

tong tana

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Chief Seattle, 21st century

Franz Hohler

In 1855, Chief Seattle of the Suquamish Indians signed an agreement with the American Governor Stevens according to which the Indians would leave the entire area of the present state of Washington to the Americans and withdraw to the island of Bainbridge. Seattle, after whom the capitol of the state of Washington was subsequently named, had converted to Catholicism 25 years earlier and must have been persuaded to accept the agreement by the necessity of somehow coming to terms with the superior white intruders. It is well possible that he also hoped the federal army would protect him against hostile tribes.

During the negotiations, Chief Seattle was said to have made a speech to the "Great Chief of the Whites" in which he stated that the earth does not belong to man. It became known throughout the world in the 70's of the 20th century under the title "We are part of the earth". Speaking a poetic and archaic language, he expressed the incompatibility of the feelings of a people living according to nature with the life patterns of the modern Western world. He used sentences such as "If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?"

Or, “If all the beasts were gone, man would die from a great loneliness of the spirit.” Or “You must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of your grandfathers. So that they will respect the land, tell your children that the earth is rich with the lives of our kin.”

We, who stood on the side of nature, and are still standing there, have all gladly read such sentences which refer to the spirit of nature and that which is united with it.

They have just one flaw however. They are not the words of Chief Seattle. Only two very short notes that he made during the 1855 negotiation proceedings have been recorded and have nothing to do with his speech. The American Ted Perry wrote the speech for “Home”, a documentary film on environmental pollution that he made for the Southern Baptist Convention in 1970.

“Although Chief Seattle’s speech was fabricated, it is true.”

An irritating story, especially if one realises that more than a half million copies of the German version were sold.

When I stood by the grave of Chief Seattle on Bainbridge Island in 1996, his speech was cited as “Chief Seattle’s Speech” and passed off as authentic by referring to a source from October 1887. It still appears as such on the homepage of the Suquamish Museum today.

Not only we, as nature lovers from the industrialised world, have been taken in by the Chief’s oration, it was so welcome to the descendants of his Indian tribe that they did not bother to question its origin.

Why?

The answer is simple.

Although the speech was fabricated, it is true.

What it describes happened not only in the 19th century, it also happened in the 20th century and it is happening in the 21st century.

It came to mind when I saw this picture in the Bruno Manser Archive.

The person who is looking at us is Along Sega, the Penan headman who was Bruno Manser’s host from 1986 until 1990. His group of nomads lived along the Limbang River in the north of Sarawak and only recently decided to become settled – not because it was their wish and will but because it was the only way to survive. The reason is the ever-worsening destruction of their forest by the various logging companies, and above all by Samling. The supplying of the group with sago, its most important food, is in particular jeopardy as a result. For the last time two years ago, Along Sega’s group put up a blockade on the Samling road and saw it torn down just three days later. The photograph shows

Along Sega holding a satellite picture of his land, with the veins of the various logging roads criss-crossing clearly visible.

He says nothing, he just gazes at us. But the look in his eyes conveys a challenge: Look at this! What do you have to say about it? What should we say?

“Along Sega says nothing, he just gazes at us.”

First and foremost, we would like to say: Dear Along Sega, we are not cutting down your trees! And none of these logging roads lead to Switzerland!

Unfortunately this is not quite true. The logging company Samling, which is responsible for the largest part of the destruction in Sarawak’s rain forest, was listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange in 2007. And who enabled this initial public offering, or in other words offered it for sale? With earnings of 10 million US Dollars? Switzerland’s “Crédit Suisse” bank.

But for the time being Credit Suisse has other problems, and must recoup the 4 billion that it gambled away on the American sub-prime market from some other source. If it doesn’t succeed, then it, together with the UBS, will be lost as taxpayers and we can no longer afford our school buildings, freeways, sewage system and the maintenance of our army and our forests.

“None of these logging roads lead to Switzerland! – Unfortunately this is not quite true.”

Along Sega looks at us, as though he senses the relationship. And he is not alone in looking at us. Chief Seattle is standing behind him, and Chief Bruno is standing behind Chief Seattle. And behind them are standing all of the chieftains of all the tribes who consider themselves as children of Mother Earth and who cannot understand what one is doing to their Mother.

Franz Hohler’s speech in Basel on 19 April 2008 on the occasion of the vernissage of Bruno Manser’s photo archive going online.

Headman Along Sega (right) was the host of Bruno Manser in the rainforest of Borneo. The picture shows him holding a satellite map of his land that was made with the help of the Bruno Manser Fonds.



Native Customary Rights (NCR) Area of the Nomadic Penan Communities under TK Along Sega and under TK Awing Tuvai of Long Pusit
 Satellite Image: 25.2.2001



— Boundary of the NCR of the Nomadic Penan Communities under TK Along Sega and under TK Awing Tuvai

Logging Road / Bare Soil

1:100 000
 0 1 2 3 4 km
 Projection: UTM 50N

Satellite images:
 LANDSAT ETM, resolution 28.5m
 Acquisition date: 25.2.2001, 22.5.2001, 24.5.2004
 Base image: acquisition date: 25.2.2001
 Copyright: Geospace Australia, 2005
 Original data: USGS 2005

Left: Satellite Image Analysis: Logging Roads and Bare Soil detected in 2001, 2003, 2004

Boundary of NCR of the Nomadic Penan Communities under TK Along Sega and TK Awing Tuvai

Bare Soil detected in:

- 2001
- 2003
- 2004

White transparent areas: Clouds in either 2003 or 2004 or both years. Therefore no information for 2003, 2004 or both

Data source:
 Penan Communities:
 BRIMAS / Penan Communities

Satellite images:
 LANDSAT ETM, resolution: 28.5m
 Satellite images used for analysis:
 Acquisition date: 25.2.2001, 22.5.2001, 24.5.2004
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News in brief



New dam project endangers Limbang rainforest

A new dam project is endangering the survival of various indigenous rainforest communities on the upper reaches of the Limbang River in northern Sarawak. Since last April, preliminary studies are underway for the realisation of a major power plant that, according to research of the Bruno Manser Fonds, will flood several hundred hectares of rainforest and various villages. Those affected include the Kelabit village of Long Napir and other settled and semi-settled Penan communities. It is particularly worrisome that until now those affected have been insufficiently informed about the plans of the Sarawak government. Mutang Urud, an environmentalist from Long Napir and a close friend of Bruno Manser's, has told Tong Tana that he is shocked. "We put up a blockade on the Limbang to protest the intrusion of the logging companies in the 1980s. That my homeland should now be flooded distresses me immeasurably." Tong Tana will return to the project and its presumed impact.

Clean drinking water for the Penan in Long Pusit

Thanks to the help of the Bruno Manser Fonds, the Penan communities of Long Pusit and Ba Nyakit on the upper reaches of the Limbang are receiving clean drinking water. Until now, both of these communities of semi-settled Penan have been getting their water from the river that is strongly polluted by the Ravenscourt and Lee Ling Timber companies. The Penan have been able to lay a water pipe from a wellspring in the primary forest to their villages. Crossing the Limbang with a 90 meter long water pipe was technically very demanding.

High Court dismisses Penan land rights claim

The High Court of Sarawak and Sabah has dismissed the lawsuit that the Penan community of Long Lamai submitted in 2007 against Samling, the tropical timber company, and the government of Sarawak for reasons of form. According to the Court, the claim should have been submitted no more than three years after a logging concession had been granted to the timber company. "Land rights of indigenous communities are not subject to a time limit" according to the lawyer responsible for the land rights claim. "This is an important judicial precedent and could have consequences for numerous other cases." The Penan's lawyers immediately appealed the decision.

Switzerland participates in the World Bank's Tropical Forest Fund

With a contribution of 7 million francs, Switzerland is participating in the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF). In view of a new financing instrument created for a global climate agreement, it should help to assure that protected or sustainably-used tropical forests can be supported as reservoirs of carbon. The FCPF is subject to controversy among environmental and human rights organisations. Indigenous representatives are fearful that the inhabitants of the tropical forests will be deprived of even more of their rights to use the forests. There is also little trust in the World Bank, whose policies in the past have accelerated the clearing of the rainforests in many places. On the other hand, there is hope that the inclusion of tropical forests in climate policies could curtail the destruction of the forest.



The 2007 annual report and annual account were unanimously accepted at the annual meeting of the Bruno Manser Fonds on 19 April 2008 in Basel's Natural History Museum (picture). Marion Graber, an economist, and the lawyer Susette Biber-Klemm were newly elected to the executive committee. Retiring President Sibylle Spengler took leave with applause.

Impressum

Tong Tana means «in the forest» in the language of the indigenous Penan living in the rainforest of Sarawak (Malaysia)

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