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Walking into the Forest

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I last wrote about how I was searching for the forest, places with names not on maps, places of the orangutans' eyes. Over the past month of December, I've began making longer journeys into the forest, camping with communities. In this next installment, I continue this story, describing some of my first journeys reaching the forest and the people who live with it.

Getting to the forest is an expedition in itself. My pack is divided into various partitions. I carry shotgun shells, fishing line and hooks, drawing books and colored pencils for kids, candles, pictures. These are all gifts for people I work with. In a compression sack in the bottom of my pack I carry a mosquito net, two long sleeve shirts, two t-shirts, underwear, a towel, a sarong, a sheet for sleeping. Wedged between my sleeping pad and sketch pads for kids are cans of food to share. I carry a medical kit that seems to always need to be re-supplied, a headlamp, camera gear. I have a new journal, which during the course of my trip, will become filled. I am overloaded, the pack, and nearly everything around me is busting at the seams.

The landscape tilts and sways with twenty-four pairs of legs and arms. I've been traveling for two days, by land rover, longboat, and now by hitching a ride on the back of a logging company pickup truck. The last leg of the journey is near. We take a sharp turn and the back end of the truck slips on the clay-pan road. The five or six hands around my waist and on my sandaled feet momentarily shift. One woman clinging to the side of the truck lets out a large cackle and her entire rattan backpack shakes. Three of the hunting dogs, one which is cut up from a morning encounter with a wild pig, growl at the laugh. Rain falls. I begin laughing at the absurdity of the situation; I really can't move any of my body in any direction. I give a loud cackle and together all of us on this journey begin laughing. By the time the truck stops my eyes are salty and dusty from the road. Some of the Penan I'm with shyly smile.





My guide, Martin, is perched high amongst our pile of belongings. He jumps off the truck first and I begin handing him various baggage strewn about the small truck bed: a small boy here, someone's *parang* (jungle knife, or machete) there, a rattan basket, a hunting spear that has been carefully wedged in alongside the truck bed so it doesn't hurt anyone.

Martin is a walking dictionary. He speaks five of the major tribal languages in Borneo. He also speaks Mandarin and English in addition to the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. For the purpose of my writing, we talked about giving him a pseudonym. He did not want one; like many Penan he is proud of his identity and his work. He works with at least one non-governmental organization (NGO) documenting and mapping land claims in the forest. Juggling family responsibilities and other work, Martin is also part hero to me.

'Just call me Martin,' he tells me.

The rain subsides, a hornbill flies overhead and we begin our walk to the community of Bila. We descend to the river bed and the primary forest envelopes us. This is where the encroachment of logging ends; the soil color shifts from a red clay pan to a darker color of tannin that matches the trickles of water running along the river bed. To stop and stand in a river bed in the primary forest is to hear springs, dripping, water running. The earth is being fed.

The people I'm traveling with break out packets of rice stored in folded banana leaves along with bundles of sweet green tapioca root. I lay out my crackers and we sit quietly eating.

I don't think I'm ever been introduced to a group of forest people this way, by traveling together. Rather than relying on my limited vocabulary in Bahasa or Penan, mutual efforts made by sharing food and the act of walking through the forest-- not getting too muddy, watching for sharp rattan that can catch packs or tshirts—are common goals.

Of course, I'm not doing well accomplishing either of these goals and I don't mind. I'm getting very muddy. The rattan, I explain, must like *orang puti* (white people) very much.

Women and kids ahead of me collect bundles of green juray leaves that will become portions of our dinner by quickly





stooping down while they walk. This is one sweeping, elegant motion, evident by the sound of soft footsteps changing cadence and leaves snapping from plants. Since part of my work is to learn about what people collect and how this serves as piece of forest knowledge, I collected the plants too. Small kids look at me in wonder. To amuse them I stuff the leaves behind both of my ears, taking the wads of leaves and holding them out to them as green bundles of offering when I catch up to them on the trail. This is also practical. I need whatever I can get from my hands for balance.

This balance is more than physical. The word forest people conjures a particular image—perhaps something naïve, inexperienced, not cognizant of global markets, history, or tensions. It's not so. Walking this forest trail, and others, I've seen boys touting gasoline for generators, others with Christian bibles for church services. And there are also many cases of forest communities literally being split by payoffs from logging companies. Groups leave a community and set up shop somewhere else. This divides entire communities across Sarawak. Others move out of communities and move into logging camps. Some of the results are strikingly painful. Many of these communities have an out-migration, they are losing people, and especially young people. Even from just visiting a few places, I can already tell that the loss of knowledge is a problem. This is,

perhaps, the new forest community: places where people know and hold these tensions just as much they have embraced a life that embraces what the forest has to offer.

A professional healer in the United States tells me that one key part of dealing with trauma and conflict involves a process of individuals understanding their root sources of pain. To arrive at a place where dialog can occur to resolve this, people need to embrace their pain and hurt, and understand how it may be driving decisions. This process often involves talking and sharing. Individuals need to be heard. If people don't feel heard, they feel powerless, sometimes judged, other times forgotten.

I wonder, how do you deal with pain if you can't have a dialog? What if the young people have left? What if people feel powerless? If you are told by logging companies that you don't have rights to the forest? What do the people remaining in some of these forest communities think of these tensions? Or, perhaps, I think, I'm just seeing too much into the situation.



An answer comes three days later. We've finished a long lunch. My stomach is warm with fresh meat from a barking deer we caught early in the morning. I haven't found what I'd describe as a real forest expert in this community, but I'm listening to stories from Lajang, the headman. He's describing planting by moon cycles, his ideas about forest problems, his history. He's filling me with feelings of content and happiness. We sit cross-legged on a hardwood floor. He tells me about the British giving him shotguns, food, feeling respected. He talks about the forest product trade, which is something that I'm especially interested in. At first I think he's telling me of his travels, but then I realize I am hearing his life story. It dawns on me that he was nomadic, only recently did he switch from gathering sago to planting rice. I ask him if anyone else in his community knows these stories.

He tells me no.

I tell him that it's difficult for me to understand the change that he's gone through, from being nomadic to being settled within less than a generation of time. My friend Bill Beevis in his book Borneo Log, writes that this is like witnessing part of an extinction of the American Indian when the buffalo were slaughtered. The other part of course, is the loss of the forest. I realize I need to go deeper and look harder than I thought to find the people I'm seeking. I feel hopeful, more convinced that this is an important journey.

Martin leaves the large kitchen of the longhouse to go pack. The two of us sit together. I replay part of my journey in my mind, thinking back to the logging camps I've traveled through, the communities and the problems of people leaving, my search for knowledge. Lajang and I exchange gifts. I've showed him how to use a camera I'm leaving with him to document things that intrigue me. He gives me two jong. These are Penan wristbands made from rattan collected in primary forest. They represent both people and shared stories. They are traded and passed down. His wife places two on my wrist.

Suddenly, I feel his weight upon me. Seventy years of life are bearing down on my body. We are both on the floor, and I feel a strong embrace. I didn't expect this. My arms fold around his muscled back. Lajang begins softly murmuring to me.

Martin walks in and translates.

“He is glad you are here to visit. The logging and the change—he feels like it is fruit being taken from his stomach. This work of yours, this forest journey is important. He is glad you are here. People need to visit so they can understand. Slowly, our bodies leave on another. Our eyes are moist. We touch hands and I get up and we take our leave, touching hands as we walk out of the village, and slowly, into the forest, continuing to walk.

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Images. Page 1: Taweewet Waterfall, named by a nomadic family; baby monkey adopted by forest family. Page 2: Series of walking with forest communities (mural in progress); formerly nomadic woman, holder of forest knowledge. Page 3: Husband of woman in preceding image (ongoing series of holders of forest knowledge). Page 4: Penan jarong bands; Girl and adopted monkey. Images are only proofs of work in progress for *Forest Visions*, a writing and photography project of sponsored by US Fulbright, donors, and collectors of Noah Jackson's writing and photography. Email for donation information. C. Noah Jackson 2007, [jackson.noah@gmail.com](mailto:jackson.noah@gmail.com)

