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SOME ASPECTS OF LIFE OF THE PENAN**Jayl Langub****INTRODUCTION**

Malaysians have many misconceptions about the Penan of Sarawak. As an ethnic group, they are often confused with the Punan and Punan Bah. As a nomadic people, they are thought to roam about aimlessly in the forest, eking out a living, without a sense of purpose, history, culture and identity to a place. In this paper I want to discuss briefly some aspects of their life: who they are, where they are found, what kind of settlement pattern they have, their use and management of forest resources, their economic activities, their pastimes and their cultural heritage, with the hope of providing some insight into the nature of the Penan society.

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by

Jayl Langub

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PENAN OR PUNAN?

Penan refer to themselves as 'Penan', but outsiders often confuse this with another ethnic term of reference, 'Punan'. Since there is a great deal of confusion over these two terms, it is necessary to briefly discuss them first.

Early writers such as Hose and McDougall (1912), Harrison (1949; 1967) and others, rarely distinguished between the terms, 'Penan' and 'Punan'. Urquhart (1959: 73) is correct in saying that the term 'Penan' is used by the Kenyah and the term 'Punan' by the Kayan to refer to the people who lead a nomadic life, but the Penan themselves point out that the Kayan have incorrectly called them 'Punan'. On the basis of his fieldwork among the 'Penan' of Baram in the early 1950s, Needham (1953: 82) says that there are actually three distinct groups of peoples respectively known as 'Penan', 'Punan' and 'Punan Bah'.

The difference between Penan and Punan is language. Although the Penan are divided into two divisions, the Eastern Penan (largely limited to the Baram and Limbang watersheds) and Western Penan (found in the Balui watershed and in the Silat, tributary of the Baram), these two groups are closely related to each other and their languages are mutually intelligible. There are some other significant differences between Eastern and Western Penan, for instance, in subsistence technology, settlement and social organization, but in broad outline the forest adaptations of these two groups are

very similar. The languages spoken by the Eastern and Western Penan are completely different from that spoken by the Punan, represented in Sarawak by only two communities of Punan Busang at Long Lidam and Long Unai in Belaga district. Although both Penan and Punan share a common nomadic background, culturally they are very different. The Punan Busang are related to various Punan groups in Kalimantan, but there, Punan also applies to other, quite distinct, nomadic groups (King, 1974; Whittier, 1974; Hoffman, 1981).

In Sarawak, it is the 'Punan Bah' with whom the 'Penan' have frequently been confused (Langub, 1975). Forming three longhouse settlements in Belaga and six in Tatau and Bintulu, the 'Punan Bah' are a subgroup of the Kajang people (de Martinour, 1974; I. Nicolaisen, 1976). Linguistically, they speak a dialect related to the Sekapan, Kejaman and Lahanan, which is not at all intelligible to the 'Penan'.

The Punan Bah are a stratified society (I. Nicolaisen, 1976) while the Penan egalitarian (Hose and McDougall, 1912; J Nicolaisen, 1976). The Punan Bah used to carve magnificent burial posts (kliering) for the dead chiefs (I. Nicolaisen, 1984) while the Penan did not. The Punan Bah have been agriculturalists for a very long time, while the Penan are or were until recently nomadic hunter-gatherers; to this day, a small number of them still maintain this nomadic existence in the Magoh and Sepayang rivers, in Baram and Limbang districts respectively.

POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

There are 9,237 Penan in Sarawak residing in some 78 settlements (See Map and Table 1). The vast majority of them occupy a large area of tropical forest in the watersheds of the Baram and Rejang, the largest rivers in Sarawak. Here the Penan country is formed by an endless expanse of green forests interrupted only by small patches of swidden clearings and old fields owned mainly by the Penan's neighbours. In some places, the landscape is cut by webs of logging roads.

Table 1

Penan Population Distribution

District	No. of Settlement	No. of Household	Population
Baram ^a	50	935	5,625
Bintulu ^b	8	114	748
Miri (Suai and Niah) ^b	5	168	1,094
Limbang ^c	4	45	209
Belaga ^d	13	167	1,561
5	78	1,429	9,237

Source: Penan Census obtained from a) District Office, Baram (1987); b) Yayasan Sarawak (1985); c) District Office, Limbang (1987); and d) District Office, Belaga (1988).