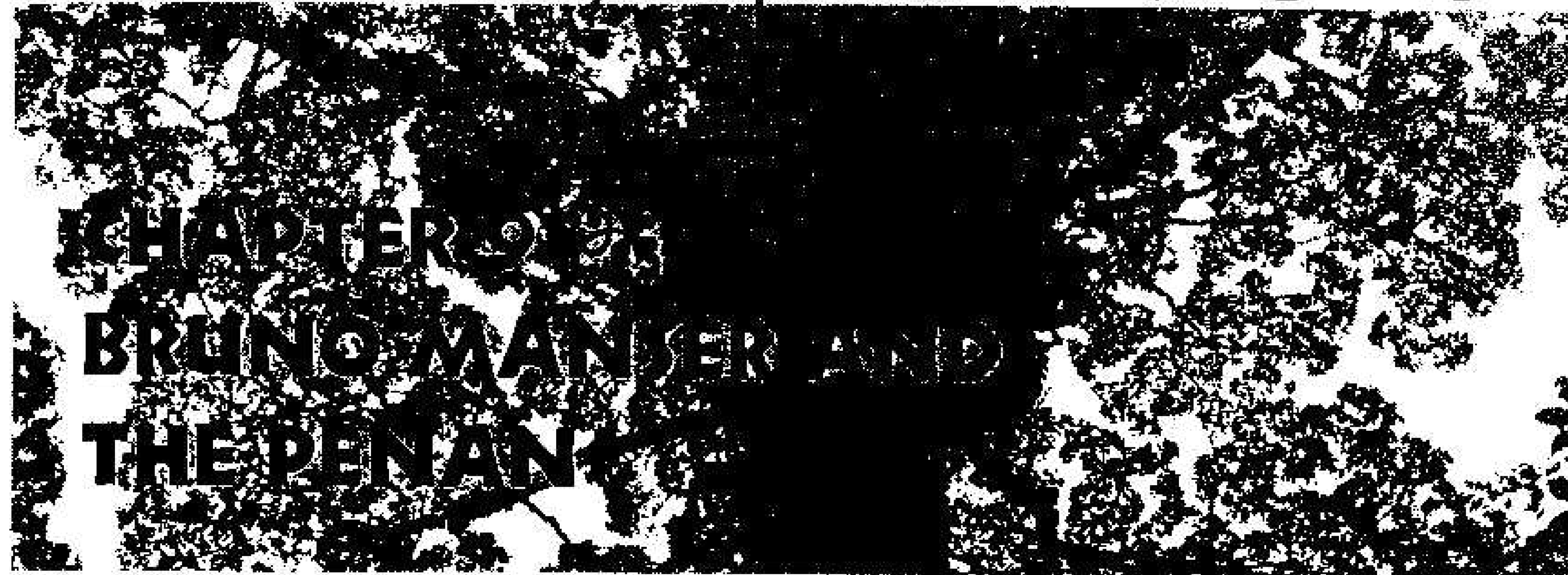
From: Borneo Log: The Struggle for Sarawak's Forests, By William Bevis (1995)



The road Japan funded on Wong's timber concession cut right through Penan territory in the Limbang district, and was clearly aimed across the border to the upper Tutoh, in the Baram. In the Tutoh area, at that time, was a small Swiss man, thirty-three years old, who had sought out the Penan and was living with them. He was perhaps the first European to learn the Penan language well, and to live—not just visit or observe—their way of life. This is remarkable because the nomadic Penan, the "wild men of Borneo," had fascinated Europeans for over two hundred years. In many ways like nature itself, they were admired, overlooked, misunderstood, abused. About three hundred nomadic Penan are left. This is the story of Europeans, Malay, and Chinese coming to them and to their forest.

THE RAJAH JAMES BROOKE and his friend Alfred Russel Wallace used to sit up evenings, in 1854 and after, at the palace in Kuching or at James's mountaintop retreat, a few hours away by canoe and foot. They took delight in arguing Wallace's new views on evolution, which he was developing concurrently with Darwin. James howled at the idea that his ancestors were orangutans.

Wallace had come to see the "little men." Just as the Galapagos and the voyage of the Beagle were inseparable from Darwin's intellectual growth, Borneo and the Malay archipelago shaped Wallace. Unlike Darwin, however, Wallace did not just sail through; he stayed eight years. He came to know the natives; and this, in turn, shaped his view of evolution and the descent of man.

In 1855, Kuching was lively. In the sixteen years since Brooke's arrival, the "very small town of brown huts and longhouses made of wood . . . sitting in brown squalor on the edge of mudflats," which he had described in 1839, had grown to include his attractive

cottage-palace (The Grove) and several other British style bungalows on the landscaped grounds of the compound. Wallace and the Rajah looked out across the river to the thatch-roofed Malay houses and a growing Chinese bazaar with apartments above the shops. They could see hundreds of buildings through the tall jungle trees arched over the river, where birds hunted the mudflats and crocodiles lay in the sun. The casual, energetic and fun-loving Rajah set a good table and talked late into the night, often to visitors from Singapore. The Rajah's unique kingdom and hospitable palace were favorite stopping places for British travelers on their way to various colonies. Wallace, two years in the archipelago, told James he wanted "to see the Orang-utan, to study his habits and obtain good specimens."

The orangutan in Malay dialect is quite human (*orang utan* means "little man," as *orang tuan* is "headman" and *orang ulu* is "remote man," upriver, an aboriginal). But if the Malays spoke of the ape as a kind of human, Europeans were positively obsessed with the possibility. In his book on Borneo, Redmond O'Hanlon tells how in England, as early as 1792, Lord Monboddo "maintained that the orang-utan was a variety of *Homo sapiens* with a merely accidental speech impediment," and he "took his own pet ape out to supper parties dressed in a dinner-jacket to prove his point."

Wallace was fascinated with this leading candidate for a missing link; he shot seventeen. A few years later, in 1865–67, "the great Italian" as Tom Harrisson called him, Odoardo Beccari, came through Sarawak with his gun:

> Looking intently, I at last made out something like red hair amidst the dense foliage. There could no longer be any doubt—it was an orang recumbent on its nest. The creature was evidently aware that it had been discovered, and yet it showed no fear, nor did it attempt to fly. On the contrary, it got up and looked down at us, and then descended lower amidst the branches, as if it wished to get a better view of us, holding on to the ropes of a creeper which hung from a branch on which it was first squatting. When I moved to take aim with my gun, it hauled itself up again, pushing forward its head, to look at me as it held on to the branches above with its hand. It was in this position when I fired. . . . I caught sight of a second orang on another nest. Although I couldn't see it well, I fired. . . . I perceived

> something reddish moving on the top of a big tree. I fired at once almost at random. . . . As I was reloading, a second suddenly appeared, . . . [then] the huge beast turned, and it fell dead to a bullet in the chest. I should particularly have liked the skin, but I had to abandon both it and the skeleton and content myself with the head alone.
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> It was quite dark when we reached the camp, loaded with orang-outangs, drenched to the skin. . . . All told, I had got either the entire skeletons or portions of twenty-four individuals. Later, Azton brought to me several other heads from the same district. But with all this I came away without having been able to solve the doubts I had regarding the species or races of orang-outang.

"Hoorah for systematic collecting!" exclaimed Harrisson, quoting this passage in 1938. A few years later Harrisson returned during the Second World War, to direct the resistance from the Bario highlands. He stayed on as curator of the Sarawak museum.

The orangutan—an ape-man both theoretically valuable and physically expendable—wandered into European lore during the great romance of nature, 1750–1850, when Rousseau's "natural man" was a widespread ideal. Living rudely yet happily in a state of nature presumed the opposite of a state of civilization, the natural man was thought to be simple, innocent, direct, unspoiled. Holding to this fantasy, Europeans throughout the colonized world (on which the sun never set) overlooked the tribalism and complex socialization of natives, called them "primitives," and alternately envied them as free men and enslaved them as beasts.

Deep in the jungles of Borneo, which until the logging roads of the 1980s and 1990s was one of the wildest places on earth, lived—also—*Homo sapiens*: nomadic, thinly clad forest hunters with blowpipes. Given the drift of European thought, it is not surprising that the orangutans sometimes got confused with the Penan. Before he left England for Borneo, in 1838, James Brooke said he had heard of men "little better than monkeys, who live in trees, eat without cooking, are hunted by the other tribes, and would seem to exist in the lowest conceivable grade of humanity." And he wrote in Rousseauan manner that he "wished to see man in the rudest state of nature." By the late nineteenth century the desire to push orangutans forward toward men and nomadic men back, toward orangutans, in order to bridge the great

man-nature gap imagined in Europe, had led to accounts of the "wild men in the interior of Borneo" living "absolutely in a state of nature, who neither cultivate the ground nor live in huts; who neither eat rice nor salt, and who do not associate with each other, but rove about some woods, like wild beasts; the sexes meet in the jungle, or the man carries away the woman. . . ."

The "singles bar" fantasy at the end is distinctly European, as is the notion of isolated individuals roaming alone. Even as recently as 1969, the "brown nomadic hunters, the Punan and Ukit" of Borneo, were identified with "the paleolithic virtues and vices of keen eyesight, alert observation, and incapacity for what neolithic man calls work."

Brooke's fantasies of a "natural man" live on to the present day. In November 1990, I was sitting at dinner with Chinese in Kuching, listening to one man tell of meeting (after flying into Mulu Park by company helicopter) a Penan man who could not tell how many children he had. This was interpreted not as a failure of communication or of numbers, but as evidence of a social structure so "wild" that the Penan man had no idea who or how many were his children (horror to the Chinese, and sheer nonsense). The entire incident was adduced as proof that their condition is so "degraded," so "barely human," that it is a favor to take the Penan out of the jungle, or, more to the point, to take the jungle away from the Penan. The Chinese gentleman was trying to show me why logging benefits natives. Having taught Native American history, I felt the weight of centuries as I heard, yet again, a man justifying colonial exploitation by means of racist attacks on those born with the gold, the silver, the buffalo, the wood.

O'Hanlon, who wrote a book on Conrad and Darwin as well as *Into the Heart of Borneo,* so funny and humane it could be Irish, notes that Darwin, like my Chinese friend in Kuching, spent very little time upriver. O'Hanlon, lying on a Sarawak riverbank considering his Iban guide Leon and wondering how anyone could think these people stupid or insensitive, recalls that among the evolutionary thinkers, only Wallace spent time with native guides:

> Helped at every turn by Leon's ancestors and related peoples in his eight years of travel, often by native *prau,* from one island to another in the Malay Archipelago, he [Wallace] had come to conclude that "The more I see of uncivilised people, the better I think

> of human nature, and the essential differences between civilised and savage men disappear." He developed his concept of Latent Development—all the races of *Homo sapiens* had evolved a much bigger brain than they actually needed, at the same time. They just used different parts of its capacity in different ways.

Wallace found the interior natives beautiful, energetic, resourceful and clever, "lively, talkative . . . truthful and honest to a remarkable degree. . . . Crimes of violence (other than head-hunting) are almost unknown." James Brooke shared, and probably helped shape, this opinion.

So the natives in Borneo, and evening debates in Kuching, may have helped to give Europe its least racist theory of evolution, and Sarawak its least racist Rajahs, for on one point Wallace and all Brookes agreed: the natives were extraordinarily fine human beings.

The origins of the Bornean natives are obscure. The oldest evidence of *Homo sapiens* in all of Asia is found in north Borneo, in the Niah caves and elsewhere, Stone Age remains forty thousand years old. Who these people were we do not know. The first Malay migration down from southwestern China was around ten thousand years ago, and the pockets of aboriginals (*orang-asli*) left on the mainland are probably descended from those people. They were supplanted, however, by "proto-Malays" about four thousand years ago, who were probably the ancestors of the Malays and natives of present-day Borneo. In the broadest terms, we can say that the people of Borneo—native, Malay, and Chinese—are one race, Mongolian, originally out of central Asia; that the natives and Malays are part of the great Malay migrations that repeatedly overran the peninsula, Java, and the islands thousands of years ago; and that the Chinese are much more recently arrived from the mainland. Across Southeast Asia, most of the people are Mongolian: pockets of Negroid natives remain in the Andaman-Nicobar Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Australia, and empires and emigrations have brought some Aryans and Dravidians from India to Malaysia, and many Caucasians to Australia and New Zealand. Still, Malaysia and especially Borneo are thoroughly Asian. It can be hard to tell, at times, whether you are looking at a native of Borneo, a Malaysian, a Chinese, or an American Indian. Bornean native groups migrate, and easily mix, merge, and split. "Malays" are those who became Mus-

lim, and a ruling class, about five hundred years ago. Intermarriage between all groups has for centuries blurred the taxonomists' best attempts to keep men and women apart.

Languages have evolved to become substantially different and mutually unintelligible, so that language is one hard division; another is geography. The effective identity is by place, longhouse by longhouse, and by tongue. In the 1980 census, the Iban, that vigorous native group migrating north from Kalimantan over the last two centuries, could be seen to dominate Sarawak; the native groups up the Baram are minorities. Major native groups of Sarawak included the Iban (368,000), Bidayuh (104,000), Kenyah (15,600), Kayan (13,400), Kedayan (10,700), Murut (9,500), and Penan (5,600, probably undercounted). So the tribes represented up the Baram—the Kayans, Kenyahs, and Penan—all together amount to about one-seventh of the Iban. Clearly the issue of minority rights could arise, even within the context of a native-controlled government. The natives are about 45 percent of the Sarawak population, the Chinese 30 percent, and the Malay 20 percent.

The Penan, then, are a remnant of an ancient Asian invasion—the remnant that has stayed deep inside, away from the rivers, one of the last nomadic tribes on earth. Perhaps 300 of them (500 in 1989, 700 in 1987) still roam free in the jungles, eating fruit and sago palm and hunting animals with blowpipes, while 7,000 live in scattered settlements in upper stretches of Sarawak rivers, combining farming and hunting in shrinking habitat. Most of the semi-settled Penan have been forced into longhouses and rice-growing within the last twenty years. These are the people all the other natives know, with some awe and respect, as the ones at home in the forest. As nomads, they do not build longhouses. They were never headhunters. They are shy and secretive, coming out occasionally to remote longhouses to trade. They know you are inside the jungle, but you do not know they are present unless they choose to reveal themselves. Even among the other natives, who consider the Penan inferior socially and politically, who have sometimes treated them as property and slaves, the elusiveness of the nomads creates a certain mystery. They move every few weeks or months, finding clean camps and fresh foraging and game. They are legendary: tough, sweet, kind, wild—and scarce.

These are the people—the wild men of the forest, the missing links, the "little men" and noble savages—that Bruno Manser, in 1984, left

Switzerland to find. "And I can assure you," he said to us years later, in Tokyo, "that I have found these nomadic groups."

We had heard of Manser before leaving the United States, but had little idea who or what he was. Then in August 1989, in Taman Negara Park in mainland Malaysia, a young woman wearing a white blouse and red skirt walked out of the jungle and into the river. She was blonde and blue-eyed. As her skirt billowed up, she sank to her neck with a sigh, closed her eyes, and let the current carry the heat away.

Hannah Olesan, twenty-two, from Denmark, was working on her master's degree on shifting agriculture in Borneo. She spoke quietly of primary forests, of forest farms and of forests gone, of wild pigs and orangutans in Kalimantan. Then she told of happening upon a native blockade of logging in Sarawak. She had been walking alone up the new dirt road. A logging truck stopped. As she climbed in, the driver said in English, "Do you know Bruno Manser?"

"That's what they always ask," she said to me with a smile and twinkling eyes. "They will ask you."

"Do you know him?"

"No. He is hiding with the Penan. They move him around in the jungle. I saw them at the logging blockade—five or ten natives behind wooden poles, holding blowpipes and knives. The police kept me away. Everyone said Bruno was somewhere near, in the jungle, watching. That's how the pictures got to the *Straits Times* in Singapore."

Bruno Manser was born in 1954 in Basel, Switzerland, one of six children in the German-speaking family of a gardener. At eighteen, after high school, he disappointed his parents by skipping the university and moving to a farming village. There, living alone, he worked as a shepherd and fisherman, grew his own food, and sewed his clothing. In his words, he "made practical apprenticeship in all fields of agriculture and handicraft, trying to get the base of economic self-sufficience and independence, spending most of the time in the Swiss alps. Six years as cheesemaker with cows, six years with sheeps." Small, wiry, impish—it is not hard to picture him beside his cows in Heidi's alpine meadows. By 1982, he was also interested in spelunking, and spent much of his time in caves deep beneath the Alps.

His mountain retreat, however, was not enough. The next phase of his life he told vividly to Wade Davis, rainforest expert, ethnobotanist,

and writer, when Manser won *Outside* magazine's Outsider of the Year award in 1991:

> "As a child, I collected leaves and feathers, and at night lay in my room imagining that it had become a jungle. I wanted to live with a people of nature, to discover their origins, to become aware of their religion and life, to know these things." In a library he came upon a single black-and-white photograph of a Penan hunter with a caption that read simply, "A hunter-gatherer in the forest of Borneo." The book offered no other information. Manser dug further, eventually discovering an obscure report that described the Penan's homeland: lush forest and soaring mountains, dissected by crystalline rivers and the world's most extensive network of caves.
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> Intrigued, Manser travelled to Malaysia in the winter of 1984, became conversant in Malay, and accepted an invitation to join a British caving expedition headed for Gunung Mulu, a national park that encompasses the heart of Penan territory in Sarawak [up the Tutoh]. . . . Manser and the British cavers traveled deep into the park, where they explored the caves for two weeks. The British then departed, but Manser had been told of a group of nomadic Penan living beyond the southern boundary of the park in a region called the Ubong, and so he pushed on, alone. For several days—most, Manser says, without food or water—he struggled through a dense jungle that seemed to mock everything he had learned in Switzerland about nature. On the ninth day, exhausted but reluctant to turn back, he climbed a tree and saw, across a valley, the white plume of a cooking fire.
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> It was nearly dark by the time he came upon the footprints in the mud by the river. "I knew they would be afraid," he says, "so I made camp. The next morning I let the sun come up. Then I heard two voices, a man and a woman's. For two minutes nothing happened. I held up my hand in greeting. The woman fled. But the man came to me. He spoke a few words of Malay. We touched hands and he drew his fingers back across his breast." Manser followed the Penan man up the slope to the encampment.

Without special provision, the tourist's entry visa for Sarawak is good for three weeks. By December 31, 1984, Bruno Manser had overstayed his visa. At first, this was of no great concern to the authorities,

and certainly not to himself. He was in settlements or deep inside the forest, up the Tutoh a few days' travel above Long Bangan, near Long Seridan, stripped to his shorts, toughening his bare feet, learning the blowpipe and the Penan language, beginning his valuable journals of Penan vocabulary, customs, and drawings, most of which are still in the hands of the Malaysian police, who have refused to release them. Wade Davis writes:

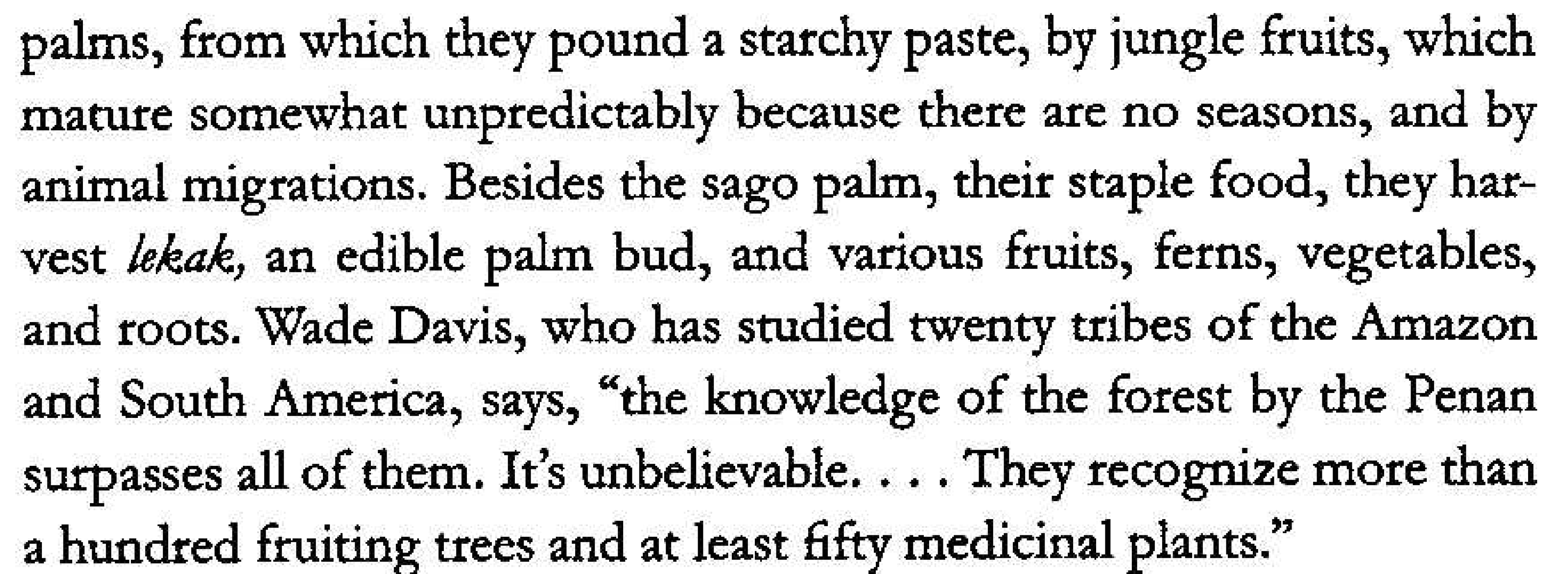
> Fearful of the heat of the sun, ignorant of the seas, insulated by the branches of the canopy, the Penan live in a cognitive and spiritual world based entirely on the forest. Distance and time are measured not in hours or miles but in the quality of the experience itself. A hunting trip, if successful, is considered short, though a Westerner might measure it in weeks. An arduous journey is one that exposes a Penan to the sun.

Manser, as much as possible, became a Penan, and they accepted him. Pictures from the jungle years show him in his bowl haircut, in shorts, with Penan bracelets on wrists and legs. Often he is seated on a tree limb, blowpipe nearby, Penan basket, notebook, and pet monkey in his lap. Sometimes, he is playing the flute. The puckish smile is actually Penan as well as Swiss; only the wire-rimmed glasses give him away.

In the 1980s, the Penan were distributed mainly across the upper Tutoh and upper Baram, and over the divide into the headwaters of the Rajang. A high percentage of the nomads were in the upper Tutoh, especially along the Magoh tributary (a few were also up the Silat and Tinjar, tributaries of the Baram). Like the grizzly bear in North America, Penan had been driven to the most remote, inaccessible habitats.

The nomadic Penan move from base camps, which may last a year, to temporary camps near food sources, and to travel camps—bivouacs—over a large territory. In all camps, nomadic Penan build light, thatched shelters of bamboo or softwood, one per family. Usually the huts are up on stilts, above the damp ground, above the leeches. The floors are split bamboo, well ventilated and springy, quite comfortable for sleeping. The roof is thatched leaves. Nomads do not build hardwood longhouses. A group of nomads might typically number thirty; those semi-settled in longhouses, from fifty to two hundred or so.

The rhythm of Penan life is determined by the maturing of wild sago


palms, from which they pound a starchy paste, by jungle fruits, which mature somewhat unpredictably because there are no seasons, and by animal migrations. Besides the sago palm, their staple food, they harvest *lekak,* an edible palm bud, and various fruits, ferns, vegetables, and roots. Wade Davis, who has studied twenty tribes of the Amazon and South America, says, "the knowledge of the forest by the Penan surpasses all of them. It's unbelievable. . . . They recognize more than a hundred fruiting trees and at least fifty medicinal plants."

Sago palms grow in clumps, several trunks springing from one mass of roots. "If there are many trunks," says a Penan, "we will get one or two. We thin it out so it will thrive. If there is a lot of sago, we will harvest some, and will leave some. We don't like to kill it all off, in case one day there is nothing for us to eat. This is really our way of life. . . . If we harvest the [sago at] Ula Jek first and finish the *nangah* [mature sago] there, we *molong* [put a mark and preserve for future use] the *uvud* [young sago]. . . . After two or three years, mature sago will grow out of the young sago that we have preserved." Scattered across the steep, intricate ridges and valleys of their district, many wild sago clumps will be known and claimed (marked) by a single group. They know when it is time, in two or three years, to return to a certain clump. And so with many other types of edible plants; in all of their fruit and vegetable harvesting, they are careful to preserve a sustained yield.

The other rhythm is hunting, which they love. The small, bearded pig of Borneo is their favorite food, and in virgin forest, pig supplies most of their protein. The pig is taken with the poison dart from a blowpipe (rarely), dogs and spears or, increasingly, by shotgun. They also hunt, by blowpipe, deer, monkey, gibbon, civet, porcupine, squirrel, and just about anything else. The rhinos are gone, though fresh tracks were seen in the highlands in 1984. The pigs travel in bands, foraging their favorite roots, fruits, and nuts. Fruiting can be unpredictable, but the Penan know exactly where the fruit trees are, and live for the pig migrations to come their way. In one heart-breaking story of a few years ago, the small, clear tributary suddenly went brown, and the hunters jumped to their weapons—pigs must be crossing upstream, a lot of them. No, it turned out to be big, and yellow. A bulldozer.

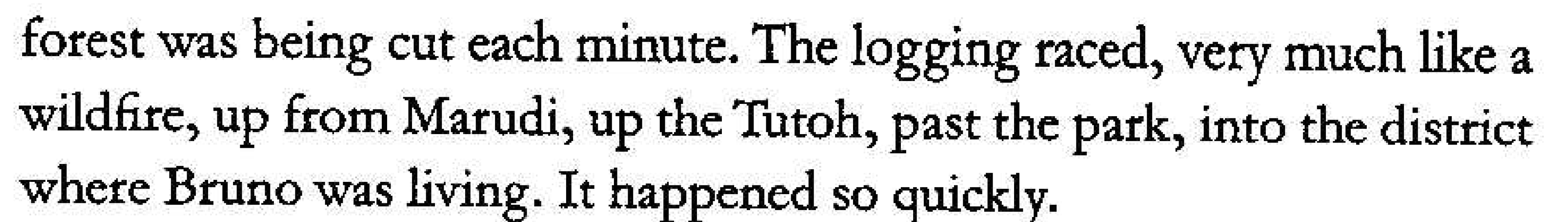
By all accounts, the Penan and the longhouses can live well in virgin forest. One ethnologist in Belaga in 1986 reported that Penan hunts lasted from sunup to early afternoon, covered six or eight miles, and

had a 90 percent success rate. A century before, up the Rajang River in longhouses in 1865, Alfred Russel Wallace reported, "The people produce far more food than they consume, and exchange the surplus for gongs and brass cannon, ancient jars, and gold and silver ornaments, which constitute their wealth. On the whole, they appear very free from disease. . . ." Eric Hansen, who walked back and forth across the most remote Penan territories in 1982, says, "The only Penan I have seen who were not in superb physical condition were from Sungai Ubong on the ulu Tutoh. . . . their traditional hunting grounds were squeezed between Mulu National Park and a huge timber concession." This is the Penan settlement the Chinese gentleman had visited by helicopter.

The Penan have for centuries traded with nearby longhouses, which in turn traded with Chinese boat peddlers working out of settlements downstream. From the forest they harvest camphor, wild rubber, *damar* (a resin), *gabaru* (the incense wood which boomed in the 1970s), bezoar stones (monkey gallstones valuable to Chinese medicine), and rattan, which they use to make the famous Penan baskets and mats, for their own use and for sale. They trade at longhouses for salt, cloth, tobacco, cooking utensils, radios, tape players, batteries.

Their personal style, and the atmosphere in a camp, are difficult to describe, and perhaps to believe. Mild and sweet in manner, curious and active, to us at least they are utterly charming. All food being shared, their governance democratic, their manner open, it is not surprising that generosity is a primary virtue. Davis reported of Manser that in six years "he never saw Penan quarrel. Only once did he see a hungry child neglect to share food." Manser said: "There was a boy in that first Penan group who caught seven fish. I remember watching the headman give three to each family and then carefully slice the remaining fish in two. That is the Penan. You will never find one with a full stomach and another who is hungry."

Readers from my own culture may feel that such a paradise must be lost. Alas, that is the story we are writing across the face of the earth. Bruno's first years with the Penan, 1984–85, were the years the logging moved up the Tutoh. In 1975, the annual cut in Sarawak had been 2.5 million cubic meters; by 1985 it was 12 million. By 1990, it was 18 million. In 1985, as Bruno was getting to know his new friends, who had probably been in the jungle for four thousand years, over an acre of



forest was being cut each minute. The logging raced, very much like a wildfire, up from Marudi, up the Tutoh, past the park, into the district where Bruno was living. It happened so quickly.

An announcement in fine print would have appeared in the *Sarawak Gazette,* in Kuching, months, maybe years before. It would have given the natives six weeks to claim customary rights to tilled acres in a certain district. Nomads would have had no rights anyway, even if they had happened to see the newspaper (no mail service above Marudi), find someone who could read it, and compose a written reply within six weeks. The land now belonged to the government, and the government had seen fit to lease it out to a timber concession. Never mind that since the drifting apart of the continents, the rise of mammals, the first migrations from central Asia—that in all human history not a single government or its agents had ever set foot in most of this forest. Not the Malay sultans, the white Rajahs, the Japanese in World War II, the British resistance (who chased the Japanese up one stream to Limbang), the colonial regime, or modern ministers of Malaysia and Sarawak. Government had never left the rivers and the park. Suddenly the forest was declared the property of those who had never seen it, who did not know it, who did not love it. But they were powerful people, and they intended to be rich.

For the Penan, the first warning was the sound of a helicopter, just before Manser arrived. "The Penan expected to talk about their situation. Instead, they were stunned as an anthropologist asked to measure their skulls." The "little men" were not amused. The government survey party did its work, said the land belonged to the state and would be logged.

After four attempts in the fall of 1985, a few Penan leaders were finally able to bring representatives of Tutoh nomadic bands and settlements together in a meeting. To the Penan, such a political gathering was not an accustomed activity; you might imagine the level of fear, frustration, misinformation, and ignorance. Manser, too, knew nothing. As secretary to the group, he helped send a petition to the government to protect five hundred square miles near the park as a nomadic homeland. "I was so naive," he recalled. "It was such a small area of land. You could walk across it in three or four days. I really expected the government to set it aside." The petition letter was never answered.

Still hoping for quick changes, he prepared in 1985 a report on Sara-

wak logging and sent it to twenty papers and magazines in Malaysia, Europe, and the United States. Nothing happened, though of course some seeds had been sown.

Other native tribes, settled tribes with more political savvy, had already blockaded some logging roads before Manser arrived in Sarawak. He urged the Penan, traditionally shy and nonviolent, to do the same.

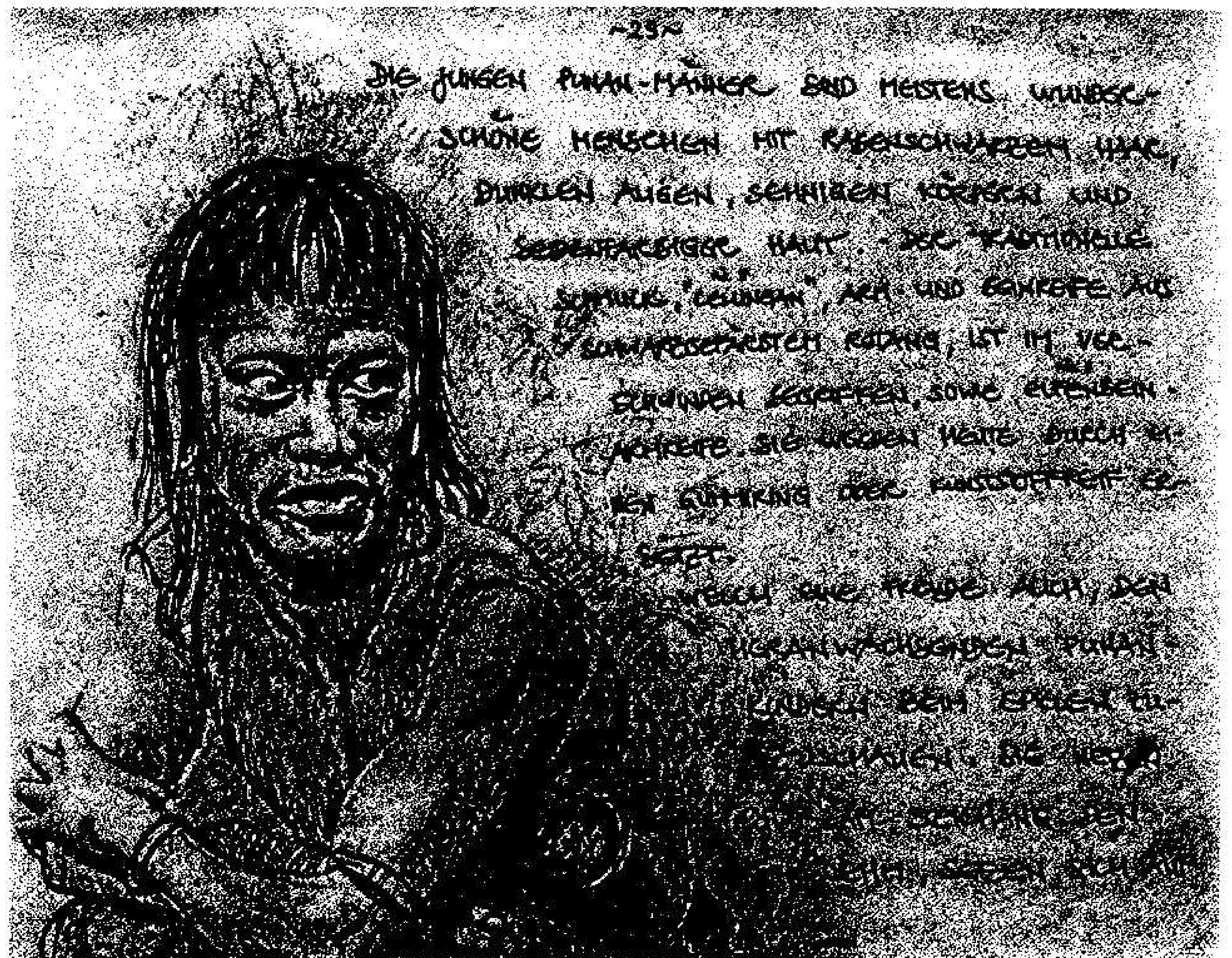
In the spring of 1986, as told by Wade Davis:

> Manser and a group of 25 Penan stood in front of an oncoming bulldozer that was breaking ground for a bridge into the forest. The driver retreated, but the next morning 30 bulldozers appeared at the roadhead, backed by police and logging company officials. The Penan fled. Malaysian officials had trouble believing that the savages of the forest could devise such a strategy of resistance. They blamed instead a foreign agent of influence and ordered his arrest. Manser became a marked man.

From 1986, when the police took official notice of him, until 1990, the story could be heard essentially unchanged in any upriver cafe, any airport police office, the Sarawak State Government offices in Kuching, the American Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, or in Friends of the Earth offices around the world. Bruno Manser, a Swiss, is hiding with the Penan, Malaysia has a price on his head, and he is organizing opposition to the timber trade.

It was a story Europeans wanted to hear, and also a story Malaysia wanted to tell, since it diverted attention from the new SAM office in Marudi, staffed by Sarawak citizens, natives from the longhouses who thought the timber trade was rotten to the core. The Manser story focused all attention on the romance of a white savior.

After the spring of 1986, Manser could not safely leave the forest and come in to the settlements. The companies and government were said to offer $35,000 for his capture, and the nomadic Penan kept him for three years, moving about in the forest, passing him from band to band. The two hundred armed soldiers sent after him by Malaysia could not find the camps. Manser began to learn the meaning of the stick signs left by Penan for each other at every jungle trail or event, who was going where, why, when, what's up. Two pieces of wood across the completed sign meant that all people of the forest were of one heart.

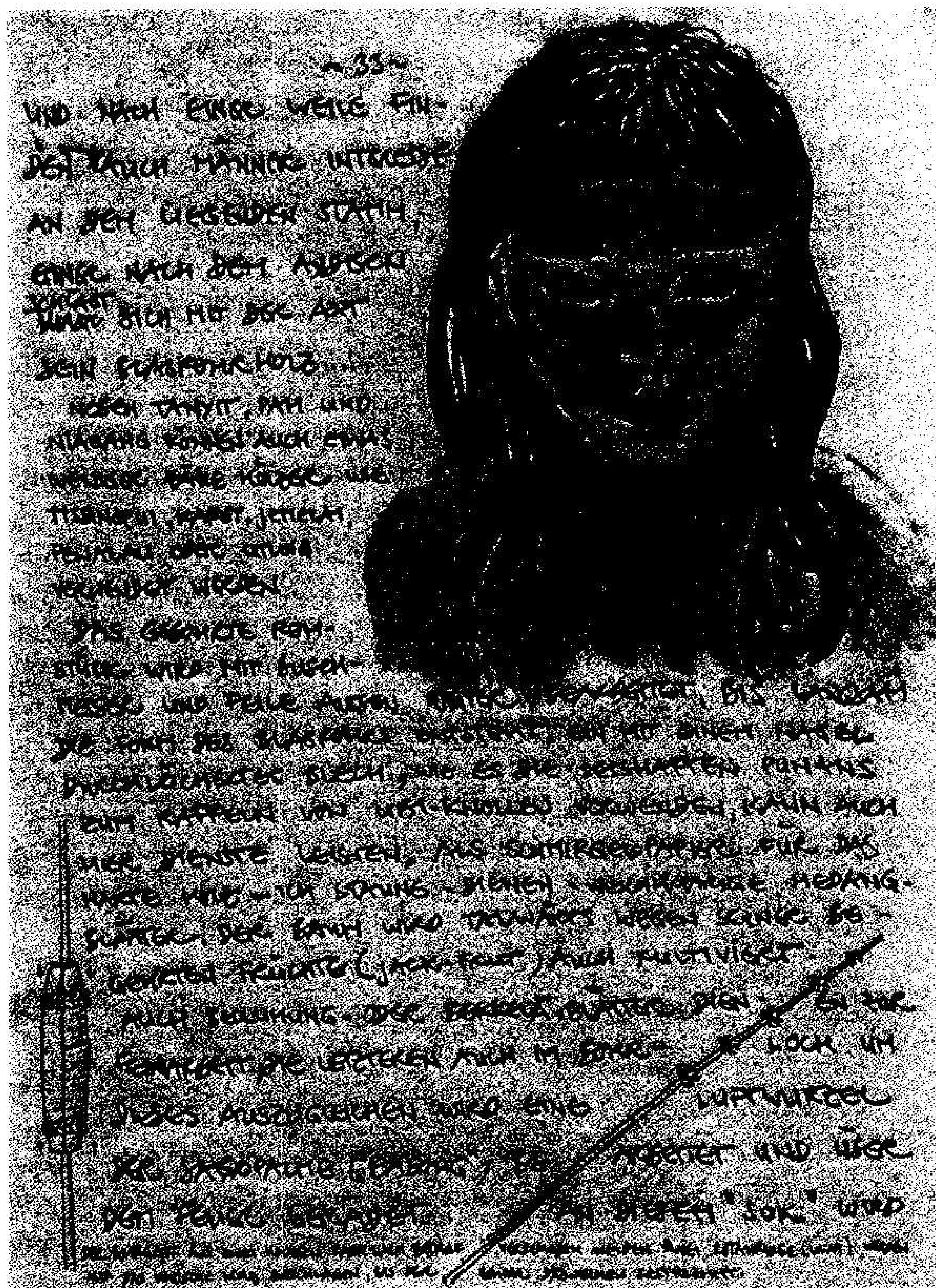


Pages from Bruno Manser's journals.

"In all my years among the Penan," Manser says, "I never saw a sign that did not bear this simple message." Thom Henley of Vancouver, Canada, tells of an old Penan placing one rock in the middle of a circle of rocks, threatening sticks outside the circle, to show how the Penan sheltered Manser from the police.

Manser was captured twice, and twice escaped. The first time, by chance, he ran into an off-duty policeman who recognized him; he ran away, shots whizzing over his head. A second time he was betrayed by a reporter who came to a Penan meeting by helicopter, left, and then the police arrived in the same helicopter. He was taken down the Tutoh by boat; on the way, he had time to review his situation, and in a rapids he jumped out. Shots again were fired; he swam to shore and disappeared into the jungle. That is how the police came to possess his notebooks. In both cases, he thinks they were probably not shooting to kill, but the doubt was sobering.

In April 1987, the Baram erupted with blockades and logging oppo-



sition. During the summer months, fifteen timber operations were shut down by various tribes at over twenty-three sites in the Baram and Limbang, and four bridges were burned. It was close to an undeclared war; the government passed new laws against obstructing timber operations, stepped up harassments and arrests, and went after Harrison Ngau and Bruno Manser. Manser was a rajah, they said,

carried by the Penan on a bamboo throne; a Zionist (Malaysia is Muslim); a communist (armed communist insurgents were still operating at the Thai border on the mainland). The Sarawak newspapers loved it. The *Star,* April 30, 1987, reported:

> I'M SECRETARY TO THE PENANS: MANSER
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> Kuching, Wed. — *The Star* has received a letter supposedly from Swiss fugitive Bruno Manser in which he says he is hiding in the Sarawak jungle to act as secretary to the Penans.
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> The writer says the land of the nomadic tribe is being destroyed by timber operators and that the State Government and logging companies are not looking into the Penans' demands.
>
> He alleged that one timber company had already destroyed half of the forest area in Magoh where the Penans collected their rattan to make baskets, mats and other items. He says good quality rattan is hard to find in other parts of the State.
>
> He adds that fruit trees, sago palms and tacem, from which the Penan get poison for their darts, are being felled by loggers. . . . Manser, 33, has stayed on illegally since December 1984. He is said to be carrying out a study on the Penans. . . .
>
> The State Government has, however, said that it would not recognise the study because it was being carried out illegally.
>
> A government spokesman said that even before Manser entered the jungle, several government agencies had conducted studies and research on the Penans and had drawn up plans to improve their standard of living.
>
> He said the Penans have been accepting changes slowly and interference from foreigners like Manser had hindered the government's efforts.
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> For the past few weeks, the Penans have been blockading timber camps, bringing logging activities to a standstill. The State Government believes that the action was instigated by Manser.

By 1988 the international community was responding; the European Parliament passed a resolution to suspend Sarawak timber imports, and debated banning them altogether; some Australian docks refused to unload Malaysian logs; criticism of the tropical timber trade mounted in Japan. Meanwhile, Manser, who had probably come to know the

Penan better than any European since interest in "the wild man of Borneo" began, continued his unauthorized study. The government pointed out that he was not a trained anthropologist and therefore his findings were worthless. Manser, however, seems to have found a superior way of measuring heads: Henley recalls being in a longhouse, listening to a tape that was circulating among the settled Penan. "Bruno was singing, in Penan, songs he had made up about the government. The people were convulsed with laughter. One of them explained to me, 'He understands our language. He makes very good jokes.'"

The opposition continued. September 1989 saw the most massive blockades to date, with four thousand natives participating in twelve roadblocks. International attention had been gained. Yet, not only had the logging continued, moving up the Tutoh past Manser's home into the Magoh, and up the middle Baram past Long San, it had increased. Day and night, the timber was coming out faster than ever, as if the companies and government were desperate. In five years, the annual cut had gone from 12 million to 18 million cubic meters. By 1990, it was clear that SAM and Manser and the natives scattered across the forest had succeeded in organizing themselves, had succeeded in staging protests and drawing international attention—and yet they were losing, losing badly. Only a few years were left for the Penan before a whole way of life would be gone; for the longhouses, a few more years, five to ten, remained. In the spring of 1990 Manser knew that what could be done from inside Sarawak had been done. Only world pressure, largely on Japan, could stop the cutting. He escaped from Sarawak—how, where, is a secret. But after five years of hiding deep inside, in March 1990, he came out. "I would have stayed," he said, "if the Penan could have been left alone."

ON THE AFTERNOON of June 6, 1990, Bruno Manser was out of the rainforest, sitting on the eighteenth floor of a building in downtown Tokyo, staring out the window: across the street, a platform of five window-washers hung halfway down a wall of glass and steel. They looked like ants, a cliché that after six years in Borneo must have had a force for Bruno that we cannot imagine. To their left, painted on a fifty-foot-high billboard, was a huge, nearly naked Chinese woman with a semi-automatic assault rifle—a movie advertisement. Behind her, the blue Matsushita Electric building, the black Sony tower, and

the department stores of the Ginza. "I went to Sarawak," he was saying in a soft and careful voice with a slight German accent, "to join the life of an indigenous people who still live independent, having their own economy, somehow in harmony with nature." He looked at his audience. "They have existed."

Bruno Manser seems small in baggy trousers and a rough cotton, open-necked shirt, about five feet nine inches tall and weighing 150 pounds, but pictures from the jungle show an adventurer's muscles on a lean frame trimmed by malaria. He wears rimless glasses and has an instantly engaging smile, at once witty, ironic, and compassionate—Ben Kingsley playing Gandhi. That afternoon, his gaze roamed the room and the wry smile was directed at the dark wall panels of tropical timber, as he spoke:

> The settlements are dirty. They will throw just anything out of the house. But when they are in the jungle, the dish is a leaf and they throw the leaf away, and when their hut will get greasy from the wild boar fat or black from the charcoal also they will just leave for a new place—they will be all new and clean—and that's how they can survive.

Hosted by Yoichi Kuroda of JATAN and the Friends of the Earth office in Tokyo, Manser was meeting Japanese government and industry leaders, holding vigils on the sidewalk in front of Mitsubishi, running off mimeos in the tiny JATAN office in crowded Shibuya, downtown Tokyo, trying to find his footing on the treacherous path of international environmentalism.

Bruno Manser, sui generis, Swiss shepherd, intellectual, spelunker, botanist, artist, is possibly the first man, and maybe the last, to stand with one foot in the stone age, or at least in a European Romantic's love of it, and the other foot in the offices of environmental science: a world of timber exports, hectares per minute logged, carbon dioxide emissions, German analyses of satellite photographs showing 4 percent of the Philippine forest left.

His new allies are hardly Penan: bright, young one-worlders in tiny, messy offices which in 1960 would have churned out civil rights mimeos and in 1970 anti-Vietnam or pro-consumer Xeroxes and now have the latest fax on whales. They and Bruno are friends, but they prefer law school to leeches. Yoichi Kuroda of JATTAN and Thom Henley of En-

dangered Peoples Project are handsome and articulate, wear their suits comfortably and answer stupid questions with courtesy, smart questions with facts. Henley is impressive in Washington and Tokyo and has visited Sarawak four times. Henley and Kuroda, however, would not prefer to remain with the Penan.

Strange that a man so independent, who wanted to get away to a life in nature, should wind up at the middle of so much. Some of Manser's activities would later be seen as competitive to SAM, while some of his popularity in Europe offends even activist Malaysians because it seems racist. Randy Hayes of Rainforest Action Network sums it up well:

> Bruno Manser's story evokes the notion of the Tarzan syndrome. No one cared about the Penan until a white man came to the scene; they were considered little brown men who needed guidance. While this is not Bruno Manser's fault, he plays into it unwittingly. It's a classic European fantasy—a Lawrence of Arabia. . . . Manser's impact lies in the fact that he brought attention to the issue. But there's a danger in letting the messenger steal the limelight.

Even opposition Sarawakians and Malaysians can easily tire of hearing about the Rajah Brookes, and Manser. The white men, of course, were the ones who once thought the Penan were apes; who loved the orangutans to death; who brought the British land laws that now serve the government so well; who brought the helicopters, the bulldozers. And now, as international economies replace race as locations of power, the Japanese join the Europeans in the first world: these new Asian white men build the dozers, run the banks, buy and burn the logs. Being saved by someone else's Tarzan—that rankles.

There's another danger, besides the attention to the foreign adventurer: the Penan themselves, as nomads, play into the hands of European romanticism; also, as nomads, they divert attention from the issue of longhouse land rights, the overriding issue for most of the population and most of the territory. Therefore, the Penan issue is a double-edged sword: it attracts international attention, but makes an easy target for government defenses of timber. Do you expect to keep them in a stone age forever? Just 700 . . . 500 . . . 300 of them left? Over and over, Chinese in Kuching accused me of wanting to save the nomads in the forest; thus the conversation was kept away from the longhouses that wanted to gain control of their own modernization and industrial-

ization. Over and over, I would have to say, "Forget the Penan, forget Manser, I don't care, pretend they don't exist," in order to talk issues.

No one blames Manser for these difficulties. He is single of purpose and pure of heart. There are tragedies enough in Sarawak, without setting one disaster against the other. Among the natives of various tribes, I found repeated and deep sympathy for the Penan; they are the ones who really know and love the jungle, they are the ones losing it all. Their numbers, many or few, make little difference. To Kayans and Kenyahs up the Baram, as well as to Europe, the Penan are symbols of a kind of purity and a kind of loss. An old Penan from the Magoh River said:

> We know that the dipterocarp seeds are pig food, we do not cut this tree anyhow. The river banks [roots] are what pigs eat, we don't pollute the rivers. Sago fruits, "tevanga" are what pigs eat, we make sure the pigs have their share of these sago products. There is a fruit tree called "tekalet" (acorn). That is pig food, we don't disturb the tree. But in Layun, Apho and Patah those trees are fast disappearing because they are cut down by timber companies. If the companies come here and cut all the trees in the Magoh, there will be nothing for pigs to eat. The pigs will not come here. They will go somewhere else, and we Penan will not have any food. That is what I fear if the companies come here. But as long as the Penan are left alone here, we will have enough food because we care for the forest, we look after it well to provide us our food, our life.

Since that statement appeared in the *Sarawak Museum Journal* of December 1989, the Magoh drainage has been cut. The "little men" have finally been brought into our world, on our terms. Hoorah for systematic collecting.