) that the game has disappeared, (2) that the rivers are muddy, (3) that the sago is destroyed and that even when it is not, it is impossible to process because all the small streams are muddy, (4) that rotan is destroyed and that they are thus no longer able to participate in the cash economy, and (5) that graves are obliterated.

The next issue that must be commented upon is who Penan hold responsible for the current situation. They point to two parties in particular: (1) logging companies, and (2) the government. Here I would like to say a bit more about the Penan view of the government. It is, of course, well known that the Penan presently hold a rather negative view of the government. Putting aside the question of where blame might lie, the fact is that this view is a *fait accompli*. The Penan presently have little confidence in the

government, and feel that they cannot trust what the government tells them. There are a number of reasons why this is the case.

First, many Penan, especially the nomadic groups, frankly do not know exactly what the government is. At one point during a discussion with several Penan, I used the phrase *perinta Sarawak*, after which one man asked another what I meant. Another man answered him by saying "Taib Mahmud". That is to say, nomadic Penan sum up the Sarawak State Government in the person of the Chief Minister. For these groups, the distinction between the political domain and the civil service is unclear, as is the distinction between the state and federal Governments.

A further matter about which Penans are unclear is the distinction between the government and logging companies. They believe these to be part of a single entity, or that logging companies are somehow working under direct instructions from the government.⁸ As several individuals noted, when they have blockaded logging roads in the past, it is the police who come to take down the blockades. The result is that Penan assume many, if not all, civil servants are acting in some way as agents of the logging companies, and that they are doing this in order to become wealthy.

Second, Penan do not believe that the government is acting in their interest, that it looks down upon them, that it does not listen to them, and that it supports only the logging companies. While I was with the Penan, I heard two statements repeatedly: (1) "The government does not hear what we say", and (2) "When they [the government or company people] look into our eyes, they see the eyes of a monkey, the eyes of a dog", or "They think we have tails".

Penans are very aware of the stated desire of the government to bring them development, and it must be stressed that *they are not in any sense opposed to development*. However, they presently have a very cynical view of this. On the part of semi-settled Penan who actively desire such efforts, the complaint most often heard is that promises made to them about piped water systems, zinc roofing, and the like, are not kept. As for nomadic Penan, they view government development initiatives as a ploy to remove them from the forest so that it may be logged without interference. Further, both nomadic and semi-settled Penan see places such as Lg. Kevok and Bato Bungan, which have received substantial assistance from the government, as showcases used to deceive outsiders. They also see the resources which go to these two settlements, rather than to themselves, as being used to punish them for past blockades. Finally, Penan constantly contrast government statements about the desire to help them develop with what they see going on around them, i.e. logging. They find it difficult to reconcile these, and thus assume that the government does not really have their interests at heart.⁹

When Penan discuss why they have erected blockades in the past, they provide many reasons. But one theme arises more than any other: that they

blockade when they feel they are not being heard. They say their complaints are not taken seriously because they are looked down upon, and that their concerns are dismissed. They describe the government and companies as being deaf, and say that they blockade to get them to listen. Penan say that companies don't want to hear their complaints, and that officials in the District Office are not any help. As Penan describe it, they blockade because they believe this is their only recourse: they do it as a last resort, and then only to the extent necessary to be heard.

Penan construct the issue of blockading in terms of fault. They go to great lengths to avoid any implication of fault on their side. As they describe it, when they do talk to the government or companies, they then sit back and wait for some result. They describe themselves as being patient, slow to anger, and unwilling to act foolishly or precipitously. As they put it, once they have spoken to the government, they wait patiently "in front of the government, not behind". Only when they loose patience with waiting do they blockade.

One result of the negative view Penan hold of the government is that they have created an historical dichotomy which distinguishes between a good life in the colonial past with their current hardship. I believe this has important implications for Penan inclusion in the mainstream of Malaysian society, a point to which I will return.

THE ENVIRONMENTALIST PERSPECTIVE

Western environmentalists have taken two approaches to the issue of conservation in Sarawak. First, they have put forward arguments of an economic sort, about the value of the rainforest itself. For instance, Julian Caldecott, a zoologist working with the World Wildlife Fund, calculated that wild game provided some 20,000 metric tons of meat per year in the state of Sarawak, with a replacement value calculated at a minimum of RM\$100 million annually (Caldecott 1986). Another set of arguments have focused on the ecological value of the forest in terms of watershed protection, global warming, the preservation of biodiversity, and on the potential value of tropical forest flora for the development of medicines.

I do not think that economic or ecological arguments for the conservation of tropical forests are likely to have any impact on the outcome of this debate. To Westerners the long-term benefits of conservation seem self-evident, and it is natural to think that we need only persevere in demonstrating this to be the case: that it is a matter of persuasion. But in talking about such vaguely defined future benefits as the medicines that might be produced, or even present benefits in things such as the availability of game to rural populations, such arguments ignore the issues of who the beneficiaries of

such medicines might be, who is most responsible for global warming and, most significant for the present discussion, what is the meaning of development to the government.

A second strategy has been to try to mobilize support in the West for the Penan cause, and to try to influence the Malaysian government by external pressure. It is here that I believe the most serious mistakes are being made. Western environmentalists have based their arguments on a somewhat idealized view of who the Penan are. The greatest interest has been in those very few Penan groups that are still nomadic, wear loin-clothes, and are in every way more photogenic than the majority who, though still vitally dependent on the forest, and equally affected by logging, prefer to wear Adidas running shorts. In films and in other representations of the Penan, one sees them too often represented in an idyllic, romanticized way, and a strong hint of New Age obscurantism can be detected. The film *Blowpipes and Bulldozers* opens by showing scenes of big-eyed children, wherein the narrator says:

The Penan are shy, gentle people who avoid the sun and move through the forest like swift and elusive ghosts, always ready to vanish without trace at the smallest alarm.

At the start of the film there is a discussion of the word "adat", which is defined as "the belief that everything has a soul - forest, earth, rivers, stones - and the "balance and harmony each person keeps with all things". This sounds very nice but it is, of course, wrong. The words "sacred", "dream", and "spiritual power" come easily to those who have been involved in the Penan campaign. In a recent book about the Penan Thom Henley describes the bracelets that Eastern Penan wear as "dream bracelets" (Davis & Henley 1990: 94). In the same volume, Wade Davis (1990: 98) writes that:

For the Penan this forest is alive, pulsing, responsive in a thousand ways to their physical needs and their spiritual readiness.

In a joint commentary by both Henley and Davis (1990: 107) it is stated that:

To walk in God's forest is to tread through an earthly paradise where there is no separation between the sacred and the profane, the material and the immaterial, the natural and the supernatural.

Elsewhere it is stated that "If there is a pattern to the Penan migration, it is determined by the sacred growth cycle of the sago palm" (Davis and Henley 1990:106). In the preface to this book David Suzuki states, "Listen to Dawat. He is what we once were" (Davis & Henley 1990: 8).

In another recent publication, poet Carol Rubenstein stated:

In their fairness, grace and attentiveness to nature, they [the Penan] bring to mind the Balinese. A perhaps romantic notion is that the Penan were a Hindu type of wandering holy group, bound to self-sufficiency within nature, for whom possession and war were anathema (Rubenstein 1990: 21).

These people, with their concentrated peacefulness, seemed to be of an especially high order spiritually. They bring to mind the gekko lizards, charming and wriggling, and track-prints and imprints of lizards found among layers of stone - a past and present that is one, remaining in mid-movement (Rubenstein 1990: 23).

Most reprehensible has been the predilection of environmentalists to dress Penan up in loinclothes and parade them in front of cameras at various media events. In October of 1990 two Penan, along with Bruno Manser, were brought on a tour of Australia, Canada, the US and Europe. During a long introduction by a Canadian environmentalist, it was claimed that the Penan had no words for greed or war, and he explained away a slide showing a Penan wearing a wristwatch by claiming that these are worn merely as bangles. After this the two Penan who accompanied him were brought out to make their case - resplendent in loinclothes and with blowpipes. Any number of other photos have been taken and published in which Penan, many of whom have never worn loinclothes, are dressed up and brought out into some patch of forest to speak about their plight.

Though the intention of such portrayals is noble, these representations really serve to objectify and dehumanize the Penan. The subtext of this idyllic portrayal of Penan is that the claims of these people are more valid because they are beautiful. Such representations, while appealing to Western audiences, are of no use to a government concerned with development, and provide the government with a basis for claiming that foreign conservationists are interested in the Penan only insofar as they want to maintain a human museum.¹⁰

It is my view that Western environmentalists must be willing to acknowledge mistakes on their part. In portraying the Penan as they have, they are perpetuating falsehoods. It is this misinformation that allows officials to trivialize and thereby ignore their arguments. Ignoring, stretching, or distorting the truth, either to portray the Penan more attractively to the media, or to fulfill one's own romantic longings, ultimately works contrary to the interests of the Penan and to the conservation of the rain forest ecosystem. The facts of deforestation speak for themselves: there should be no need to embellish them.

Western environmentalists must also be willing to examine the very fine line that exists between a desire for the preservation of biodiversity and the issue of the rights of indigenous peoples. In conflating these - conservation and land rights - it is dangerously easy to reduce this to an issue of habitat, and thereby to place peoples such as Penan within the same conceptual frame as clouded leopards and other endangered species, a benevolent denial of their humanity.

THE GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE

Since joining Malaysia in 1963, the Sarawak state government has made a concerted effort to bring the Penan into the "mainstream" of Malaysian society. This has mostly involved measures aimed at persuading Penan to settle, as well as providing services such as the schools and access to medical care, and items such as zinc roofing, plywood, chain saws, outboard motors, and the like.

The dominant paradigm underlying nearly every government action and expenditure in Sarawak is, of course, development. Though it is certainly obvious to all Malaysians, I do think it bears stressing just how central the development paradigm is, if for no other reason than that this is something that Western environmentalists have been blind to. As it was stated in the recent Kuala Lumpur Declaration, "Development is a fundamental right".¹¹ I think it could be argued that the antitheses of development in Malaysian political ideology are colonialism, communism and, increasingly today, environmentalism, which is itself seen as a form of colonialism. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has referred to this as "Eco-imperialism" and has stated that "When we achieved independence we thought we would be free. But the North is still subjecting us to imperial pressures." I do not think that Dr. Mahatir's view can be easily dismissed.

In her recent book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt examines how during the colonial period

travel books by Europeans about non-European parts of the world went (and go) about creating the "domestic subject" of Euroimperialism; how they have engaged metropolitan reading publics with (or to) expansionist enterprises whose material benefits accrued mainly to the very few (Pratt 1992: 4).

In her analysis, she introduces the concept of *anti-conquest narratives*: "the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (Pratt 1992: 7). This concept, it seems to me, has a certain relevance to the present topic. The debate which has emerged about the Penan is a single example of a much larger trend: the growth of environmental awareness in the West and the challenge that that awareness, and the activities which it engenders, poses to the sovereignty of recently independent developing nations. Just as the conventions of representation in European travel writing during the period of Western colonial domination registered a shift in what Pratt calls "planetary consciousness", so too might the conventions of representation employed by Western environmentalists be viewed as registering a contemporary shift; different in its aims perhaps, but of equal historical significance. In declaring solidarity with indigenous peoples and proclaiming a global biological heritage, environmentalists might be seen as attempting to

possess the planet. The debate between the Malaysian government and Western environmentalists can be seen as one in which representatives from wealthy nations are attempting to establish a kind of ecological hegemony over Malaysia by delegitimizing Malaysian national ideals of unity and development.

It is in this light that we can view the government reaction to recent events involving the Penan. The government response to the international campaign on behalf of the Penan has been directed at two targets: the Penan themselves and the international rainforest conservation movement.

In responding to the actions of the Penan, the government's has tended to portray them as confused. In any number of ways, Penans have repeatedly made their case to the government, explaining what it is about logging that they are so opposed to: the kinds of statements I provided before. Yet, government officials claim, they just don't understand what it is that the Penan want, as if the Penan are being not quite rational, or as if they are opposed to development. It is true that Penans do not always speak in one voice, but as I think the previous quotes illustrate, the Penans are extremely articulate about this.

An extension of the idea that Penans are confused is found in statements that they behave as they do because they have been instigated by Western environmentalists, and that they simply do not know any better. In this way, Penans are portrayed as being deluded and under foreign influence. The civil disobedience of Penan is thus transformed into the misbehavior of children.

The government has also responded to Penan civil disobedience through the language of rights, inclusion, and responsibility. Sarawak Chief Minister Taib Mahmud recently stated that:

That's why we want to slowly settle them and it is our responsibility. We are belted with one philosophy and this is to build an equal society. How can we have an equal society when you allow a small group of people to behave like animals in the jungle....I owe it to the Penans to get them gradually into the mainstream so that they can be like any other Sarawakian (Siva Kumar 1991:178-9).

Sarawak Minister of Environment and Tourism James Wong was also quoted as saying "No one has the ethical right to deprive the Penan of their right to socio-economic development and assimilation into the mainstream of Malaysian society" (Davis & Henley 1990:100). The other side of this argument is that the essential root of the problem is that the Penan have been "neglected".

The government has reserved its most harsh condemnation for Western environmentalists: at times rightly so, as I have discussed, but at times, I believe, off the mark. Among other things, the government has questioned the sincerity of their motives, claiming that: (1) they are merely acting as a cover for temperate softwood logging interests, (2) that they use the Penan as a way to enrich themselves, (3) that they are using the Penan campaign

only for organizational fund-raising purposes. Where I do think the government has made a valid point is in its accusation that environmentalists wish to maintain the Penan as human museum specimens.¹²

One of the most frequent points of attack, directed most often at Americans, is that, given our own heritage of environmental degradation and persecution of indigenous peoples, we are in no position to preach to Malaysians.¹³ This dark side of our national heritage is absolutely undeniable, and I think most American environmentalists welcome the attention that Malaysia has brought to this: we are involved in our own struggles to secure rights for Native Americans and to preserve our old growth forests. But in making such accusations, a certain danger exists for this to backfire on Malaysia: it sounds like an implicit admission of equal wrongdoing.

Finally, the claims of Western environmentalists are dismissed because it is said that they do not know what they are talking about. Unfortunately this is sometimes the case. As noted, the Malaysian government has been accused of genocide and of moving Penan into internment camps: both decidedly false. In April 1989, a number of environmental groups staged protests at the Malaysian embassy in Washington to protest the arrest and incarceration of 42 Penan. Unfortunately it was not Penan who had been arrested but Kayan, members of an entirely different ethnic group.

All of these arguments are summed up by the assertion that whatever outsiders may think of what is happening to the Penan, it is an internal matter, and that the actions of Western environmentalists are a violation of Malaysian sovereignty.

FINAL COMMENTS

As the subtitle of this conference suggests, the theme upon which we should be attending to here is "Challenges for the 1990's". I believe the case of the Penan presents a fundamental challenge not simply in the arena of forest conservation but, of greater significance, to the role that peoples such as the Penan will play in Malaysian society in the future. I wish to direct the following comments to the issue of citizenship.¹⁴ In speaking of citizenship, I refer not to a legal status, but rather to the sense of attachment and commitment that an individual might feel toward their nation.

Of all the factors that brought about the end of colonialism in Malaysia, the most important was the historical process in which a national identity was forged. This was a process in which regional or ethnic loyalties were superseded by a more inclusive consciousness of national purpose. As Benedict Anderson has suggested in his book *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983), one of the characteristics of national identity is the feeling that one is a member, not simply of a political entity - a state - but of an

inclusive moral community, marked, among other things, by respect, legitimacy, and justice - a nation. In mainstream Malaysian society legitimacy is enshrined in the rule of law, in participation in the political process, and in such things as the right to own property.

As any number of Malaysian officials have asserted, the fundamental aim of government development efforts directed toward the Penan has been to bring them into the mainstream of Malaysian society. What this implies is that, with time, they should become aware of and accept their status as Malaysian citizens. This is something which does not occur overnight, nor can it be merely declared: it requires time and a fundamental shift in Penan self-perception. Certainly, many settled Penans have already begun to define themselves as such. But for an equal number of Penan, it is a process which has only begun. To these more traditional groups, some of whom are unsure even what the word "Malaysia" means, nationalism means nothing. They view themselves first and foremost as Penan, and the only moral community to which they have allegiance is their own. As R.F. Barton said of the Ifugao of the Philippines, to the Penans the family is his nation (Barton 1919, Pg. 92). Even as they are increasingly brought into the state fold by the extension of development projects, Penan have viewed government largess not from the perspective of citizenship, but rather from the perspective of their traditional relationships with Orang Ulu aristocrats. In speaking of government today, Penans employ the same vocabulary of dependency as when speaking of their relationships to Orang Ulu in the past.¹⁵ Further, Penans view the Malaysian nation-state in contingent, historical terms, seeing the recent period of independence as merely one more transition in power: from Brunei, to the Brookes, the Japanese, the British, and now to Malays. It does not hold for them the aura of pride and commitment implied in the term *merdeka*.

This is why the present involvement of Western environmentalists presents a particular challenge to efforts to bring Penans into the embrace of citizenship. As noted, Penan often contrast their present situation with their lives during the colonial period, for which they have great nostalgia. In the Penan's view, during the colonial period, government stayed where they felt it belonged - downriver - and it supplied shotguns in abundance. Colonial officers interceded for Penan in trade meetings between Penans and Orang Ulu, and it brought about an end to headhunting. In short, Penans feel, government then cared about their welfare. This nostalgia has in fact been transformed into a real sense of hope. Many Penans express an active desire for the return of the Queen. They truly believe that their only salvation lies in a return to colonialism. For Penans, environmentalists - many of whom have surreptitiously visited them in recent years - embody the colonial past and are seen as the vanguard of its return. The entity by whom they are *tagung* by is, in their view, negotiable. It is indeed an anachronism that in

a post-colonial world, Penans view persons which they see as representatives of colonialism as the ones which represent entitlement and give them voice.¹⁶

In this sense, the current debate between Penan and the government is one over the meaning of the colonial past, and the relevance of the colonial past for the future. Both to Penans and to the government, environmentalists embody the colonial past. Penans see their salvation in those very expressions of colonial domination that most Malaysians rightfully find so offensive.

To assume that the issue standing between Penan and their development of an identity as Malaysian citizens is due to foreign instigators alone is to mistake the symptom for the disease. The root cause is logging. The entire dialogue between Penan and the government is about legitimacy: the legitimacy of Penan concerns in the face of the commodification of a culturally significant landscape that is currently being logged. Defining the landscape as a commodity requires that the legitimacy of Penan land claims be ignored or denied. Penans view this as indicating an utter disregard for their humanity, a lack of respect which they cast in profoundly moral terms.¹⁷ In arguing their case to government officials, Penans speak in reference to the same types of self-evident moral truths that bind us all to our various societies and nations. By virtue of the fact that they are trying so very hard to explain themselves, they are trying to engage, and even to participate in, the larger moral community - the nation - that is Malaysia. They see a certain inconsistency in being told that the government is concerned for their welfare and wishes to bring them development, while simultaneously sponsoring the destruction of everything they value. And yet they continue to talk, to engage, to try to convince, to participate. It is, at last, only when they feel that they are not being heard that they engage in acts of civil disobedience.

This situation has profound implications for Penan participation as Malaysian citizens. It is certainly possible to enforce the law, but it is not possible to force people to view themselves as citizens. This requires the establishment of a relationship built on trust, respect, and goodwill. By following a strategy of denial, however, the government prevents the very thing they would promote: the participation of Penan as citizens in the larger moral community that is Malaysia. Much as anyone may wish it to be otherwise, Penans can never embrace the idea that they are citizens as long as the community in which they are attempting to participate refuses to hear or acknowledge their concerns. As things now stand, for Penans, citizenship in the Malaysian state is possible only to the degree that they are given consideration as rational moral actors. It is because they have felt this to be lacking that they have been led to a politics of desperation which has resulted in acts of resistance.

NOTES

1. In the present discussion, I wish to focus primarily on Western environmentalists. In many ways the strategies and goals of Western environmentalists contrast markedly with those of Malaysian environmentalists and it would be inaccurate to lump these.
2. Fully recognizing that the policies of the Sarawak state and Malaysian federal governments may at times vary, in the interest of space I will hereafter use the words "government" or "Malaysian government" to refer to both of these.
3. There is also one settled Eastern Penan community in Brunei.
4. There is also one Western Penan community at Lg. Beku in the Baram District, and several communities of Western Penan in the Bahau watershed of East Kalimantan. The latter migrated to Kalimantan from Sarawak in approximately 1895.
5. For additional information on the Penan, see Brosius 1986, 1990, 1991, 1992; Chen 1984; Harrisson 1949; Kedit 1978, 1982; Langub 1972a, 1972b, 1974a, 1974b, 1975, 1984, 1989; Needham 1965, 1972; Nicolaisen 1976.
6. This figure includes only Eastern and Western Penan in the Belaga, Baram and Limbang Districts. It does not include long-settled groups such as the Penan Nyivung, Penan Suai, and Penan Jelalong, many of whom have been settled for well over a century (See Needham 1965).
7. Most of this settlement, however, has occurred since about 1960.
8. This point was well illustrated to me on one occasion when a Penan man showed me a RM\$10 bill and asked "What kind of money is this? Logging company money?"
9. I must also note that Penan expressed to me on many occasions their absolute determination not to move to any other area. They feel they have deeply historical connections with their foraging areas. All the nomadic groups in the Tutoh River area are aware of the proposed Melana Biosphere Reserve, but state unequivocally that they will not move there: one man commented that he will move only when he goes to heaven. They recognize that the Melana area has already been logged, and say that it would thus be no different from where they are now. And, they state, they have a responsibility to protect the sago and resources fostered by generations of ancestors and that they must also protect the graves of their deceased kin.
10. Distortions about the present situation occur in other ways as well, mostly about the treatment of Penan. In the New York Times some time ago, there was a letter accusing the government of genocide and of putting Penan in internment camps, a fiction that is being perpetuated by a number of environmental organizations.
11. It bears reiterating that Penan are not in any sense opposed to development. Though the government and Penan may at times differ on what development entails, and though many Penan are suspicious of government intentions, never have I heard any Penan declare opposition to the idea of development.
12. According to Prime Minister Mahathir, "The Penans are not a showpiece, neither are they there for the Europeans to do their anthropological theses on; they need to live like human beings." (INSAN 1989, Pg. 79-80, originally cited in New Straits Times, Nov. 17, 1987). A recent government publication stated that "It is questionable whether western critics who take upon themselves to judge

- what's good for the Penans would have wanted their forebears to have remained as cave and forest dwellers as they are pleading so strongly that the Penans should be left alone in the jungle, as if they were an endangered species. It is high time environmentalists treat Penans as humans and not as part of the biodiversity" (Ministry of Primary Industries 1992, Pg. 19).
13. As Trade and Industry Minister Rafidah Aziz stated: "Anybody who's too concerned about what happens in other countries better not venture out of their own country...We don't want people to impose their human rights values on us. These great busybodies of the world, who don't bother with their own problems, their back yards are full of dirt" (Schoenberger 1992, Part D, Pg. 3).
 14. The inspiration for my attention to the issue of citizenship was provided by a discussion piece entitled "Re-imagining National Communities", submitted by Renato Rosaldo (Stanford University) to the Social Science Research Council as part of a proposal for a conference on "Cultural Citizenship in Southeast Asia".
 15. For instance, Western Penan speak of being "held" (mengen - this term having a benevolent connotation) or "cared for" (tagung) by Orang Ulu aristocrats. Depending upon how they were treated by such aristocrats, these relationships were evaluated in either positive or negative terms, and Penan historical narratives are filled with such descriptions. There existed a great deal of competition among Orang Ulu aristocrats to lure Penan to their respective watersheds, and if treated badly, Penan had the option of moving elsewhere to where they might be treated better. The important point is that while the terms mengen and tagung imply a benevolent relationship, they do not imply unconditional loyalty. Engagement in such relationships in the past was conditional on benevolence. This seems to me very different from the type of relationship implied by the term rakyat. I should note too that even contemporary rivalries between political parties, whose candidates continue to be Orang Ulu aristocrats, are viewed by Penan in terms of this historical process of competition by such aristocrats to lure Penan within the vicinity of their longhouses.
 16. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that environmentalists see themselves as colonial representatives. Indeed, I do not think that Western environmentalists are in any sense aware of who Penan believe they are talking to.
 17. One Penan headman described to me how the graves of 31 of his kinsmen had been destroyed by bulldozers: not the graves of distant ancestors, but of his mother, father, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, children, and others, all of whom he had known well. What, one must ask, could be more indicative of a lack of respect than this?: and then to be told in every case that no compensation could be given because he was lying.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Barton, Roy F. 1919. *Ifugao Law*. University of California Publications in American Ethnology, Vol. 15.
- Brosius, J. Peter. 1986. River, Forest and Mountain: The Penan Gang Landscape. *Sarawak Museum Journal* 36(57) (New Series):173-184.

- Brosius, J. Peter. 1990. "Penan hunter-gatherers of Sarawak, East Malaysia. *AnthroQuest*. **42**:1-7.
- Brosius, J. Peter. 1991. Foraging in tropical rainforests: The case of the Penan of Sarawak, East Malaysia (Borneo). *Human Ecology* **19**(2):123-150.
- Brosius, J. Peter. 1992. Perspectives on Penan Development in Sarawak. *Sarawak Gazette* **119**(1519):5-22.
- Caldecott, Julian. 1986. *Hunting and Wildlife Management in Sarawak*. Kuching: National Parks and Wildlife Office.
- Chen, Paul C.Y. 1984. Child nutrition among the Penan of the upper Baram, Sarawak. *Medical Journal of Malaysia* **39**(4):264-8.
- Davis, Wade & Thom Henley. 1990. *Penan: Voice for the Borneo Rainforest*. Vancouver: Western Canada Wilderness Committee.
- Harrison, Tom. 1949. Notes on some nomadic Punans. *Sarawak Museum Journal* **5**(1, New Series):130-46.
- INSAN (Institute for Social Analysis). 1989. *Logging Against the Natives of Sarawak*. Petaling Jaya: INSAN.
- Kedit, Peter M. 1978. *Gunong Mulu Report: A Human-ecological Survey of Nomadic/ Settled Penan within the Gunong Mulu National Park Area, Fourth/Fifth Division, Sarawak*. Sarawak Museum Field Report Series No. 1. Kuching: Sarawak Museum.
- Kedit, Peter M. 1982. An ecological survey of the Penan. *Sarawak Museum Journal*. **2**, (New Series):225-79.
- Langub, Jayl. 1972a. Adaptation to a settled life by the Punans of the Belaga Subdistrict. *Sarawak Gazette* **98**(1371):83-86.
- Langub, Jayl. 1972b. Structure and progress in the Punan community of Belaga Subdistrict. *Sarawak Gazette* **98**(1378):219-21.
- Langub, Jayl. 1974a. Adaptation to a settled life by the Punan of the Belaga Sub-District. *Sarawak Museum Journal* **22**(43):295-301.
- Langub, Jayl - 1974b. Background report on potential for agricultural and social extension service in the Penan community of Belaga District. *Sarawak Gazette* **100**(1395):93-96.
- Langub, Jayl. 1975. Distribution of Penan and Punan in the Belaga District. *Borneo Research Bulletin* **7**(2):45-48.
- Langub, Jayl. 1984. Tamu: barter trade between Penan and their neighbors. *Sarawak Gazette* **110**(1485):11-15.
- Langub, Jayl. 1989. Some aspects of life of the Penan. *Sarawak Museum Journal*, Special Issue No. 4, Part III, **40**(61 - New Series):169-84.
- Ministry of Primary Industries. 1992. *Forever Green: Malaysia and Sustainable Forest Management*. Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Primary Industries.
- Needham, Rodney. 1965. Death-names and solidarity in Penan society. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* **121**: 58-76.
- Needham, Rodney. 1972. Penan/Punan. In *Ethnic Groups of Insular Southeast Asia*, Vol. 1, F. LeBar (ed.). New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press
- Nicolaisen, Johannes. 1976. The Penan of the Seventh Division of Sarawak: past, present and future. *Sarawak Museum Journal* **24**(45 - New Series):35-61.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge.

- Rubenstein, Carol. 1990. *The Nightbird Sings: Chants and Songs of Sarawak Dayaks*. Dumfriesshire, Scotland: Tynron Press.
- Schoenberger, Karl. 1992. Malaysia's Trade Minister Exhibits a True Grit. Los Angeles Times, June 15, 1992.
- Siva Kumar G. 1991. Taib: A Vision of Sarawak. Kuching: Jacamar.

Department of Anthropology
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602-1619
USA