

Penan concepts of conservation of lands and forests

by Jayl Langub

Institute of Borneo Studies,
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Introduction

Numbering 21,367 people¹, the Penan of Sarawak occupy the headwaters of two of its largest rivers, the Rejang and Baram, especially their tributaries, as well as the Limbang, Kemana and Jelalong rivers. Based on dialect, Rodney Needham (1972) divides the Penan population into Eastern Penan and Western Penan. The Eastern Penan comprise all those Penan living on the true right bank of Baram River as well as those in the headwater of Limbang while the Western Penan are located around the Rejang watershed and Silat River, tributary of the Baram. There are also Penan settlements along the Tinjar River in Baram District, the Kemana, Labang and Jelalong Rivers in Bintulu Division, and Suai-Niah in Miri District. Historically these groups are Western Penan. Broadly speaking, in ways and socio-economic activities, Eastern Penan and Western Penan have a lot in common, and consider themselves and are recognized by their neighbors, as one people.

Way of Life

Traditionally a nomadic people, each nomadic band moves from one resource area to another within a specific river system or geographical area, managing and harvesting resources sustainably. A nomadic band moves camp comprising several family lean-tos (*lamin tana'*) from one resource site to another within a defined geographical area or river system to allow previously harvested area to regenerate (Needham 1953, 1958; Brosius 1986, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, 2001, and 2006; Langub 1988, 1989, 2011, and 2013). Individuals or the band as a group may stake claims to resources such as wild sago, rattan, fruit trees, *getepai* (a wild rubber), various species of useful trees such as *tajem* tree (*Antiaris toxicaria*) that provides poison for blowpipe darts to hunt game, and trees to make blowpipes, to build boats, houses and coffins, in the area surrounding the camp (*lamin tana'*).

When mature resources in one area have been depleted, the band moves to another resource rich area to allow previously harvested area to regenerate. Members of the band establish new *lamin tana'*, and the one left behind is now known as *la'a*,² old campsite, to which they will return to in future when resources there have regenerated.

The movement is cyclical in nature and the band returns to an old campsite, *la'a*, when resources have regenerated. In a lifetime of an individual, the person is likely to occupy a campsite, *la'a* several times, depending on the rate of resource regeneration. Stories

¹ Basic information on the Penan population in Sarawak is provided by Ezra Uda, Principal Assistant Director, attached to the Economic Planning Unit, Kuching vide his email dated Wednesday July 15, 2020.

² *La'a* is known in Western Penan as *laa lamin*.

associated with the campsite grow with each individual and occupation. Each *la'a* has its own story and history: the *la'a* where a popular District Officer came to visit; the *la'a* where the band enjoyed a bountiful fruit season with lots of wild boar game; and perhaps the *la'a* where a couple got married, a child born, and an aged person sadly passed away. Such event, happy or sad, a time of abundance or a time of scarcity, are told, retold and shared with everyone, young and old.

In some of the *la'a* (old campsites) may be found various types of fruit trees, *telo bua'* (Eastern Penan) or *saka bua'* (Western Penan) that ancestors of the band ate and grew into fruit-producing trees. If a person died there and buried at the site, the band would have moved elsewhere immediately after the burial. The grave and the fruit trees become useful evidence of previous occupation of the area by the ancestors or elders of the present occupants confirming their rights to occupy the place and have access to its resources.

In the past, the forest used to provide them with trade items such as camphor, *jelutong* (a wild rubber), *damar* (a resin), *gaharu* (incense wood), and bezoar stone (gall stone to which the Chinese attribute medicinal properties). These they barter traded with their longhouse neighbors at government supervised barter trade meetings known locally as *tamu* for industrial goods such as salt, cloth, cooking utensils, iron to shape into bush knives (*parang*), and other essential urban goods.

The geographical area within which the band moves about to harvest resources is known as *tana' pengurip* or the land that provides the essentials of life, food and other resources that they collect to barter trade or convert into handicrafts for domestic use or for sale. As the *tana' pengurip* of a particular nomadic band was created by the forebears of later generations, band members sometimes refer to it as *tana' pohoo* (Eastern Penan) or *tana' puu* (Western Penan) or ancestral land.

As hunting and gathering people the Penan depend a lot on the forest for all sorts of resources, wild sago, especially the species known as *uvut* (*Eugeissona utilis*) and *jakah* (*Arenga undulatifolia*), rattan, trees of all kinds including fruit trees, medicinal plants, and wild vegetables, to name some. These are harvested and managed through *molong*, discussed in detail below.

Penan Language and Conservation

The following Penan words play significant roles in conservation: *molong*, *mihau* and *minut*.

Molong means to lay a claim to a resource and foster it for the future. When an individual *molong* a resource he places an *oro olong* (claim mark or sign) by the side of the resource to indicate ownership. Once an individual *molong* a resource, he is responsible for its upkeep and sustainable management. He also establishes rights to the resources. These rights are heritable and passed down from one generation to the next of household members. Other members of the community may harvest the resource with permission of the person who *molong* it or any members of his family. *Molong* can be done individually or communally, and when a fruit tree or a *tajem* tree is *molong* communally, rights of inheritance to the resource go to the community.

Another conservation concept unique to the Penan that guide them in their management of resources in the forest is *mihau*. *Mihau* means to protect, preserve, or take care of (see Ian Mackenzie 2006 page 119). *Mihau* is a fundamental ethical principle that not only instructs Penan to take only what they need from the forest, but to respect (*mengadet* or *seva*) nature or creation. It is ethically a powerful principle shared by all Penan of *kua kenin* (same feeling or heart). While *mihau* guides the way Penan conduct their activities sustainably in the forest, *molong* is a system of preserving and fostering resources through sustainable management in particular geographical domains.

The third conservation concept is *minut* that instructs Penan to use resources sustainably sparingly. The idea of *minut* comes with the awareness of resource limitation, and hence the inherent attitude of utilizing resources sparingly.

Although virtually all the Penan have now settled down, the forest still plays important role in their lives. It is still an important source of food --such as wild sago, game, fish, and various varieties of jungle shoots and leaves-- for the majority who still live literally in the forest itself. It is the source of materials for building houses and boats; to make blowpipes, still an important hunting equipment for some groups of Penan in the interior; and rattan to weave into mats and baskets. The forest is also the source of materials necessary for their cultural expressions in arts and handicraft. Today, they continue to manage these resources the way their nomadic ancestors managed them via the trilogy conservation concepts of *molong*, *mihau*, and *minut*.

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