

Tamu: Trading at the edge¹

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This paper is an historical account of a system of trade between two broad categories of people in interior Borneo: longhouse-dwelling swidden agriculturists and hunting and gathering nomads, in this case, the Penan. While agriculturalists live along the main rivers, Penan and other groups of hunting and gathering peoples occupy the interior headwaters. The Penan have long occupied a specific niche in the economic activities of central Borneo, being a major supplier of forest products (Brosius 1999:350). These are traded with longhouse people for export to the coast and overseas, thus connecting them to the network of global trade.

Traditionally a nomadic people, comprising some 16,000 souls, the Penan of Sarawak inhabit the most interior of the northern part of the state, in the headwaters of two major rivers, the Rejang and Baram. On the basis of dialect, Rodney Needham (1972) divides the Penan population into Eastern Penan and Western Penan. The Eastern Penan comprise those living roughly to the east of Baram River while the Western Penan are located around the watershed of the Rejang River, and along the Silat River, a true left bank tributary of the Baram. There are also some Penan settlements along the Tinjar River in Baram District, along the Jelalong River as well as the coastal area of Bintulu District, and in 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 similar and consider themselves and are recognized by others as one people.

For a long time, the Penan have established a trading relationship with their longhouse neighbours, primarily Kayan, Kenyah and Berawan. Described as 'meek', 'inoffensive', 'peaceful', and 'politically irrelevant' the Penan were often taken advantage of by their longhouse trading partners, who made exorbitant profit from the trading relationship. For instance, in 1927 one Brooke official, Ermen (1927:185) mentioned that longhouse traders made a profit of 600 to 1000% from trading with Penan. From their earliest encounters with the Penan, Brooke officials voiced concern on the need of protecting the Penan from exploitation and also headhunting raids². It came as no surprise then that in 1906 the Brooke regime

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² Prior to the establishment of the Brooke regime, tribal warfare conducted in the form of headhunting raids between groups, was prevalent in Borneo and the Penan did not practice this