

Full speed ahead for big dams

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There was nothing left here.

On top of that, as Kulleh Gau had observed from the start, there never were sago palms in this region for them to harvest and process. Now the Penan are fringe dwellers, sometimes working for the palm oil companies and growing a little rice.

It is not only the Penan who lament the fact that the jungle is gone.

A chief of the Kayan – known as a penghulu, a rank higher than a longhouse headman – Penghulu Saging Bit, of Uma Belor, said that when the headmen were taken to the region it was all forest. They were told, “‘Your house will be here.’ We thought we could hunt.

“We never thought the life would be like this – if we build a house here, they will clear the land [around].”

He said they now knew that officials had already surveyed the land and that the surrounding area would go to the logging and palm oil companies. This, he said, could be the reason why the families had been squeezed, each given a mere three acres for their farms, an area everyone agrees is totally inadequate.

“[We] never know this land given to this big company,” he said.

But from the companies’ point of view, the relocation has been a great success. The longhouse dwellers are now an ample source of cheap labour for the palm oil industry.

One can’t help but wonder if that wasn’t the plan all along.

A Kenyah woman, Bivillie Bua Gariny, said her family of six brothers and sisters had grown up and married. How can the three acres allocated to the family be divided?

“If I want to plant then my brother also wants to plant,” she said, “... We try to ask the Government to give us another three or six acres. We think if the Government can give [to] companies to plant palm oil, they could have given it to us.”

In the old world the growing family could be accommodated by the extensive forest. The people did not see the land around their longhouse as “state” land. Jungle it might be, but it was their jungle to distribute to those who could use it. Each community allocated new land to grown-up children as required.

But they are no longer in a remote region, beyond daily government authority. The Sarawak system is more like that in Australia before the 1992 Mabo decision when the ludicrous legal concept of terra nullius, or land belonging to no one, prevailed. The Sarawak state does not recognise that native people own their land unless they have clear property like that of a Malay peasant, ie, a rice field, or a home with title.

Penghulu Saging Bit said compensation for some of his people’s gardens was not paid because the Government said they were on

state land. He said his people “did not know state land. We regard that place as ours, no matter a forest. We assume that area is our place. We never know it’s like that.”

In addition he said that when the dam filled there would still be land above the high water mark that they still regarded as their land.

“We want this land and not the Government. ... We want this to be given back to us,” he said.

As chief of the kampong, Penghulu Saging Bit works with the Government and is paid a small sum for his services to his people. Like all headmen, this payment and service must, to some extent, compromise him and limit his ability to act independently.

Penghulu Saging Bit and the Penan Talun man who agreed to speak acknowledged that they now had better roads, education was being provided for their children and that their longhouses had running water and electricity, although they had to pay for this.

At the resettlement site of Asap there are lock-up shops, housing for government servants, who provide administrative services, and a clinic, albeit with no doctor.

There is some complaint about the quality of the wood and workmanship on the longhouses but they look solid, and are much better than the housing in many Aboriginal communities in Australia. The residents maintain the houses and have modified the interiors to create rooms to suit each family’s needs.

The elderly, with little to occupy them and give them self-esteem, are lost in the new world and yearn for the old. But the young know no other and are more optimistic about the future.

All representatives from the various tribal groups said the compensation paid to them was inadequate. Penghulu Saging Bit said there were a number of surveys done on their old land and the vegetable gardens, fruit trees, pepper plants, rubber and cocoa trees were measured and counted. Prices were proposed for the production, but he said the price offered was very much less than expected. As a result, 10 years down the track, his case is still before the court.

A Kenyah man also said there were multiple surveys.

“My father claimed from the first survey and then they did a second. We didn’t plant because we had already signed [to move]. They cut our claim by 20 per cent because [they said] there is no maintenance of the gardens.

“We had a crop, rubber trees. ... They came again and surveyed and said, ‘It’s abandoned.’ They refused to pay. If it was based on the first claim we would get one million ringgit but they offer 200,000 ringgit based on the later survey.”

Only a few are still fighting in the courts. Others were unable to afford the drawn out battle, needing whatever money they could get to restart their lives. Some say they lacked faith in the lawyers, who

were frightened of the Government.

The dam flooding will inundate 69,000 hectares of land, always described in reports as “almost the area of Singapore”. It will create a 205m deep lake to drive eight turbines, planned to generate 2400 megawatts of electricity.

It may also affect those who live below its walls on the 400km of the Rajang from Belaga to Sibu. The river is not only a source of food for these people, but a major transport hub, with 100-person express boats charging up and down its course. It is feared the dam will reduce the flow and make some rapids impassable. And the question remains: will it also affect the fishing and gardens along the river banks?

Dam representatives say they have agreed to release 150 to 300 cubic metres of water per second downstream to enable river transport and they will monitor the situation to ensure no adverse effects.

Bakun, which cost an estimated 7.3 billion ringgit (\$A2.4 billion) to

build, is only one of 13 dams proposed for Sarawak. Further up the Rajang River system the Murum Dam is in development.

A Penan band from the region to be affected by this dam moved three years ago to Asap/Koyan, although ultimately they are to be relocated to Tugulang. Their move was prompted by a decision to seek education, and a new future, for their children. Other tribal groups readily accept the boarding school system the Malaysian Government offers. But Penan everywhere strongly dislike being separated from their children and their small settlements, or nomadic lifestyles in remote jungle regions, make it extremely difficult for the Government to offer schools at their homes.

The Murum group of 30 families from Long Wat has taken up residence in an abandoned chicken farm. They are well aware that there is no game to hunt but the adults appear to have consciously decided to sacrifice their lifestyle in the hope their children will get a foothold in a world they now seem

to accept is going to swamp them regardless. Another Penan group in the Bario region near the Kalimantan border similarly came into town 10 years ago to be near their children at school.

The Murum band’s farm has only one water pipe and conditions are clearly poor. In the school holidays, if they can find transport, they go to their old home to hunt and gather. They appreciate that they have a school nearby and although they say their kids are not doing well they are pleased that they can read.

But the Murum Penan are also not happy about the proposed compensation for their displacement. A special concern is that, being nomads, they do not have the houses and permanent graveyards that the Government regards as evidence of possession. An elder, Paneh, said they had only been offered payment for one recent burial and not for people buried in the past, as other tribes had received.

Penan traditionally move camp after a death and do not speak the

