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MAKING SENSE OF THE LANDSCAPE: Eastern Penan Perspectives¹

Jayl Langub

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the ways the Eastern Penan² establish their relationship with the landscape, sculpting it in the process, to make a living, and maintain a long-term relationship. As they move across the landscape, they establish a series of campsites (*lamin*) which they leave behind as *la'a* (old campsites) representing their footprints' (*uban*). The *la'a* often associated with events, such as deaths, births, even humorous occurrences, become significant *uban* of both the group and individuals linked to these episodes. Movements across the landscape within an area or specific river systems are motivated by the cycle of resource availability. As they harvest resources they establish tenure (*olong*) over them to ensure systematic management and husbandry. Thus, what appears as a natural environment is, in fact, one that has undergone the process of human activities by way of methodological sculpting. As Brosius (1986: 174-178; 2001: 134-139) noted some years ago, what appears to be an empty space is instead a landscape that encapsulates history and way of life. In numerous conversations with Penan, they often express the view that they are part of the landscape as much as the landscape is part of them; thus what is territory is a space of belonging, our space, *okoo ami*. Within the context of this human-environment interaction, the relationship of the nineteen Eastern Penan settlements - six nomadic, six semi-settled and seven settled - located in the area between the Mulu National Park and Pulong Tau National Park, in the upper Tutoh basin, with the world in which they exist will be discussed.



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The Nineteen Settlements

Essentially, this is a narrative of experience of nineteen Penan settlements between Mulu National Park and Pulong Tau National Park comprising 224 households and a population of 945 people. Locations of settlements are shown in Map (Fig. 1). The immediate paragraphs that follow are brief descriptions of groups by modes of life-style, nomadic, semi-settled, and settled.

Nomadic Groups

The six nomadic groups of Penan located in Ba' Ubong³ (#1), Ba' Bareh (#2), Ba' Puak (#3), Ba' Tepen (#4), and Long Tarum (#5) and Long Da'un (#6) in the upper Magoh are among the dwindling number of hunters and gatherers in Borneo, their staple food being wild sago of the *Eugeissona utilis* species and game (Brosius 1986, 1990, 1991, 1997, 2006; Langub 1988, 1989, 1993). They comprise a total of 62 households and a population of 268 individuals. The term 'nomadic' is in some ways misleading, as their migration over the same territory is *cyclical*, returning to previously harvested areas that have regenerated. In other words, the same resource site may be occupied more than once within the life of an individual.

The group at Ba' Ubong (#1) used to inhabit the Mulu area together with other bands of Penan (Kedit, 1978). When Mulu was constituted as a National Park in 1974, their current foraging area was reduced to the true left bank of the Ubong and its true left bank tributaries, such as Ba' Batu Punai, Ba' Batu Bala, and Ba' Nyakit.

The Ba' Bareh (#2) group is small comprising eight families and 26 individuals. Their foraging area includes the Lower Magoh and its true left bank tributary, the Bareh; the Marong, a true left bank tributary of the Tutoh; and Puak, a true right bank tributary of the same Tutoh River, which they share with their immediate neighbouring groups.

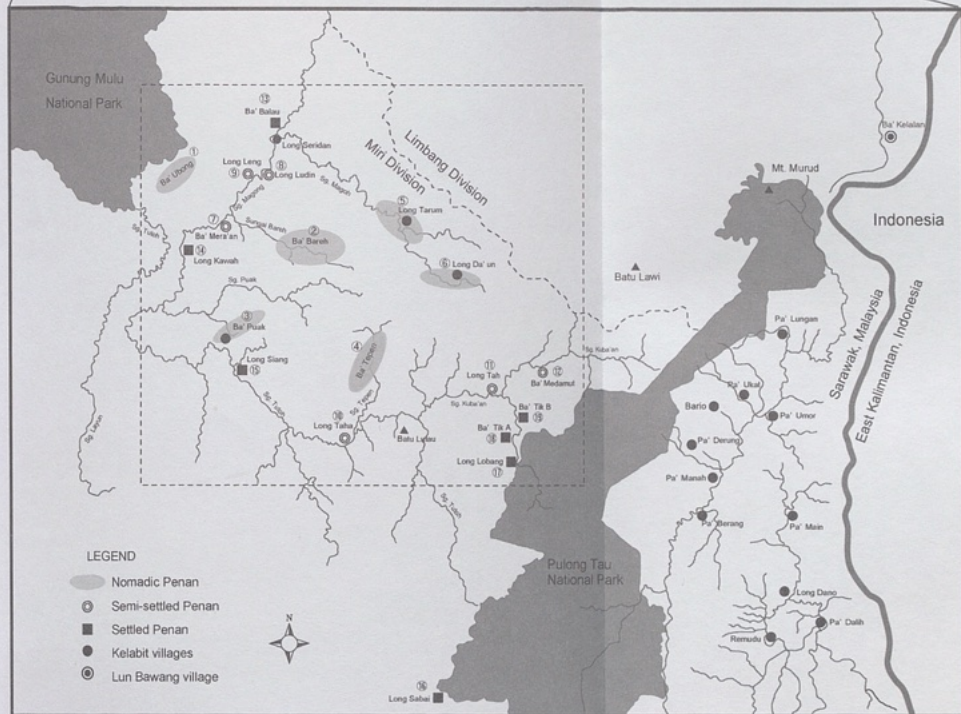


Fig. 1: Map showing locations of settlements.