

Space of Belonging: Engaging the State in Borneo¹

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Introduction

In March 1987 indigenous peoples of Sarawak, largely Penan² people, put up a number of barricades across logging roads in various parts of Baram and Limbang districts where logging was at its heaviest³. Altogether 25 blockades were set up, comprising logs or frail wooden structures put across the roads, together with scores of men, women and children sitting across the roads, preventing timber lorries from passing through. These blockades marked Penan continuing engagements with the state to assert their rights to areas they currently occupy. Described as 'meek', 'inoffensive', 'peaceful' and 'politically irrelevant' it is remarkable that such a people challenged the might of the state.

Unlike such groups as the Hmong, Kachin and Karen who pre-1945 had the political choice to keep the state at bay or escape beyond its reach to a zone of refuge (Scott 2010)⁴, the Penan have no other choice but to confront the state. The following pages are an attempt to describe this confrontation, and the reasons behind the steps taken.

Penan in Perspective

Traditionally a hunting-gathering people, the Penan occupy a specific niche as a major supplier of jungle products⁵ (Brosius 1999:350), which they traded with

¹ This paper was presented at a Seminar *Radically Envisioning a Different Southeast Asia: From a Non-State Perspective*, organized by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan, January 18-19, 2011.

² On the basis of dialect, Rodney Needham (1972) divides the Penan population into Eastern and Western Penan. The Eastern Penan comprise all those Penan living roughly to the east of the Baram River while the Western Penan are located around the watershed of the Rejang River, and along the Silat River in Baram District. There are also some Penan settlements along the Tinjar River in Baram District, the Jelalong River and coastal area of Bintulu District, and in the Suai-Niah area of Miri District. In linguistic term, these groups appear to be closely related to the Western Penan. There are some minor differences between the two divisions, but broadly speaking in way of life and socio-economic terms they are very similar and consider themselves and are recognized by others as the same people.

³ For detail see World Forest Movement and Sahabat Alam Malaysia, *The Battle for Sarawak's Forest* (New Edition), Penang, Malaysia, 1990.

⁴ Scott's (2010) book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast* is an analysis of the hill populations of Zomia who prior to 1945 "actively resisted incorporation into the framework of classical state, the colonial state, and independent nation-state" p. 19. He uses the term Zomia to describe this zone of refuge for the aforementioned groups, a geographical area comprising northeast India, Bangladesh, the adjacent parts of China/Tibet and all of mainland Southeast Asia.