

Interview:
Bruno Manser
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Tokyo, Japan

keith harmon snow
Six Hyde Hill Road
Williamsburg, MA 01096
413.634.5088

keith harmon snow: I personally want to know what it was like to live with the Penan, but for your struggle, perhaps there is a better focus...

Bruno Manser: I should make a funny description for a book or something, where I just put quotes [he's laughing] from the Malaysian newspapers together, because they give a picture of my person where I am so really awful and notorious. Hitchhiker, medical school dropout, you should look at all the articles and read it yourself. They say to me, "short-time hero" and "white Tarzan." Maybe there was also a black Tarzan, I don't know. [He's very serious.]

khs: They make you angry?

BM: Well, in the beginning, when they said that the Penan would carry me around in a bamboo throne and things like that. And the Sarawak officials said that I left a Penan wife behind with two children and no one to take care of them. And I get so tired of this, it was disgusting. I mean, people then get the picture from what they read and it is really distorted.

khs: So they didn't carry you around in a bamboo throne?

BM: No. But, well, it happened once that I got a snakebite that a man carried me on his back. A red-tailed pit viper. I nearly killed her with my machete without seeing her and she just attacked in self-defense. And I nearly died. It was the worst experience of my life.

khs: So what happened?

BM: Well, if you want to hear the story... Different groups of Penan have different style, and the one group I was with the game got a bit scarce around the settlement so just the men went out for two or three or four days for hunting trips – overnight trips – so you can go far and stay where there is a lot of wild game. You roast the meat immediately and then you carry it back where the women and children and old people can stay longer so it is more pleasant for them.

I met a really beautiful area, with fish and clear water and you could see the fins coming out of the water, and the fruits falling and [he whispers] *clear water* -- and when I saw that I said, 'WOW! I want to go there for two three days who comes with me?' Two hunters and a boy they

joined me and we went together, and they say *dai-doro* in Penan, this kind of hunting. So we built a hut – very quickly, in an hour or two – and then the two men they went with their blowpipes looking for wild game, and I just took my own casting net that I have made myself, with the boy. And here it was so, you know, the river always makes another bending and you just want to look, ‘Oh! How does the river look like after the next bending?’

And then the sky turned black, really *black*, and you know now there will be a really big rain, but still I didn’t have enough and I wanted to look more. I had on one shoulder the net, in the other hand the machete, and the bush in front of me was *Tulang Pala*, which means ‘bone of the flying dog’ and often on this kind of bush there are pit vipers, and the snake is also colored like leaves, it’s really green and I cut it while thinking where to go, not really looking, just playing with my machete. And suddenly I cut the snake so it directly attacked and bit on to my leg.

It’s not a big snake, maybe the size is as big as your big toe, and maybe 80 to 90 centimeters long. And of course I immediately realized what kind it is and that it is poisonous and I have caught it many times before. I am crazy in snakes – I always *catch* snakes and then I see how long they are. But she stuck her fangs in me, and then she retreated, ready to attack a second time, and I just killed her, I was angry. And so I directly took my knife to make the blood run out but I sat in the middle of an ants nest [he’s laughing] so I had to move but there were all these biting ants on my ass [laughing quite hard] and I tried again to get the blood out but still I had to move from these biting ants and the pain started immediately. I tried to suck my self but the pain was so much that already I couldn’t bend my leg and I told the boy please suck but he was also afraid – the Penan never touch the blood of a human being. They can touch blood of wild game but not of other people. And I went in the direction of the hut but soon I couldn’t walk and just crawled on my hands and my other leg. Then the boy gave a cry of the Argus pheasant but very loud in the jungle and you can hear it very far and when the hunter came back I told him please take your knife and cut to make blood and he just cut on the surface and I told him to push the knife in but he was also scared to do it and you need at least one deciliter of blood going out to wash out the poison.

khs: You studied things like that before you went into the forest?

BM: Well, I had a lot to do with snakes before. And so in the end he carried me, and he put up some medicine from a palm tree, and when we arrived at the hut hell started for me. I was maybe ten days in ‘the sacred fire.’

khs: Is that a state of mind or of physical pain?

BM: Just pain. You cannot think. You cannot act you are just like a metal of pain. You like to die. I would kill myself if I know I would not survive. Of course, just when I got the snakebite I told somebody to go uprivers or downrivers two or three days for a doctor but two weeks later he arrived. And I asked for a doctor and instruments so I can make myself an operation but there were no instruments. And my leg got swollen and then it was pussing and then the muscle where it connects to the knee fell off so the whole muscle fell out of my leg like a banana. And so I cut the muscle off piece-by-piece and then I saw the rest of the muscle would rot inside my leg and I wanted to get the whole muscle out. And afterwards there was no more flesh here, just the bone,

and I always had a bloody knee, just if someone touches it or running through a field from the grass. So this summer [1992] I had a transplant.

khs: Did the Penan treat you with local cures?

BM: Yes. But for two months I couldn't stand up.

khs: What was it like? What were the people really like?

BM: They are so different people. They are quite beautiful. I think they have a lot to teach us, that we can learn much from them about what concerns social behavior. I think we are really barbarians – people from modern society – concerning social behavior.

khs: Does that include the Japanese with all their politeness?

BM: I think everyone from 'civilization.'

khs: You said in your lecture the other night that you never knew greed when you were with the Penan, that the Penan never knew greed. Is that changing?

BM: Yes, it changed of course with possessions coming in from outside, products coming in from outside. Things come in from outside that not everyone can have, and it is like a status symbol to have a watch or something. Not all of them. There are older people and elders who had enough experience in life that they know about the traps and they know that what they have has proven to be something that works.

khs: Well, you have been in the concrete jungles of Japan since December 2nd; you had meetings with Marubeni executives; the Forestry Agency; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; you are on a hunger strike; you have worked alongside the Sarawak Campaign Committee ... you have seen Marubeni do nothing positive to support the Penan and, further, commit to doing nothing. Is that correct?

BM: Yes. I've had meetings with the Japanese Forestry Agency, with Marubeni, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. All of them know that they are involved in the destruction of the forests in Sarawak and that there are human rights violations and arrests and that the indigenous people are being hurt by this logging. They continue to say this is an internal affairs problem for the Sarawakian government to deal with and they refuse to even talk to the Sarawak government about it.

khs: What about the employees of Marubeni Company or the Japanese people? Do you feel that you made an impression on them throughout the nine days you protested?

Bruno Manser: Two years ago the Japanese people wouldn't even look at us. Now they at least acknowledge we are here. But of the 1,000 questionnaires we distributed to employees of Marubeni, only five were returned. One agreed there should be a logging moratorium. One said it is an internal matter of Malaysia. Others said, "Eat, take care of yourselves."

There was also an anonymous phone call from someone with responsibility in Marubeni who supported us. One person who had business with Marubeni said he told them to stop timber imports from Sarawak.

khs: This is such a personal issue for you but still you keep a sense of humor...

BM: Yeah. I remember how the Marubeni guys only smiled twice in our talks. The first time was when they said, "We really don't like you to be in front of our building, can't you stop it?" So I asked them if they would prefer we do it in front of Mitsubishi ... [he's laughing] and they all smiled. They didn't say anything but of course they thought yes ... [laughing] ... yes, go. And tonight after our meeting, when we left the building. They came with me and then the Marubeni guy was starting to freeze [he's laughing] and I invited him to join us for the night (laughing). And then I wanted to explain to him you know this is not fun; that Kazuo Matsue [Sarawak Campaign Committee] had nearly vomited the other night, that it was really bad and we almost had to call emergency and... oh, they understand... they have sympathy... and blah, blah, blah.

khs: What will Marubeni do?

BM: Marubeni says there is nothing they can do. That's what all the people say. Marubeni says it's the client: "Our customers make the demand for wood so we must follow." It is the same when the Swiss government says it is up to the consumer to decide. But who makes it possible? Who makes it all happen? Who allows the imports? Marubeni and the EEC and even the Ministry in Switzerland always push the responsibility of the terrible things that are happening inside Malaysia on Malaysia. So then you ask, "Who is financing this logging? Who takes the logs? If the government is corrupt, who-pays for the corruption? Where does the money come from?" It's a big game - the EEC, Japan - Is Japan financing a corrupt government while aware of the corrupt practices that are happening? And they certainly know. But, of course, you are asking where is the center of evil...

khs: Is it the government's responsibility then, or companies like Marubeni, or the consumer, or the entire cycle of consumption?

BM: Well, you have to ask, where does it all start? OK. There is the tree back in the forest: the logger who cuts it, and the barker who barks it, the bulldozer driver and all the transport workers, including on the roads and in the rivers, and there is the cargo ship and whoever is involved in shipping, and then there is the trading. And when it ends up in Japan, as 'kon-pane' [disposable shuttered cement-mould panels used in construction], there are the men in construction. Maybe the handle of a brush is made from tropical timber so the end user is maybe a simple house-woman. Is she responsible?

If the governments do not allow imports it cannot happen. There is a big difference in responsibility. The responsibility in government should be much higher than that of the simple consumer. When Marubeni decides OK, we will continue to import timber from the Penan land, then the decision of these three or four guys affects maybe five thousand or even one hundred thousand people, who are then supporting human rights violations.

khs: Why is it so easy for the men at Marubeni or Mitsubishi, or whomever you are talking to at the time, to deny that they have the power? Is there a chance that they really believe that they have no power?

BM: No. They have proved themselves that they have the power. Our demands were that Marubeni approach the chief minister in Sarawak and ask for a moratorium on logging in Penan and other conflict areas. They said no, they can't meddle in the internal affairs of Sarawak. Marubeni has both the freedom and the power to stop imports that are related to human rights violations. Nobody is forcing Marubeni to be involved in a trade where there are human rights violations and destruction. I asked Marubeni for a written answer from President Toriumi and they said that the President has no power to deal with this. So who? Who makes the decisions? They said we all agree and we make the decisions.

After all the information that has been given about the situation in Sarawak, each government or person that does not act - the Japanese Forestry Agency or Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the European Commission or Marubeni – I call them criminal. I know this is a harsh word.

khs: So what do you think the average person should do, anyone who becomes aware?

BM: First, don't consume tropical timber from Sarawak. The easiest thing, a global remedy for all these issues, is that wherever you are, ultimately, you always consume things that are locally produced. If you do this, then you are creating 'islands' so to speak, local economic circles where everything is bought, sold, or made locally. This will lead to sustainability. The world market is clearly not sustainable, allowing exploitation of goods that can never be controlled where they are consumed. Many awful and nasty and corrupt things happen.

On the Sarawak issue, there should be no companies involved. People should send letters to Marubeni or Mitsui or others. Of course, they will send you a glossy paper about how to care for the environment - but ask them, "why they don't stop timber imports from Sarawak? You know what's happening to the Penan. Why do you close your eyes?" But of course, they are under one carpet with the Ministers in Malaysia. And one day the population in Japan will get a bit more critical and dare to ask questions inside the places where they work about all the things that are happening. And with the Sarawak issue Japan certainly has responsibility.

khs: The Ambassador of Malaysia, at the UN International Year of Indigenous Peoples Symposium, said that: "Efforts must be undertaken to improve Penan standards of living and to bring them into the mainstream of the society in which they live while respecting their culture and traditional way of life."

BM: How is the Malaysian government respecting their traditional way of life? I really can't understand how the Malaysian government can have the face to say what they are saying. How can they make these statements when they have made more than 400 arrests of indigenous people since 1987? It's clear that the Malaysian government is forcing the people against their will. It is strange when somebody from the office tells the Penan what they have to do. I think the people from the office can learn more from the indigenous people than the other way around -- they take away resources from those who have nothing but the forests. It's the old story where

a few get most of the profits and the majority get nothing, they just face destruction and false dependence on outside help afterwards.

khs: But it says they have given them every opportunity...

BM: The Malaysian government has never listened to the demands of the indigenous people that the government stop the logging. These demands have never been respected by the Malaysian or Sarawakian governments. The people and government of Malaysia should recognize that they complain about colonialism of industrialized countries, and how these countries are happy to get the resources they need. But Malaysia gives its natural resources away for nothing. In twenty years these forests will be worth three, four, five, ten times what they are earning now. Maybe then there will also be better ways of using them.

The politicians never talk about their own involvement in logging, and how much money they themselves make and how much of the privately conceded land they themselves control. And they also control the newspapers. They don't talk about that or, if they do, it's clear that it's all vested interests. Government officials could learn much from the Penan -- about sharing, respect, nobody telling the other what to do. The Penan respect territories. The Penan say: "The government claims that this is their land ... but we have been walking through this forest for many, many years and we have never seen the government. If it is the land of the government, they should show us where the graveyards of their parents are and where they have tapped this poisonous tree and where their forefathers have gathered the sago. And they should tell us the names of the mountains and the rivers. But they cannot do so; it is clear proof that they are just intruders from the outside, just strangers."

khs: Can the Penan tell you the names of the mountains?

BM: Of course; every mountain has a name in the Penan tradition. They know the trees. They will show you where their forefathers have kept the Sago. Each Penan group is founded in one area and the different rivers and mountains all have their own names. Each group has something like one big watershed - water catchment area - and inside that they have their nomadic way of life.

khs: According to the Malaysian Government, in promoting the quality of life as a Penan, the government per capita expenditure on Penan exceeded the average per capita expenditure on other citizens.

BM: Well, if you look at the drop in per capita protein consumption due to logging, the figure - from a WWF study - is from 54 to 12 kilograms. The indigenous people get their protein from the wilderness. They have no alternatives. Without their lands they have nothing and so they naturally need to be given more to survive than, say, farmers.

khs: Are there cases in Malaysia like in Indonesia where the indigenous people have been put 'on display' for tourists?

BM: They have a showcase of different tribes in Kuching [capital of Sarawak] at the Holiday Inn, where they try to show how the people live.

khs: I understand the Penan are being moved out of traditional lands into communal longhouses-and told to weave baskets, for instance.

BM: Other tribes live in longhouses - the Penan don't live in longhouses - each family has their own huts. One Penan put it quite correctly: "We have never asked for a longhouse. We know how to build our own huts, does a longhouse solve our problems? Does a longhouse clean up a polluted river and bring back wild game which has been killed or chased away?" And that is why the forced settlements the Malaysian government has built have only created misery.

khs: Isn't it true that if Malaysia continues to advance and modernize, the people in the forest will be left behind?

BM: No! Why? The government can give the indigenous people hospitals or schools or whatever the people want. The people have a right to take it or not. But what the people want is that their forests not be logged and the way they have always lived to stay the same. That's a different thing. The people are not against development. They are against the destruction of their land. They are against so-called 'development' as they have experienced it -- and what they have experienced is theft.

khs: In fact, hasn't the government actually set aside a reserve for the Penan?

BM: Yes, which was logged meanwhile. In 1987 there was a study done by the Sarawakian government itself. The Penan were peacefully blockading the logging roads and the government proposed to set up two biosphere reserves -- and it was even published in newspapers -- if they would stop the blockading. The government also spoke of a ban on non-resident hunting by loggers and outsiders in these areas where the game has become scarce. And nothing of all these promises has happened. The proposed biosphere reserves were logged meanwhile, and a report about this was not published, it was hidden, it was confidential, and it's all really sad, and afterwards, the chief minister proposed a new area for a biosphere reserve for the Penan, but most of this is mountainous forest where the Penan cannot live and anyways these are areas that have already been logged. And then the government expects that how many hundreds of Penan from all areas should gather here and be able to continue their way of life? How can you tell people to leave their traditional areas -- and put them all together without any idea on what the Penan depend? On whether there are enough sago palms and everything.

khs: But the Penan can hardly expect all that land to become 'theirs'...

BM: Dr. James Wong, the Minister for Tourism and the Environment in Malaysia, a man whose father was an immigrant from China -- he owns 300,000 hectares of forest in indigenous people's land. These land 'concessions' were somehow politically granted to him for logging purposes. So he has more rights than the Penan? How can this be? And the Chief Minister [Taib Mahmud] himself?

It is clear for every thinking human being what is right and what is not. The Penan have lived here for hundreds of years and they have their own systems for land and laws. But the government has the power to change laws, to make the laws fit their own needs, or if not, to use pressure... When you speak about the facts it always sounds so negative, it sounds like a strong accusation, but you are speaking about the facts.

khs: Whose 'facts'? Yours or Malaysia's or Marubeni's?

BM: Well the fact is, over 400 indigenous people have been arrested for peacefully blockading the logging. Studies have been done by the ITTO [International Tropical Timber Organization], by the World Bank, WWF [World Wildlife Fund] ... I have seen it [devastation] with my own eyes. This is the most important experience. Just listen to the voice of the Penan themselves, all the witnesses and facts. Nobody can deny this.

khs: Has it occurred to you that maybe you can't help the Penan?

BM: Oh, it's not up to me. I just have to try my best.

khs: But with all your trying and all your efforts, perhaps in the end, the Penan will lose.

BM: Oh, I know that it's possible to stop logging in Sarawak. Within one week the license holder has to give back the license to the chief minister, and within five weeks he has to leave the area with all his gear if the chief minister withdraws the license, and he has the legal right to do so for the benefit of the people, that's the law, and he can be pushed. Or if he really cares about the people and about the resources in Sarawak he can do so. And because he does not, this is proof that he is operating only for his personal goals, and they are all talking about 'sustainable' and still they exploit resources for their own short-term profits and maybe also a little profit for the state. But most of the resources just leave the country and the exchange of money is nothing compared to the destruction and to the loss but it's clear that Sarawak and Malaysia are losing. And this [Penan] is a society that lives without money and produces everything they need themselves. But it's a hard life and it's a question of daily food. And this is being taken away from the Penan.

khs: Why do you feel such responsibility for the Penan?

BM: Why I myself? From the time I was asked by the Penan – and it took me a long time to give an answer -- but I finally give the answer "o.k." I try my best to help you. I had been living with them for such a long time and I had felt their pain. I felt it inside myself. I look at the destruction and I know the wonder - what wonder! - the primary forest! Such a wilderness! With all the hardship, with all the joy... and this is being taken away from a peaceful people that just look for their daily food. And to see the violence of this big machinery -- which turns this paradise into wasteful consumption -- it hurts.

What came out of these meetings with Marubeni is that the responsible staff will continue or that they like to continue to exploit the resources from the lands of the poorest part of the population that they cause to suffer hunger as a result of these exploitations. In fact, they say they don't

intend to reduce if their clients have demands. So they just work according to the markets... to the laws of business... and I think we have to expose them for this.

There is this song by a Swiss activist, he sings in a dialect, and it is about how the people are so lovely, and he talks about nuclear power, and he was there as a protester, and it's all so lovely, and afterwards he was invited by the big tycoons, and they are all so lovely when you meet them, and as they are chopping off his head he sees that they are not lovely, he sees it is just the face they put on. And that is like in the Japanese, where there is *honae* – the real, the interior – and *tatemai* – the mask.

Like when I asked them [Marubeni] yesterday, “You have been speaking now as representatives of Marubeni, but what do you say as men, as fathers with families, about causing hunger to those people?” And they all looked around, and one said he cannot answer this question, and then he left. And the other one said, “It is the same answer as before. I don't have a different answer.”

We got some calls from some people. One said, “Eat, take care of your selves.” Another one said, “You people are crazy. You can't make a difference,” but we are making a difference by drawing attention to this. Even one person called from Marubeni, a manager or something, and he said, “Yeah, I agree with you, Marubeni is causing human rights problems and is acting like criminals, and I support you, but I cannot do anything about it.”

So I feel that Marubeni has not been sincere, that this lack of sincerity will also be important in other situations where they are brought to question for their human rights violations in Papua New Guinea and other places. Since this situation has not changed we will call on the business partners of Marubeni overseas and inform and lobby them to stop business with Marubeni and to find new business partners. And we will inform all consumers when we know which products are on the market related to Marubeni and we will boycott these products. Of course we still hope for a positive sign from their side, It would be much more satisfying for us to tell people that Marubeni is a leading Japanese company and the first one to take responsibility and that respects human rights where 220,000 people are affected by this logging in Malaysia.

We wanted to be able to say that Marubeni is an example of one company that cares. Marubeni does not care. Their whole company does not allow them to be touched... not even for one day... for one small issues... it's a big issue for us, but for them it is nothing. Somehow it touched me that in this big business there is no place for feelings. These people have stopped feeling. Even those who are leaders inside the company, they are – how to say – they are educated -- conditioned – not to think individually but to think about everything just as business for the company. Everything that is against the business they are not allowed to think about. They have to close their eyes and close their ears.

They have closed their minds. ~ **begin.**