

Culture of the penan tribe



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The review that I would like to make among the 5 tribes that acted by the Bruce Parry is the Penan tribe. First of all, I would like to introduce briefly about the character of Bruce Parry. Bruce Parry is an activist that venture into the most remote area of Sarawak state in Malaysian Borneo. He believes that the only way to know more about the culture anthropology and knowledge for a tribe is to have a participant observation in his fieldwork. Participant observations mean that living within a given culture for an extended period of time, and take part in its cultural daily life in all its richness and diversity.

The Penan is a nomadic aborigine that roved on the land of Sarawak Borneo and some other parts on Brunei Bandar Seri Begawan. Nowadays, the number of Penan had officially stated approximate to 10, 000 people and around 350-500 of them are nomadic that scattered over Ulu Baram, Limbang, Tutoh and Lawas of Sarawak. (Figures retrieved from: <http://www.survival-international.org>) The present Penans are consisted with settled, semi-nomadic and total nomadic communities that fully depend on the forest products. In Penan society, the natives are highly developed in an egalitarian society and little gender division. It means that the social stratification among the man and women are almost equal. For instance, the man and women shared most of the chores among them. Such as, gathering the forest product and extracted sago from the sago palms, but they are still some part of chores that dominated by male, for example, hunting in the forest.

Penan is a group of native that practiced the ritual of “ Molong” which means that “ never take more than necessary.” The majority of the Penan natives

are work as nomadic hunter-gatherers. The nomadic Penan usually moves in group that consisted approximately 40 people included children and old people. They do not stayed for a long time in a particular place. The period of time that they stay is depend on the resources at the place that they stayed and when the resources became fewer, they will choose other suitable places and moved again.

The nomadic Penan native that lived in the forest was very much depending on their traditional diet-Sago that starch from the Sago palm. Once, the Sago palms are matured and fully grown, the sago palm trees will be cut down. The leader of the collecting sago palm will make sure an amount of sago starched is enough for each family and kept adequately for their supply. After that no more sago palm will be chop down until they are ran out of food. Besides that, the Penan native also preys on wild animals like wild boars, mouse deer and monkeys. The hunters hunt by using a blowpipe, made with the Belian wood and carved out with a bone drill. The poison darts that they used are made from the sago palm's tree bark and on its tip; the Penan dipped it with kind of powerful poisonous latex that extracted from a tree from the forest. However, the Penan natives also cultivate the planting of paddy and domestic animal breeding for their own foods not for sales.

Furthermore, I would like to discuss briefly about the Penan culture. Culture can be defined as a " learned behavior in any particular society includes those ideas, techniques and habits which are passed on by one generation to another in a sense, a social heritage and which are virtually a set of solutions to problems that, in the course of time, others have met and solved before."

(Tony Bilton, Kevin Bonnett, Philp Jones, Michelle Stanworth, Ken Sheard, and

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Andrew Webster, 1987, page 11) The nomadic Penan move in groups and they have their own clan territories, the groups are consisted of a family of five or six members and some family even consisted of 30 people. The nomadic Penan will leave their old selap (huts) and move to another domain of forest when their sago supplies are exhausted. The majority of the roofs are tarpaulins and there are seldom roof made by giant palm leaves.

In the aspect of material cultures, only Penan elders dress in traditional dress, which called "chawats" means that the loin cloths, and wearing large holes in their earlobes. Nowadays, the Penan natives are making the tattoos by themselves which is almost like prison tattoos. Only few Penan now go in barefoot, most of them are wearing cheap plastic boots with rounded studs to protect their foots.

In addition, I would like to discuss about the Penan traditional weapons that are used for hunting. For example the Penan's blowpipes which is used for hunting wild animals. The another name for blowpipe is called keleput, are approximately 6 feet long and made from one solid piece of iron wood.

Secondly, the process of making the Penan poison darts is cutting off the bark of the tajem tree to extract milky latex that is warmed over a fire to produce the poison. The poison darts can cause lethal arrhythmias to the animals. Blowpipe darts are made from palm fronds with light weight. Darts with metal tips which cut from tin cans are used for bigger size wild animals like deer and bearded pig. The last weapon used by Penan hunters is knives. The Penan hunters are carrying two knives. The first knife is called a "poeh", is large and machete-like. The second knife is called darhad which is much

smaller than “ peoh” and is used for cutting meat, whittling blowpipe darts and fine work. Both knives are carried close together with the Penan hunters.

Besides that, in the aspect of religion believe for Penan native, the Penan have been converting their animism belief to Christianity since in the 1930s. According to the functionalist Emile Durkheim, “ religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practice which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” (Robert Van Krieken, Daphne Habibis, Philip Smith, Brett Hutchins, Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn, 2006, page 390) However, some of the Penan native still having a strong believe in myths and spirits. The Penan leaders still practice the ritual of blood pacts with neighboring tribe when doing the political agreement. The ritual of blood pacts was believed that anyone who breach of this pact will cause to vomiting of blood and a violent death.

Moreover, in the aspect of economic for Penan native, most of the Penan are work as a hunter gatherer in forest and selling the main resource of the forest which is sago. The economy can be defined as a system of production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including the cultural belief that supports economic processes. During the colonial times, the British government will arrange trading missions called tamu close to the forests of the Penan to offered forest products like damar (now used in eco-paints), rattan mats and baskets, rhino horn, gaharu wood (or eagle-wood), wild rubber, monkey gallstones (for Chinese medicine), bills of hornbills, and deer antlers. These items were traded for manufacturing goods like knives, cooking pots and shotguns. None of these forest products are now abundant,

but many Penans will sell surplus meat to logging camps. The Penan native also sold the high quality gaharu from gaharu tree but that can take years to accumulate. Gaharu is used as incense, for medicinal and religious purposes, and as a perfume in the Middle East countries. For the division of labor for Penan, the man will always go for hunting and the woman will generally gather the sago from the sago palm tree and do the house chores. The pattern of economic subsistence for Penan native is foraging and horticulture. For instance, they are foraging in groups for wild plants and hunting for wild animals like wild boar and mouse deer. However, some Penan hunter still practicing the pedestrian foraging which means that the hunters are diversified hunting and gathering on foot. For the horticulture, they also rear some chickens, pigs, and monkey outside their house.

The Penan native also having symbolic interactionism when they are hunting inside the forest. According to “ the principal ontological claim of symbolic interactionist is that reality is not immutable or fixed but is constantly being recreated or ‘ achieved’ through the meaningful interaction of individuals.” (Tony Bilton, Kevin Bonnett, Philp Jones, Michelle Stanworth, Ken Sheard, and Andrew Webster, 1987, page 521) Symbolic interactionism means that the interaction among people, how people use symbols in communication and interaction to establish meaning, develop their view of the world, and communicate with one another. The Penan natives have their own forest sign language. For example, a bent twig stuck in the trail may simply delivering the direction of the hunter is going. The complex arrangements of cut twigs, sticks and folded leaves means that delivering the message to the Penan

native about anything from the state of the hunting locally to the others hunter whether they are in good mood or not.

Furthermore, the Penan native also facing social changes in the Penan society. In general terms social change refers to the changes in the nature, social institution, social behavior or social relations of a society, or other social structures. According to Barbara Marliene S. & Mary Ann A. Schwartz (2006) social change was defined as the time when external events happened, such as war and conquest and culture contact and diffusion, or environmental factors or internal events, such as innovations, invention and population shifts. For instance, in Penan society, the Penan native was influenced by the cultural diffusion from western, such as wearing t-shirt and jeans, cooking pot and cups made from western and lastly some of the hunter are using shotgun for hunting instead of using the blowpipes.

The collective action also occur among the Penan natives toward the government when the logging company keep on cutting of the tree in Penan forest without paying any compensate and development to the Penan area. For example, many blockades were set up in attempt to stop logging operations on their land. Unfortunately, the efforts were hard to carry on and the situation turns bad with vast scale of clashes between the indigenous community and the state supported logging company.

The Penan native also facing social changes because of the the geography and climate. It is because, the Penan natives is dealing with the survival problems inside the forest. Their food becomes hard to attain and the inhabited environment was contaminated because of the serious logging

happened in Penan forest. These kinds of situation makes their natives' life in the jungle becomes tough and unease. So, the member in the group is keep decreasing due to migration. " Migration refers to the movement of people into or out of a geographical area" (Barbara S & Mary A, 2006). So, in future, many youngsters who grew up in the nomadic group will choose to move out from the community and headed to the life style in the city. It is because the young people rather choose a spouse from the city than they own people that stayed in the group.

In the aspect of development in Penan society, the Penan native did not want any development from the government to them and they just want their own traditional life remains. According to Hunt, E. F. & Colander, " human being appears to be basically conservative and the human mind and personality are so constituted that once people beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of behavior, they have difficulty in changing them." (Hunt, E. F. & Colander, D. C. 2005, page 90) The statement above have shown that why the Penan natives reject the development from government. However, the logging company which could bring development and economic rises to the country have also cause a lot of negative impact to the Penan natives. For instance, the poorly planned logging trails had caused the issues of earth erosion, landslides and the silting of watercourses happened. The situation had affected the functional relation among the Penan and the forest. The big trees which were removed had cause the Penan native hard to gather and hunting for their foods. Lastly half of the habitat of Penan native was being demolished.

In the aspect of family in Penan society, the Penan natives are having closure group of marriage, it means that the Penan native will only married each other which is in their own tribe. According to Murdock, “ family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults.” (James Fulcher, John Scott, 2007, page 447) Most of the family in Penan society is nuclear family and extended family. Nuclear family refers to a “ domestic unit composed of a man and woman in a stable marital relationship, with their dependent children, and the extended families refer to where more than one generation of husbands and wives cohabit with their offspring.” (Tony Bilton, Kevin Bonnett, Philp Jones, Michelle Stanworth, Ken Sheard, and Andrew Webster, 1987, page 253) Most of the family member in Penan was built in extended family where the Penan natives live and work together inside their huts.

In the aspect of gender in Penan society, gender can be defined as “ a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are “ male” and “ female”, the corresponding terms for gender are “ masculine” and “ feminine”; these latter might be quite independent of biological sex.” (Robert Van Krieken, Daphne Habibis, Philip Smith, Brett Hutchins, Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn, 2006, page 304) The Penan natives are having their gender identity through the gender socialization. According to Ann Oakley, “ gender socialization is how socialization in modern industrial societies shapes the identity and behavior of girl and boys from an early age.” (Robert Van Krieken, Daphne Habibis,

Philip Smith, Brett Hutchins, Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn, 2006, page 316) For instance, the Penan's male when they are born they have to be a hunter-gatherer and do some rough work or learning the skill of doing rattans. The female who are born will have to do the house chores with their mother and do the fine work like collecting sago or fruits.

As a conclusion, the social changes have caused a lot of conflict among the Penan tribe and the government. Individual, groups, communities are reluctant to change and facing big struggle to adjust from the life style and conditions that they had used with, so many aspects in life have to be considered. At the same time the society have to differ themselves to maintain existing conditions. " The Penan resists change because of their romanticized notion of traditional values and " the good old days"." (Barbara S, Mary A, 2006) For example, the Penan people valued their forest habitat and their traditional rituals very much and fear of losing each of them caused them hesitated to receive changes. So, the phenomenon of the Penan resistance is natural and it is common if they persisted in their objection.

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