



## A Sociohistorical Transition

### Trade in Forest Products and Bride-Price among the Punan Tubu of Eastern Kalimantan

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**Abstract.** – Most of the former nomadic Punan of Kalimantan (Borneo) reside along the large rivers of the hinterland. For almost a century in northeastern Kalimantan the increased trade in forest products along the Tubu River, as well as the settling process, had a significant impact on the Punan Tubu's social system and the interaction of the different groups with the outside world. The article analyses and summarises the continuity between the commercial trade of the past and the current "bride-price" as exemplified by the Punan Tubu – at first glance two unrelated spheres. A sociohistorical review highlights the effects of the evolution of trade and the emergence of new goods, of the neighbouring Dayak groups' influence, and of the adoption of complex marriage payments. [*Borneo, Punan, nomads, social change, forest products, trade, marriage, bride-price*]

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## Introduction

The Punan, grouped into small bands of hunters and gatherers of forest products, travelled in the past in the inland forests of Borneo. They usually lived upstream from the Dayak, a generic term used to name several stratified and nonstratified farming groups.<sup>1</sup>

The band's subsistence depended mostly upon the consumption of sago palm flour, on hunting, and on food gathering. The band was formed by an extended family within which an elder, chosen among the most experienced adults of the group, ensured an informal authority. Punan groups traditionally established trade relations with their slash-and-burn farming neighbours. As time went on and government pressure increased, these groups settled in small hamlets and began basic farming activities. Supported in their conversion by their sedentary Dayak neighbours, some Punan groups became farmers and began to identify with their farming mentors, while some preferred to remain nomads.

In the 1940s, most Punan groups of the upper and middle Tubu River settled along the main river shores under the patronage of the Merap and Abai (Dayak) groups. In the early 1970s, the groups of the middle and lower Tubu River officially resettled downriver in village resettlement programmes (*Resetelmen Penduduk* or *Respen*) under the auspices of the local administration and the Church. The largest resettlement is still located in Sembuak

1 The term "Punan" or "Penan" (or the transcription "Pnan" as suggested by Sercombe and Sellato [2007] to prevent ambiguity) is used by Borneo's settled peoples, Dayak and Melayu, to refer to various nomadic groups of hunter-gatherers. It stands in contrast to "Dayak," a term generally carrying the meaning of upriver people and used by coastal, Islamised peoples to refer to settled or itinerant tribal farming groups.