

Nomades et Sédentarisation à Bornéo: Histoire Economique et Sociale. By Bernard Sellato. Paris: Editions de L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. 1989. Pp. 293. 9 tables, 12 maps, 23 black-and-white photographs.

This important new contribution to Borneo studies is based on an unusually long and close acquaintance with the elusive Punan peoples, nomads (or former nomads) of the interior forests. There remain many unanswered questions about the Punan, though Sellato's work adds to a growing corpus of new researches which are gradually building a clearer picture both of who the Punan are, and their relations with other Borneo peoples. Sellato came to anthropology by a rather unusual route. His encounter with Borneo began in 1973, when as a twenty-two-year-old geological engineer he arrived upriver from Pontianak, not speaking a word of Indonesian and with all his luggage having been diverted to Tokyo, never to be seen again. He spent the next two years working in the inaccessible Müller mountain ranges, during which he became acquainted with one particular group of Punan, the Aoheng. His superiors, fearing that he had gone bush, next posted him to the Sahara, but after two years of this he quit and returned to Borneo, having retrained as an anthropologist. Subsequent employment as consultant to a petroleum company enabled him to organize further expeditions into the interior, so that between 1973 and 1985, he spent an estimated total of six years in the field, living with at least ten different Punan groups in different areas, including the Aoheng, Seputan, Hovongan, Kereho, Bukat, Semukung, the Punan of the Murung and Ratah, the Punan Merah of the Mahakam, and the Lisum and Beketan of the Belayan.

Part of the confusion about the Punan (or Penan) has been due to the existence of these many groups with their different names. In the late 1940s and 1950s, there was a dispute among scholars of Borneo as to whether "Punan" and "Penan" were distinct groups, or merely different local names for sub-groups of the same people. A contentious hypothesis put forward more recently by Carl Hoffman (1981) would have it that there is no overall cultural or linguistic relation at all among the different Punan groups, who he proposes are descendants of various different

settled peoples, who have chosen independently to abandon agriculture in order to specialize in forest collecting for trade. Hoffman's writings, however, have already drawn such severe criticisms, not only from Sellato but also from other researchers (Brosius 1988; Sellato 1988; Kaskija 1988), that it is perhaps not surprising that Sellato wastes no space on this argument here. The "devolution" thesis is briskly disposed of in a couple of sentences in his introduction, and without mentioning Hoffman by name. According to Sellato, most of the names given to the "Punan" (including others such as Ukit, Bukit, Olo Ot, Penan, and Tau Toan) are exonyms having the sense either of "mountain people" or "those who wander in the forest". Sellato finds that all groups appear to have been nomads at least for the last two or three centuries (which is as far back as oral histories can trace), having become settled to varying degrees only in relatively recent times. He contents himself with saying that Punan groups are unquestionably all "more or less closely related" in terms of language and culture (1988, p. 26). Unfortunately, no linguistic data is presented here to support this assertion, though the author promises future publications. Certainly one could wish for a more precise statement than this one, especially since Brosius speaks of Penan/Punan groups as "widely divergent linguistically and culturally" (1988, p. 103), while Kaskija calls them "a very heterogeneous category of people" (1988, p. 123). Both of these authors none the less consider Punan to be more closely related to each other than they are to settled Borneo groups, but clearly the question is a complex one, the subtleties of which are not addressed here. Could it be that Sellato is continuing his argument with Hoffman without telling us, and hence wanting to stress what he sees as unifying the Punan peoples? If so, it would certainly help the reader if the issue were pursued more openly.

Perhaps surprisingly, Sellato includes no consideration of prehistory. The peoples of Borneo all speak Austronesian languages and they are not physically differentiated from each other in any significant way. Bellwood therefore considers that foraging groups must indeed have derived from agriculturalist ancestors at some point in the past, for linguistic reconstructions of Proto-Austronesian clearly demonstrate that its speakers were cultivators (1985, pp. 133–34). There is also the

question of the absence of archaeological finds from Borneo's deep interior, which leads the same author to postulate that settlement here may not be of great antiquity. I myself see no problem in considering the possibility that the ancestors of the Punan may indeed in the period of Austronesian prehistory have abandoned agriculture. This in no way conflicts with Sellato's picture of a long-established foraging life-style and a historically recent trend towards settlement. Answers to such questions will always remain speculative, but I find it surprising that Sellato has elsewhere (1988, p. 118) been quite so dismissive of the issues raised by comparative linguistics and prehistory, apparently again in an attempt to discredit every aspect of Hoffman's argument — though Hoffman himself may have misused the data in support of his own case!

Two major strengths of Sellato's work are its meticulous concern for historical detail, and its insistence on locating the Punan within the dynamic of inter-ethnic relations and movements in Borneo. The complexities of these, alone, make his task a challenging one. Another problem is that references to the Punan (often sketchy or second-hand) are scattered here and there through the mass of historical literature on Borneo, the majority referring only to Sarawak and not to Kalimantan. The bibliography indicates a comprehensive acquaintance with past and contemporary works on the Punan, including Dutch, Indonesian, and English sources. Piecing this material together with the many oral accounts which he collected in the field, Sellato develops a detailed historical picture of the movements of some nomadic Punan groups and the dynamic of their relations with settled agricultural peoples. He chooses to concentrate on two groups, the Kereho of the Busang, who remained completely nomadic until the early years of this century, and the Bukat, who have had prolonged contact with Kayan agriculturalists since the beginning of the nineteenth century, in response to which some of them have become sedentarized. Combining these two case-studies with his knowledge of other groups, he also attempts a synthesized picture of shared features of Punan culture and the social transformations they have undergone. This exercise is possibly rather risky, given the mentions of heterogeneity encountered above, and in places the picture constructed seems a little two-dimensional. Perhaps what is needed is

more of Sellato's intense attention to detail among other groups, before such a synthesis could be fully convincing.

Borneo peoples have migrated widely over the last few centuries, the more aggressive ones displacing others as they sought new territories. Part of the reason Punan groups sought contact with peoples like the Kayan during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was to avoid head-hunting raids from the expansionist Iban. The amount of protection offered was, however, dubious and bought at a price, since agriculturalists typically despised the Punan and exploited their carefully maintained position as middlemen in order to cheat them in the trade for forest commodities. Bukat and Aoheng themselves sometimes killed Iban who trespassed on their territory to collect resins. Hostilities peaked during the "Iban war" of 1885, when thousands of Iban attacked and burned Aoheng and Kayan villages. Sellato describes a world of rapidly shifting loyalties, as hostilities between different bands of nomads or settled communities gave way to strategic marriages or blood pacts formed in the interests of trade. The aristocratic leaders of settled groups strongly desired to keep "their" Punan attached to them, but when they went too far in their efforts to reduce the Punan to dependency, a group might always move away and seek to establish partnerships elsewhere. Moving as they commonly did in territories interstitial between several settled groups, the Punan could keep this option open. Still, some groups badly affected by wars were simply assimilated by settled peoples, or regrouped, changing their ethnic identities in the process. Marriage with a Kayan almost always involves the Punan partner (of either sex) going to live with them — resulting in steady population losses for some nomad groups. Out of this fluid situation an overall pattern emerges of a steady drain of "upland" to "lowland" groups. If the former represent the "core" of Punan culture and an older nomadic subsistence economy, the latter are characterized by gradual economic innovation and adaptation in response to settled peoples' demands for forest commodities. This led nomads to specialize as professional collectors, developing at the same time a partial dependence on the cultivation of mixed crops, flexible enough in terms of time commitments to allow long absences in the forest. Sometimes the node between upland and lowland groups was provided by a trading

settlement, such as Nanga Hovat for the Bukat. As fast as lowland Bukat intermarried with the Kayan and became “Kayanized”, nomads from the upland regions would be drawn towards the trading site and themselves tend to become partially settled.

External demand for Borneo’s forest products has existed for at least a thousand years, when trading networks supplied the Chinese with rare medicinal and luxury items such as rhino-horns, hornbill beaks (carved into belt-buckles for high-ranking officials), and gibbons’ and porcupines’ bezoar stones. In this early period, speculates Sellato, only the more accessible nomads would have been drawn into the trade. As they became more settled, bands further inland would have taken over the role of suppliers. Punan of the deep interior have probably been engaged in the networks for not more than 200 years. Resins, *gutta percha*, honey and beeswax, incense, arrow poisons, deers’ antlers, birds’ nests, hornbill feathers, skins, candlenuts, and gold powder are other items which, over time, the Punan have supplied to their settled trading partners, in exchange for iron, hunting dogs, salt, tobacco, cloth, glass beads, and rings. It was the first two items, suggests Sellato, which had the most impact on the Punan life-style, making hunting and sago collection more efficient and freeing time for the collection of forest products. For their part, their aristocratic trading partners often tried to lure the Punan into debt and hence dependency, while preventing their forming direct ties with Chinese, Malay, or European traders. The Punan have also commonly supplied their agricultural neighbours with dried and smoked meat and fish, as well as being renowned for their skill in the manufacture of fine mats, baskets, and blowpipes. More curiously, they sometimes traded in “human” products, slaves and heads captured from other bands in response to Kayan demand. These things were meaningless in terms of their own social order, as were the heirloom valuables — gongs, jars, leather, or brass items — which the Punan none the less occasionally sought to acquire from their trading partners. The nomads hid these goods in caves or buried them in the forest, using them to achieve certain ends in relation to the settled peoples — perhaps the payment of bridewealth necessary to achieve a band leader’s marriage to a Kayan woman, or payment of compensation for murders, or

sometimes simply to gain respect from their settled neighbours, who valued these prestige goods so highly.

Sellato carefully evaluates the ways in which interaction with agriculturalists has stimulated change among the Punan, and draws important conclusions which are relevant to the study of foraging peoples everywhere, and, more broadly, to the general understanding of social change. There has been for some time a growing awareness among scholars that most hunting and gathering peoples have had prolonged contacts with sedentary farmers, and are well aware of agriculture as an alternative mode of subsistence. Any idea that the maintenance of a nomadic, foraging life-style is the result of ignorance or "backwardness" must be dismissed, since it is clear that foraging peoples have made conscious decisions to maintain their own way of life. Since the value systems associated with each type of economy tend to be radically different, such decisions involve (or indeed are motivated by) an ideological commitment to their own set of values. Currently, many Punan peoples are under intense pressure from government authorities to become completely sedentary and take up rice agriculture, which is regarded as more "civilized" than either horticulture or hunting and gathering. Sellato, by contrast, insists that rice is not an automatically superior crop in Borneo conditions, and that the Punan are not sitting recalcitrantly at the bottom of some evolutionary scale of modes of subsistence. Most Punan long ago gave up purely subsistence foraging in order to become professional collectors, taking up the cultivation of some crops like bananas and cassava, in addition to their traditional exploitation of wild sago. Unlike rice, these crops do not require intensive labour and prolonged time commitments, thus being compatible with long absences on forest excursions. Even where rice cultivation is taken up, its place in this economy must remain minor. Sellato sees this as an economically rational decision based on the perceived greater profitability, sustainability, and flexibility offered by collecting. The decision to trade, while being a Punan initiative, was also encouraged by various strategies of their trading partners. Partial sedentism of the Punan also suited the interests of agriculturalists, since it made it easier to draw them into partnership (and debt), but they too did not want them to

become fully dependent on rice since this would have robbed them of the time and the incentive to search for forest products.

A fascinating dimension of Punan interactions with agriculturalists, particularly those with social stratification systems like the Kayan, is how far the Punan managed to resist adopting Kayan ideas and values. Although often made to feel inferior to their aristocratic trading partners, they persist in their own explicit commitment to social equality. Rather than change, they have sometimes adopted ruses such as pretending to have four social ranks while dealing with the Kayan, in order not to be thought inferior. Among the Bukat the term "aristocrat" has been borrowed from neighbouring languages, but is only used among themselves as a term of abuse for anyone attempting to behave arrogantly. Sometimes the community will co-operate to help a band leader maintain face in his dealings with Kayan aristocrats, but among themselves they are explicit in their rejection of what Sellato terms "the temptation to inequality". Neither have they shown any interest in adopting the more elaborate rituals of their settled neighbours, except again where their relations with the latter might make it essential. According to Sellato, they have retained instead an essentially pragmatic and secular orientation (which he notes is common to various other hunting and gathering or nomadic peoples). While accepting that Sellato is right about the rejection of agriculturalists' religious patterns, I am left with a suspicion that this picture of the Punan world-view is perhaps a little impoverished. Brosius (1988, p. 91) speaks of "a vast body of beliefs and practices relating to thunder, animal mockery, food-mixing, death, and a rich and poetic figurative vocabulary involving the addressing of the supernatural world and the concealment of human activities from malevolent spirits". What has happened to all of this among Sellato's informants? Has this distinctive corpus been eroded, or is it possible that Sellato is once again concerned, without saying so, to refute Hoffman's characterization of Punan religion as merely a scaled-down, "back-pack" version of "Dyak" beliefs? If, on the other hand, he has some disagreement with Brosius's understanding of the Punan world-view one would expect this to be discussed. This is not to deny that the Punan have been successful in keeping their own orientation over remarkably long

periods, even when the purely nomadic life has been abandoned. Sellato proposes that this ideological commitment is primarily expressed and sustained precisely through the *economic* choices that the Punan have made, with their emphasis on maintaining flexibility and a degree of mobility. The demonstration of this intimate link between ideology and economy represents a significant contribution to the study of social change.

This is a closely argued and meticulous work to which I have hardly done justice in a brief summary. Let me end with the expression of one or two criticisms. It is admirable that the publishers should make available in reasonably cheap editions such specialized theses as this, but the print face of this one is so tiny as to make it unnecessarily arduous reading. Ethnic maps of Borneo cannot help but be confusing, but these could definitely have been better presented. My more serious reservations concern the author's presentation of his data. As I have indicated, Sellato is clearly familiar with the work of other contemporary specialists on the Punan, yet he does not clearly situate his own work in relation to any of the theoretical issues raised by their researches. Secondly, one of Sellato's stated aims — which he appears to have achieved remarkably well — is to prove that it is in fact possible to recover the history of peoples who have only oral traditions, those who for too long have been judged to be "peoples without history", in Eric Wolf's phrase. This endeavour, difficult as it may be, is not only democratic, but of the utmost importance in correcting imperialist bias in our view of history. This being so, I find it regrettable that Sellato, on the stated grounds of shortage of space, has failed to name and locate the Punan informants who supplied him with the oral accounts on which much of his work is based. Even if it had added a few pages of footnotes, they ought to be acknowledged. It is inconceivable that he would have omitted references to published authors, even though many of the earlier sources had only nonsense to report about the Punan. Why should not the Punan themselves receive the same consideration? If oral history is to be taken seriously, then so must its sources. One looks forward, then, to future publications from this author, both in the field of linguistics, and also perhaps one in which Punan voices will have room to speak to us more intimately.

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