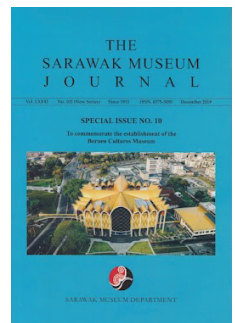




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ORO TONG TANA': STICK SIGNS IN THE FOREST, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO EASTERN PENAN PRACTICE

Jayl Langub

INTRODUCTION

Oro in Eastern Penan simply means a sign. More specifically, Mackenzie (n.d.) in his unpublished Eastern Penan dictionary describes oro as "a sign stick planted in the ground supporting symbols made of leaves, stalks, roots etc., inserted in notches along its length...being conventional symbols that communicates a message to someone who follows [from behind]". This paper analyses fourteen sets of stick signs (oro) used by the Eastern Penan of upper Tutoh1 [see map 1] to communicate messages in the forest, and provides their interpretation of the symbols attached to the sets. It also looks at the significance of these stick signs from the perspective of the Eastern Penan community in the area, specifically the settlements of Long Siang and Ba Selulong.

Keywords:

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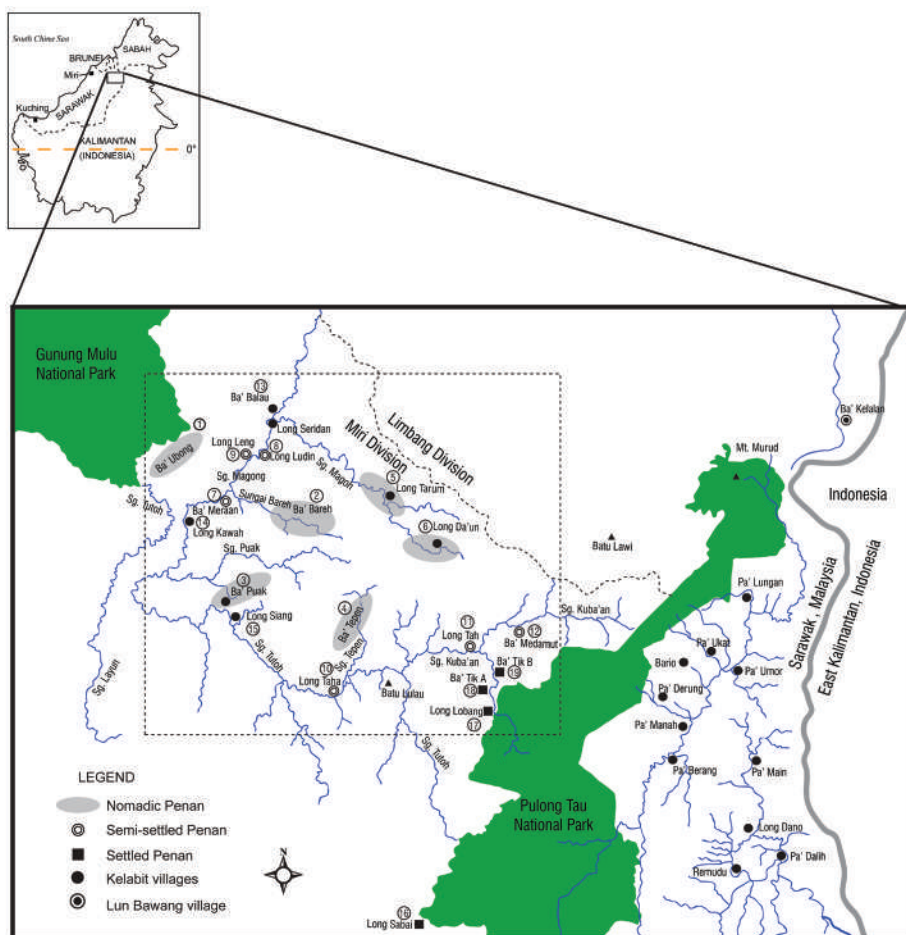
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Stick signs in the literature

What the Eastern Penan call *oro* is known in Western Penan as *sang*.² Guy Arnold (1958) says the Western Penan of Usun Apau in Belaga District leave two types of “jungle signs” (*sang tong tana'*) in the forest: one as “play”, the other with messages. “Play” signs (*sang mengata*) include those “carved on fallen trees at resting places or chiseled on stones on the banks of rivers and streams; and those made from branches or sticks and placed at points along the path as messages (*Ibid.* 1958: 70)”. Arnold provides examples of sixteen sets of these stick messages but does not give any local names.

Harrison (1965: 74) says that the Punan Busang³ have sixteen sets of stick signs in everyday use:



Map 1 showing the 19 Penan settlements in the dotted square (adapted from Langub 2011)

These sticks are placed by tracks or meeting points. They are usually cut (from any reasonable wood) between 5 feet 6 inches long, and half an inch in diameter. The message is elaborated by material, angle, frills in bark, leaves, etc., and/or the insertion of one or more other twigs, or objects (skin, feathers) in lateral cuts at right angle to the axis of the main stick. Each of these main sticks has a name... But these must be treated with caution.

Each set of stick signs is given a name and provides information on the movements (or non-movement) of individuals in the forest, away from the main camp (Ibid. 1965: 74). The stick signs are used for the duration of time individuals are away from the main camp; perhaps when they go hunting or go in search of forest resources, such as rattan, for a specified number of days.

Bruno Manser (1996: 29-30), a Swiss activist who lived with the Eastern Penan in the Magoh River, Baram District and Adang River, Limbang District for several years in the 1980s and 1990s, refers to these sign sticks as “writing”. He writes (*Ibid.* 1996: 29-30):

Penan “letters” take the form of shoots, leaves and stone left behind as messages along the path. Their formation indicates how many families went how far, in which direction and why, and whether they want you to follow or wait.

Sign may warn of danger, tell of hunger, disease or death, or simply proclaim, “look at that magnificent sago palm! If you are hungry go and harvest it!” One sign will be found with every message: two small sticks of the same length pressed into a branch meaning: “we share one heart”.

Mjöberg (1927: 70), then the curator of Sarawak Museum⁴ while travelling up the upper Baram with a number of local porters stumbled upon a “forest sign” which he described as “gates”. It is likely that it was a rattan vine suspended stretched across the path, tied to two saplings erected on each side of the path, and a caladium⁵ plant hanging down from it. He writes:

...from the bows caladium were hanging down...the porters looking at the gates in despair⁶...

The porters understood the sign as a warning to outsiders not to proceed towards the direction because of an outbreak of an epidemic.