

Narratives about space and place in Eastern Penan

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Abstract: Space as 'landscape' (rather than 'seascape'), rainforest in this case, has been fundamental for satisfying the resource needs of Borneo's foragers in East Malaysia. Due to deforestation in areas where Eastern Penan reside, a foraging existence has become less viable or even unsustainable. A primary aim has been to gain a richer understanding of their relationship with the environment, referred to by Eastern Penan as *tana'* 'rainforest'. A question arises as to whether or not this term may actually be undergoing semantic narrowing or a meaning shift, given unprecedented levels of deforestation, permanent settlement of most Eastern Penan and, for many, their entry into the lowest stratum of society.

Keywords: forest, space, place, hunting and gathering

This research involved two Eastern Penan men walking through rainforest they are familiar with. They were asked to follow their choice of route and describe aloud ways in which the landscape is significant to them. Each wore a chest-mounted video camera. Results provide some insights into ways Eastern Penan relate to and articulate aspects of the rainforest environment, and its role(s) in their lives.

The rainforest is referred to by Eastern Penan in various ways regarding its function(s), topography and value. Specific places within the forest, sometimes named, tend to be referred to in similar ways, spoken about at greater length, in more personalised ways or qualified with reference to particular events. Whether space more generally, or places more specifically, mention of the rainforest is frequently juxtaposed with reference to Penan society, and likely to invoke toponophilia.

1. Introduction and background

The idea of space tends nowadays to be viewed as a social construct; it, along with place, tend to be seen relativistically as ‘constructed by human agents in a variety of ways, and as such are filled with politics and ideology’ (Soja 1989:6), as is the case here, when it comes to a state’s versus a community’s (opposing) perceptions of the value of rainforest. It is also suggested that ‘we cannot discuss world without considering for whom’ (De Pina-Cabral 2014:49). This is contextually salient here, given that the Eastern Penan overtly express a close relationship with their ‘world’. Furthermore, we cannot ‘debate “home” without placing it in “world” for two main reasons: one is that home is that which is not world; the other is that home is perhaps the central feature of any person’s world’ (De Pina-Cabral 2014:57–58). However, places we inhabit continuously or, in the case of Eastern Penan foragers, the only kind of space that most have ever inhabited, tend to be imbued with meaning (Cornips & de Rooij 2018). Furthermore, the production of space as an idea can be viewed as both a medium and an outcome of social action and social relationships, with the consequent understanding that ‘social life is materially constituted in its spatiality [and] is the theoretical keystone for the contemporary interpretation of spatiality’ (Soja 1985:94), there thus being no social reality that is not in some way spatialised.

The author’s main task has been to record, describe and discuss ways in which Eastern Penan narrate their perspectives about rainforest they inhabit, and the kinds of roles it has in their lives. From this study it is intended to gain a richer insight into their histories and relationship with rainforest, a cornucopia of resources and means for sustaining a foraging existence. The research involved two Eastern Penan men selecting and walking through part of a rainforest they are familiar with. They were asked to follow a route of their own choice and to describe aloud ways in which the landscape is significant, from their perspective(s). Each wore a chest-mounted video action camera, providing good quality audio-visual data.

2. Eastern Penan

The focus on space and place here has been undertaken with reference to Eastern Penan in Borneo, who inhabit the Baram and Limbang River watersheds of East Malaysian Sarawak as well as the southern part of Brunei’s western enclave. Eastern Penan were thought to total around 10,000 in the

early twenty-first century (Sellato & Sercombe 2007), and are demographic and political minorities in both states (Sercombe 1996a). They are traditionally hunter-gatherers, comprising small groups of 50 or less; their camps are generally located on ridge tops and of relatively shorter duration (of around two to three months); they rely on blowpipe hunting, and have no formal institution of group leadership.

A hunting and gathering mode of existence can be associated with a band level of organisation; this generally exhibits simplicity and flexibility of social structure (Testart 1988) and may well orient towards egalitarianism (Woodburn 1980) as well as high levels of in-group symbiosis. Concomitantly, egalitarian hunting and gathering groups generally have no experts, specialists or shamans, as among the Eastern Penan. Males and females are able to perform tasks normally carried out by that sex for the survival of the group (thus, all men learn to hunt and build shelters; and all women become competent to gather edible flora).

Eastern Penan tend to lack overt formal rules and, along with a high degree of symbiosis among members of a band (Bender 1978), an individual's position is normally defined in terms of relationships with other members, rather than in terms of social rank or status (cf Turnbull 1983). If irreconcilable intragroup disputes occur, which is generally rare, a common means of resolution is band fission.

For the indigenous peoples of Borneo, the notion of private ownership of land did not exist, in a capitalist sense, prior to colonialism. In Sarawak's (pre-colonial) indigenous societies, unwritten 'customary law' (*adat*) considered that a community controlled its resource base. Needham (1972:177) also states: '[T]here is no Penan territory', however Eastern Penan can and do lay claim to certain resources, eg fruit trees, while also practising usufruct. The situation is now somewhat different, given the wide-ranging shift to sedentism and the need for land titles to secure fixed territory for purposes of agriculture and security (of the land on which people farm). In-group interdependence, which had helped insulate groups from some of the challenges of a foraging existence, has come under increasing stress, undermining Eastern Penan's greatest taboo, stinginess, due to the reduction in available resources and ensuing material poverty.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, Eastern Penan were largely hunter-gatherers; most have now become cassava and hill or wet rice farmers (not always very successfully [Sercombe 1996a]), while periodically returning to nomadism, especially between planting and harvesting of rice, and during fruit masting when game meat is reported to be easier to obtain. Eastern Penan's

traditional subsistence economy is concentrated on hunting bearded pig (*Sus barbatus*) and preparing sago starch (*Euglossonia*); and it is the extent of sago in an area that mostly determines the location and duration of temporary camps. Their way of life is dependent on their habitat (Brosius 1991), invoking a close relationship with the rainforest, as summarised by this Eastern Penan statement:

1 *Urip amé lakau tong tana' pitah ka'an ngan uvut.*
 life 1PL.EXCL.POSS walk inside land look.for food and sago

'Our life is to travel in the forest in search of food and sago' (food implicitly referring to 'meat').

(Sarawak Campaign Committee 2004:6)

Eastern Penan also have few complex rituals; traditional beliefs (a form of animism) are often associated with misappropriate behaviour towards resources (eg laughing humiliatingly at animals or an aspect of the physical environment). Proscription against excessive consumption or the amassing of resources beyond a group's or an individual's imminent needs is functionally logical, given hunter-gatherer mobility and problems of portability or storage of excess resources. As foragers, Eastern Penan did not farm (or not in a conventional sense) but, nonetheless, were involved in incipient horticulture (Voeks 2007), through the disposal of seeds from plant foods. They also practise a form of environmental stewardship, encapsulated in *molong*, 'a harvesting strategy which rotates the extraction of resources from one area to another, allowing harvested areas to regenerate' (Janowski & Langub 2011:122–123). Furthermore, they adhere to an idea of sustainable resource use, a term for which is *minut* ('sparing or economic use' of resources). Waste and excessive consumption are seen as likely to anger forest spirits. While spiritual transgression is, for example, seen to have a connection to disease etiology, Eastern Penan are not dogmatic about their beliefs (Voeks & Sercombe 2000), although their cosmology is not greatly developed, certainly less so than that of their settled neighbours. However, sensitivity to nature is not inherent to Eastern Penan; rather, it results from evolving adaptations of perceptual and practical skills.

3. Penan and fundamental changes

In the last century or so, Eastern Penan have been undergoing substantial social and cultural changes; these changes, summarised below, are relevant to their relationship with the rainforest:

- i permanent settlement, which began around the end of the nineteenth century and has increased since the mid-twentieth century, either voluntarily, as a result of persuasion from settled neighbours and/or the state government
- ii as a result of extensive state-endorsed deforestation since the 1980s (Sercombe 1996a), commercial logging has considerably reduced opportunities for foraging. Deforestation has met with resistance by many Eastern Penan, in the form of blockades (ibid), but it has not prevented large-scale timber extraction in areas where Eastern Penan reside
- iii a subsequent shift in main means of Eastern Penan production towards agriculture, and entry into a monetary economy to satisfy needs as they no longer had forest resources to trade
- iv conversion, by missionaries, largely to Evangelical Christianity for many Eastern Penan, a proselytisation process that has been ongoing since the nineteenth century; Evangelism does not accommodate animism
- v full-time formal educational opportunity, for many Eastern Penan children, in the national language, Malay (Sercombe 2010).

Despite these fundamental changes, many Eastern Penan retain certain forager characteristics, eg a tendency to immediately consume (rather than conserve) resources they obtain, whether food or cash (hence, little accumulation of wealth), and a return to foraging at certain times of year.

4. Methods

The purpose has been to document and deliberate ways Eastern Penan talk about the space they occupy, and important aspects of this in order to gain a more informed understanding of their relationship with the rainforest, *tana'* (Obrador-Pons 2006). The researcher travelled with two adult Penan men into an area of rainforest, selected by the Penan, three hours north of the cluster of villages (of settled Kelabit, long established neighbours to the Eastern Penan, in this part of Sarawak) situated on the Bario plain, in East Malaysia, where

we camped for the night. In the morning, both men donned a chest-mounted video action camera and were asked to follow a route of their own choice and to describe aloud ways in which the landscape is salient. Thus, rather than predetermining a specific space, it was seen as more productive to induce a sense of space from places selected by the two Penan for a walk, through recorded behaviour (cf Soja 1996). The time length was set to one hour, the approximate duration of a camera battery on one charge.

Neither of the Eastern Penan consultants had travelled outside the highland area where they live, so had no first-hand experience beyond this, their known world. One man had attended initial years of primary school; he had some knowledge of Kelabit (a neighbouring language), Malay (the national language) and a smattering of English, but both were otherwise confident of their proficiency only in Eastern Penan.

The extracts below are a sample taken from nearly two hours of audio-visual data. The segments included here were spoken when the two participants had stopped, where there was a panoramic view (Figure 1, below) of surrounding rainforest (a rare occurrence) and began to extemporise about the landscape around them.

5. Penan accounts of rainforest

A number of Eastern Penan tropes occur in the data, regarding time, place and people. The rainforest is referred to with regard to its utilitarian role, topography and association with Penan sentiments. Deictic references – personal, temporal, spatial – each offer insights into Penan perceptions of, and relationship to, the rainforest they inhabit (cf Wartmann et al 2018:3). Specific places within the forest (sometimes named), tend to be referred to in comparable ways to rainforest space more generally. Whether concerning rainforest space more generally or place more specifically, mention of these is often made in conjunction with reference to their role for Penan society.

Extract 1

2	<i>Urip amé</i>	<i>Penan sahou</i>	<i>bé</i>	<i>amé</i>		
	life 1PL.EXCL.POSS	Penan	in.the.past	no	1PL.EXCL	
	<i>pu'un moko</i>	<i>bé</i>	<i>amé</i>	<i>jah</i>	<i>jalan.</i>	
	have permanent.place	no	1PL.EXCL	one	way	



Figure 1 Location where extracts 1, 2 and 3 were recorded

'Previously, in our lives as Penan, we did not have permanent dwellings, we didn't have one way of living'.

- 3 *Amé Penan sahau pu'un dua jah*
 1PL.EXCL Penan in.the.past have two one
sanan, dua sanan, telo sanan, pat
 household two household three household four
sanan, paling pina lema sanan inah
 household most.many five household that
kekat lem jah retek.
 all in one place

'We Penan, previously had two or one household, two households, three households, four households, a maximum of five households; and that would be all of us in one place'.

- 4 *Urip amé Penan sahau bé amé pemung*
 life 1PL.EXCL.POSS Penan in.the.past no 1PL.EXCL associate.with
moko, bé amé jah jalan.
 household no 1PL.EXCL one way

'Previously, in our Penan lives, we did not associate with one place of residence, we didn't have one way (of living).'

- 5 *Iteujalan ja'au ... amé Penan jin sahau.*
 this.route large 1PL.EXCL Penan from in.the.past

'This is a main route ... for us Penan from long ago'.

- 6 *Ngelayau kelunan lepah siteu sahau.*
 always people after here in.the.past

'There were always people here before from long ago'.

- 7 *Tovo-tovo urip sahau.*
 simultaneously life in.the.past

'Together people lived here before'.

Amé Penan, meaning 'we [excl.] Penan...' (ie not others) is a common noun phrase when Penan are foregrounded in relation, or in contrast, to others; it frequently occurs utterance-initially and is thematically significant as emphasis is on the Eastern Penan as agents. *Amé* is the first-person plural exclusive form (versus *itam*, the inclusive equivalent) and, in this context, explicitly distinguishes Penan from non-Penan (*vaé* 'foreigners'). *Inah kekat lem jah retek* 'that would be all of us in one place', in which *inah* ('that') distances the 'all of us' being referred to, as also made explicit by *sahau* ('in the past'), below. Again, *bé amé* ('we [did] not [have]') emphasises their lack of settlement and, hence, nomadism.

Sahau means 'before', and is a reference to an indeterminate past, besides reference to the distant past being a frequently occurring trope in Eastern Penan speech (as can be seen in the extract above where it occurs in nearly every line), contrasting the present with the past, generally seen by Penan adults more favourably than their current circumstances, and prior to deforestation. Reference to a full-time foraging existence is nostalgic and alludes to a time of greater individual and collective contentment (Voeks & Sercombe 2000). Furthermore, *ngelayau... sahau* ('always... before') stresses this was an ongoing state, albeit no more. Penan still forage sporadically in this area of Sarawak, but

not as full-time hunter-gatherers. *Tovo* is a time expression meaning ‘during’ or ‘at the same time’, and its reduplication foregrounds the simultaneity of people being together in an area.

Regarding space and place, *moko*’ relates to place. It is normally a verb (*oko*’ being the noun form), suggesting an ongoing process of remaining in one setting, not previously the Penan norm, as stated here. *Retek*, as uttered above, refers to a specific place (but can also refer to an occasion) and (*inah lem jah retek* ‘that’d be in one place’) further highlights the communal nature of Eastern Penan experience. If a meeting had special significance, it might also be marked with a ‘friendship name’ (Needham 1971; Sercombe in press); and, through this, a convergence of ‘place’, ‘identification’ and ‘attachment’ is suggested (Thompson 2016).

Extract 2 continues from the first and describes how Eastern Penan would meet up and tell stories with other group members who had temporarily separated, possibly for foraging reasons.

- 8 *Ke’woo ha’, ke’woo, ha’, inah ha’ ha’ ngaran ha’*
 kewoo sound kewoo sound that sound sound name sound
Penan ngewoo, woo ha’, ke’woo, ha’ inah ha’ réh
 Penan to-kewoo.IN woo sound kewoo sound that sound like
ke’woo.
 kewoo

‘Kewoo sound, kewoo sound, that sound’s name in Penan is ‘to kewoo’ like the sound kewoo’.

- 9 *Boh jah menéngéh boh jah irah*
 so one hear.TR which.REL so one them.3PL
menéng éh boh jah kahut kepéh. Bara ke’woo
 hear.TR who.REL so one call.back again say kewoo
ha’ ke’woo ha’.
 sound kewoo sound

‘So, when another person hears that, s/he calls back and says kewoo’.

- 10 *Kenat irah pepipa sinah=lah*
 thus people.3PL around.DEM.LOC there=EMPH

petavin *petemeu*
 visit.IN meet.IN

'Thus, the call over there is meant to bring people to visit, to meet up'.

- 11 *Boleh* *cerita* *lem* *urip* *irah;* *lem* *urip* *tong*
 can story in life people 3PL.POSS in life at
akeu *siteu* *pu'un* *babui,* *pu'un* *savit* *pu'un* *kinan*
 1SG.POSS here have pig have sago have food
siteu *éh* *jian* *néh.*
 here which.REL good it

'There would be stories about their lives; in my life there were wild boar here, sago palms, food and it was good'.

The extract spontaneously invokes nostalgia for an earlier time, the forest as a place of travel and a catalyst for maintaining and enriching relations among Penan referring to the reciprocal summoning of others for exchange of news and socialising purposes. *Petavin* is about meeting others with a deliberate purpose (rather than coincidentally, *pe-* being both a causative prefix and one of reciprocity), while *petemeu* can be 'meet' intentionally or by chance. Together, they accentuate the reciprocal value of these meetings and a function of 'calling out' to bring people together. *Boleh cerita* is a verb phrase that can be considered a neologism from Malay (lit 'can story', vs Eastern Penan, *omok pesuket*), reflecting broader issues of language contact between Eastern Penan and the state's official language (Sercombe 1996b).

Extract 3 is a further continuation of a monologue, this time referring to a particular route, on a north-south axis, used by Eastern Penan and Kelabit (settled neighbours).

- 12 *Iteu* *jalan* *ja'au* ... *amé* *Penan* *jin* *sahau.*
 this route big 1PL.EXCL Penan from time.before

'This is a main route ... for us Penan from before'.

- 13 *Iteu* *ngaran* *juk* *siteu,* *lem* *ha'* *irah* *Kelabit,*
 this name will here in language 3PL.POSS Kelabit

'Buduk Pawan', lem ha' irah lebo=lah.

Plateau Pawan in language 3PL.POSS community=EMPH

'From this point its name in the Kelabit language is *Buduk Pawan*, in the language of that community'.

14 *Ngelayau kelunan lepah siteu sahau.*

always other.people after here time.before

'There were always people here long ago'.

15 *Tovo-tovo urip sahau.*

at.the.same.time life in.the.past

'Together people lived here before'.

Again, the speaker locates the travelling route (a jungle path) in the past, *jini sahau* ('from before'). *Buduk Pawan* was and remains, for Penan, an important thoroughfare. Still used by them (but hardly at all by the settled, wet rice-farming Kelabit, anymore), it is a route between the more populated highland plain and remote outlying Penan settlements to the north. Again, there is use of the reduplicated form, *tovo tovo*, emphasising that people were together in the area at the same time, and that this had 'always' (*ngelayau*) been the case.

6. Discussion

As hunter-gatherers, Eastern Penan were in symbiotic relations with others in their group, as well as other Penan groups. This was by both necessity and by inclination given potential resource challenges of their nomadic way of life especially outside of the fruit season, their pacifism and hence vulnerability in the face of possible dangers from other more aggressive settled Dayak groups (Rousseau 1990). This sense of Penan community is implicitly expressed through *amé*, an exclusive first-person plural pronoun form used by the speaker to separate self from the interlocutor and invoke a sense of belonging with fellow Penan. This is the most frequently occurring lexeme in the data, reflecting how Penan tend consistently to see themselves as distinct from other local ethnolinguistic groups. Their close relationship with the rainforest invokes the concept of *tawai* ('fondly remembering something or someone') by Eastern Penan, although the term does not arise in the data, a sense of closeness to the rainforest environment, as implied in examples 1 ('life is to travel in the forest') and 15 ('being together' [in the forest]), and made explicit in example 11

(sharing stories and the forest's bounty, eg 'wild boar' and 'sago') (see also Rothstein 2020).

Eastern Penan view *tana'* (cognate with Malay *tanah*, 'earth', 'land', 'ground') as their 'home' and 'world' (cf De Pina-Cabral 2014), although not uttered in the extracts above. *Tana'* can also mean 'rainforest', 'world', 'surface of the earth', and 'places not under water'. *Tana'* is often qualified, eg *tana' lihep* ('shaded land', 'rainforest'), *tana' kayeu* ('wooded land', 'rainforest'), and *telo'ong tana'*, a collective term for 'all places' (Rothstein 2016). *Tong tana'*, literally 'inside the forest', 'on the land', can contrast with *tong lamin*, 'inside', or 'at home', although the difference may be with another kind of delimited space, not inevitably 'inside' (Burenhult et al 2017:459). Less commonly heard in Eastern Penan is *tana' pengurip* ('land on which one spends one's whole life') with reference to rainforest at large, but nowadays being more specific to a defined village area. Consequently, it is argued here that while 'home' and 'world' have traditionally been conflated, rather than being discrete for Eastern Penan (cf De Pina-Cabral 2014), environmental changes have affected ways in which Eastern Penan can interact with rainforest. The links between 'social solidity' and 'sense of place' (Thompson 2016) have been affected as a result of landscape changes, with consequent difficulties in satisfying basic needs, via the sago starch staple (for example), as well as maintaining a core value, the 'sharing of perishable resources', which has led to the sale of meat between Eastern Penan, rather than equally dividing up game among family and friends (Sercombe 1996a).

Humans live in an era of 'uprootedness, with fewer and fewer people living out their lives where they are born [...] what does it mean to be "at home"?' (De Pina-Cabral 2014:57–58). The sense of topophilia expressed by Eastern Penan is both explicit and implicit (as mentioned in the first paragraph of this section) in ways rainforest is talked about, in terms of what it provides and sentiments towards it. In 'the phenomenological encounter between the human being and [...] Nature may form an important part of such placial experience [...] impregnated with "geopiety"' (Pardoel 2015:17). This 'reverence' is likely to be reinforced by length of time spent in a place, generally increasing attachment (Hunziker et al 2007), to the extent that space becomes place and this then becomes part of oneself (Greider & Garkovich 1994). Cross (2001) maintains that the strongest relationships with place are those characterised by length of residence, personal history in a specific setting, and identifying with the place in question; these have been called 'biographical relationships'. These are distinguished from 'spiritual relationships' which are more about a sense of 'belonging to a place' (ibid:4), as implied especially by reference to places where Penan travelled (in extract 2), and 'ideological relationships' about appropriate

ways to ‘live in a place’ (Cross 2001:5), which are given overtly in Eastern Penan. Thompson (2016) suggests that ‘the most significant social unit in terms of sense of place for hunter-gatherers is the conglomeration of multifamily units’ (Thompson 2016:283), as reflected in each of the extracts above.

7. Conclusions

The purpose of this article has been to document and consider how Eastern Penan talk about space (in the form of rainforest) that they inhabit, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of their perceptions of the role and value of the tropical forest in their lives. A small Garmin recording device provided audio-visual data and geospatial information, while leaving Eastern Penan to talk freely while moving through space. Data reveal spatial–social and spatial–language features, linking language to space and place, in situ, social reality being explicitly linked to certain places. This is less likely to arise in the same ways in a more contrived setting. It has not been the intention to present an arcadian view of Eastern Penan life (cf Parry nd), but recordings suggest a yearning for circumstances that are no longer possible.

It has been claimed that the style of discourse in the data presented above is one that Eastern Penan have learned from western anti-logging protesters (Bending 2001). Certainly, since Sarawak’s 1958 Land Code was introduced, primary forest claimed by the Eastern Penan under customary rights has come ‘legally under state control’ (ibid:4). However, Eastern Penan have, over an extended period, been in conflict with the state government, unlike the Western Penan (Brosius 1997). In the time period I and co-researchers have interacted with Eastern Penan, none of us has ever witnessed their support for deforestation and loss of *tana*. On the contrary, state-supported logging, as part of globalisation, has led to the deterritorialisation of ‘cultures and places’ (Saar & Palang 2009:16) such that, ‘at the heart of the debate about forests lie [...] values’ (Côte et al 2018:257) whereby those of Eastern Penan can be seen in stark contrast and opposition to those of the state and its proxies.

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Abbreviations

1	first person
3	third person
DEM	demonstrative
EMPH	emphasiser
EXCL	exclusive
IN	infinitive
LOC	locational
PL	plural
POSS	possessive
REL	relative
SG	singular
TR	transitive

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