

# FSSH

## Research Review



**“Bridging Communities,  
Research and Policy”**



## RESEARCH UPDATE

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# CONTESTED LANDSCAPE IN THE MAGOH REGION OF SARAWAK (F06/SpMYRA/1673/2018)

KELVIN EGAY AND NICHOLAS GANI

The main aim of this research is to explore how the Penan of the Magoh River creates and recreates their sense of space amidst the turbulent changes happening in the environment in which they live. The Penan views their physical environment as more than just a physical space waiting to be exploited. It defines the community's core of life, history, identity and sense of being. To outsiders (i.e. the timber companies, the state, conservationists or tourists), the Magoh area is merely a space on the map, subjected to their own disposition. Its local inhabitants are often excluded from this spatial imagination, apart from being seen as passive recipients of changes that come their way. In this research we employ the theoretical framework of 'landscape' - which in anthropology, deals with the complexity of lives, historical contingency, contestation, and memories in a given space (Bender, 2001) - as a way to examine the Penan's changing relationship with their environment. Since there are multiple representations of the landscape, it is inevitable that contestations occur among different stakeholders. Thus, this research also aims to explore the notion of landscape as a contested space between different interest groups. In doing so, this research highlights the agency of the Penan in the processes of landscape constructions, contestations and negotiations, in a way that challenges mainstream narratives of the Penan as silent participants of change and development.

The constant changes made to their landscape have impacted on the Penan communities' conception of identity, social and power relations. The Penan livelihood strategies have also changed, from a traditional subsistence hunting-and-gathering economy to an economy based on commercial

collecting, and then to different forms of sedentary agriculture, and gradually, dependence on wage employment. This has affected how the Penan communities manage their spaces and natural resources. More importantly, it has redefined their relationship within the communities, as well as with their neighbours, and the external forces.

Our research methods are shaped by the principle of participatory research approach, specifically employing the Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) such as transect survey of contested areas (e.g. their la'a - former settlements, previous and existing blockade sites), GPS mapping of different sites of memory, focus group discussions, and a population census.

This study may directly relate to the Malaysia's National Landscape Policy, in which one of its aims is "...to drive the country towards balanced and sustainable development... and ensure landscape resources are managed wisely". At the same time, based on its SWOT analysis, one of the weaknesses relating to this National Landscape Policy is "inadequate landscape legislation and enforcement". Our study suggests that without any active participation from local communities in the enforcement of this policy, it would be impractical to ensure landscape resources can be managed wisely. Active participation also includes taking into account the indigenous communities' responses to changes to their landscape and community-based actions taken to mitigate the possible detrimental consequences of such changes. The state recognition of the indigenous communities' participation in managing their landscape would ensure a balanced and sustainable development.



Interview with community leaders and voters in Julau, 15 March 2019.



Nick Gani interviews Bajut Kurau of Long Meraan at the la'a (old settlement) of Tokong Sawa' Tevakun. This was the place where they collected rattan vines to make mats and gaweng (medium-sized backpack). In the mid-1990s, they built a cluster of 30-40 *lamin* (lean-to) here to blockade against a timber company operating in this area.



They are the remaining hunter-gatherers of the Ba Ubong watershed. Ba Ubong is known to be the original home of the Penans who have settled down in the upper Tutoh, lower Magoh and in Mulu today. There are 11 persons remaining in the primary forest of Ba Ubong today, led by Pajak Beto', while their relatives decided to live a sedentary lifestyle since the 1980s.



Kelvin with Kristina, Pajak and Iben at Long Ba Ipa Renga, recording their settlement history of the area. According to Pajak, there used to be several *lamin* here more than 15 years ago but it was destroyed by a bulldozer paving the way for logging activities.

## REGIONAL DYNAMICS IN MALAYSIA'S ELECTORAL POLITICS (F06/SGS/1787/2018)

ARNOLD PUYOK AND MEREDITH WEISS

General elections have been held regularly in Malaysia ever since it achieved independence in 1957. Most scholars studying elections in Malaysia mainly look at the electoral dynamics in Peninsular Malaysia. They argue that electoral politics in Peninsular Malaysia are primarily determined by the ethnic factor i.e. the electorates' votes based on ethnic considerations and political parties use ethnic issues to win support. However, scholars give very little attention to another equally important feature of Malaysia's changing political environment, that is, the "regional dimension".

This feature looks at the role of "emerging states" or "fixed deposit" states in the country's electoral landscape especially after 2008. Previous studies are "piecemeal" in nature and do not address the specific details of the "local dynamics" and its impacts on the federal electoral politics and on federal-state relations. Besides, with BN's diminishing influence in Sabah and Sarawak after GE14, it is important to examine how this will affect the future of federal-state relations. The main questions that this research attempt to answer are: what is the significance of the key electoral issues in Sabah and Sarawak to Malaysia's electoral politics? To what extent does the electoral dynamics in Sabah and Sarawak shape and influence the federal political landscape? What are the impacts of the changing political environment in Peninsular Malaysia on Sabah and Sarawak particularly after GE14?