


2017

## Resisting Dams and Plantations: Indigenous Identity in Sarawak

Wan Ping Chua '17  
*Yale-NUS*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/envirolabasia>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Asian History Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [East Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Environmental Policy Commons](#), [Environmental Sciences Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [Policy History, Theory, and Methods Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), [Social Policy Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Chua, Wan Ping '17 (2017) "Resisting Dams and Plantations: Indigenous Identity in Sarawak," *EnviroLab Asia*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8. Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/envirolabasia/vol1/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Claremont at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in EnviroLab Asia by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

---

# Resisting Dams and Plantations: Indigenous Identity in Sarawak

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Wan Ping CHUA is a 2017 environmental studies graduate from Yale-NUS College, Singapore. She specializes in sustainable agriculture, and her senior thesis focused on private, non-governmental food governance through initiatives like the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil. Wan Ping is also the co-founder and chair of the Sustainable Solutions Network, a portal that connects environmental stakeholders in Singapore across all sectors. She will matriculate at the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies in Fall 2019.

## Resisting Dams and Plantations: Indigenous Identity in Sarawak

Wan Ping Chua<sup>1</sup>  
Yale-NUS

**Abstract:** The market and community are always intertwined, and sustained through economic power, social obligations and ideologies. In Sarawak, Malaysia, the expansion of land use for the development of cash crops and energy infrastructure has faced resistance from indigenous communities who depend upon land for subsistence lifestyles. In this encounter, values and cultures are reworked, and the ways in which the community and market rely upon each other in the community changes. The examination of the rice and wild foods sustenance lifestyle of the indigenous *Kenyah* in Sarawak, Malaysia, and resistance against land development projects, suggest that in the conflicts over land use, the indigenous groups increasingly view themselves less as subsistence farmers and more as autonomous landowners. During these encounters, indigenous groups become increasingly dependent on the market, but in doing so, construct an identity that is even more communal, although without any cultural specificity.

The market and community are always intertwined and sustained through economic power, social obligations and ideologies (Gudeman 2001: 7-8). For indigenous groups, the market plays an important role in sustaining the community and its subsistence economy. However, when there are challenges to the subsistence economy, the ways in which the market and community interact shifts. This can be observed in resistance sites against development. In Sarawak, Malaysia, the expansion of land use for the development of cash crops and energy infrastructure has faced resistance from indigenous communities who depend upon land for subsistence lifestyles. In this encounter, values and cultures are reworked, and the ways in which the community and market rely upon each other in the community changes. The examination of the rice and wild foods sustenance lifestyle of the indigenous *Kenyah* in Sarawak, Malaysia, and resistance against land development projects, suggest that in the conflicts over land use, the indigenous groups increasingly view themselves less as subsistence farmers and more as autonomous landowners. During these encounters, indigenous groups become increasingly dependent on the market, but in doing so, construct an identity that is even more communal, although without any cultural specificity.

This study was conducted during a local NGO, Save Sarawak Rivers Network, effort to engage outside scholars and academics in a local resistance movement against the Baram Hydrodam to be constructed in Sarawak. From January 4 to 7 2016, we visited five different resistance sites along the Baram River Belt, in Long Lama, Long Liam and Long Beku. Of these five sites, one site was a palm oil plantation resistance site. Three of these were located close to a village,

---

<sup>1</sup> Wan Ping **CHUA** is a 2017 environmental studies graduate from Yale-NUS College, Singapore. She specializes in sustainable agriculture, and her senior thesis focused on private, non-governmental food governance through initiatives like the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil. Wan Ping is also the co-founder and chair of the Sustainable Solutions Network, a portal that connects environmental stakeholders in Singapore across all sectors. She will matriculate at the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies in Fall 2019.

which we visited. All the communities visited are from the indigenous *Kenyah* tribe, with the exception of a village in Long Beku, which is Penan (Figure 1). The sizes of the communities also varied, from 44 families in Long Beku to over 200 families in Long Liam. Research data was mostly gathered from speaking to the NGO representatives and local protestors. Additionally, I also used data from interviews collected by Colchester et al. 2007 and Colchester et al. 2013 for palm oil resistance in Sarawak, and data collected by Lee, Jalong & Wong 2015 for dam resistance along the Baram river belt. Most historical data about the *Kenyah* subsistence lifestyle was from Chin's (1985) work on Long Selatong in the Baram district, although some data was also gathered from speaking with elders at the resistance sites.

### **Traditional Economy of *Kenyahs***

Gudeman argues that we can understand economies in two parts which are mutually dependent – the anonymous, distant market, primarily comprised of short-term interactions, and the localized and human community (2001: 17). The traditional economy of the indigenous *Kenyah* demonstrates how these two parts, the community and the market, are connected through practices and institutions.

Rice is an important staple in the *Kenyah* diet. As the main starch, rice is present at every meal. Substituting rice with any other form of starch staple is seen as a sign of poverty, and *Kenyahs* would complain of being “hungry” as long as they do not have rice (Chin 1985: 85). The rice is supplemented by other side dishes. These dishes might be comprised of wild vegetables, meat or fish, other cultivated crops, or food bought from shops. As swidden agriculturalists, plots for rice farming are created by slashing and burning. The decisions concerning swidden agriculture are often made collectively. Household collectively agree on swidden sites in order to share labor and resources (Chin 1985: 134-135). Burning dates are also communal decisions (Chin 1985: 165). Participation and involvement by the whole community is important, and the decisions are led by the headmen, although households still have some flexibility in deciding the exact date of burning (Chin 1985: 166). As well, households are responsible for providing their own required labor for burning (Chin 1985: 167). Hence, while the indigenous *Kenyah* value community, self-subsistence and independence are also important values, as illustrated by rice farming. These values thus acts as the “base”, which determines social relationships in the community (Gudeman 2001: 7). The values of independence and community is related to a farming culture which remains largely independent, with a single leadership role. The social relationships are important in shaping the traditional *Kenyah* economy.

Other values form the base of economic behavior as well. As rice has to be harvested quickly, and harvest do not mature at the same time in a village, rice harvesting is carried out via reciprocal exchange labor (Chin 1985: 194). However, in times of good harvest, the plot owner may allow the harvester to keep half of what is harvested (Chin 1985: 194). This special harvest method known as *metau* is borne out of a need to harvest all rice as much as possible (Chin 1985: 194). The cultural importance placed on rice shapes a labor system that is simultaneously communal and calculative. However, at times, harvest labor becomes more flexible and borne out of goodwill due to reluctance in wasting food.

However, rice was not strictly a crop rooted solely in communal values either. Families who ran out of rice before the next harvest season would sell their labor by working on another man's plot (Chin 1985: 85). Rice milling was set at a fixed price, with little room for negotiation (Chin

1985: 194). While the harvesting of rice, and rice sharing and eating is an important part of community building, hulling rice was a “market” procedure – short term, autonomous and less flexible (Gudeman 2001: 17). Furthermore, although education was free, parents sending their children to school were expected to contribute a fixed amount of rice for their child’s boarding (Chin 1985: 194). Sending rice is thus a necessary and expected act of goodwill. The varied uses of rice as currency and social capital sustains its importance in the indigenous community, and the farming and harvesting cycle allows the *Kenyah* people to value independence even while remaining communal.

### **Multiple economic models**

Rice in the *Kenyah* community serves multiple functions as food, gifts and currency. It was also interchangeable with cash for school fees and labor. Moreover, rice swidden agriculture sometimes makes use of work groups, and the labor may be reciprocated through other activities including boat making or house repair (Chin 1985: 65). Activities and labor surrounding rice thus has flexibility in value. The need to maximize labor resource for the household and community thus makes men and women’s labor equal (Chin 1985: 64-65). A family with more female members might exchange weeding labor for male labor to perform more strenuous tasks (Chin 1985: 65). This model of communal and reciprocal labor distribution exists alongside other labor distribution models. Reciprocal labor strictly excludes the growing and harvesting of cash crops, assisting in a journey as drivers, navigators or general help (Chin 1985: 65). For the latter, a strict form of wage labor is prescribed (Chin 1985: 65). Thus, an economy that is more market based and less communal exists alongside the rice economy in the same *Kenyah* community.

The cultivation of cash crops such as rubber and oil palm by indigenous groups were introduced as part of government schemes. Although private concessions produced much of Malaysia’s cash crops, government schemes by the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) tried to organize large area of land to smallholder production areas in Peninsula Malaysia (Sajhau and Muralt 1987: 94). These were developed as part of a post-colonization scheme to transfer ownership of plantations from the Western to Malaysian hands (Sajhau and Muralt 1987: 93). However, the FELDA scheme did not encounter serious resistance from indigenous groups occupying historical land (Colchester et al. 2007: 29). This is the chief distinction between cash crop schemes in Peninsula Malaysia and those in Sarawak. The FELDA scheme in Peninsula Malaysia was used as a model for agricultural development schemes in Sarawak (King 1993: 273-274). These schemes took on two forms. The first involved relocating populations to newly cleared lands, and the second involved introducing new crops, infrastructure and providing financial subsidies for the growth of cash crops on existing land (King 1993: 274). As King has argued, the land relocation schemes were generally unsuccessful as the indigenous groups were not motivated to fully exploit their plots of land, as they were unused to land scarcity (1993: 276). Furthermore, the labor requirements of these schemes came into conflict with the hunter-and-gatherer and swidden-agriculture that indigenous groups were accustomed to (King 1993: 276). The market was in tension with the community. Even the introduction of new crops and technology on existing, or in situ, land was unsuccessful. Chin noted that although the *Kenyah* population was familiar with cash crops such as rubber, cash crops were generally seen as cash reservoirs which required considerable effort to exploit (1985: 228). Hence, cash was not a priority, and the indigenous groups could not be successfully converted into small-holder cash crops farmers under Sarawak’s early agricultural diversification scheme. Sarawak did not evolve

to become a cash crop economy through the agricultural development schemes of the 70s and 80s.

The tensions between the autonomous market economy and a community-centered lifestyle is reflected in sentiments regarding rural to urban migration. Education is seen as a way for subsistence farmers to leave the drudgery of farming life for white collared jobs (Chin 1985: 48). Sending money back to the community upon attaining these jobs was expected (Chin 1985: 48). This form of thinking continues to persist. In Long Beku, a small *Penan* community along the Baram river has had to relocate twice because of a mixture of tribal conflicts and government relocation projects. Currently, the community which comprises 44 families is sharing land with a neighboring indigenous group and the lack of land for farming has forced most of the young people in the village into the neighboring settlement of Long San. The traditional art of iron smelting and shaping is still practiced, but is not seen as a financially sustainable form of lifestyle (Figure 1). Among the community, there is a strong consensus that providing an education institute was the most important priority for the village. Infrastructure, land rights and the preservation of local traditions were seen as secondary to the provision of education. Rural groups working in urban settings have always existed within the community, and the income earned provides a way for indigenous communities back “in the village” to continue sustaining themselves. Hence, the involvement with a market economy outside of the village is important for the village. This is particularly so when land required for subsistence lifestyles is challenged. Education may thus serve the role of increasing village dependence on the market.

At times, however, education may also cause the indigenous community to further isolate themselves. Discrimination in the classroom, and the irrelevance of standardized education to the laboring lifestyles of children can further isolate indigenous groups. Furthermore, teachers are typically not local. In one village, all of the teachers interviewed were Malays from Sabah. A village elder was adamant on discrimination against indigenous groups in the classroom: *He didn't study but he got an 'A'. I didn't get one because I am not Malay, and the teachers did not like me.*

Another woman in the *Kenyah* community of Long Liam, Rosti, had just graduated from a small university in the capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. Rosti expressed unease at working in Kuala Lumpur (KL): *I think I will work in Miri. Miri is closer to home, and not so big like KL.*

Land development transforms communities, and the ways in which the urban market relates to the rural community. Even as education increasingly assimilates indigenous communities into the market, it also strengthens perceptions of a difference between indigenous people and other Malaysians. Education is one example of how land development can alter village economy and identity. The ways in which land development threatens self-subsistence is a much more prominent example.

### **Land Development and Self-subsistence**

Land development comes into conflict with the traditional economic activities of the *Kenyahs*, threatening self-sustenance. Land development projects directly challenges rice swidden agriculture, which is dependent upon periodic movement from plot to plot. As land is being claimed by the government, the possibility for swidden movement is threatened. The loss of biodiversity through the cash crop monoculture also threatens wild life and crops, which make

up a substantial part (47.4 – 64.4 percent) of the *Kenyah* diet (Chin 1985: 91). These challenges posed to land rights were mostly due to land policies that developed after the agriculture diversification schemes.

Because it learned lessons from the failure of these schemes, the government began developing land policies that would take indigenous land rights into account. The Sarawak Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (SALCRA) was established in 1976 with the object of developing agricultural land on existing lands, with joint partnership and consent of indigenous groups (Bulan 2006: 51). The program was contingent upon government funding to provide the necessary resources for households to divide and manage plots of cash crops (Bulan 2006: 51). Around the same time, the private sector was also brought in to develop estates through the Land Custody and Development Authority that was developed in 1981 as an intermediary between landowners and corporations (Colchester et al. 2007: 28). This was justified on the grounds that indigenous groups were making inefficient use of land resources and that land should not be left idle (Cramb 2011: 281). The dominant idea by the government that land left alone is idle land, instead of a necessary part of the swidden cycle (Cooke 2002: 197, Cooke 2006: 33) is a key premise underlying the land conflicts in Sarawak. However, although the expansion of private plantations was said to be developed on unencumbered land, poor land survey efforts meant that land rights were unclear (Cooke 2002: 193; Cramb 2011: 285; Bujang and Ngau, 2016: 14). Hence, encounter with encumbered land slowed down the acquisition of land for private estates (Colchester et al. 2007: 28). Today, private estates still make up around 70% of Sarawak's oil palm plantations (Bujang and Ngau, 2016: 14), although a new joint-venture scheme known as *Konsep Baru* was introduced in 1994. Under *Konsep Baru*, indigenous groups would exchange their land for investment shares in plantation companies (Cooke 2002: 195). However, the scheme was viewed suspiciously by the villagers (Cooke 2002: 195). As pointed out by authors such as Colchester et al., *Konsep Baru* functioned as a compensation scheme that would deprive indigenous land owners of ownership of their land for the lease period of 60 years (2007: 30). As such, the consequences of poor land development schemes continue to persist today and indigenous groups continue to contest land rights.

The land conflicts have been exacerbated by a history of poor management of land rights. The problematic notion of land rights can be traced back to pre-colonial history. Historically, an *adat* system of governance has always existed in Sarawak. This form of governance functioned as law for conflicts between and within communities, and is largely led by the village headmen. During James Brooke's dynasty, there was an important provision put forth in the Land Regulation Act of 1863, which disallowed land development unless no rights have been established (Ngidang 2005: 51; Bulan 2006: 46). While the act seemingly serves to protect native rights, it was accompanied by other legal instruments which eventually made natives licensees of the land they have historically used. This was first developed through private property ownership schemes, which issued land lease from the government (Ngidang 2005: 54). This form of land ownership challenged the hereditary ownership tradition of the *adat* system (Ngidang 2005: 52). Legal instruments were later applied by Charles Brooke to relax the land development provision, due to an increasing need to commercialize land. As Charles Brooke and his successor improved land administration through documenting land and assigning land rights in Sarawak, the *adat* system was increasingly undermined (Ngidang 2005: 56).

Following World War II, British colonial control created a system of land classification, and the category of "Native Customary Land (NCL)" emerged. Natives were granted NCL licenses.

When colonial ownership was transferred to the Sarawak state government, natives became licensees of the “state”, instead of the “crown” (Cooke 2002: 193). The Sarawak Land Code of 1958 issues NCL to natives who used the land prior to 1958, but the burden of proof lies on the natives to demonstrate that those lands have been used for purposes of cultivation, burial, the felling of virgin jungles and the right of way (Bulan 2006: 49; Bujang and Ngau 2016: 41). The problem of “uncultivated” or “idle” land remains a problem today, as land is recognized as NCL only when it is occupied or felled (Cooke 2002: 193). This is in direct conflict with the swidden cycle. In addition, a series of amendments were made to the Sarawak land Code to further undermine native ownership. In 1994, an amendment was made giving the Minister power to extinguish NCL rights, and in 1997, occupation without permit was henceforth considered illegal “notwithstanding any custom to the contrary (Situn and Lin 2012: 4-5).

The current system of land management takes its influence from the past, and favors formal registration of land, which undermines the historical occupation by natives. Hence, indigenous groups in Sarawak have always had their land rights undermined, although in practice, the perceptions of intrusion might be different as the dynasty leaders and the colonial administration was not as ambitious in its land development strategy as the Sarawak government. When indigenous groups offer community maps or maps from dynasty period as evidence of land ownership, the maps function as evidence, but are also examples of a different body of governance and politics (Cooke 2003: 280; Barney 2004:336). Referencing land division agreements from *Adat* law, for example, might constitute a rejection of the current legal system. The Sarawak land code, however, may not always reflect actual practice. Courts have often granted decisions in favor of natives when conflicts of land ownership with private companies come into question. This, however, is not unaccompanied by inconsistencies. The provision of compensation differs from case to case, even if the land conflict is similar (Colchester et al. 2013: 243).

The history of land conflict has not had a satisfactory or consistent conclusion in Sarawak. Legal conflicts continue to persist in the Sarawak courts today, as detailed by Colchester et al. (2007: 35-41). The history of land policies has also created a distrust in the government, and history of low wages and accidents in the plantation industry (King 1993: 296) also makes abandoning a subsistence lifestyle for plantation work unappealing. Land is an important part of the social and economic functioning of the indigenous community. In the legal conflicts over land, indigenous groups have had to emphasize their native history in order to obtain rights to land. The changes in development to the *Kenyah* population has not only shaped its political identity, it has also altered the ways in which the market and the community interacts.

### **Resistance and Community in the Village**

The land development policies by the government have met with resistance from indigenous communities. One form of resistance is through the legal pathway of court cases, but the communities in Sarawak have also had a history of erecting blockades. These have happened in Eastern *Penan* communities against logging companies (Brosius 1997; Brosius 1999), and across numerous communities in Miri and Mukah districts (Côté and Cliché 2011: 132-133). As Côté and Cliché argues, blockades are typically the last resort for the indigenous groups of Sarawak, and used when means to engage the government or corporations, or means of seeking fair compensation have failed (2011: 144-146). These blockades also tend to be peaceful and non-



violent (Côté and Cliché 2011: 145-136). Although the blockades are peaceful, blockades typically attract police attention as they constitute disruption to the plantation and are illegal (Brosius 1997: 475-476). However, these same encounters with the police are means of attracting attention and achieving legal recourse (Colchester et al. 2007: 42-75).

Colchester et al. (2007) has shown that in times of resistance, indigenous groups have generally expressed a desire to have their land back. The desire to use land as a bargaining chip to attain more financial gains for the community is only hinted at (Colchester et al. 2007: 74). For an *Iban* community in along the river banks of banks of Sungei Tampoi, Sungei Krang and Sungei Meringgang, a blockade was set up after construction of a plantation continued despite the lack of resolution regarding NCL. The requests to pay a fine was ignored by the company, who later tried to charge the villagers a toll fee when the villagers used the roads meant for the plantation to access the land. The district office and the villagers could not reach a satisfactory price for compensation, and Jingga, a member of the community said: *We do not want any compensation. We only want our land back* (Colchester et al. 2007: 68). This sentiment is echoed by another villager, a member of the village's action committee on land rights: *There is no price for NCR lands because there are no other lands*, (Colchester et al. 2007: 68). In these encounters, the indigenous groups were typically anguished and had little demands except for ownership of their land. However, in a blockade erected on a palm oil plantation in a *Kenyah* community in Kampong Long Teru, the villagers' response demonstrated a willingness to negotiate, and more importantly, a shift in the way in which the market and community interacts for the indigenous group (Figure 2).

In Kampong Long Teru, the construction of a 3000-hectare plantation began in 1994 on what the community regards as its ancestral land (Figure 2). The land was unused by the community before the plantation was built, but it held the graves of the villagers' ancestors. Therefore, the plantation is regarded as an act of intrusion. The community claimed it had begun negotiations and discussions with the company since its first entrance in 1994 but when these discussions fell through, the community brought the case to the courts in 2007. In 2014, the community began erecting a blockade to block access to the plantation. The blockade was removed twice by the policemen but re-erected again. As of January 2016, the blockade is still erected.

Unlike other communities who are still awaiting the results of trial, the community has received (discourse is the wrong word). However, Toni, a blockade leader, expressed dissatisfaction at the compensation: *They are paying us 1, 500 Ringgit per hectare [for our ancestral land]. It is a one-time payment. But the companies have been paid for 30 years to own the land here.*

Unwillingness to accept the compensation policy stemmed from the feeling that it was not sufficient. Toni had a sense of how much the village land was worth, and was able to list it out, including how much premium the palm company had to pay for the land, the monthly revenue from the sale of palm products, and even the cost per year of fertilizers. He also noted that sustainably sourced palm fetched a higher price on the market. The information came from some people in the neighboring community who worked in palm oil plantations. This flow of information and access to legal recourse likely shaped the community's attitude towards land. Even though the grounds given for the blockades was ancestral importance, the community had a clear idea of the land's worth in cash.

This may explain economic behavior at the blockade. As the company neglected the land that was blocked by the natives, the indigenous community began harvesting and selling the palm

kernels. A small shelter was constructed beside the plantation for the working men to take a rest and lunch breaks in between work. After the kernels were harvested, Toni would drive into town to sell the palm, and the profits would be distributed among the working men. However, the plantation was clearly too large for the small group to manage, and Toni pointed out that some trees were diseased. The village, however, did not have the capacity to manage the diseased plants. Due to the lack of labor, many of the palm were also left unharvested. When asked whether he wished for the company to leave, or for the community to regain its land back, Toni was adamant that neither should happen: *We ask for 49% of the [company's] profit. And they must hire local people. Employment should be from the local people, but the companies engage people from outside.*

The displacement of local workers by Indonesian migrant workers has been documented in other land development projects in Malaysia (Colchester et al. 2007: 73; Cramb and Sujang 2011: 93). Toni cited that migrant workers were preferred by companies as contribution of the employee provident fund, a compulsory saving plan for Malaysians, are not required for foreign labor. The economic thinking behind resistance pervades the community. The locals did not romanticize nor were they overly sentimental about their land, although the reasons cited for NCL was historical. Rather, they were familiar with the market, and the capital worth of their land. The harvesting of palm oil at this resistance sites thus requires an assimilation into the market. Yet the patterns of work were similar to those found in *Kenyah* swidden agriculture. Men worked independently, although there was a stewardship of a leader. There was pressure for households to contribute labor, and earnings were distributed among the community. While the community was no longer practicing swidden agriculture, important aspects of the community continue to persist. The financial sustainability of the resistance would be impossible without both the market and the community.

The resistance observed at this community is centered upon native-ness, and exclusiveness. Although the local labor was clearly insufficient for the work required at the plantation, the rhetoric by Toni was centered upon keeping profits and benefits within the community. The practice of claiming land as NCL thus not only has historical significance, but also serves to further isolate the indigenous community. However, this isolation was not based upon any sort of cultural specificity either. The economic behavior and rhetoric behind palm oil harvesting by the blockade leader at the resistance site is no less calculative than an estate manager. This desire for development without the required “tribalness” has been argued as Li (2000) as a form of articulation which draws upon previous histories of encounters over entitlements. For the indigenous communities in Sarawak, which has had a long history of land development and challenges, the market has come to play an increasingly important role in its economy, facilitating the shift of indigenous groups from subsistence farmers to landowners.

Scott (1976) has argued that the subsistence ethics of peasants are related to a different moral economy, where rebellion happens when subsistence is threatened. Risk is understood as that which would threaten subsistence, and insecure poverty is often seen as worse than poverty itself (Scott 1976: 34). Scott’s argument is somewhat applicable to the subsistence indigenous villagers of Sarawak. When all possibilities for negotiation have been exhausted, and there remains no way for communities to continue their subsistence lifestyles because land use is directly challenged, communities resort to resistance either through legal means or through direct blockades. Brosius notes, however, that resistance is not uniform, and some communities have chosen to accept the terms offered (1997: 471). Brosius attributes this to differences in unity

among different communities, and to previous political encounters, such as the relationship to colonial administration (1997: 474-491). For indigenous groups then, subsistence not only encompasses the material, such as food or land, but it also includes community. These are crucial to the economic functioning of the indigenous lifestyle. However, indigenous groups are free to define themselves in ways that peasant farmers cannot. This is partly because they are not bound to any form of occupation, but also because indigenous groups in Sarawak have received differentiated treatment politically, whether good or bad, which further highlights them as a special case and group. In short, while tribal people can demand rights with or without being tribal, peasant farmers are not free to do the same, although both groups rely on subsistence farming.

### **Resistance and Community beyond the Village**

Land challenges directly alter the economy of indigenous communities, which in turn shifts the ways in which the market and the community interact. Through these changes, indigenous communities begin to see themselves less as subsistence farmers and more as landowners. This change is apparent in resistance against dam development. While resistance against plantations and dams might be seen as separate, the patterns of resistance are similar, as are the effects on the economy of the community. Furthermore, the mode of intrusion are similar in that dams are typically built on areas where NCL is unclear. The poor reputation of palm and timber plantations inform plantation resistance. Similarly, the poor reputation of previous mega dam projects have made indigenous communities suspicious of existing plans. The Bakun dam is a notable example. It was developed as part of the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy Project, which aimed to increase electricity generation capacity from 966 MW to 12,000 MW to 20,000 MW by 2020 and 2030 respectively (Sovacool and Bulan 2011: 4842-4843). As the biggest hydroelectric dam in Southeast Asia (Lee, Viswanathan and Ali 2015: 65), the dam forcibly relocated 10,000 people and further affected 60,000 which relied on the Balui river for sustenance, transport, and a source of livelihood (Sovacool and Bulan 2011: 4852). Many indigenous groups rely upon the river for fishing and food. While the economic and technical potential of the Bakun dam was limited from the start (Sovacool and Bulan 2011: 4848), the project attracted particular controversy due to its social impact. Poor compensation policies which resulted in the alteration of livelihoods and poverty to indigenous communities have been well-documented (Choy 2004; Lee, Viswanathan and Ali 2015). Testimonials of the project's lack of transparency were also noted (Lee, Jalong & Wong 2015: 13-14).

After the Bakun experience, communities who faced destruction from other mega dam projects quickly put up resistance. Unlike plantation resistance which tends to be site-specific and isolated, the resistance against dams was much more organized geographically. In Miri, the resistance against Baram dam was facilitated by local NGO Save Sarawak Rivers Network. The resistance efforts in 2013 led to a moratorium on the dam in 2015, and the return of indigenous rights on the affected land site in 2016 (Bardeen 2016). Leading up to the success, however, was a series of blockades similar to plantation resistance, but at a larger scale, beyond the village level.

Long Lama is one of the key sites of protest (Figure 3). Since 2013, a blockade has been set up, with at least one clash with the government conducting engineering assessments in the area (Bardeen 2016). A second protest site was set up close to the homes of a *Kenyah* community due to its strategic position in restricting access to an important site on dam construction (Figure 4).

This blockade received more attention. Shelters were constructed beside the existing longhouses to accommodate protestors. The blockade encountered heavy resistance by the police (SURAM 2014), and was removed 12 times across 2 and a half years. The support for the blockade went beyond Sarawak, and drew the attention of NGOs in Sabah and Kalimantan. The protest was chiefly to contest the effects the dams would have in displacing communities who depend upon the Baram River, and largely due to the poor experience with Bakun Dam. This was a conversation with Peter, a protestor:

Do you support the SCORE project?

Yes, I support.

But you don't support the Baram dam?

No.

Why do you not support the Baram dam?

Because we know of the bad experience in Bakun. The people from Bakun come and tell us about their bad experience. I support SCORE but not the Baram dam.

The conversation with Peter revealed the same kind of tension between development and native rights and ownership that was central to plantation protests. In communicating the reasons for eliminating the dam, a leader of the protest in Long Lama said: *The energy from SCORE will not go to Sarawak. It will go to Sabah, to Peninsula Malaysia, but it is not for Sarawak.*

This rhetoric of keeping development within the indigenous community is echoed by other residents resisting. In Na'ah: *The company and the government will spend billions to build the dam. But if they were serious about development, that money could instead develop infrastructure for our village* (Lee, Jalong & Wong 2015: 15). The form of development voiced by the community in Long Lutin also required indigenous ownership of land:

What we need here in Baram is basic development: a clinic, a school, roads, electricity...This is the kind of development we want. We are very firm: we will not give up our land. We rely on the land; we want the land for the generations to come.

(Lee, Jalong & Wong 2015: 15)

Land is crucial to the indigenous groups for the practice of its economy. The desire for development within the indigenous community comes with an exclusivity. This desire is a result of native's history with Sarawak's land laws and policies. In times of resistance, the indigenous groups have tried to differentiate themselves as politically different. One of the key ways this is demonstrated is through self-election. In Sarawak, the village headmen are elected by the Sarawak government (Sarawak State Planning Unit 2011). This has resulted in conflicts of interests, particularly as resisting dam construction directly challenges the government's SCORE project. Villagers also reported that some headmen have taken bribes from the government in order to prevent their community from protesting. Lee, Jalong and Wong have also examined other coercive and deceitful techniques used, such as dam representatives refusing compensation, or gathering false consent (2015: 13-14). At the site of resistance in Long Lama, however, the villagers chose their own leader to lead them, having nighttime strategizing sessions (Figure 3). The process of self-election constitutes a rejection of the

government's SCORE project, but also a rejection of the government's assignment of leadership in the community. The indigenous people are demanding self-rule because they are different.

Furthermore, at the Long Lama blockade, the villagers constructed a cross, a symbol of Christianity (Figure 4). The symbol is placed at a site where encounters with legal forces are intended. It is particularly assertive not only because Malaysia is a primarily Islamic country with political power resting among the police (US Department of State 2013: 1-12) but because Christianity flourished in the region due to visit by Christian missionaries in the past. While most middle-age residents of Sarawak would speak English as their second language following their native tongue, an increasing proportion would speak Malay instead today. This is the effect of the "Malaysianization" of Sarawak in the 1970s and the 1980s, beginning with the addition of Malay (to English) as Sarawak's official language in 1974 (Hazis 2011: 84). This change was cemented later in 2011, when the Education Minister Tun Abdul Rahman Yakub demanded that schools in Sarawak should change their language of instruction from English to Malay (Bernama 2011). Rahman was the same minister involved in adding Malay to Sarawak's official language (Hazis 2011: 83). The change in language is just one example of attempts by the government to "Malaysianize" the state, which has in turn invoked resistance by indigenous groups. The erection of a Christian symbol resists the oppression of non-muslim cultures and is particularly political because of the sentiment that Muslim or Malay leaders held most of the countries' power.

There are some key differences between dam and plantation resistance, particularly because dam resistance is non-economic. Protestors leave their jobs to stand guard at the blockades, and typically count on goodwill from neighboring villages for food and shelter. Yet, both forms of resistance react to a sentiment that the indigenous identity, culture and community have been threatened, and seek a form of development that is as autonomous as it is isolated. This form of development is shaped by encounters with the market and past land laws and policies, which has shaped how the value of land, and the indigenous identity is perceived.

## Conclusion

In revisiting resistance, it is meaningful to consider what the indigenous identity means. In dam resistance, the geographic spread of the problem has created local NGO networks. These NGOs like Save the River work across different indigenous groups. The scale of the SCORE project means the NGOs target not only one dam, but several. In doing so, they acknowledge the differences between indigenous groups, from *Kenyah*, *Penan*, *Kayan*, *Iban*, among others, but consistently reference "native" rights. While the different indigenous groups can have vastly different lifestyles, the rhetoric of presenting themselves as "native" is a response to the ways in which they have been portrayed, and their encounter with political forces.

Indigenous groups have a history of obtaining land rights and compensation based on "native" claims in plantation projects, but these rights have often been obtained after the land that allows for the practice of their traditional economy has already been disrupted. Despite making a claim on being native, the natives have lost the land that allow them to be native. The changes in the way the community and market functions in these sites of resistance is thus an assertion of legal, rather than cultural, claims. While the market and community continue to be intertwined in indigenous economy, there is also a gradual movement from individualized self-

subsistence to collective self-subsistence. Community members have had to cooperate in more strategic and targeted ways, to achieve rights and compensation on the basis of the community, as opposed to cooperating with the community for the sole purpose of harvesting one's own plantation. indigenous Even as the indigenous groups become increasingly dependent on the market, they also have to group tighter together to assert rights based on their identity as indigenous. With resistance, this happens at a village level, but also across villages and different indigenous groups. Dam resistance breaks down the geographic barrier that keeps different indigenous groups from interacting with one another but because it is geographically specific to areas where indigenous groups live, it highlights the perception that the government is "doing natives wrong", regardless of which tribes the natives might come from. In studying the effects of land development and resistance, it might be useful to consider how communities resisting have had to change in order to obtain the rights to stay the same.



Figure 1 Iron smelting in Long Beku (Tom White 2016)



Figure 2 Trucks used to transport palm at the resistance site in Long Teru (Tom White 2016)





Figure 3 Strategy meeting in Long Lama (Tom White 2016)



Figure 4 Blockade at Long Lama (Tom White 2016)



## Literature Cited

- Barney, Keith. "Re-Encountering Resistance: Plantation Activism and Smallholder Production in Thailand and Sarawak, Malaysia." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 45, no. 3 (2004): 325–39.
- Bernama. "Former Education Minister Calls For Return To Teaching Maths, Science In BM." *Bernama*. Last modified July 11, 2011, [https://web.archive.org/web/20110711152042/http://education.bernama.com/index.php?sid=news\\_content&id=371208](https://web.archive.org/web/20110711152042/http://education.bernama.com/index.php?sid=news_content&id=371208)
- Bardeen, Sarah. "Baram Dam Stopped! A Victory for Indigenous Rights." *International Rivers*. Last modified March 22, 2016, <https://www.internationalrivers.org/blogs/433-18>
- Brosius, J. Peter. "Prior Transcripts, Divergent Paths: Resistance and Acquiescence to Logging in Sarawak, East Malaysia." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 03 (1997): 468–510.
- Brosius, J. Peter. "Green dots, pink hearts: Displacing politics from the Malaysian rain forest." *American Anthropologist* 101, no. 1 (1999): 36-57.
- Bujang, Mark and Harrison Ngau. "Protecting Indigenous People's Land Rights using the Court system." Presentation for NGOs and students by International Save Rivers, Sarawak, Malaysia: Jan 7, 2016.
- Bulan, Ramy. "Native Customary Land: The Trust as a Device for Land Development in Sarawak." In *State, communities and forests in contemporary Borneo*, edited by Fadzilah Majid Cooke, 45-64. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006.
- Chin, See Chung. "Agriculture and Resource Utilization in a Lowland Rainforest Kenyah Community." *Sarawak Museum Journal* 35, no. 4 (1985): 1-332.
- Choy, Yee Keong. "Sustainable development and the social and cultural impact of a dam-induced development strategy - the Bakun experience." *Pacific Affairs* 77, no. 1 (2004): 50-68.
- Colchester, Marcus, and Sophie Chao. *Conflict or Consent: The Oil Palm Sector at a Crossroads*. Moreton in Marsh: Forest Peoples Programme, 2013.
- Colchester, Marcus, Wee, Aik Pang, Wong, Meng Chuo and Thomas Jalong. *Land is life: land rights and oil palm development in Sarawak*. Forest Peoples Programme (FPP), 2007.
- Cooke, Fadzilah Majid. "Expanding State Spaces Using 'Idle' Native Customary Land in Sarawak." In *State, communities and forests in contemporary Borneo*, edited by Fadzilah Majid Cooke, 25-44. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006.
- Cooke, Fadzilah Majid. "Maps and Counter-Maps: Globalised Imaginings and Local Realities of Sarawak's Plantation Agriculture." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 02 (June 2003). doi:10.1017/S0022463403000250.
- Cooke, Fadzilah Majid. "Vulnerability, Control, and Oil Palm in Sarawak: Globalization and a New Era?" *Development and Change* 33, no. 02 (2002).
- Côté, Denis, and Laura Cliche. "Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Oil Palm Plantations in Borneo." *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (2011): 121–52.
- Cramb, R. A. "Re-Inventing Dualism: Policy Narratives and Modes of Oil Palm Expansion in Sarawak, Malaysia." *Journal of Development Studies* 47, no. 2 (February 2011): 274–93. doi:10.1080/00220380903428381.
- Cramb, Rob, and Patrick S. Sujang. "'Shifting Ground': Renegotiating Land Rights and Rural Livelihoods in Sarawak, Malaysia: Land Rights and Rural Livelihoods." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 52, no. 2 (August 2011): 136–47. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8373.2011.01446.x.

- Gudeman, Stephen. *The anthropology of economy: Community, market, and culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.
- Hazis, Faisal S. "The resurgence of Muslim Bumiputra Politics 1970–81." In *Domination and Contestation*, 71-112. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2011.
- King, Victor T. *The Peoples of Borneo*. London: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.
- Lee, Tanya, Jalong, Thomas and Wong Meng Chuo. *No Consent to Proceed: Indigenous Peoples' rights violation at the proposed Baram dam in Sarawak*. Save Sarawak Rivers Network: 2015.
- Lee, Wen Chiat, K. Kuperan Viswanathan, and Jamal Ali. "Compensation Policy in a Large Development Project: The Case of the Bakun Hydroelectric Dam." *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 31, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 64–72. doi:10.1080/07900627.2014.914429.
- Li, Tania Murray. "Articulating Indigenous Identity in Indonesia: Resource Politics and the Tribal Slot." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 01 (2000): 149–79.
- Ngidang, Dimbab. "Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Native Customary Land Tenure in Sarawak." *東南アジア研究* 43, no. 1 (2005): 47–75.
- Sajhau, Jean Paul, and Jürgen Von Muralt. *Plantations and plantation workers*. Geneva: ILO, 1987.
- Scott, James C. *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.
- Sarawak State Planning Unit. "Governance." Last modified 2011, <http://www.spu.sarawak.gov.my/governance.html>
- Situn, Jaikon and Lee Lyn-Ni. "Orang Asli Deserve to be Treated as Original People of Malaysia." Speech at the Seminar on The Struggles of the Orang Asli and Other Minorities in Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Dec 7-8, 2012.
- Sovacool, Benjamin K., and L.C. Bulan. "Behind an Ambitious Megaproject in Asia: The History and Implications of the Bakun Hydroelectric Dam in Borneo." *Energy Policy* 39, no. 9 (September 2011): 4842–59. doi:10.1016/j.enpol.2011.06.035.
- Suram. "[JOINT STATEMENT] – Attempt to Expel Indigenous Peoples from the Proposed Baram Dam Site Denounced By Human Rights Groups." Last modified October 23, 2014, <http://www.suaram.net/?p=6655>
- US Department of State. "Malaysia 2013 International Religious Freedom Report." Last modified 2013, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/222357.pdf>