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What Can be Done for the Penan Culture

of South East Asia?

A New View on Modernization and Deforestation

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OR CENTURIES, THE INDIGENOUS PENAN PEOPLE OF SOUTH EAST Asia have lived self-sufficiently in the Bornean rainforest. Their nomadic lifestyle in one of the world’s oldest ecosystems is remarkable for its close connection with nature, but it has also become endangered in contemporary times due to deforestation. As the Bornean rainforest is increasingly cut down to fuel interests in logging, mining and agriculture, it has become difficult to sustain their traditions or, for that matter, to survive in the rainforest. The difficulty of living in the Bornean rainforest is made more difficult by geographic, political and economic borders. Borneo includes Indonesian territory, and the Penan people straddle Sarawak (a Malaysian state) and Brunei (a sovereign state). Living in Borneo is made even more difficult by the Sarawak government’s role in promoting deforestation: the government, eager for economic development, has turned to the rainforest for raw resources and brooks no arguments concerning its approach to the ecosystem. Because the government of Sarawak has been an agent in deforestation and the focus of both international pressure and environmental activism, this paper will look at its troubled role in modernizing its economy and how this modernization has affected the Penan people and their culture.

One environmental activist was particularly adamant in calling attention to the problem of deforestation and the treatment of the Penan at the hands of the Sarawak government. This was the Swiss-born Bruno Manser, who in 1985 began publicizing the effects of deforestation on the Penan culture. He paired publicization with activism, helping to organize the Penan to form blockades against logging companies. Although local officials drew considerable ire from his publicization of the Sarawak government’s role in promoting deforestation and in denying the Penan their political rights, Manser’s efforts have received positive acclaim, bringing environmentalism and indigenous rights to the forefront of international news and making the Penan “icons of resistance [among] environmentalists worldwide” (Brosius 469). Manser’s efforts continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, until his disappearance in 2000.

Such claims on the Penan people as models of resistance should not, however, mislead us to believe that the problems of modernization, deforestation and cultural sovereignty have been resolved in region. Despite increasing public knowledge about the situation in Sarawak, Manser’s international campaigning unfortunately has yielded few results. To this day, the Penan people continue to struggle for the recognition of their rights to remain in the rainforest (Bruno Manser Funds). Furthermore, the deforestation of the Bornean rainforest is accelerating; about two million acres have been cleared annually since Manser began advocating for preservation (White). The escalation of these problems despite governmental policies that purport to aid the Penan, as well as prolonged global efforts to aid the Penan, calls into question the Sarawak government and the international community’s ability to preserve indigenous cultures. This failure is certainly due in part to the Sarawak government’s masked efforts to assimilate Penan culture into modern Malaysian culture. Their desire to exploit the natural resources of the rainforest and their denial of the Penan’s right to cultural self-determination created a crisis to which Manser and the international community rightly reacted.

I argue that this failure is due largely to a fundamental misunderstanding of the multifaceted nature of culture; it is, moreover, a misunderstanding we rarely acknowledge. When dealing with the problems of deforestation and indigenous rights, Manser and the international community have tended to make an assumption: that stopping logging and preserving the rainforests would lead to the preservation of Penan culture. However, this view is overly simplistic; culture is composed not only of rituals and traditions associated with the physical environment, but also of beliefs and social structures that are unrelated to the physical environmental. Although deforestation has direct, negative consequences on the practice of the Penan culture, attempts to preserve their culture fail because they overemphasize the cultural connotations attached to the tangible rainforest. In fact, as seen through an application of Ann Swidler’s analysis in her seminal paper, “Cultures in Action,” we can see that Manser’s fixation on the tangible and his failure to account for intangible social changes paradoxically changed Penan culture by introducing a previously unpracticed element of aggression and confrontation to the Penan.

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roblems concerning cultural destruction via environmental damage are global in scope but unique to each circumstance. Therefore, we must first understand that the particular issue of deforestation in the Bornean rainforest requires understanding the reasons why both the Penan and Manser sought international attention: they sought this attention mainly because the Sarawak government failed to resolve newfound internal conflicts concerning its indigenous people and their political rights. Under the colonial Brooke administration, which preceded the current Sarawak government, the Penan had some measure of protection and political freedom to practice their beliefs. The Penan traditionally depended on the native longhouse-dwelling farmers as their contacts for the world outside of the rainforest; however, the relationship was colored with the Penans’ inherent desire to avoid conflict and the longhouse people’s desire to exploit the Penan in trade (Brosius 483). In response to unfair labor practices designed to place the Penan in debt and the extraordinary profits the longhouse people made by taking advantage of the Penans’ ignorance of true market prices, government officials became the Penans’ liaisons to the world outside of the rainforest (Brosius 484-485). By setting up supervised trade meetings, or *tamu*, the Brooke administration gave the Penan opportunities to barter their wares safely and fairly, protecting them from the longhouse people’s business dealings and providing the funds to allow the Penan to continue living their nomadic lifestyles.

The Brooke administration also extended existing customs of negotiation by normalizing political expression in Penan society through the *tamu*. The hallmarks of the Brooke government were the political dialogue between the Penan and the governing body and the feelings of “reassurance that the government would look after their interests” (Brosius 486). By tradition, the Penan are peaceful, non-aggressive people and “their *adat* [custom] of solving their problems [was] by consultation, discussion and dialogue” (Richie 95). Although government interaction was a first, Penans continued to practice their *adat* with the Brooke administration. Even today, the Penan often recount how responsive government officials were to their troubles: the Penan were repeatedly assured that their problems would be solved by the government, that the forests were theirs, and that any intruders should be reported for removal (Brosius 486). The success of Brooke officials in removing trespassers, punishing trade violators and preserving peace further raised the Penans’ esteem for the colonial government and compelled the Penan to address their problems to administrative officers. The allowance of political say in policies indicated a responding respect from the Brooke administration as well: by allowing the Penan to negotiate, officials created a safe environment in which the Penan could thrive without fear of persecution from others.

The fall of the Brooke administration, and the creation of Malaysia and the state of Sarawak in 1963, however, led to radically different governmental policies concerning the rainforest and the Penan that threatened Penan culture. Although the Bornean rainforest has been used for centuries as a source of materials and goods, the new Malaysian and Sarawak government encouraged modernization by using timber as an economic commodity. Moreover, in light of the promotion of deforestation, new social policies encouraged the Penan to assimilate into contemporary, non-nomadic society outside of the rainforest. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003, argued the following during the European Economic Community-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (EEC-ASEAN) Ministers Conference in 1990:

We [the Malaysian government] do not intend to turn the Penan into ‘human zoological specimens’ to be gawked at by tourists and studied by anthropologists while the rest of the world passes them by. … Whilst the majority of them have successfully settled, the remainder are [sic] still leading nomadic lives in the jungle. It is our policy to eventually bring all jungle dwellers into the mainstream of the nation’s life. There is nothing romantic about these helpless, half-starved and disease-ridden people and we will make no apologies for endeavoring to uplift their living standards. (Manser 225)

Indeed, the Sarawak government’s new ethical duty became, according to government rhetoric, “uplift[ing] their living standards,” and they enacted this rhetoric by removing the Penan from their native environment rather than fossilizing them as an example of an age-old nomadic society (Manser 225). By doing so, Sarawak officials claimed they were bettering the lives of the Penan through deforestation, saving the “helpless, half-starved and disease-ridden people” with the comforts of modern living (Manser 225).

Yet contrary to governmental assertions, modernization through deforestation has largely harmed the Penan and clearly undermined its culture. Deforestation has decreased the availability of food and natural resources that the Penan depend on for trade. For instance, sago palms, the Penans’ main source of carbohydrates and the trees from which the Penan make their blowpipes and potent dart poisons, are cut down for timber or to make way for roads; habitats and rivers are polluted and eliminated for game, fishing stocks and human consumption (Bronius 472-473); and rattan vines, which the Penan use to weave furniture and other products, are also disappearing. Without food or resources to earn from, living in the Borneo rainforest has become increasingly difficult, if not impossible. Upon adopting governmental recommendations to settle and abandon nomadic life, the Penan quickly discovered that life in longhouses is marked by cramped quarters with little to no promised governmental aid (Davis and Henley 126). Without access to natural resources on which they traditionally depend, knowledge about agriculture, access to medicine, or methods to lift themselves from poverty, the Penan struggle and largely fail to prevent infectious diseases and malnutrition, which wreck widespread devastation upon their communities (Davis and Henley 140). Instead of being “uplifted” above all previous conditions, the Penan are caught in a “vicious cycle … unlike anything known to their ancestors” (Manser 225; Davis, Mackenzie and Kennedy 123).

Thus the Sarawak government’s capability to aid the Penans should be questioned. Upon closer reexamination, the Sarawak government’s claims of aiding the Penan mask ulterior motives to civilize the perceived savages and strip them of cultural self-determination. Sarawak officials have continued deforestation not only because of the economic benefits that come from exploiting natural resources, but also because of their beliefs in Sarawak and Malaysian cultural superiority. This belief in cultural supremacy is implied in Dr. Mohamad’s remark that the Penan are “helpless, half-starved and disease-ridden.” It is found even more strongly, however, in the words of other officials who believe in the inferiority of the Penan culture and the need for immediate cultural change, forced or otherwise (Manser 225). “People still shooting monkeys. Big deal! Some people actually believe this is the way these people should live,” scoffed Rafiah Aziz, then Minister of International Trade and Industry, in 1992 during a documentary filming. “We have this [fascination for] exotic tribal life. Therefore don’t touch this, don’t touch their cultural heritage, their burial grounds, and so on. And therefore stop logging. That’s sick” (Davis, Mackenzie and Kennedy 127). In the eyes of the Malaysian and Sarawak government, cultural change is necessary because the Penans’ way of life is incompatible with their views of appropriate living.

The Sarawak government’s ulterior motives can also be seen with its refusal to engage in political dialogue with the Penan in order to force the Penan to adopt its preferred policies. “No one,” declared James Wong, then Sarawak State Minister of the Environment and Tourism, “has the ethical right to deprive the Penan of the right to assimilation into Malaysian society” (Davis, Mackenzie and Kennedy 124). But the Penans had enormous difficulty practicing the ethical right *not* to assimilate into Malaysian society. Frustration among the Penan is rampant because of the conscious lack of communication between the Sarawak government and the Penan: current officials often ignore complaints from the Penan or hold them in contempt and refused to listen. Above all, the Penan now feel their efforts to find common ground with governmental policies are made in vain and that at the core of the matter, “those [government] agents are not listening to them” (Brosius 475). The dearth of political engagement between officials and citizens is a critical factor in perpetuating the aforementioned “vicious cycle.” It has taken a critical toll in the Penans’ belief in the government and their ability to find domestic aid for their problems (Davis and Henley 140).

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n such a climate of political and cultural frustration, action often arises from strange and sudden sources; in this case Manser, reacting to the very real threat of the Sarawak government to Penan culture, was the catalyst who pointed the Penan to the international community for aid. International publicization on Manser’s part was both an attempt to verbalize complaints to a willing audience and resolve the Penans’ problems. When he began in 1985, Manser attempted to appeal to the local Sarawak government to preserve some of the rainforest for the Penan and submitted reports to local and international papers and magazines to rally support. However, Manser quickly turned to the international community. His efforts were born out of the same frustration the Penan felt and the belief that only the international community could help the Penan. In a letter to journalist James Richie, he stated the critical need to confront both logging companies and the Sarawak government in order to preserve the Penan lifestyle: “I never have tried to convince the Penan tribes from anything but one: That they will be overrolled [sic] by logging, as long as they don’t unite and demand clearly their rights from the government” (Richie 56). Manser was successful, convincing the Penans that blockading was their “last resort” for gaining attention to save the rainforest (Brosius 476). The result was international fame: local authorities, in another slight to the Penans’ abilities to think of and organize such a blockade, placed the blame on Manser and put out a warrant for his arrest. The media fanfare, both in Sarawak and on outside, emerged due to Manser’s efforts to evade the government and the Penans’ continued blockades against logging companies. This fanfare launched the Penan into the public sphere and successfully publicized the conditions in Sarawak (Bevis 119-122).

The success of publicizing the deforestation of the Bornean rainforest, however, illustrates subtle threats to Penan culture that even Manser overlooks. There has been a considerable lack of emphasis on preserving Penan culture as a distinguishable issue from rainforest preservation, which is due in part to the difficulty in separating the two matters. Aside from destroying the tangible trees and landscape of rainforest that the Penan are physically dependent upon, deforestation also leads to the unraveling of the underlying cultural relationship between the rainforest and the Penan. To the Penan, nature is not only a means of gaining resources for survival, but also a landscape imbued with cultural meaning. Natural landmarks and geographic features are woven into the fabric of Penan society as markers in Penan history, which, put together, function as “a vast mnemonic representation of social relationships and of society” (Bronius 473). For instance, one river of the Western Penan was the site in which a man named Akem Japi learned his daughter had died in his absence; sharing his grief, other Penan embraced him and named the stream *Be Mengen Akem Japi* – “the river at which Akem Japi was held” (Davis, Mackenzie and Kennedy 46). To the Penan, nature links the past to the present, the individual to the community and the community to its culture. Logging and polluting the Bornean rainforest sullies both the physical environment and symbols that are emblematic of Penan culture; thus the overwhelming importance of the rainforest on Penan culture makes equating deforestation and cultural destruction seemingly logical.

Yet cultural preservation is a distinguishable issue from rainforest preservation. Although the definition of culture continues to be debated, many in the social sciences perceive culture as a combination of “symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life” (Swidler 273). Following this definition, preserving Penan culture requires more than preserving the traditions and rituals associated with the physical rainforest. The rituals, traditions and natural symbols that depend on the presence of rainforest are aspects of Penan culture that can be preserved by saving the tangible; however, stopping deforestation will not help preserve intangible aspects of culture like beliefs, language or gossip.

Instead of emphasizing cultural preservation as a critical issue that could be independent from rainforest preservation, Manser and the international community have equated deforestation to cultural preservation by suggesting that physically stopping deforestation would also prevent cultural loss and changes. Despite widespread press coverage of the situation in Sarawak, Manser fled to Switzerland in 1990, frustrated by the stalemate between the Penan and the government and convinced that only pressure on the international community could save the Penan; this pressure was understood primarily in terms of stopping deforestation (Bevis 122). From then onward, Manser equated saving the rainforest to saving Penan culture: even testimonies chosen for his non-fictional account of the situation in Sarawak, *Voices from the Rainforest*, were oriented towards bringing the Penans’ personal stories about deforestation and their interactions with employees of the logging companies or government officials to public light (Manser). Penan culture preservation was thus placed in the context of deforestation: both would be solved together because the relationship between deforestation and cultural destruction was perceived as causal.

By suggesting deforestation as the cause of Penan cultural destruction and reorienting efforts to preserve Penan culture to join the larger struggle to preserve rainforests, Manser and the international community inadvertently prioritized solutions to preserve the rainforest over solutions to preserve Penan culture. This effort rendered Penan cultural preservation into a one-dimensional problem that ignores other more intangible aspects of culture that are also vulnerable to change. Actions taken by the international community have focused on preserving the forests first because activists assumed that the byproduct of doing so was cultural preservation; this attitude can be seen with the 1988 European Parliament’s call to ban Malaysian timber imports, with Al Gore’s 1990 Senate resolution for the “survival of the rainforests and the cultures dependent upon them,” and even with Prince Charles’s call for the end of the Penans’ “collective genocide” by saving the Bornean rainforest (Manser 270; Manser 271; "A Speech by HRH The Prince of Wales"). Perceiving the relationship between deforestation and cultural destruction as direct and causal limited the effectiveness of international attention and aid to the Penan because the issue of deforestation ultimately eclipsed the Penans’ struggles, leading to fewer efforts to provide aid to these indigenous people or to help them secure their rights to live in the rainforest. By approaching cultural preservation in a reductionist manner, Manser and the international community’s solutions target only one potential avenue of change – those associated with the tangible – and thus do not account for any other cultural changes that can occur.

The failure to acknowledge potential intangible cultural changes resulted in drastic alterations in Penan society because the intangible cultural traditions and attitudes have a strong influence on the actions of individuals. In her paper “Cultures in Action,” Swidler rejects the theory that actions are only determined by individual tastes or normative social values, noting that individuals in reality do not “choose their actions one at a time according to their interests or values,” but instead “construct chains of action [to a goal] beginning with at least some pre-fabricated links” (Swidler 277). She argues that culture shapes the selection of actions by providing these “pre-fabricated links” of “skills, habits and styles” and forming a “tool kit” in which “actors [can] select differing pieces for constructing lines of action” (Swidler 277, 275). In short, intangible cultural derivatives form the basis on which individuals choose and justify their actions and changes to them can critically alter any society.

Ironically, Penan society was altered just so: because of the misunderstanding of tangibility in cultural preservation, Manser ended up changing the Penans’ intangible cultural approach to resolving conflicts by convincing the Penan to try to prevent changes to the tangible through confrontation and protest. Traditional Penan practices of nonaggression have been long-standing, with roots in the Penan community’s internal dealings and in the Penans’ dealings with the longhouse people and the Brooke government. As Manser even noted, “The Penan are a most peaceful people,” and goes on to note that “In their shy way, they avoid conflict or try to find a solution by talking” (Manser 26). By convincing the Penan that blockading was their “last resort” for gaining attention to save the rainforest, Manser unintentionally caused the Penan to abandon “their *adat* [custom] of solving their problems by consultation, discussion and dialogue” in exchange for a more confrontational approach (Brosius 476; Richie 95). Although elementary and unperceivable, introducing protesting and blockading as forms of problem solving also introduced aggressive methods of interaction into the Penan cultural “tool kit” that could be used in the future (Swidler 277). Thus Manser’s attempts to preserve tangible cultural practices unintentionally subverted the preservation of intangible cultural practices and Penan culture in general, resulting in Manser changing the very culture he attempted to preserve.

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hat can be done for the Penan? In light of the past and current tragedies of the Penan, Manser and the international community are correct in trying to help the Penan by ending deforestation. Yet the flaw in their approach is their failure to account for intangible cultural changes. As seen with Manser’s unintentional introduction of aggression into Penan culture, cultural changes are not limited to those associated with the tangible. Cultural change can occur due to minute changes in customs and approaches; by pushing the Penan to act against their customs, Manser meant well, but ultimately caused the very actions he was trying to prevent.

The implication of Manser’s influences is that cultural change is an inescapable reality, a conclusion that is remarkably bleak considering the attempts to save the Penan and their way of life. The above-mentioned statement holds some truth – cultural change is inevitable to some degree – but the most critical problem facing the Penan is their inability to contribute constructively to these changes as opposed to the inevitability of them. As seen in Sarawak, forced cultural changes are inexcusably brutal and the results are ripe with misery. Change should be ideally in accordance with the society’s desires; having some hand in molding change is better than none. Instead of asking what can be done *for* the Penan, the question to ask is this: how can others work with the Penan to aid them in gaining a say, and a level of self-determination, in the cultural changes which have occurred and will occur?

Examining Penan history provides examples of successful government-citizen ventures. Although *tamu* have long stopped being held, the sentiment behind them (and the feeling of political expression and freedom that existed under the Brooke administration) should be central to future solutions for the Penan. Allowing the Penan to have a say in their actions is vital to any successful long-term venture between the government and its people. Furthermore, providing a structural means of Penan self-determination through *tamu* or *tamu*-like councils may prevent the accidental or unwilling cultural changes that occur from ignoring intangible cultural aspects by giving the Penan choices to act. Until then, the Penan will continue to suffer because of the Sarawak government’s unjust treatment towards them; conditions will continue to worsen as more of the Bornean rainforest is logged each year, and more Penan are forced into squalid conditions in resettlement camps without aid or ways out. The future should be viewed with considerable hope, but in the absence of aid or political freedom, the Penan will continue struggling for the rights to practice their culture with little to gain.

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