

2017

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### Recommended Citation

Kassam, Zayn (2017) "Considerations of Development in Malaysian Borneo," *EnviroLab Asia*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/envirolabasia/vol1/iss1/5>

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# Considerations of Development in Malaysian Borneo

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Zayn Kassam is the John Knox McLean Professor of Religious Studies at Pomona College, Claremont, California. A graduate of McGill University (Ph.D. 1995), she teaches courses on mysticism, gender, literature, ethics, and the environment. She has been honored with three Wig Awards for Distinguished Teaching at Pomona College, as well as an American Academy of Religion Excellence in Teaching Award. Kassam is the author of *Introduction to the World's Major Religions: Islam* (2006), and editor of *Women and Islam* (2010). She is currently editing a book on gender activism in Asian religions, and is preparing a book on gender and Islam. She has chaired the department of Religious Studies at Pomona College, and has coordinated the programs in Gender and Women's Studies, and Asian Studies. She currently coordinates the college's Mellon-funded initiative on raising the profile on the arts, musical traditions, and cultures of Africa on campus.

## Considerations of Development in Malaysian Borneo

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**Abstract:** Given Malaysia's vast natural resources, the country has embarked on an ambitious set of development projects capitalizing on the opportunities afforded by extractive industrialization. Global and national demand for oil palm products, timber, and hydropower resources coupled with a governmental development agenda guided by neoliberal market principles has led to both economic growth and social and environmental injustice. This chapter argues for an alternative development model along the lines suggested by Escobar in addressing Malaysia's path to development and fiscal well-being in a manner that safeguards its cultural and natural resources.

### Field Trip Notes, January 5-7, 2016

A hot and bumpy ride in early January, 2016 that commences at Miri airport in Malaysian Borneo leads us past a sign for a national park. Our driver tells us that it has a lake that produces long grasses filled with long worms (eels?) when the rains come, before it dries up again. We marvel at the thought. We are on our way to the area around Long Lama located in the state of Sarawak, the largest of Malaysia's states. But first a couple of stops, to take advantage of the daylight before we reach Long Lama for dinner and an overnight stay. We begin at the Baram Dam blockade, where we are offered lunch and hot sweet coffee, along with durian, a fleshy white fruit with a notorious aroma, by the Kayan and Kenyah Dayaks (non-Muslim indigenous peoples) who inhabit the area. We learn about the devastating environmental and social effects of the proposed dam, which carries the risk of displacing up to 20,000 of the local Kayan, Kenyah, and Penan people through the flooding of their lands and forests, while subjecting the villages affected to bribes, harassment, and destruction<sup>2</sup> in order to clear the land through clear-cut and unsustainable logging practices to prepare for construction. Information of any environmental impact studies is not shared with the residents, thereby taking away their right to self-

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of the Murum dam, a village was burned down at the same time that the river outlet tunnel was shut down. See <http://www.malaysia-today.net/humanitarian-crisis-in-sarawak-as-dam-empoundment-destroys-penan-villages-long-watt-burned-down-in-suspected-arson/> accessed January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017.

determination in development planning and implementation. The dam is one of many along a corridor of megadams that have been slated to be built by the Government of Malaysia, as part of its development plan for Sarawak. The idea of the blockade is to prevent an access road from being built that would facilitate dam construction. We then go to the Baram river, which at one time used to run clear but is now brown and full of silt due to timber logging, which causes the forest soil to be rendered unstable and wash into the river.

Our next stop is at an oil palm plantation blockade, where as we swat at mosquitoes we hear about an Indonesian company being given rights to plant oil palms on land appropriated by the government for such use. Promises made by the company to hire local workers were not kept as an influx of workers hired from Indonesia and the Philippines work the plantations while the company benefits from tax relief. We learn about how lucrative raising oil palms is for the Malaysian economy, for which palm oil, dubbed “the golden crop” is the chief driver of its economic growth, with Sarawak being slated as the next frontier for oil palm plantation expansion in conjunction with logging. Although the company has been offered a buyout through a court case, oil palm production is too lucrative an enterprise for the company to cede its operations to the indigenous groups, who tell us that 2 hectares of oil palms yields 2 million ringgit, the Malaysian currency, in profits per month, with the workers each barely earning 1200 ringgit in salary each month. We hear about contested land claims in court, as many as 300 such cases pending in Sarawak alone, as forests are claimed by the government as “uninhabited” and thus targeted as prime land for agricultural conversion to oil palm plantations; about the clearing of all unused land for oil palm plantations and for timber logging; about ongoing protests and the government’s responses: raise taxes, bring in the police to shut down protests, and survey the land for further development.

Wending our way uphill to Long Lama through dense forest and a stunning sunset, we arrive to dinner and a star-studded sky whose cosmography is pointed out to us by an astronomy professor who is with this group of faculty and students from The Claremont Colleges and Yale-NUS (National University of Singapore). He points out Betelgeuse, the brightest star in the sky, located in the constellation we know as Orion, and tells us that it will likely vanish in the next million years or so, reminding me that all is ephemeral.

The next morning, as some of us (me) shake off our creaky bones from a night on the wooden floor of a longhouse, the sky opens to a downpour and the road rumbles as logging trucks laden with lumber precariously make their way down the muddy road. Meanwhile, we hear about the robust efforts of Christian missions, both Evangelical and Catholic, from Britain and Australia in the interwar period that rendered the indigenous peoples of Sarawak fifty percent Christian, while approximately twenty percent continue with their indigenous traditions, and thirty percent profess Islam. The discussion turns to the necessity of development, the importance of consulting with the inhabitants of the region about the pace and mode of development, and the purpose of the dams and whether the ecological and environmental impacts outweigh their purported economic benefits, unlikely to be seen by the residents of the areas through which the corridor of dams will extend.

We retrieve our luggage and stop at a riverbank where not only is the water brown from logging and increased sedimentation, but also to talk about the habitat destruction caused by clear-cut

logging despite a court decision to halt it altogether--which then led to comments about political corruption. Faculty schooled our group on the relation between sediment and river flow, and how changing the sediment budget has ecological consequences on how the river acts. For instance, beaches, which are a defense against flooding would also be destroyed, removing a further natural protection if river levels were to rise due to increased rainfall wrought by climate change, causing devastation to the surrounding communities. At a discussion of the absence of birds apart from a few swallows, we heard that the government has authorized using bombs to blast limestone hills to quarry them for materials to make cement, which destroys the habitat for birds and other creatures.

Our jeeps then collectively make their way on rough roads rendered bumpier and slippier by shifting mud in the rain to a longhouse where we stayed the night--the final leg of which journey was by boat. We arrive at the longhouse and are served lunch; music is played and women dance gracefully, turning flowered plates in their hands. We then ready ourselves with life jackets for a longer boat ride to another community living upstream, about 35 minutes away. By now the heat is impressive and I am dead tired from an uncomfortable and sleepless night the day before, and still somewhat jet lagged.

Off we go on the boat ride enjoying the rush of air that helps to cool me down. It proves to be a temporary respite as at our destination we are met with sweltering heat and hungry chiggers. The village headman talks to us about sending the children to a nearby school and about quotidian life in the village, punctuated by sounds from the smithy--blacksmithing with materials procured from the town, including car parts, is one way in which the villagers make their living. Young boys are learning the craft, which is passed down from the elders. Every village headman is supplied with a television and a satellite dish and the entire village can gather to watch if they wish.

Despite my flagging energy, we continue with discussions of how this village and its ways will endure, especially as their environment is threatened by both the logging and increasingly sediment-bloated river. The villagers have asked the government for help in putting up new housing, but they have received no response. With the children going to school there is little help when needed for harvesting rice and other crops, and concerns are raised about what changes and challenges will be wrought by schooling, in the years ahead, all the more so given that children are increasingly divorced from learning the ways of their ancestors and living symbiotically with the environment as they spend their waking hours traveling to, being at, and returning from school.

We take to the boats again and stop at a rocky beach for a swim. I stay in the boat, too exhausted to make the effort to disembark. The ride back brings welcome relief. Dinner is an hour away; a good conversation ensues before dinner, touching on myriad subjects having to do with indigenous peoples and the assault on their lifestyles, with the knotty question of development-as-assimilation raising its head.

I manage to take a bucket bath after dinner, set up my sleeping area and head to the evening group discussion where one of our group leaders has us think about why dams are built and the environmental impacts of each rationalization. A student follows with a splendid talk about her

eight-year long campaign against using palm oil for Girl Scout cookies. I can no longer keep my eyes open, and after caving in to exhaustion, I rise at 4 am, at which point I clean up, read, gratefully accept coffee offered silently by the cook, who has also risen early, write some notes and hear the ecstatic trilling of birds, likely swallows, pheasants, partridges and babblers, before the rooster announces the dawn of a new day.

Following our morning discussions, we get back onto the boats and go on a boat ride back upstream along the river. Because it had rained so heavily during the night, the river is now swollen and the current is swift, with large logs floating along other logs and branches of various sizes. Our boatmen are on high alert, concerned for our safety, as they rapidly change course to avoid logs barreling down the river. The beach we had stopped at the day before was completely submerged, so the boatmen led us into a narrow tributary that is absolutely magical with its thick canopy of trees and air of stillness punctuated by calls of birds. We stop for victuals along the banks displaying prodigious gnarly roots that provide seating; the mosquitoes also enjoy a very tasty lunch. We reluctantly head back out to join the main river and after a short while arrive at a riverine community that stands in stark contrast to the one we had visited the day before. It is larger, with a church at its center, boasts an enormous satellite dish; its two longhouses are well built with verandahs for communal gathering, and schoolchildren in uniforms follow us around, clearly well fed and curious. Stray dogs are the only malnourished creatures in sight; it is heartbreaking to see fat puppies who will soon be emaciated. Here is a community benefiting from development funds and thereby unwilling to join in on resistance to logging, dam-building, and oil-palm plantations. And then we are back on the river to be ferried to our waiting Jeeps for the ride to Miri airport to catch our flight to Singapore, where we will learn more about, debate, and discuss what we have seen in our time in Borneo, in addition to making site visits to organic farms, corporate offices, and panel discussions held by activist organizations such as The Borneo Resources Institute and Save Rivers, both of which are working to preserve and strengthen the natural and cultural heritage of Malaysian Borneo.

## **Development and Sarawak's Natural Resources**

The remainder of this chapter offers some preliminary reflections stemming from the clinic trip to Singapore and Sarawak. Development efforts in Malaysia focus on capitalization—more accurately, the production of capital—and modernization. The rich resources of Malaysian Borneo offer prime opportunities for development and are core components for Malaysia's economic growth. In addition to oil and gas, not discussed here, as the world's largest exporter of tropical logs, timber and timber-related products comprise close to half of Malaysia's exports, with the industry netting over RM 20 billion (USD 4.9 billion) during 2010 and 2011, with growth projected to RM 50 billion (USD 12.26 billion) by 2020, according to the Malaysia Timber Industry Board. 10 percent of these exports go the USA and Europe; close to a third goes to Japan, with India, China, Japan, the Middle East, and Korea comprising the remainder.<sup>3</sup> The increasing extent of forest exploitation led the Malaysian government to develop a national forest policy in 1978, with the three aims of environmental sustainability, education research and recreation, and “the supply in perpetuity and at reasonable rates of forest produce for further

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theborneopost.com/2012/06/03/timber-industry-still-growing-strong/> accessed July 24, 2016.

processing, manufacturing, and export.”<sup>4</sup> To this end, annual quotas for felling are set for each state depending on a forest inventory, and severe penalties are attached to illegal logging. The presence of lumber trucks in the area we visited showed that such penalties are not always leveled, for which we were offered explanations such as corruption, lack of policing resources, and the like.

Malaysia’s palm oil industry, which began in 1917, is equally lucrative and central to Malaysia’s economic growth. Indonesia and Malaysia are the two largest global producers of palm oil. Palm oil is utilized primarily in the food, chemical, and biodiesel industries in products including margarines, noodles, baked goods, ice creams, soaps, cosmetics, lubricants, paints, and palm oil biodiesel. In 2007, the Malaysian government mandated 5 percent palm oil biodiesel to be mixed into all diesel sold in Malaysia. In 2011, palm oil and related products contributed 13.7 percent to Malaysia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and amounted to RM 80.3 billion (USD 19.65 billion), incentivizing the conversion of land from cocoa, rubber, and coconut plantations to oil palm cultivation, while adding an additional 2 million acres between 1980 and 2010. It can be surmised that the additional acreage came from deforestation, causing the United States and the European Union to employ trade tariffs on Malaysia’s palm oil biodiesel due to the loss of habitat incurred by pygmy elephants and orangutans.<sup>5</sup> The number of orangutans in Borneo was reported at having dropped to 100,000 from 288,500 in 1973, and expected to further decrease to 47,000 by 2025.<sup>6</sup> Such tariffs against palm oil biodiesel, while a step in the right direction, do not address the larger issue of the demand for palm oil and its related products, as the global demand for biofuels as an alternative to fossil fuels continues to rise, as does the global consumption of palm oil in edible and non-edible products, and in vegetable oils. Demand for palm oil and its products is forecasted to rise to 60 million tonnes by 2020, over the 35 million tonnes (about 15 of which are produced by Malaysia, expected to rise to 23.4 million tonnes by 2020) traded in 2010. Demand is largely driven by the benefits of palm kernel oil over manufactured trans-fats made from partially hydrogenated unsaturated plant fats, which have been shown to carry significant heart health risks. Palm oil is a source of healthy unsaturated fats and hence an ingredient of choice in commercial baked goods as it does not require hydrogenation to remain in a solid state; further, palm oil’s tolerance for high temperatures makes it ideal for the fast food industry.

The palm oil industry’s defense against environmentalist concerns about deforestation, habitat loss, loss of biodiversity, and carbon dioxide emissions through the conversion of forest to oil palm plantations is to question the data regarding deforestation due to oil palm cultivation, and to suggest that carbon dioxide emissions are relatively low in palm oil producing countries per capita than they are in the developed world, while also suggesting that habitat and diversity loss are due to factors other than conversion of land to oil palm plantations. Indeed, in its website that has since been dismantled, the Sarawak Ministry of Land Development specified that its mission

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<sup>4</sup> <http://enviroscope.iges.or.jp/modules/envirolib/upload/1503/attach/3ws-12-tachibana.pdf> accessed July 24, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theborneopost.com/2014/05/06/the-prosperous-malaysian-palm-oil-industry/> accessed July 25, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/bornean-orangutans-whale-sharks-winghead-shark-are-near-extinction-endangered-humans-a7128746.html> accessed July 25, 2016.

is to “expedite the development of Native Customary Rights (NCR) land and other idle land into economically productive assets for optimal and sustained benefits to the land owners and the State through plantation development and commercial oriented programmes.”<sup>7</sup> Such defenses are no doubt in response to robust calls mounted by the environmental organizations such as The Rainforest Network to major corporations such as PepsiCo to cut Conflict Palm Oil from its products. They claim that Indonesia, the world’s largest palm oil producer, has since 2010 developed a policy to use degraded land for new oil palm plantations, rather than converting forest or peatland. Further, the argument is made that the genetic potential of oil palms should be fully utilized in order to increase production.<sup>8</sup> This sentiment was echoed in a visit to the Singapore headquarters of Wilmar International, Asia’s leading agribusiness group, suggesting implicitly the creation of new breeds of oil palms, perhaps genetically modified to increase annual yields per oil palm.

Malaysian Borneo’s rivers also offer another economic opportunity. The Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) has planned 12 dam projects, to be managed by Sarawak Energy, a governmental body, in partnership with Chinese state-owned companies. As noted on its website, “SCORE has a long coastline of more than 1,000 km, over 8 million hectares of forests, almost 5 million hectares of arable land and peat land suitable for agriculture. The corridor has 1.2 billion of known oil reserves, over 80 million tonnes of Silica sand and over 22 million tonnes of Kaolin of China clay, a key component of cosmetics, ceramics and, most recent, for combat area medical equipment.”<sup>9</sup>

These dams are slated to be built by 2020, of which the Batang Ai dam has already been built and has the capacity of 108 megawatts (MW). The Bakun (2400 MW) and Murum (900 MW) dams are currently under construction, while work on the Baram dam has been halted due to indigenous people’s protests and blockades.<sup>10</sup> According to Save Rivers, a network comprising of indigenous communities and civil society organizations in Sarawak, in the 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysian governmental plan, the state aims to develop hydropower through five economic corridors, of which SCORE is one. SCORE has a projected output of 20,000 MW from 52 potential sites to produce 87,000 GWh (gigawatt hours) annually, far exceeding the energy needs of the state in order to attract industries such as aluminum smelting, the glass, marine, engineering, petroleum, timber, livestock, and aquaculture, all of which require cheap sources of energy. Excess energy

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Fadzilah Majid Cooke, Su Mei Toh and Justine Vaz, “Making an informed choice: A review of oil palm partnerships in Sabah and Sarawak, East Malaysia, report commissioned by International Institute for Environment and Development (London, UK), May 2011, fn.6, 11, found at:

[http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/tci/pdf/InternationalInvestment/IIED/MALAYSIA\\_OIL\\_PALM\\_STUDY\\_IIED\\_FINAL\\_MAY\\_2011\\_v2\\_-\\_LC\\_-\\_Clean.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/tci/pdf/InternationalInvestment/IIED/MALAYSIA_OIL_PALM_STUDY_IIED_FINAL_MAY_2011_v2_-_LC_-_Clean.pdf) accessed January 1, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> [http://worldgrowth.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/WG\\_Indonesian\\_Palm\\_Oil\\_Benefits\\_Report-2\\_11.pdf](http://worldgrowth.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/WG_Indonesian_Palm_Oil_Benefits_Report-2_11.pdf) accessed July 25, 2016, 7-9; 16-21.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.recoda.com.my/invest-in-score/what-is-score/> accessed July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/notes/center-for-orang-asli-concerns-coac/the-orang-asal-of-baram-succeed-in-stopping-a-mega-dam/1079239915453267> accessed July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

will be supplied to peninsular Malaysia, which already in 2010 had energy in excess of its needs, and to link to an ASEAN power grid through a proposed underground/undersea cable network, despite concerns that ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand are already building dams for hydropower in their own territories. Countries that have invested in SCORE's implementation include Norway, Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan, and despite the promise of 1.6 million jobs, the workers brought in to work on the dam projects are reported to have come from China, Malaysia, India, and Bangladesh. It is expected that 70,000 square kilometers of land will have to be flooded in order to build the 12 dams already planned, much of which land is richly forested with timber, and includes entire villages, burial grounds, and farms.

At the crux of indigenous activism against dam construction in Sarawak is the issue of indigenous land rights, which played a key role in the success of the protests and blockades in halting the construction of Baram Dam. Government-issued gazettes had already in 2013 and 2015 taken close to 20,000 acres of land from indigenous peoples spread over 26 villages, and the victory earned on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016, revoked an earlier order seizing the land needed for Baram Dam. Mr. Peter Kallang of Save Rivers noted in a presentation made to our group that government appropriation of what it considers to be “unused land” infringes heavily on the rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral territories. The government's appropriation of communal forests as state land has led local indigenous and civic groups to mount legal challenges to such appropriation, engaging in mapping indigenous land claims and also drawing on British colonial-era documents to prove such land claims. Such legal efforts express the reliance indigenous peoples have on the rivers, forests, and other natural resources for fishing, hunting, subsistence agriculture, and materials for their livelihoods.

Thus the tripod of natural resources, available in abundance in Sarawak, clearly offer the potential for a development model centered around capital growth. As the second largest economic corridor in Malaysia, Sarawak's per capital GDP grew from \$9,150 in 2009 to \$ 12,507 in 2015,<sup>11</sup> suggesting that the investment earmarked for Sarawak is creating capital, even if not necessarily for the populace. It is surmised that the wealth held by Abdul Taib Mahmud, Chief Minister of Sarawak from 1981 to 2014, approximates \$21 billion, and a 2013 documentary titled, “Inside Malaysia's Shadow State” alleges that the family “has exploited the natural resources of the country at some of the most intense rates seen anywhere in the world.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the situation of rural villagers in Sarawak and Sabah is such that organizations such as Impian Sarawak,<sup>13</sup> have mounted projects to address deficits in water rights, electricity, roads, education, medical care, and rural economies to attend to needs that should more properly have been met through development, understood from the ground up—the real needs of people<sup>14</sup>--rather than solely from the perspective of economic growth.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/sarawak-2015/economy> accessed July 28th, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> <http://says.com/my/news/trending-inside-malaysias-shadow-state-video-reveals-corruption-in-sarawak> accessed July 28th, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.impiansarawak.com/en/index.php> accessed July 29th, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> <http://says.com/my/news/from-broken-bridges-to-paved-roads-how-impian-malaysia-is-changing-lives-in-rural-sarawak> accessed July 29th, 2016.

## Rethinking Development

The environmental impacts of the development and marketization of Sarawak's natural resources are substantial. They range from anthropogenic contributions to climate change, air, water, and soil pollution and degradation, to significant habitat loss for flora and fauna and hence additions to the endangered species list, some of which impacts have been explored in other chapters in this volume. Such harnessing of natural resources for economic gain and development, replicated all over the globe, also have social consequences on human populations, most readily seen in the impact on the exploitation of labor, and on indigenous populations that continue to have a symbiotic relationship to natural resources, including in Malaysian Borneo.

The global economic system set into motion by industrialized nations at the Bretton Woods conference in New Hampshire at the close of World War II, were the imperative behind current international organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and others. These institutions adopted the economic policy of neoliberalism and a free market, and were given further ballast by what the economist John Williamson in 1990 termed "the Washington Consensus", developed in 1989, comprising a set of ten principles guiding reform packages to developing countries facing economic crises. Built on the ramparts pithily summarized as "The market is to make major social and political decisions. The state should voluntarily reduce its role in the economy. Corporations are to have complete freedom. Unions are to be restrained and citizens given much less rather than more social protection",<sup>15</sup> the Washington Consensus added elements such as the liberalization of flows of foreign direct investment<sup>16</sup> that, in essence, facilitated the entry of developing countries into the web of the global neoliberal market economic regime. Critics such as the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz have opined that western countries "pushed poorer countries to eliminate trade barriers, but kept up their own barriers, preventing developing countries from exporting their agricultural products and so depriving them of desperately needed export income."<sup>17</sup> Countries that resist such policies, which are couched in language ostensibly appearing to lift the livelihoods of those living in poverty and privation across the world, are simply disciplined through the removal of aid and foreign investment and the refusal to trade with them, in other words, economic ostracization. Countries such as Malaysia, replete with natural resources, are thus able to avail themselves of the neoliberal market capitalist economy through inviting foreign investment and finding ready buyers for its production of energy in the form of oil and gas, and hydroelectric power, and for raw materials such as timber, and for processed products such as palm oil, to show robust economic growth, masking such efforts as "development". Indeed, economic globalization has had some gains, in that the percentage of those who make less than \$2 per day has been almost halved from 2001 to 2011, whereas the percentage of those making between \$10 and \$20 a day has nearly doubled, from seven percent

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<sup>15</sup> Pamela K. Brubaker, *Globalization at What Price? Economic Change and Daily Life* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.cid.harvard.edu/cidtrade/issues/washington.html> accessed July 30th, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2003), 6.

to thirteen percent. Yet, the Global Wealth Report released in October 2015 notes that 71 percent of the world's adults own 3 percent of the world's wealth, 21 percent owns 12.5 percent, 7.4 percent owns 39.4 percent, and 0.7 percent owns 45.2 percent of global wealth.<sup>18</sup>

These statistics suggest that the gap between the wealthy and the poor is growing, rather than diminishing, on the one hand, and on the other, that economic liberalization policies and practices are facilitating an upward shift of wealth to the top one percent of individuals—a feature illustrated by the wealth of the Taib family in Sarawak, in contrast to villagers still struggling for provision of basic services such as clean water, electricity, and education. Thus Malaysian Borneo provides a fine example of what have been identified as concerns with economic liberalization policies: “rapidly growing inequality, environmental destruction, and rural exclusion, marginalization, and poverty.”<sup>19</sup> Such considerations led Arturo Escobar to coin the term postdevelopment, designating the necessity of three needs: (1) decentering development, “that is, to displace it from its centrality in representations and discussions about conditions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America”, “to open up the discursive space to other ways of describing those conditions, less mediated by the premises and experiences of ‘development’”; (2) identifying “alternatives to development”; and (3) “transforming the ‘political economy of truth’”.<sup>20</sup> Thus, for instance, little value is given to the symbiotic relationships indigenous people encountered in Malaysian Borneo have with the rivers, the forests, and the land, all of which sustains their livelihood. Rather, development is posited as the need to modernize such peoples, some of whom reported to us that while they longed for modernization, they wished they could be participants in their own modernization processes. Sending children away to school, thereby divorcing them from cultural knowledge transmitted through the generations on how best to live in harmony with their natural environment, was a form of modernity that was unacceptable and considered a form of cultural genocide. Drawing on Carmen Medeiros’ 2005 work, Escobar summarizes her position thus:

...indigenous peasants have their own situated understanding of development, which articulates their historical experience of modernity and coloniality. The local notion of development includes the acquisition of those tools of dominant knowledge systems that might empower them to implement a viable future. Local talk about development is not only about development per se, but about history and culture—about the State, citizenship, difference, knowledge, and exploitation. It is about the communities’ positions with the modern colonial world system.<sup>21</sup>

Social movements among the indigenous and civil society organizations in Sarawak manifest the acquisition of “tools of dominant knowledge systems” in mounting challenges to statist land claims in the courts through referencing colonial British records. The Borneo Resources Institute (BRIMAS), an indigenous non-profit organization in Sarawak, declares its mission to be “To educate indigenous communities about their rights, to promote community-based sustainable resource management and conservation, to empower their initiatives toward self-reliant and

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<sup>18</sup> <http://inequality.org/global-inequality/> accessed July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1995), viii.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

resilient communities, to assist in their pursuit of self-sufficiency and to ensure the survival of their traditional knowledge, arts and cultures.”<sup>22</sup> Escobar’s three-point taxonomy of postdevelopment is evident in BRIMAS’ formulation of its identity, purpose and activity. The first, decentering development and creating discursive space to other ways through which to talk about local conditions rather than having them be defined by external actors (development experts and the state) is found to be evident in BRIMAS’s uncovering of statist corruption and nepotism, and its robust legal efforts to identify and address human rights violations, environmental injustices, land appropriations, while working to recognize the human rights, identity, and culture of indigenous peoples. The second, developing alternatives to development, is identified in BRIMAS’ efforts to aid indigenous communities secure full rights to their customary lands and forests, and to manage their resources within the framework of sustainable, rather than capitalistic development. The third, alternate forms of knowledge production in terms of Escobar’s call to transform “the political economy of truth, is evidenced in BRIMAS’ engagement with “indigenous communities who face massive problems of development intrusion that threaten their survival and environment, deprive them of traditional resources, alienate and displace them of their customary land” through establishing a resource center that promotes both exchange of information and active programming, undertakes community education, research, and training on policy matters affecting indigenous peoples.

The discourse and practice of development is too deeply entrenched within the neoliberal capitalist market economy to be easily dislodged, despite the failures observed with respect to ameliorating the lives of the indigenous people affected by the development of natural resources undertaken in Malaysian Borneo. Escobar notes that hope lies in the transition discourses (TD) that are being developed at a multiplicity of sites, such as social movements, non-governmental organizations, civil society, and those connected to environmental and cultural struggles, that is, those who work with environmental and social justice issues.<sup>23</sup> Useful for our purposes are his observations, first, that transition “involves complex epistemological processes—intercultural and interepistemic—that require in turn a type of cognitive justice that has not been recognized” such that “different, often contrasting, cultural-historical experiences are rendered mutually intelligible and commensurable; this has happened in recent history through the imposition of the cultural codes of capitalist modernity on an increasingly global scale.” Illustrative of the formation of such epistemological processes bringing together different experiences rendered mutually intelligible is a five-day event organized by Save Rivers in October 2015. Named “World Indigenous Summit on Environment and Rivers” (WISER, Baram 2015), it brought together indigenous peoples from Brazil, Honduras (including the recently assassinated environmental activist Berta Caceres), Chile, the Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia, Australia, the United States of America, with the indigenous people of Malaysian Borneo. The purpose of the summit was to observe the two-year anniversary of the Baram dam blockade, visit the blockade sites, to celebrate the July 2015 moratorium on the building of the dam, and also “to build solidarity and sharing experience among the indigenous facing the threat posed by mega dams”<sup>24</sup> through a day-long conference held in Miri. WISER also hoped to mobilize support to halt

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<sup>22</sup> <http://brimas.www1.50megs.com/> accessed July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Escobar, xix.

<sup>24</sup> <https://intercontinentalcry.org/world-indigenous-summit-on-environment-and-rivers-in-sarawak/> accessed July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

construction of twelve mega dams proposed for Sarawak, which if built, would “force thousands of communities off of their land, drive untold species into extinction, pollute the rivers—the lifelines of the jungle—and produce more greenhouse gas emissions per megawatt of energy than a coal-fired power plant.”<sup>25</sup> As noted in Save Rivers Press Statement, mega dam construction is a global issue, dislocating 40-80 million people, largely indigenous, tribal, and peasant, off their lands, according to the World Commission on Dams. Such people, who more properly should be termed development refugees/internally displaced persons are rightly considered to have been “economically, culturally and psychologically devastated”<sup>26</sup> and the need for new epistemologies of a transitional discourse contesting and reimagining development has never been more apparent.

A second observation made by Escobar relates to reimagining a different world. Transition:

entails multiple ontologies...when radically envisioned, transition involves moving from the modern understanding of the world as universe to the world as ‘pluriverse’ (without pre-existing universals) or, ...from a paradigm of ‘globalization’ to one of ‘planetarization.’ If the former privileges economic and cultural integration and homogenization under a set of (Eurocentric) universal principles, the latter advocates for communicability among a multiplicity of cultural worlds on the grounds of shared ecological and political understandings.<sup>27</sup>

The struggle against homogenization among the indigenous peoples of Malaysian Borneo begins with childhood, that formative period when cultural memes are communicated and inculcated. BRIMAS identifies Community Literacy and Cultural Renewal as one of its key objectives, in conceiving a rural literacy program “through early childhood development that incorporate[s] [the] national education curriculum and the social and cultural values of local indigenous communit[ies].”<sup>28</sup> Rather than being seen and construed as fighting modernization, this focus on childhood education suggests the immense value that lies in a pluriverse that sees diversity as a strength, especially in the face of extractive industries that erode environmental and cultural wealth. Its campaign activities are directly aimed at addressing the concerns of indigenous peoples, as for instance in lobbying for constitutional recognition of indigenous rights to customary land and resources, and its focus on campaigns against extractive industries, violations of human rights, and commercialization of indigenous culture. Its program strategy includes creating “public discussion, debate and consultation which can lead to the rethinking of development policies.”<sup>29</sup> Such a statement speaks powerfully to the need to move from a worldview that places (economic) globalization on a pedestal to one that considers planetarization—the well-being of the planet’s ecological systems, and all that they sustain—to be of paramount significance, worthy of attention.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.sarawakreport.org/campaign/save-rivers-press-statement-world-indigenous-summit-on-environment-and-rivers-wiser-baram-2015/> accessed July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., accessed July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Escobar, xx.

<sup>28</sup> <http://brimas.www1.50megs.com/> accessed July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., accessed July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

On my last morning at the longhouse before we are taken to Miri for our flights back to Singapore, I ask one member of our group who is from this area about Penang as home, and what that means. He mentions that people don't complain about life being hard here but those who were moved to Baku, a larger nearby city, complain. They were given two-acre lots that are not good quality land whereas their landholdings here are much more extensive and fertile--something I called legalized theft. Another member of our group asked him if people want to have development and want to leave this area in pursuit of education and employment. He replied that the villagers want the kids to have an education but they want to stay here and even if the younger generation gets jobs elsewhere, they want to be able to return here. To lose their connection with their ancestral lands, rivers, and way of life is equivalent to ethnocide for them. Logging erodes the soil into the rivers, affecting the habitat not only of forest creatures but riverine creatures, and makes the communities more vulnerable to natural disasters due to the sediment load carried by the rivers. Oil palm production also produces its own maleffects, including depleted soils and overuse of respiratory illness-causing pesticides. The unintended consequences of development, he says, are the loss of our sustainable natural habitat and the cultural life that goes with it, as engineering solutions from the developed world are thoughtlessly applied to the developing world.