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Being lost

Landscape, troubling spirits and ritual strategies among the Eastern Penan

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Abstract: This article explores the relationship between humans, their landscape and a spirit believed to make people lose their way. Departing from a very brief ethnographic sketch of the last remaining nomadic foragers of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, this article explains the relationship between the Eastern Penan and their forest home. It is emphasised that they consider themselves part and parcel of the forest, rather than subject-inhabitants in an object-environment, and that the nomadic process, the locomotion through the forest expanse, is a mode of being rather than a journey from one place to another. The article’s focal point is the predicament of being lost, a situation that effectively cuts the ties between the wayfarer and the rest of the world. It is argued that going astray is a chaotic situation, which reveals the nature of the Penans’ relationship with the forest. Two apotropaic ritual strategies for overcoming the situation are described and analysed. As the problem is overcome, a cosmic balance is re-established on several levels. A brief conclusion stressing the particularities of the Penan case ends the article.

Keywords: Penan, balei spirits, apotropaic rituals, nomads, Borneo, getting lost, rainforest

1. A brief ethnography

The Eastern Penan of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, lived until recently as nomadic hunter-gatherers. Each group, numbering around 25–40 individuals, would primarily occupy their own customary territory, tana’ pengurip – which probably is best translated into ‘the place where [our] lives unfold’ – and each member of the egalitarian group would know the expanse from his or her everyday experience. A group’s tana’ pengurip is not static or definitive; people move and groups divide, so tana’ pengurip does not need to be about one
place only over the course of one’s life (for ethnographic references, including the differences between Eastern and Western Penan, two related but different groups, see Nicolaisen 1976; Needham 2007; Rothstein 2016a). Only few such groups have survived the cultural changes brought about by severe logging (Straumann 2014) and Christian missionary work (Rothstein 2016a:441–496), but in little clusters, in total perhaps less than 50 individuals out of the approximately 9000 Eastern Penan (according to the Sarawak Statistics Yearbook 2014 there were, all in all, roughly 12,500 Penan, Eastern and Western), the old ways still prevail, and people, settled or not, are still astonishingly well oriented in the remaining forests, individually, but perhaps more importantly, as a group. They know their way (in areas with which they are familiar, but not otherwise, obviously), know what to expect, what to avoid, and how to overcome the obstacles that are always encountered during movements over the rugged forest hills. Now, as huge areas of primary rainforest have been logged, the structure of the forest, whether climatic or with regard to flora and fauna (McAlpine et al 2018; WWF 2017), has changed considerably. The secondary forest that emerges in the wake of logging is often quite impenetrable and very different from the more open and traversable primary forest, and it cannot sustain the same biological diversity as the primary rainforest. In this article, I shall only discuss issues pertaining to the original conditions, as the Penans’ way of coping in their forest homes was developed in the pre-logged environment. The intention is to cast some light on how the forest landscape is understood in conjunction with notions of certain spirits, and how ritual measures may be applied in order to uphold the wandering Penans’ perception of the forest and their role in it.

A methodological note is in place here: what I term ‘original conditions’ as a coherent system only survives in very few places among very few individuals and must in effect be considered a thing of the past. However, by seeking out information about old beliefs, customs and habits, it is possible to build a more or less coherent picture of what it was like. My main data was derived from members of the now settled Ba Puak group – living along the Tutoh river, a tributary of the Baram – whom I had the opportunity to visit regularly during the final stages of their nomadic lifestyle (2005–2011). During subsequent visits (2011–present) we have learned that knowledge of their traditional lifestyle is not at all forgotten, and much is still to be learned from settled Penan who, disregarding acculturation, Christian mission etc, retain a number of old traditions, or remember things of bygone days quite vividly. Memory ethnography remains a viable path. I have good reasons to believe that the
issues dealt with in this article are still part of many Penans’ perception and practice.

2. Being one with the forest

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes about peoples’ ‘attachments to their homelands’, stressing that a special relationship is always built between a land and the people living on it (Tuan 2011:149–160). But the Penan do not ‘live’ in the forest in any simple terms. With reference to Western ideology (and disregarding the academic problems of actually defining ‘forest’, cf Chazdon et al 2016 and Côte et al 2018), the forest is a place in its own right, which can be occupied or inhabited, and people may therefore ‘live in the forest’. The Penan, however, according to their world view, are co-constituents of what I tentatively would call the forest-phenomenon; tong tana’, that which transpires or simply ‘is’ in the forest (tana is ‘forest’ while tong tana’ denotes the forest including what it contains). They do not ‘live in the forest’, they are part and parcel of it in all its complexity, physically, ecologically as well as socially. The forest is the cosmos, and the challenge is to understand more precisely what that entails to the forest dwellers of Sarawak: to the Penan, the forest is (in my words, not theirs) a multispecies organism, which is constituted by the simultaneous presence of a large number of living, interacting things, humans being one of them. The forest without people, animals, spirits or the dead is precisely as impossible as a forest without trees. Indeed, as stated by Eduardo Kohn (2013:9), ‘semiosis (the creation and interpretation of signs) permeates the living world, and it is through our partially shared semiotic propensities that multispecies relations are possible, and also analytically comprehensible’. Tana’, obviously, is a specific ecotope, a place that forms the biological home for the lifeforms that inhabit it, but it is also, and just as much, a social field made up of a variety of species, faunal (humans included) and floral, and imagined entities. In fact, the Penan have no word similar to our ‘nature’ (Rothstein 2016a:406–412). Neither is there a single nominal word for ‘forest’. At least 15 different terms denote tana’-modalities; a watery place, a place with large trees, a shady place, etc. The forest is basically cultural, and the word adet – ‘customary law’, moral codes, traditions and customary law – refers to the desired order of the forest as such, as much as it refers to the narrow system of human. All beings, animals included, abide to some mode of adet, even the spirits to which we shall return shortly. Even time is woven into the forest fabric. Significant events are commemorated through narratives about particular spots on the terrain, and changes in the forest environment are noted as indicators of
time passing (Rothstein 2016a:357–396; Langub 2010:82). Indeed, the forest to
the Penan is a well-ordered whole, their cosmos.

The Penan, however, have no tradition of a formal description of their
cosmology, but from what they say, and on the basis of what can be deduced
from myths and folktales (a narrative genre known as suket), the forest is the
world, and the world appears to be one place, and one place only, where entities
of different kinds all exist, albeit in rather different ways. A human, a dead
human, an animal, a monster and a spirit basically exist in the same world,
but in different modes or on different terms, which means that interactions
take place in different ways depending on who or what communicates to
whom or what. Focus is not on the organic, biotic or ecological per se, but on
the communicative relations between the constituents of tong tana’, and on
the forest-world’s varying structures. This perception of the relation between
humans and other-than-human beings is akin to perspectivism (the theory that
world views depend on the perspective of the individual, human or non-human)
or ‘new animism’ of South American peoples – as originally described by
Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1992) – or ‘relational epistemology’ described by
Nurit Bird-David (1999), but the inter-species relations are less pronounced
among the Penan. Rather, the issue of co-existence has to do with simultaneous
presence more than interchangeable morphologies.

The relative lack of a subject–object relation to the physical surroundings
permeates the Penans’ way of thinking and has fundamentally hindered, or at
least confused and complicated, their ability to adapt to recent changes and
become settled farmers, where humans and land are far more separated. The
cultural changes affect everybody, ranging from severe cognitive dissonance
among certain elders, to less dramatic problems among the youth. For instance,
with reference to an ideology of stewardship, molong, the Penan harbour
resentments at keeping livestock, and find it absurd to clear larger areas of land
for agriculture. When an animal is introduced into the human sphere, typically
as a pet, it leaves the realm of prey and cannot be eaten. Livestock, including
chicken, therefore are difficult to introduce as food. Many settled Penan will,
for instance, not eat eggs laid by domesticated chicken, but they will happily
collect eggs for consumption in the forest. The forest provides everything, so
why destroy it in order to toil as smallholders? While farmers are themselves
producers of food, the Penan will, in much more general terms, talk of the forest
as the provider, and as nomads they will go with the forest-flow and take their
share.

Thus, being themselves an inherent component of the bio-social system,
tana’, the Penan are extremely skilled navigators. They will almost without
exception find their way in known parts of the forest expanse, and with stunning precision, if relevant, congregate at the time and place decided. To the Penan the forest is no incomprehensible or confusing morass. On the contrary, it is always seen as intelligible, meaningful and to some extent predictable. Indeed, the forest is a *cosmos*, an ordered world. In fact, there are no alternative expressions of either ‘forest’ or ‘world’ in the Penan language, and therefore no terminology to create a semantic, and thus ideological, contrast between the two. Both categories (‘forest’ and ‘world’) remain encompassed in the same single word (*tana’*), which, as mentioned, also holds the human, *kelunan*, as an essential element. Humans, consequently, are not only part and parcel of the ‘forest-entity’, but of the *world* as such. The Penans’ cognitive and linguistic representation of space must be understood accordingly. Their perception of, and language about, the forest concerns the entire world and everything in it. The Penans’ association with their land is not symbolic nor rhetorical. It is absolute and literally essential.

In the absence of a creator god, a first principle, a beginning *ab origine*, or any other cosmogonic theory, the Penan think of the forest-world as self-sustaining and self-referential. It has no beginning and no end. Therefore, *tana’* can be understood as a kind of causal nexus, an ordered system (in physical and social terms), which exists by virtue of *tong tana’* understood as a more abstract structuring principle. The expression *tong tana’*, ‘in the forest’, denotes the forest-world as a bio-social-mythic system, but the words may also be seen as an idiom encompassing notions of implicit agency: ‘tong tana’ in abstract terms, makes *tong tana’* in concrete terms, possible. In ancient Egyptian religion *maat* was at the same time ‘the ordered world’ and the ruling principle which produced this order. *Tong tana’, ‘that which transpires in the forest’, in principle, seems to cover reality in a similar manner. Consequently, the world of the Penan is held together by a multitude of mechanisms, some seen and some not, which make life in the forest possible. But sometimes the equilibrium gets out of balance. Thunderstorms strike, someone dies, hunting fails, people get ill, or they get lost. In virtually all such cases ill-willed spirits are at work, be it one of the many different, rather diffuse *balei*, or one of the more concrete demons or ogres such as *tepun, penakoh* or *ungap* (Rothstein 2010). The ecology is disrupted, not only on a biological level, but also in terms of humans’ relationship with the world more generally. After a brief look at the navigational strategies of the Penan, I shall return to the predicament of going astray.

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1. One peer reviewer informs me that *ungap* may in fact be benevolent which contradicts everything I have been told (Rothstein 2016a:117, 228; 2020).
3. Locomotion in the landscape

The nomadic Penan will primarily walk in known landscapes, but sometimes a band will reach the outskirts of its primary habitat, or venture into virtually unknown areas. People will orient themselves in different ways, but observing landmarks (hills, caves, limestone pinnacles, big rocks, large trees, etc) and following ridge tops and streams and rivers are the main ways of forming a comprehensive image of space and place. Hydrology in particular is employed as a rather precise system to know weather conditions further upstream, and to determine positions, directions and even the angles of slopes in the forest. Observations of topographical demarcators are shared, which makes the perception of the environment a collective affair. Indeed, the nomadic process, the movement through the forest, is also a communicative process. Walking – *lakau gum* (to go by foot; *gum*) – implies talking. As revealed during mobile recording in Sarawak (2018–2019, to be published), the Penan, with great ease, will translate their sensory experiences of the landscape into language, suggesting that the nomadic locomotion in general includes an ongoing verbalisation of what is experienced. The forest is registered with all senses, but it is also translated into a narrative which can be recapitulated intellectually. Each path has its own line of stories. Interestingly, however, according to Lye Tuck-Po, there is no native term for ‘path’ in the Penan language. She says: ‘presumably this is because of its [the path’s] critical salience and ever-presentness in their lives. Path is like “world” to them’ (2016:240). This is not entirely correct. The word *jalan*, ‘road’ or ‘path’, used by the Penan is cognate with the Malay term, which also occurs in other Bornean indigenous languages, and is a Proto-Malayic form derived from Proto-Austronesian, *zalan*. But Lye Tuck-Po’s observation is otherwise good; the Penan certainly live their lives on paths, either those that already exist, or those that appear during their locomotions. However, I would be more specific and suggest that paths (some visible to the visitor, others not at all) are traces contributed by humans as elements in the overall construction and maintenance of their cultural space, *tana’* (also see Langub 2011; Janowski & Langub 2011). When a camp is set up, a system of tracks will appear as people move around in the surrounding landscape, and as long as the camp remains, the tracks will provide the primary means of orientation (an entire anthropology can in fact be deduced from humans’ track-production, see Ingold 2007:43f).

Furthermore, as a navigational tool, an asynchronous signage language system of rather complicated designs, *serata* and especially *orio’*, are often applied. Sticks, prepared with cuts, twigs and leaves in certain positions and
places, will guide people and inform them about directions, time, dangers, resources, etc. *Oroo’* is primarily applied when a band will follow an agile scout, who places the signs as he or she moves forward during a *toro*, ie a hunting trip lasting a few days or longer, away from base camp, but the system will also be in use during longer trips (Rothstein 2016a:296f; Zaman et al 2016). The system, which ties people together across time and space and allows users to be aware of one another, supports the intellectual and practical mastering of the landscape, but the signs, and the eco- or biotypes people pass through, as well as the general landscape patterns, are not simply registered. They are analysed, discussed, labelled, specified and, not least, physically experienced by the group. Visual identification goes hand in hand with the sensory encounter with the forest. The landscape is not simply seen. It also manifests as a bodily awareness. The *oroo’* are themselves expressions of social interaction, and given the fact that people usually travel together, the reading and interpretation of the signs is also a social practice, although often the meaning of *oroo’* is rather explicit. In fact, knowing the landscape and knowing your whereabouts is to a very high degree a social affair.

Finally, a divinatory system known as *amén juhit* ‘bird signs’, must be mentioned. By observing a number of different birds, and listening to their calls, the Penan will determine what direction to go, particularly when it comes to hunting. The system introduces randomness in situations where regularity, resulting from deliberate control, could be detrimental. For instance, *amén juhit* will prevent foragers from exhausting the same area by too intensive hunting (Rothstein 2019:624–631). For our purpose it should be noted that the system ties together humans, birds, the landscape (direction) and prey.

### 4. Being lost

But disregarding the Penans’ ability to orient themselves and find their way, people may get lost either when individuals travel on their own or when people move together in small groups. Finding your way implicitly means having control and being well placed in the world. If there is no such control the landscape becomes a confusing void, and the human falls out of his or her position in the world. A possible parallel (and there could be others) is the Penans’ fear of being drunk. The intoxicated person loses control, which is considered a very undesired state of affairs. The disoriented individual has lost not only knowledge of his or her location, but also his or her social connectedness with others. The landscape has become meaningless, rivers and creeks
point in no direction, oroo’ placed by other humans are absent. Sometimes the individual may think of the surroundings as well known, but soon he or she will realise that it was an illusion. In effect the strayed person’s grasp on reality has been weakened or even lost. He or she is stranded in a non-place; a person who is disconnected with the forest and with other people is literally nowhere. In fact, this person may even lose his or her feeling of being someone. As explained by a circa 60 year old man: ‘My grandfather was once lost. He thought he would die. He felt that he died. He said that he was dead. But he came home. He was very hungry. He told me about it when I was much younger’ (quoted from conversation in Long Iman, August 2008). In another example a man (probably around 50 years of age) explained how he was found by a search party after having lost his orientation when he was very young: ‘I thought I was dead, but I wasn’t. When I saw them coming I could understand that I was not dead. I was crying. I will never forget it. It was very, very bad’ (quoted from conversation in Ba Puak, August 2007).

In essence the experience of being lost is very similar to the condition established during rites of passage. The normal is deconstructed, and the individual finds him- or herself to be betwixt and between: no longer this, not yet that. A liminal condition, a ritually established disconnection to the world, prevails until the individual is inserted into his or her new reality.2 During rites of passage the process through liminality allows the individual to ‘die’ from his or her condition or status so far, and move into another by being ‘born’ into a new reality (membership of a society, adulthood, wedlock, etc). The lost wayfarer, on the contrary, is stuck in the structureless, meaningless void, not being able to return to where he or she came from, and unable to proceed in any meaningful way. To the Penan, to whom sociality and locomotion are the essentials of life, this situation is deeply feared. The situation triggers a strong feeling of cognitive dissonance and, as seen from the quote above, the concept of death enters the language in order to describe the situation. As it appears the individual may consider him- or herself to be de facto dead. The individual has fallen out of reality, so to say.

When somebody is missing, people will do what they can to find them. Usually they are successful enough to recover him or her, but a deeper level of concern lies beneath the obvious social solidarity. The nomadic group is a tight-knit unit, not for social reasons alone, but also because physical survival

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2. A ritual pattern of separation, liminality and integration was originally described by ethnologist Arnold van Gennep in 1909 (van Gennep 1977). Since then it has, in various forms, had a prominent place in the toolbox of comparative religion and anthropology.
in the forest is almost impossible in the long run unless you have the support of other people. Most significantly perhaps, as so often among small-scale immediate-return foragers, food is always and scrupulously shared (Needham 2007:54; Rothstein 2016b). One single hunter is not likely to have a successful kill every day, and the chance for food therefore increases if everybody can rely on everybody else. Losing members of the group therefore has a deeper impact than simple social distress and being lost also amounts to a collective crisis. The disconnection experienced by the isolated person is also experienced by the rest of the group, the isolated individuals extended social body.

Going astray is no random thing. It does not simply happen, and it will not go away on its own. The situation is, according to the Penan, caused by supernatural agency, a particularly sinister spirit, and very specific measures must be taken to overcome the situation. The problem does not occur often, but everybody fears it, and everyone is taught to overcome the situation should it come about. The examples mentioned above, however, testify to the fact that it is difficult to focus on solutions once the problem is there.

5. Ritual strategies

The individual amiss may apply at least two apotropaic ritual solutions to his or her predicament. In both cases the intention is to lure *balei tawang*, the spirit that causes the problem. *Tawang* simply means ‘being lost’, but the word may also refer to things that are deliberately hidden or accidentally misplaced (another word, *metat*, also means ‘lost’ or ‘disappear’, but I have never heard it used in this connection). *Tawang* may also be used in connection with the term *boléng*, which means dizzy, thus indicating that the experience of being lost and the state of dizziness, or being off balance, are comparable. It may at this point seem as if the *balei* itself is the phenomenon – ‘lostness’ – or that the phenomenon at issue is a manifestation of the spirit. This, however, is not the case. *Balei tawang* causes *tawang*, but is not *tawang*. This applies to all *balei* spirits. They are associated with certain phenomena, and have the capability to control them, but they do not manifest themselves as these phenomena. *Balei* spirits (generally nouns are not pluralised other than to show variety) are salient to say the least, but they are also ambiguous (sometimes they may even be summoned as helpers), obscure and vague. They have no definite form but may appear in whatever shape they choose. Usually they are not seen, but their presence will be revealed by their sound or occasional odour. In practical terms the presence or misdemeanours of a *balei* is detected when something happens.
For instance, when thunder and lightning strike, *balei liwen* is certainly active, and a reason for its (*balei* are usually non-gendered) wrath is sought. Usually the trespassing of a taboo, *kilin*, is the cause of the bad weather, and rituals to appease the angry divinity will be administered. If not, further repercussions (such as petrification) may strike. Similarly, when *balei tawang* is active, its presence is revealed by the fact that the walker cannot find his or her way and is left confused and endangered. In some cases, a reason for *balei tawang*’s anger can be determined, but more often it seems that the *balei* is simply a sinister being that wishes to do people harm.

One method to counteract the spirit’s workings is to play a mouth harp, while simultaneously placing a stick in the ground. The Penan mouth harp, *oréng*, is a small musical instrument made of very thin wood or a harsh leaf. It can be made in a few minutes, and it produces a very soft and delicate sound. *Balei tawang* will be attracted by the music and will mistakenly believe that it comes from the stick. It will then, enchanted by the music, cling to the stick and lose attention, while the person who was misled by the spirit finds his or her way again and escapes. *Balei tawang*, apparently, has many human attributes; it can hear, it can be tricked, and it loves music. The wayfarer, however, will not see it, but only knows its presence – and defeat – from what is going on around him or her. Being able to play the instrument is considered important, not simply for the sake of musical enjoyment, but also in order to avert problems with *balei tawang*. I have asked if a song or recitation is part of the ritual, but this does not seem to be the case. At other ritual instances people may communicate with spirits by means of certain songs, *tiwai*, using a special language, *lita*. The spirits will listen and understand, and may, depending on the situation, be either averted, appeased or, more rarely, summoned as helpers. In this situation, we may hypothesise that the presence of the human must be downplayed. The intention is to distract *balei tawang* from its preoccupation with the troubled individual, and the spirit’s interest in the illusional musician (the stick) should not be interrupted by a human voice. If *balei tawang*’s concentration can be broken, the jinx is dissolved. A relative anthropomorphism has equipped the spirit with rather human like cognitive faculties.

Analysing the experience of being lost, psychologist Paul A Dudchenko refers to a hunter in Canada gone stray:

He was hunting for partridges and was drawn more deeply into the woods until he became quite disoriented. He tried to head in the direction in which he thought he would encounter a familiar road, but as the hours passed his apprehension
increased: ‘I fought off several waves of overwhelming panic – every tree looked familiar, every stone, every clearing – but it wasn’t’. Eventually the hunter emerged from the woods very near the point at which he had entered them. (Dudchenko 2010:3)

The disturbing unease described by the Canadian hunter is rather similar to the Penans’ experience, including the strange illusion of recognising unknown trees, stones, etc, but more interestingly, perhaps, is the fact that the ritual measures prevent the lost Penan from making things worse. Referring to rescue experts, Dudchenko stresses that running in an unknown direction serves no purpose, and that panic must be averted at all costs. First step should always be ‘to stop, sit down and gather your thoughts’ (Dudchenko 2010:3).

Another method to overcome tawang is more complex and much more difficult to analyse, but it also seems to counteract the psychological mess discussed above; it keeps panic at bay and forces the lost individual to reflect and act systematically: a string of rattan, wai, approximately one meter long, is split (ends remaining intact), and a gate is created as the slit is opened. The lost person quickly passes through the opening, dragging his or her belongings along, and shuts it immediately thus leaving balei tawang and its powers behind. In this case the spirit’s intellectual capabilities or emotional conditions are of no direct relevance as the spirit itself is not manipulated, but it is quite difficult to understand what is going on. I have asked but received no real answers. It just works. The Penan are not in the habit of theological speculation, and there is no reason to expect an intellectual unfolding of the ritual. As seen from the outside, however, it is obvious that a new condition is created as the lost individual passes through the gate. As long as balei tawang’s powers are exerted, it is impossible to break out of the intolerable state of affairs, but if the spirit’s control can be somehow undermined, a new situation prevails. It is explicitly said that you need to jump through the loophole very quickly, and drag your stuff along immediately, as balei tawang will try to follow you. However, once on the other side, the spirit can no longer detect you, and you will be able to re-establish a clear sense of your whereabouts. One possibility is, of course, that the spirit is tricked once again, and that it believes the individual to be gone. If so, the ritual, as the mouth harp-version, reflects a simple urge to escape the spirit’s jinx by deceiving it and running away. However, the ritual may well have another focus: it may be a method to re-establish the individual’s lost connection with the forest-world on a deeper level. The spell is not broken directly, but the ritual – I would suggest – reconfigures the individual’s connection with tana’ in a way that cuts balei tawang and its sinister stratagems
off. If the walker is able to move on and find his or her course, it is because tong tana’ – now as a structuring principle – has been re-established. The chaotic is averted, and the cosmic prevails.

This cherished state of affairs also has a name, not directly, but implicitly. The Penan talk of a condition known as tawai. The literal meaning is ‘remembering’ or ‘commemorating’ and tawai certainly covers that. In this connection, however, another implication is more important: tawai also refers to a feeling of being one with the forest, being at ease with what surrounds you; you ‘remember’ (we would say recognise) the forest for what it is, and contemplate on your own contribution to it. People have tried to relate this particular sense of topophilia in words but fail to do so. ‘Only the Penan can experience tawai. We don’t know how to explain it, but if you were a Penan you would know’, they maintain. Emotional expressions are difficult to translate, of course, and it remains a distinct possibility that they refer to feelings or intuitions that grow from their particular cosmology and practical life experiences as nomadic hunter-gatherers. At any rate, the Penan quite explicitly describe a mode of being that is defined by the exact opposite of what transpires when you are lost. Tawai is an emotional reflection of being in full harmony with the forest-world. The state is not only desired, it is believed to be the default condition of any Penan. The world is basically good, and humans will thrive unless something bad happens that breaks the tong tana’ system. When this happens, the world turns bad, for instance, when loggers ravage the forest and harass the Penan, they will talk of tana’ saat, ‘an evil world’, where tawai cannot be experienced.

6. Conclusion

We tend to think of humans as beings inhabiting physical space. Tim Ingold says, ‘people do not just occupy but inhabit the environment in which they dwell’ (2007:75), but I would, as explained, take the argument further and suggest that the Penan transcend what we normally deem habitation. The Penan understand themselves to be part of the world around them. In simple cognitive terms they relate to the surroundings, but epistemologically they are themselves part of what they cognitively perceive. Tong tana’ is not only physical space, but also a social and mythological realm. The Penan example reminds us that humans, depending on their relationship to their physical milieu, their social backdrop, mode of production and religious imaginations, perceive the world in specific ways. In the case of the Penan, a closeness to the biological world – in physical reality as well as religious imagination – rises from their nomadic activities,
and issues of spatial cognition and behaviour become of a certain kind. The forest is never objectified, but remains linguistically represented in a multitude of designations, which point to its dynamic character and its functions, be they good or bad. The forest is not ‘natural’. It is cultural, and the Penan are part of that culture. I quote from one of my fieldwork notebooks: ‘You can remove a Penan from the forest, but you cannot remove the forest from a Penan’.

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