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Ethics of Refusal: Globalization and the Penan People's Struggle for Recognition¹

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Abstract

In this article I explore ways in which the Penan of Sarawak, Malaysia, whose lives have been impacted by globalization, draw on their rich cultural heritage to demand recognition. I argue that an articulation of a new rather than traditional form of struggle for recognition should come from the margins of the global system. Their indigenous practices, when linked to neocolonial domination, point to a possible “outside” of the system by highlighting the system’s destructive potential rendered invisible “at the center” and by embodying ways of living that promote social solidarity and preserve the environment. I argue further that by serving as alternative to globalization and their being an exploited social

¹ This paper was written while I was a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Asian Cultures and Theologies (IASACT), Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong from June to July 2014. I would like to thank the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia for their generous financial support, without which this project would not have been possible. I have benefited from the comments and constructive criticisms on an earlier draft by Prof. Bonita Aleaz, the Head of the Department of Political Science at the University of Calcutta and Rev. Dr. Eugene Eung-Chun Park, Dana and David Dornsife Professor of New Testament at San Francisco Theological Seminary, my mentors during my IASACT fellowship. I also have benefited from the comments and constructive criticisms of my fellow IASACT scholars.

class, the Penan can serve as potent agents of social transformation and represent an “ethics of refusal.”

Key terms *globalization, Penan people, struggle for recognition, indigenous culture, ethics of refusal*

In the face of the tremendous power of modern industry, science, and financial techniques, the appeal to indigenous modes of social organization as an alternative to the destructive tendency of globalization² might appear incredibly naïve. But this naiveté only appears to be the case if one forgets the immensely destructive nature of globalization. To speak very simply, and if one lets oneself be guided by the generally accepted notion that globalization has a destructive tendency: if a logic at work “at the center,” which has been imported to the new emerging powers, and has subjugated territories “in the periphery” like the Penan community in Sarawak, Malaysia, is left to rule unchecked, only a catastrophe can emerge from it—either a social (new wars) or environmental (climate change) catastrophe, or a combination of the two. Against this

² I take the term globalization along the lines of Anthony Giddens’s thoughts. Giddens defines globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations linking distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many thousands of miles away and vice versa”. See Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), 64. Yet Giddens, in his work *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives*, claims that the meaning of globalization is not always clear. What is clear, according to him, is that we now live in one world. See Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives* (New York: Profile Books, 1999), 7. Giddens argues that it is a mistake to take globalization purely in economic terms. Globalization for him is a complex notion, so that it encompasses not only the economic but the political, cultural, and technological as well. (Ibid., 10). When I use the term “globalization” in this study, I specifically mean “economic globalization” which, to follow closely Giddens’s contention, undermines local subsistence economies and has caused familial and cultural distortions. (Ibid., 17). Giddens’s notion of economic globalization indeed provides a theoretical basis for this study.

background, the alternative model of social life presented by the Penan indigenous culture, and indeed the historical struggles that were waged in its name, suddenly appear anything but sentimental. Thus, while it is true that the Penan culture has been under threat, I argue that it can be a point of resistance. Indeed, indigenous cultures in general and Penan culture in particular can be viewed as one of the rich sources of social hope in today's globalized world.

It must be noted, however, that the emphasis on indigenous cultures as potent agents of social transformation will no longer champion the capacity of these groups of people to overthrow the system through violent means, like the socialist revolution. Rather, it will highlight the specificity, for example, of the cooperative nature of production and consumption inherent in the traditional values of indigenous peoples, values which are potent instruments of emancipation, inasmuch as globalization can best be countervailed by these. Thus, this article argues that an articulation of a new form of struggle for recognition, one that is directly antithetical to the traditional ones, should come from the periphery, from the margins of the global system. Traditional forms of the struggle for recognition that have resulted in radical social transformations, such as the ones we witnessed in history, for example, the French Revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Long March in China, and, recently, the Arab Spring, have in common the disenfranchised groups taking the courage to rise up to the task of transforming the society to their advantage. However, with the intensification of the cultural form of domination in the postwar period, where domination has become so subtle, there is a need to rethink and significantly revise our traditional conception of resistance. A return to the indigenous mode of work, consumption habit, and distribution, which primarily hinges on the notion of cooperation

exemplified by the cultural practices of the Penan people, therefore, can be viewed as the best alternative because it would mean a redirection of the capitalist-driven economic globalization toward the satisfaction of the basic needs and aspirations of individuals. In fact, the indigenous culture located at the margins of the global system enjoy the privilege of having its practices, as soon as they are linked to neocolonial domination, point immediately to a possible outside of the system in two ways. First, it highlights from the outside the destructive potential of the system, a destructive potential that has become invisible at the center; and second, it also embodies other ways of living and organizing society, one that promotes social solidarity and a sustainable method to conserve and preserve the environment. It is precisely in this respect that the Penan people pose themselves as potent agents of social transformation, given that the model of social life that they represent can be an alternative to globalization. All other groups, except those in the periphery, have already been included in the mechanisms that allow the global system to perpetuate itself, notably by making them accept a language and a way of feeling and looking at social life that serve the system's self-reproduction.

Furthermore, I argue, along the lines of Georg W. F. Hegel's theory of recognition, that the role of the Penan people as potent agents of social transformation in contemporary societies is substantiated by their being an exploited social class today. One good reason for adopting Hegel's theory here is that it provides a moral ground for the Penan people's resistance to economic globalization. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel argues that when individuals or groups are denied recognition, that is, when they are disenfranchised and do not feel connected to a community or institution that could provide them with the means necessary for

them to realize their being, they have no other option but to struggle for it.³ For Hegel, therefore, disenfranchisement serves as a normative ground of any form of a struggle for recognition. Now, given the extent of the disenfranchisement of the Penan people as a result of the invasion and penetration of their space by the forces of globalization, indeed, we can rightly claim that, following Hegel, the Penan people can represent a force that corresponds to what we may rightly call an “ethics of refusal.”⁴

The article is divided into two major parts. In the first, I briefly sketch how economic globalization, through its major stakeholders such as the transnational corporations and the local elite and politicians, penetrates into the very core of the Penan culture resulting in what we can very well observe today as the structural transformation of indigenous communities. Here, I will specifically highlight the miserable conditions this penetration creates, as well as the extent of disenfranchisement it has brought upon the Penan people. In the second part, I discuss how the the Penan people struggled for recognition as can be seen most visibly in their resistance to globalization. Moreover, I show in what way an indigenous culture can be a point of resistance through a presentation of the historical development of the Penan people’s strategic response to the threat of globalization, highlighting their specific demands for autonomy and for recognition of their rights as an indigenous people. The cultural practices of these indigenous

³ Georg W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller with Analysis of the Text and Foreword by J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111–19. See also Jean-Philippe Deranty and Emmanuel Renault, “Politicizing Honneth’s Ethics of Recognition,” *Thesis Eleven* No. 88 (Feb. 2007): 92–111.

⁴ The term “ethics” in this article is understood as “the possibility of a radical action”—as in the case of Habermas’s “Ethics of Communicative Action” or Honneth’s “Ethics of Recognition”—and not as a branch of philosophy that studies the morality of human actions.

peoples have a direct bearing on their struggle for recognition, on their resistance against contemporary forms of economic globalization. It must be noted, however, that this narrative is not an attempt to make a history of the Penan people; rather, it is a philosophical exercise or, to be specific, a critique of the dynamics of domination and resistance in the Penan community which heavily draws on history.

The Penan Way of Life

Before I start, some brief background on the Penan is needed in order for us to make sense of who they are and their situation before and after the incursion of economic globalization into their space. The Penan community forms part of the Dayak⁵ group in Sarawak with an estimated population of 16, 281 in 2010, according to the State Planning Unit.⁶ The Penan are originally nomadic hunter-gatherers, most of whom live in the interior of Sarawak. For many years, the Penan never practiced agriculture and instead depended entirely on the forest for their survival—from food and shelter to medicine and other basic needs. In fact for the Penan, the forest is their life and, thus, an intrusion into the forest is also a direct intrusion into their private space. According to the State

⁵ The term Dayak is a collective name for the ethnic groups in the island of Borneo. See Taufiq Tanasaldy, *Regime Change and Ethnic Politics in Indonesia: Dayak Politics of West Kalimantan* (Indonesia: Koninklyk Instituut Voor Taal Land, 2014). See also Bernard Sellato, *Innermost Borneo: Studies in Dayak Cultures* (Singapore: Seven Orients/Singapore University Press, 2002). According to Fadzilah Majid Cooke, “Dayak is the umbrella name used to describe the various non-Muslim indigenous groups in Sarawak composed of the Iban, Bidayuh (composing a number of sub-groups) and the Orang Ulu (among whom are the Bisaya, Kedayan, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit and Penan/Punan). The term, however, is externally introduced and of relatively recent development” (Fadzilah Majid Cooke, “Forests, Protest Movements and the Struggle Over Meaning and Identity in Sarawak,” *Akademika* 55 [July 1999]: 103).

⁶ State Planning Unit, 2010, quoted in Novel Lyndon et al., “The World-View of Penan Community on Quality Life,” *Asian Social Science* 9, no. 14 (2013): 99.

Planning Unit in 2010, 77 percent of the Penan have permanent settlement, 20 percent are seminomadic, and 3 percent are nomads.⁷ Based on these data, we can loosely categorize the Penan people today into three different types in terms of their dwelling and the way they secure their basic needs, namely: 1) the settled Penan, 2) the seminomadic Penan, and 3) the nomadic Penan.

The settled Penan are those who live permanently in durable houses found usually in clustered communities. This type of Penan depends largely on swidden agriculture for their survival.⁸ The seminomadic Penan are those who have settled in a particular place more or less permanently. This is the group of Penan who had built more durable houses and who practiced agriculture; however, they still largely depend on hunting and gathering for their subsistence.⁹ The nomadic Penan are those who roam the jungle in search of food and other supplies, and move in groups that are normally composed of 5 or 6 families.¹⁰ They usually settle in a particular place for several days or even months until their resources are exhausted, and then move again to another place. Their settlements usually consist of huts made out of wooden poles and palm leaves as roofing.¹¹

The nomadic Penan rely mostly on sago starch extracted from wild sago palms as their source of carbohydrates.¹² The very location

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Peter Metcalf, “The Baram District. A Survey of Kenyah, Kayan and Penan Peoples,” *Sarawak Museum Journal* 22, no. 43 (1974). See also Jayl Langub, “Some Aspects of Life of the Penan,” *Sarawak Museum Journal* 40, no. 61, Special Issue no. 4, Pt. 3 (1989): 169–84.

⁹ Metcalf, “The Baram District.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. It must be noted, however, that the Penan now used tarpaulins as roofing of their makeshift huts. For more on the life and cultural practices of the Penan, see Paul Malone, *The Peaceful People: The Penan and Their Fight for the Forest* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Center, 2015).

¹² J. Peter Brosius, “Foraging in Tropical Rain Forest: The Case of the Penan of Sarawak, East Malaysia (Borneo),” *Human Ecology* 19, no. 2 (2013): 123–50.

of their camp depends on the availability of sago palms. What is interesting in the way they harvest sago is that they take only what is enough (*molong*) for each family for a specific period of time, and they do not cut down another sago palm until they run out of food. This practice is all the more interesting when we think of how it directly impacts the environment in terms of the principles of conservation and preservation. Because what is taken from the forest amounts to nothing but a very insignificant amount compared to the entire resources the forest offers, this practice (*molong*) puts little strain on the forest, thus allowing the forest to rejuvenate itself in a perfectly natural way. As is well known, the Sarawak forest had remained unspoiled until industrial logging began to take place in the 1960s. Indeed in the history of civilization, I do not know a more sustainable way of preserving and conserving the environment than the indigenous way.

Another important core value that is worth knowing and espousing in Penan culture is the notion of “sharing.” As a matter of fact, for the Penan, the most serious social offense is *see hun*, translated roughly as a “failure to share.”¹³ For the Penan, all the gifts that the forest offers are to be shared. For example, when the men have hunted a wild boar, they see to it that the meat is equally distributed among member families—even the smallest of prey has to be equally shared among all members of the hunting group.¹⁴ With this practice, we may say that there is no way a single member in the community is allowed to starve, as every single individual is conscious of her responsibility to share, to attend to the needs not

¹³ See “The Penan Hunter-Gatherers of Sarawak,” <http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2014/04/17/the-penan-hunter-gatherers-of-sarawak/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

only of her kin but of the community as a whole. This cultural value, which lies at the core of the Penan community, enables the Penan people not only to live in common, but also to bind themselves in solidarity, especially in fighting for a particular cause. For example, as I will show later, the Penan people have been in solidarity with one another for the past decades in their struggle for land rights recognition.

This brief introduction to Penan life in general shows us another way of living—of behaving and consuming—one that does not necessarily depend on a system that promotes destruction in the name of progress. It also suggests that this way of living promotes peace, solidarity, and being one with nature, and is at the same time structurally inconceivable at the center of the global system. However, as we can see, this way of living, which the Penan have been practicing for centuries, is now under attack by the forces of economic globalization, most especially through land grabbing and illegal logging. To show how the agents of economic globalization transformed the cultural practices of the Penan, I discuss briefly how the transnational corporations, in cooperation with the Malaysian government, have impoverished the Penan and made them more and more landless, thereby causing the crystallization of the Penan's resentment to a point where they could begin to embody the principle of refusal.

Development Initiatives in Sarawak and their Impacts on the Penan People

In order to make sense of how economic globalization has impacted the life of the Penan, a brief engagement with the development initiatives of the Malaysian government in Sarawak is needed. These development initiatives aim to both integrate the

Penan into the rural development projects and alleviate poverty and improve their well-being.¹⁵ These initiatives, however, may be viewed as an imposition of a Western model of development on the society in the periphery, inasmuch as between the Malaysian government and transnational corporations there exists a (holy) alliance which results to some extent in of the recipient society's structural transformation and loss of identity. While this new model of development may to some extent offer some advantages, it is imperative that it does not create extreme environmental degradation, as well as violent and abrupt structural transformations of societies at the margins. Viewed from a critical social theory perspective, any model of development needs to be mindful of the importance of the notion of immanent critique, where the offering of alternatives to perceived "social pathologies" would directly stem from the outcome of the social diagnosis of the internal contradictions latent in the society under consideration. This means allowing the recipient society to become conscious of its own internal dynamics and letting it speak for itself in the conceptualization alternatives. This point is particularly relevant in the case of the Penan community because, according to Sivapalan Selvadurai and others, the development model of the West, which aims to alleviate poverty and improve the well-being of the Penan, resulted only in the displacement and exclusion of the Penan.¹⁶ Selvadurai and others add: "Instead of generating development that supports improvement in the quality of life of their own citizens (i.e. the Penan), the state embarked on varying development projects

¹⁵ Sivapalan Selvadurai et al., "Penan Natives' Discourse *for* and *against* Development," *Asian Social Science* 9, no. 8 (2013): 74.

¹⁶ Ibid.

such as deforestation, plantation, and dam development that jeopardized their livelihood.”¹⁷ In what follows I briefly present the Malaysian government’s development initiatives in Sarawak and their impacts on the Penan community.¹⁸

On Logging. Two types of timber companies operate in Sarawak, Malaysia: one is state owned and the other private owned. The state-owned companies are under the auspices of the Sarawak Timber Industry Development Corporation (STIDC), which operates with private companies as subsidiaries. Most of the shares of these subsidiary companies are owned by the state. According to Daniel Faeh, “[b]y its own definition, STIDC plays a role in the planning, coordination and development of the timber industries in Sarawak, aimed at ensuring optimum and efficient utilization of timber resources, by encouraging downstream processing and product diversification.”¹⁹ As we can see, the Malaysian government, through the STIDC, aims to take advantage economically of the Sarawak forest resources in a more sustainable manner. In fact, the Malaysian Forest Department, which was established in 1919, aims to manage and conserve the forest resources in Sarawak in a sustainable way.²⁰ Despite its good intention, at least in principle, the Malaysian government has been directly responsible for the massive

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74–75.

¹⁸ It must be noted that these development initiatives were legitimated by the conversion of ancestral lands into state lands through formal land codification under the Torrens land registration system during the British colonial period. The newly independent Malaysian nation-state continued to implement these agrarian policies, which in most cases favored the elite and ignored the plight of the indigenous people. For a thorough discussion on the modern history of agrarian law in Sarawak, see Dimbab Ngidang, “Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Native Customary Land Tenure in Sarawak,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (June 2005): 47–75.

¹⁹ Daniel Faeh, “Development of Global Timber Tycoons in Sarawak, East Malaysia: History and Company Profiles, A Report Produced for: Bruno Manser Fund, Switzerland, February 2011,” in *Bruno Manser Fonds for the Peoples of the Rainforest*, 18, http://www.bmf.ch/upload/berichte/bmf_report_sarawak_timber_tycoons_1.pdf.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

destruction of the Sarawak forest by granting logging concessions to some of the major private-owned timber companies that have indiscriminately logged the Sarawak forest, namely: Samling Global, Rimbunan Hijau,²¹ the WTK Group, the Ta Ann Group, the KTS Group, and the Shin Yang Group.²²

According to Faeh, these six timber companies “hold at least 4.5 million or so hectares of timber concessions in Sarawak and control 90 percent of the area for which logging licenses were issued up until 2006.”²³ It is important to note that about 90 percent of the total land area of Sarawak has been licensed to logging companies both state-owned and private. According to Davis Wade, the Sarawak forest has been rapidly depleting, due to massive and indiscriminate logging.²⁴ Moreover, these six timber companies are also among the forty-one active forest plantation license-holders in Sarawak.²⁵ In fact their reserved lands earmarked for possible oil palm plantations, consisting of around 700, 000 hectares, is bigger in size than the area of 664, 612 hectares of land already planted with oil palms in 2007.²⁶

If we imagine how much destruction these huge timber concessions have brought upon the Sarawak forest—as a matter of fact, the rate of deforestation in Sarawak is one of the fastest in the world²⁷—one can truly doubt the sincerity of the Malaysian

²¹ Ironically the phrase, *rimbunan hijau*, means “forever green” in English. See *ibid.*, 39.

²² *Ibid.* 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁴ Davis Wade, “Societies in Danger: Death of a People; Logging in the Penan Homeland,” *Cultural Survival* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1993), <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/democratic-republic-congo/societies-danger-death-people-lo>. It must be noted that this is only an estimate since no exact data have been released by the Malaysian government.

²⁵ Faeh, “Global Timber Tycoons in Sarawak,” <http://www.bmf.ch/>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ “The Penan,” *Survival*, <http://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/penan>.

government in its intent to log the Sarawak forest in a sustainable way. As Faeh notes, most of the timber tycoons in Sarawak have close relationships with key politicians, especially the local elites, who are more than willing to sacrifice humanity and the environment for personal economic gain.²⁸ Selvadurai and others also note that the Sarawak state government “justifies its logging activity as a precursor to palm-oil plantation development.”²⁹

On Plantations. Another environmental issue that has directly affected the Penan people, let alone the rich biodiversity of the Sarawak forest, is the establishment of large monoculture plantations. According to the World Rainforest Movement, two types of large monoculture plantations predominate in Sarawak, namely, oil palm plantations and industrial tree plantations, both of which have severely threatened “the customary land rights and rights over resources which represent the lifeline for most of the indigenous groups in Sarawak,” especially the Penan.³⁰

In 2010 Malaysia contributed 38 percent of the world’s oil palm production, second only to Indonesia with 49 percent.³¹ Given the huge amount of revenues this industry has brought to the Malaysian economy, we can understand why the Malaysian government has allowed the transnational and local corporations alike, through the issuance of forest plantation licenses, to convert huge tracts of lands into oil palm and industrial tree plantations even at the expense of

²⁸ Faeh, “Global Timber Tycoons in Sarawak,” <http://www.bmf.ch/>.

²⁹ Selvadurai et al., “Penan Natives’ Discourse *for* and *against* Development,” 74.

³⁰ “Sarawak Campaign: Background Issues Affecting the Indigenous Dayak Peoples of Sarawak,” *World Rainforest Movement*, <http://wrm.org.uy/oldsite/countries/Sarawak/dayak.html>.

³¹ Arina P. Schrier-Uijl et al., “Environmental and Social Impacts of Oil Palm Cultivation on Tropical Peat. A Scientific Review” (Reports from the Technical Panels of the 2nd Greenhouse Gas Working Group of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil [RSPO]), http://www.rspo.org/file/GHGWG2/8_env_n_social_impacts_of_oil_palm_on_peat_Schrier_et_al.pdf.

the environment and indigenous peoples. In fact, a study on oil palm land use in Peninsular Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) in 2008–2009 showed that 5.01 million hectares have already been planted with oil palms.³²

These oil palm and industrial tree plantations have indeed caused so much destruction to Sarawak's species-rich ecosystem, such as the loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, extinction of palm sago, and the contamination of rivers. But one telling phenomenon that we cannot ignore in this process is the displacement of a human community that completely depends on the forest for survival: the Penan people. These oil palm and industrial tree plantations, in addition to massive logging, have not only deprived the Penan people of their natural customary rights, but also forcibly evicted them from the land that has sheltered and sustained them for millennia.

On Dams. The construction of massive dams in several places in Sarawak has also contributed significantly to the marginalization of the Penan people (and other indigenous groups). These “massive hydroelectric dams . . . are destroying the remaining forests of the region while violating the rights of the indigenous people who have called that land home for generations.”³³ One particular dam, located in Bakun, Sarawak (thus its name Bakun Dam) which is, according to *International Rivers*, the largest in Asia outside China, has put 700 square kilometers of pristine forests and prime farmlands under water.³⁴ “[This] project was developed by the Malaysian

³² Ibid.

³³ “Stop the Dams,” *The Borneo Project*, <http://borneoproject.org/our-work/ongoing-campaigns/stop-the-dams>.

³⁴ “Bakun Dam,” *International Rivers*, <https://www.internationalrivers.org/campaigns/bakun-dam>.

government and Chinese state-owned dam builder Sinohydro with support from the China Export-Import Bank.”³⁵ Indeed, this is another concrete example of how the Malaysian government has cooperated with a transnational corporation in exploiting the land of indigenous peoples in the name of progress and development. As a matter of fact, the Malaysian government plans to build twelve more hydroelectric dams all over the State of Sarawak in the next few years, which implies more and more displacement of indigenous peoples.

The discussion above shows that the Penan people have been among the direct victims of economic globalization that has developed in Sarawak. They form part of the most exploited of all social classes in their country. It is precisely in this respect that they can represent a force to challenge the unchecked dominance of globalization. As the direct victims of the neocolonial exploitation that accompanies economic globalization in Sarawak, they are in no way included in the logic of the system as other populations are. Thus, we can rightly argue that the social and environmental problems that the Penan people in Sarawak are facing today have been compounded and entrenched by the invasion of a country by the forces of economic globalization relayed and aided by the local elites and local institutions. This form of domination has also been accompanied by more direct, brutal, and primitive forms of oppression, which are used to impose the foreign rule and its spirit onto the native population. As I mentioned previously, this form of domination has crystallized the Penan people’s resentment, and has brought the Penan, a peace-loving people, to a point in their history

³⁵ *Ibid.*

where they begin to embody the principle of “refusal.” According to Selvadurai and others, the Penan people have opposed these development initiatives, such as logging, oil palm plantations, and dam constructions, because they disrupt their livelihood and habitat.³⁶

The full impact of economic globalization on the Penan people, as expressed most visibly through these development initiatives, is captured more fully in Christopher Joseph Fleming Skinner’s work titled “The Varying Treatment of Selected Human Rights Issues via Internet Media in Sarawak, East Malaysia.” It might be worthwhile quoting one of the longer extracts of this work. Skinner writes:

The most common complaint of the Penan people is that sporadic timber extraction has uprooted much of the jungle’s sago palms, which is their traditional staple food. Logging has destroyed many fruit bearing trees, as well as those from which the Penan extract blow dart poison, which they use for hunting. Other complaints of the Penan people are that the sound of industrial activity scares off game, while the number of those remaining has been depleted because the fallen trees cannot provide forage for them. As well, the loggers often hunt with shotguns. River siltation has killed much of the fish that people depend on, and the lack of clean water makes it difficult for people to process sago flour. The destruction of rattan, from which many goods and crafts are made, makes it increasingly difficult for the Penan to participate in a

³⁶ Selvadurai et al., “Penan Natives’ Discourse *for* and *against* Development,” 77.

cash economy. In addition to the loss of items needed for their subsistence, the Penan are deeply affected by the obliteration of their gravesites, which are almost always located on the same mountain ridges where logging roads are constructed.³⁷

Disenfranchisement and the Struggle for Recognition

Having presented a brief exposition on the life of the Penan people and the circumstances that befell them as a result of the intrusion of their space by the forces of economic globalization, we may now explore some of the ways in which they responded to such intrusion. To reiterate, the feeling of being disenfranchised, of being marginalized and deprived of their right to self-determination forms the basis of the Penan's struggle for recognition. For Axel Honneth, the leading figure of the third generation of critical theorists in the Frankfurt School tradition, misrecognition, or the lack of recognition, of the individual person or the group's collective right to self-determination and other rights necessary for the full realization of the individuals' potentialities, is the root cause of social pathologies.³⁸ Hence, for Honneth, following Hegel, social transformation or emancipation directly stems from class conflict expressed most visibly in a struggle for recognition.

After decades of exploitation of their land by the forces of economic globalization, the peace-loving Penan, along with other indigenous peoples in Sarawak, finally took action against massive

³⁷ Christopher Joseph Fleming Skinner, "The Varying Treatment of Selected Human Rights Issues via Internet Media in Sarawak, East Malaysia" (MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2010), 10.

³⁸ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

logging in 1987.³⁹ First, the Penan lodged their complaints with the Malaysian government through the help and guidance of the nongovernment organization, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), but to no avail.⁴⁰ Although it has openly expressed its interest in addressing the problem that the Penan are facing, the Malaysian government seems to have surreptitiously supported the logging companies by simply ignoring the complaints of the Penan. This anomaly prompted the Penan people in 1987 to turn to “. . . more powerful action[s] and erected 25 blockades across logging roads in the Baram and Limbang Districts of Sarawak”.⁴¹ According to Sabihah Osman, blockades and unlawful occupations of state lands are the primary forms of resistance that the Penan took as a way of responding to the forces of economic globalization.⁴² These moves, however, were unsuccessful because the Malaysian government declared the blockading of logging roads as illegal and punishable by a two-year imprisonment without trial and a fine of MYR6,000.⁴³ According

³⁹ “Since that time the Penan have become the focus of a broad-based international environmental campaign to assert their land rights and preserve the Sarawak rainforest.” See J. Peter Brosius, “Endangered Forest, Endangered People: Environmental Representations of Indigenous Knowledge”, *Human Ecology* 25, no. 1 (1997): 48. Of course, it is not only the Penan people who fought against economic globalization in Sarawak. Other Dayak groups in Sarawak also staged environmental activism in the form of blockades and occupations of state lands, but I follow Majid Cooke’s contention in finding it useful to highlight the Penan in their struggle for recognition, especially land rights recognition, because being the most direct victims of this form of domination, they may help phenomenize the struggle for customary land rights recognition in Sarawak. See Majid Cooke, “The Politics of Sustained Yield Forest Management in Malaysia: Constructing the Boundaries of Time, Control and Consent,” *Geoforum* 24, no. 5 (1995): 445–58.

⁴⁰ “A History of the Penan Struggle in Sarawak, Malaysia,” <http://penaninsarawak.blogspot.com/2010/04/penan-in-sarawak-history.html>

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Sabihah Osman, “Globalization and democratization: the response of the indigenous peoples of Sarawak,” *Third World Quarterly* 21, no. 6 (2000): 977.

⁴³ “A History of the Penan Struggle”, <http://borneo.live.radicaldesigns.org/article.php?id=61>. See also Majid Cooke, “Forest, Protest Movement and the Struggle over Meaning,” 99–132. According to Majid Cooke, “The 1987 amendment (90B) to the Sarawak Forest Ordinance made blockading of logging roads illegal and entitled the state to use power against such activity. A further amendment in 1993 presumed guilty anyone found or arrested in the area where barricades have been set up, even if he/she does not actively participate in them or engage in putting them. . . .” (*ibid.*, 101.)

to Bruno Manser, a famous Swiss activist who had lived with Penan themselves and was credited for making the Penan's struggle for recognition known internationally, a total of 478 individuals from various Dayak groups arrested or imprisoned in the years 1987 to 1994.⁴⁴ As we can see, this conundrum manifests concretely how “power” at the center of the global system has been imported to a new emerging one—which eventually becomes one of the centers of the global system—in cooperation with the said emerging local power.

In their attempt to make themselves heard the Penan leaders, together with the leaders of other ethnic groups in Sarawak, went to Kuala Lumpur to express their sentiments to the Malaysian government. With the help of SAM, these Sarawak ethnic groups came up with a written resolution containing their demands for national communal land rights.⁴⁵ But because this demand had fallen on deaf ears, in 1988, the Penan people had to resort again to erecting blockades on the logging roads that cut through their customary lands, which prompted the Malaysian government to finally heed the concerns of the Penan people. Thus, in 1990, “. . . the Sarawak State Government established the Sarawak Penan Affairs Committee, with the official purpose to facilitate government assistances towards the needs [of the Penan], to address any problems raised by the Penan, and to implement any development projects intended for the Penan”.⁴⁶ The years 1990 to

⁴⁴ Bruno Manser, *Voices from the Rainforest* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Social Analysis, 1996), 266.

⁴⁵ See Majid Cooke, “Forests, Protest Movements and the Struggle Over Meaning,” 118–19. See also J. Peter Brosius, “Prior transcripts, divergent paths: Resistance and acquiescence to logging in Sarawak, East Malaysia”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 3 (1997), 476.

⁴⁶ “A History of the Penan Struggle in Sarawak, Malaysia 1963–1986,” <http://penaninsarawak.blogspot.com/2010/04/penan-in-sarawak-history.html>.

1995 witnessed a relative acquiescence of the Penan people as they took a wait-and-see attitude toward development projects and assistance promised by the Malaysian government.

After five long years of fruitless waiting for government action, the Penan people of Long Sayan became frustrated. In June 1996 they erected new blockades on the logging roads that belong to Rimbunan Hijau. Despite several arrests from the Malaysian government, the Penan people continued to erect blockades in 1997 in their attempt to demand recognition of their national communal land rights. "Finally, discussions with the primary logging company in their area . . . led to the signing of an agreement that set aside a watershed protection area not to be disturbed by logging and granted the community compensation for harvesting their forest in other areas at 80cts per ton."⁴⁷ Yet this agreement turned out to be another broken promise. Logging continued within or even beyond the boundaries of the protected areas and the logging company (Rimbunan Hijau) provided extremely low estimates of their harvest which would then be used as a basis for compensation calculations.⁴⁸ Thus, in 2000 and 2001, the Penan people erected more blockades in many parts of Sarawak, in lands where they had claimed customary rights. And from 2001 onward, the Penan and other ethnic groups that have been directly affected by these massive loggings and the transformation of huge tracts of land into oil palm and industrial tree plantations have continued to stage protests against these transnational corporations and the Malaysian government. They have had no choice but to continue the struggle for land rights recognition as they received too little attention from

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

the Malaysian government. According to Ajang Kiew, leader of the Sarawak Penan Association, if the logging continues, then they will suffer even more, and if they keep quiet, then they would lose much more of the/their forest.⁴⁹

The foregoing narrative is meant to show that the Penan people's struggle for recognition, as expressed most visibly in their opposition to massive loggings, concretely instantiates the idea that the cultural practices of the indigenous peoples can be a point of resistance, inasmuch as these cultural practices directly influence such struggles for recognition and, as already mentioned, embody other ways of living and organizing society, ways that promote social solidarity and a sustainable method of conserving and preserving the environment.

As I have said, my emphasis on the Penan people's struggle for recognition is founded first of all on their being one of the exploited social classes in Sarawak, Malaysia suffering from direct or indirect neocolonial exploitation, whether or not imposed through the colonial powers. The full impacts of economic globalization through loggings and the establishment of oil palm and industrial tree plantations as well as the construction of huge dams hit the Penan people most deeply and marginalized them severely. Against the false hope of neoliberal propaganda, the experience of real emancipation by a marginalized indigenous community like the Penan, will have to touch real masses in ways that are authentic for them. Rather than an industrial, consumer society to which false hopes are attached, an alternative, that is, more humane and flourishing society, would have to be found in the very structures of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

indigenous life. As we can see in the above discussion, the Penan people draw on aspects of their rich cultural heritage, such as the notions of solidarity and a deep sense of community, in their attempt to resist economic globalization.

At this point, a word of clarification is in order: the idea of solidarity, which enables the Penan to bind themselves together in their struggle for national communal land rights, should be understood not only as a “coming together” when issues arise, but also as marking their very existence as a community. As a matter of fact, the Penan people, unlike any other communities, have been in solidarity even in times of peace. The notions of *molong* and *see bun* clearly show that “solidarity” for the Penan people is not only a by-word for “coming together,” for example in the public sphere, because of an issue that affects the community. “Solidarity,” for the Penan people, is a way of life; it is an indelible mark of their being a community. They do not withdraw from the community after their personal interests are addressed. On the contrary, they live in common and their priority is the community as well as the environment. Thus, my emphasis on the Penan people’s struggle for recognition, especially their struggle for land rights recognition, does not only aim to contribute to the emancipation of the Penan people themselves, but also to highlight the fact that it offers a unique way of countervailing economic globalization. Indeed, this struggle for recognition promotes social solidarity and a more sustainable method of preserving and conserving the environment.

Finally, it is important to mention that the main position of this article does not suggest that the Penan people have to remain in that seemingly backward society (that is to say, apparently “backward” from an outsider’s point of view). Whether we like it or not, the aggressive and violent penetration of the indigenous communities by

the forces of globalization would eventually integrate indigenous communities into the global system. What is important, however, is that the state duly recognizes the demand of indigenous communities for national communal land rights. In this way the Penan may be able to preserve their unique culture amidst the inevitable intrusion of economic globalization. Indeed, the Penan people's unique culture of "solidarity," as expressed most visibly in their practice of *molong* and *see bun*, may inspire societies located at the center of the global system to follow suit. It could remind us that there is another way of behaving and consuming that does not instigate the dissolution of social bond and the destruction of the environment.

Conclusion

As the Penan people have become more and more dispossessed due to massive loggings and the establishment of huge oil palm and industrial tree plantations as well as the construction of huge dams in Sarawak, it seems that the Malaysian government had never been sincere in introducing land reforms as a way of responding to the Penan people's struggle for recognition. The intervention of the Malaysian government, which enabled the Penan and the logging corporations to dialogue which each other, can now be viewed only as an act of appeasing the disenfranchised Penan people, offering false promises to the all too trusting Penan. The displacement and dispossession of the Penan, that is to say, their exclusion from the affairs of the Malaysian government, have been compounded by the transnational corporations as agents of economic globalization. While the presence of these transnational corporations in Sarawak may have contributed to the economic development of the country, we cannot discount the fact that it also has brought so much

destruction to the environment and massive displacement and dispossession of the indigenous peoples. Thus, it is precisely in this respect that the Penan people can represent a force that we may rightly call an “ethics of refusal”, that is, a refusal to abide by the prevailing repressive rationality, indeed a courageous persistence to say “no” to any form of domination.

Also, the rich cultural practices of the Penan people have shown us another, unique way of countervailing economic globalization, one that promotes social solidarity and a more sustainable method of preserving and conserving the environment. Indeed, the Penan people pose themselves as potent agents of social transformation, given that the model of social life presented by this indigenous culture can serve as an alternative to globalization.

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