A sense of space: land struggles of the Semai of peninsular Malaysia

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Chapter Seven: Conclusions

The aim of this study was twofold. First, to write a story of the Orang Asli land struggles in the context of their changing social relations. Second, to explore, from the ways I have chosen to tell the Orang Asli story, some methodological possibilities to examine indigenous land struggles elsewhere in Southeast Asia. As such, in this final chapter there will be two main parts. The first part will be a recapitulation of issues discussed in the preceding chapters. For obvious technical and organizational reasons this section will not be a comprehensive summary of all the issues covered in the earlier chapters. Rather I shall draw together some of the major contours of the Orang Asli land struggle highlighting at the same time the methodological framework employed to represent these changing relations. The reason for this is that such a summarizing will lead more easily into the next section, which is a discussion on how a similar approach can be used to examine indigenous political struggles elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Land Struggles and Changing Social Relations as Place-making

Despite the justifiable ways other scholars have examined the changing social relations of the Semai, I have sought in this text to explain similar themes but by using a framework which, as I have argued in Chapter Two, is more consonant with Semai notions of the social. My argument is that too often when a social group is marginalised or excluded - whether in the production of texts or society - so too are their perspectives on the situation even when they constitute the focus of discussion. I have also argued that when examining Orang Asli social relations, which have direct links with their land struggles, this place-making approach can offer a more dynamic way of bringing out the cultural politics central to such practices that other approaches tend to ignore or place in the backdrop. In addition, I have also claimed and hope to have demonstrated in the preceding chapters that this place-making approach can provide a clearer picture not only of the different agencies converging in the Orang Asli situation but how the latter's social relations extend beyond the familiar operational fields of the state and the political economy. This does not mean, however, that
the state or political economy is irrelevant to the changing situation of the Orang Asli. Both the state as well as business corporations are important actors vis-a-vis the indigenous situation and these facts have been brought to the fore in many studies. But at the level of social inquiry there is a need for a re-evaluation of the indigenous situation, not only in terms of the state or the international economy, but also in terms of the whole development of social relations. These relations have made for the states and the political economy to be represented, on one hand, as so powerfully capable to affect the indigenous situation, yet, on the other hand, so powerlessly incapable to rectify the indigenous question.

To reiterate, the basic idea behind the place-making approach for explaining Semai social relations is that these relations are very much place-based but they are not place-bound. The Semai, I have argued, organise their relations in terms of a sense of place about their selves, and a "structure of feeling" projected on to their immediate locale. In Semai thought and practice there is an acknowledged existence of other people-places, at the level of the intra-personal as well of the social, and it is interaction between these people-places that reproduces/maintains/change their own places of action and practice. But unlike Bourdieu's "habitus", the Semai sense of feeling is not systematized in the form of a theoretical or clearly explicated ideological paradigm or discourse. The notions of the ruai, lengriik, persusah, abor, etc. are "constituted dispositions" which shape the flows and interconnections between and within Semai constructed places. Thus, to explicate Semai notions and practices in a more analytic fashion - in order to consider the social, economic and cultural relations in which Semai senses of place are embedded in - I have drawn from the recent debates in human/cultural/feminist geography. Geographers have also emphasized that place is something created by people, both as individuals and groups and across a range of spatial scales. They are also increasingly arguing on the whys and hows to analyse the social in terms of the spatial to formulate the spatial in terms of social relations (Keith & Pile, 1993; Duncan and Ley, 1993; Rose, 1993). What feminist geographer, Doreen Massey (1994) has argued in this regard, is perhaps the most relevant for the approach employed in this study. Massey argues that

...what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'. The fact is, however, that social relations are never still; they are inherently dynamic. Thus even to understand space as a simultaneity is, in these terms, not to
evacuate it of all inherent dynamism... The view, then, is of space-time as a configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial may be conceived of as an inherently dynamic simultaneity. Moreover, since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification. (1994:2f)

Massey provides useful working definitions of "space" and "place", which the Semai notions did not, which can be used to exemplify the features of place understood by the Semai. If space is understood as the "stretched out" relations of social networks across all spatial scales then "place", Massey suggests, can be formulated "as a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings" (Ibid. p.5). But the constructions of these particular articulations (places) are also specifically constituted by the particular interconnections with social relations in places that lie beyond.

It is within this explanatory framework that the main objective of this study has been set. This objective has been to give an account of the changing social relations of the Orang Asli, which is contextualised in the process of their land struggles.

The story of the Semai land struggles whether in the past (Chapters Three and Four) or the present (Chapters Five and Six) speak of issues that range beyond the contours of the few Semai settlements. Or for that matter the political economy of the pre-colonial, colonial or postcolonial regimes. For more than a century now the Semai of Malaysia have been defined within a political-cultural universe that has enabled and justified successive dominant regimes in different circumstances to: hunt the former as slaves, relegate them to "die it out" in the hinterlands, herd them into detention camps, force them into a "special" treatment of protective segregation at the same time engineering the specific ways they are to be integrated within society, etc. This same cultural politics linking the ruling regime and the indigenous population as a whole have also facilitated the dispossession of whatever lands the latter may have been occupying whenever these lands were required by the regime or members of the dominant society. At the same time, the nature of relations prompted on the part of the indigenous various socio-economic modes and land practices of accommodation, adaptation and resistance also characteristic features of the latter's social relations. But in the interplay of these cultural-political dynamics both Semai as well as state agencies have not only taken
their place making efforts into wider social arenas but worked with distinctive discourses or ideologies of "indigenous places" that have come from a range of socio-spatial scales.

In terms of Semai place-making in the past we see that it is impossible to claim for them a timeless identity based on purely internal histories. Their identities and land practices were never fixed but flexible not only because of their unique kinship patterns upon which they were based but also because their geographical space was constantly encroached upon by other agencies. What developed in this context was a tenurial/territorial system whereby rights to the use and ownership of or access to lands were not a given fixed condition but part of the social milieu negotiated by the Semai in their day-to-day relations with each other. Moreover, these rights were negotiated constantly not only among those acknowledged to be "original" co-members of a particular group but others who came to inhabit the same geographical space.

The examples and discussions, which illustrate that state agencies operated in spatialized strategies, are clearest in Chapter Four. Whether it was the making of the Orang Asli Area a Malay place (which betrayed the nationalist project against the British/Chinese) or the character of the Orang Asli Area itself (which owed a debt to ILO impulses) the interconnections with social processes happening elsewhere were inevitable. Positions matter and they need to be legitimized in as wide an arena of the public as possible. For instance, in the face of escalating pressures from the Orang Asli and indigenous groups of East Malaysia the Federal Government sponsored an "International Seminar on Indigenous Peoples" in November 1993. This bringing together of 162 participants from 33 countries, in the background of the UN International Year of Indigenous peoples, demonstrates not only the capacity but necessity of the state to legitimate its cultural politics in a global arena.

But as I have discussed, especially in Chapter Six, the Semai were also articulating and taking their struggles in places beyond their villages. As state agencies such as the JHEOA and Islamic religious organizations reached into the homes, villages and economy of Orang Asli places - with the avowed objective of integrating the Orang Asli into the Malay community - the Semai entered into new locations and different political positions in the changing national politics. These were urban places, more specifically non-Islamic and non-governmental places which the Semai began to frequent. Unlike earlier Semai movements,
between settlements and towns, it was not just the Semai headmen who were doing the travelling. Because of governmental restrictions on Orang Asli areas, Semai men, women and children were regularly "going out" to visit Christian and Baha'i church centres located in the nearby towns of Bidor, Kampar, Tapah, etc. Although initially they were entering into religious places to articulate their "hybrid" identity and land problems, within a decade their land campaigns and "Orang Asli" discourse demonstrated clear links with constructs of "indigenous" and land strategies formulated in many different places around the world. While their various movements into different places did not translate into a symbolic power shift, the significance of their struggle is their appropriation of public space itself. In the face of a state politics, which emphasised a confinement/consignment of Orang Asli into special places protected from public politics, the Semai movements marked a clear making of an identity developed in opposition to the state.

Semai mobility and their forging of links with places beyond the village did not result in a homogenization of their relations. Or, to put it in another way, there was not the making of one community of resistance. If anything their movements resulted in a greater mixture of ideas and affiliations which came to impact on their social relations and land struggles. Again, in taking a place-making approach which entails the examination of relations in particular places the specificity of the different ideational flows and their interactions can be made explicit. This is what I have demonstrated especially in Chapter Six by discussing a particular land campaign of the Semai villagers. In going about the organizing of the memorandum campaign, the Semai were in a sense asserting their land demands and priorities in terms of their differentiated mobility and the distinct relationships they forged with people and places from a range of scales. In this context the Semai showed themselves to be not just a "people from a certain place" (Sengoi) but "people from the beginning" (Orang Asli), or Baha'i or "woman", or "like the Penan of Sarawak", etc. Thus in the case of the Semai of the three villages, the distinct articulations as a result of differentiated mobility vis-à-vis social relations changed the perspectives the masalah tanah and consequently problematized any easy alliances among them. The reason for this differentiation, and this is another aspect of a place-making approach, is what Massey calls:

...the power geometry of it all; the power geometry of time-space compression. For different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in
relation to these flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation to the flows and the movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (Massey, 1994:149)

What this underscores is that the Orang Asli land struggles are therefore place-making efforts on their part but not necessarily in circumstances of their own choosing. This shows itself most clearly in the economic system that they have developed which was the subject of discussion in Chapter Five. Faced with the ever-increasing restrictions to the use and control of their customary lands, the Semai persisted in a range of forest-based economic activities organized along place-based principles of kinship. These place-based principles of kinship not only determined for the Semai the ways for the allocation of productive means but also, by the practice of which, ensured the reproduction of their place-based social relations. But that the general circumstances were not of their own choosing is demonstrated by the supplementary ways they had to resort to make a living, i.e. engage in regular waged labour. Moreover, the context of unequal power relations applies not only with regard to the relations between the Orang Asli and the state agencies but, as I have shown in Chapter Six, power differentials in terms of gender, religious affiliations and relations with different agencies in the movement network also impinge on the Semai situation. In a sense the Semai entered into places provided for them and not places they created for themselves.

In so far as Orang Asli places are part of the space of accumulation and control ruled by the state and capital the land prospects look bleak for the Orang Asli. But the movements of both state as well as Orang Asli agencies indicate that indigenous relations cannot go on with "business as usual". If anything the spatial practices of Orang Asli groups at "locale" level is continually challenging the cultural politics linking Orang Asli and dominant society/state. What makes the spatialized practices of the Semai significant is that people treat the spatial as charged with emotional content, mythical meanings, community symbolism and historical significance. And it is the "structure of feeling", not empirical rationality that one finds built into the framework of institutional perceptions and bias which characterize the everyday life. And even if it happens, as it is likely to, that the Semai are physically relocated
their accumulated space-time experiences and inheritances, their geographical background, cultural origins and social networks - their sense of place - will be carried with them. And it can be safely assumed that just as efforts to put them in their place will continue the resistance generated from Semai sense of place will be refashioned in another place. This makes for a place-making approach of understanding all the more relevant and necessary. As bell hooks argues for those who have no place there will always be a struggle for a place to be (hooks, 1991:149). And as one Semai put it:

The orang bandar [city folks] can never understand or feel what we have been through, what our masalah tanah [land problem] is really about. The way we Orang Asli live on the land is very different from the way of the orang bandar. Our lives are so strongly connected to the land. Our culture, traditions, customs, food, medicine, income and livelihood - all of these are in the forests, the rivers and the mountains. Moreover, our God, the spirits of our ancestors and the spirits of the forests are all tied with the hills, the flowers, the forests, the stones, the trees, the rivers, the animals and the land. We are struggling for more than just a piece of land. We are struggling for the rights to live on the land as Orang Asli. For a long time now we are being forced to live as squatters on the land, to be treated as a backward people who cannot and should not enjoy some basic rights as other citizens do. We are not asking to have a country of our own or a government of our own. We are only asking that we be accepted as indigenous peoples and be allowed to stay and move in our hereditary land. People from the outside say we are nomads. Government ministers tell us that we must settle down so that we may prosper. Christian missionaries and Imams tell us that if we stay in one place we can send our children to school... their schools. Even the television programmes show us as living like animals. But we are not nomads. We are being forced to move from our hereditary land. During the war with the Japanese, we were forced to move, during the war with the communists we were forced to move. And now, we are again forced to move. We are not nomads but we are forced to move.

Place-Making as a Methodology to examine Political Struggles of Indigenous People in Southeast Asia

Most of the indigenous groups in Southeast Asia are traditional forest dwellers whose subsistence depends on the forest and its produce but who have never enjoyed legal rights over forest lands (MRG, 1994). The need for environmentally sustainable approaches to forest management based on the recognition of customary rights is increasingly recognized in the context of rapid depletion of Southeast Asia's forest resources. Environmental pressure
from the "outside", both governmental and non-governmental, has often been more concerned with improved legal mechanisms for shared resource management than with explicit recognition of indigenous land rights. Where special land status has been recognized it tends to be the result of colonial legacy but even then the fiction of communal landownership was maintained amid a widespread pattern of land transfers and private landownership sanctioned for by the state. It is no surprise, therefore, that controversial issues about Southeast Asia indigenous groups today often concern the status and meaning of the protective laws inherited from the colonial period. In the case of Indonesia, for instance, the tenure regime was derived from a combination of customary (adat) law and codified law for the protection of indigenous or tribal land rights - a system which has its origins in the racialized manner landownership was regulated by the Dutch. Although traditional occupiers can make claims based on adat customary law some, three-quarters of all Indonesian land is now classified as forest with the land rights vested exclusively in government forest departments. At least this is the case in principle in accordance with the Basic Forestry Law of 1967 (WALHI, 1990). In practice forest management, especially in the Outer Islands where most of the indigenous groups are located, has been in the hands of private concessionaires. There are now over five hundred concessions to private companies in the Outer islands with an average size of about 100,000 hectares (YLBHI, 1990). As a result there has been growing land conflicts between tribal communities, the state and logging contractors with UN and other donor agencies, advocating for community-based strategies for the mapping of adat land rights and borders. Indonesian NGOs have also lent their support to these tribal land causes by, among other things, documenting cases of land eviction throughout Indonesia and pointed to the frequency and intensity of such cases of land conflicts over the past decade (WALHI, 1990). In the Philippines, a country that has gone further than any other Asian country in linking the concepts of ancestral domain, special land rights and autonomy, indigenous land rights struggles continue to be a feature of the country's politics. More than half the Philippines is considered forest lands and within the public domain and virtually all the country's indigenous peoples live in those designated areas. For the indigenous, like the Orang Asli of Malaysia, it is their customary lands but for successive governments in the Philippines it is land that is unexploited and unclaimed. Consequently, forests have been logged at a rate
virtually unparalleled elsewhere and some thirty-one dams were proposed to be built since
1979, all these projects on lands occupied by indigenous populations. As in other places
Philippine indigenous groups have also been losing their lands to foreign interests. The Aetas,
for example have been displaced from some 50,000 hectares of their traditional land by US
army and naval bases. And the Malaysian-based Guthrie Corporation in cooperation with the
Philippines National Development Corporation, with loans from the British Commonwealth
Development Corporation (NDC), appropriated some 48,000 hectares of indigenous peoples'
land for oil palm plantations. In this latter example about 3000 indigenous peoples were
forcibly evicted from these lands and in the process, some thirty murders were documented
which were linked to the NDC and Guthrie (CIIR, 1982). As in the case of Indonesia,
indigenous groups have been mounting campaigns of sorts in defense of their land rights.
Perhaps the most prominent actions are those represented by the Cordillera People's Alliance
for the Defense of their Ancestral Domain, a coalition of some fifteen indigenous groups
which now has an office based in London.

The list of indigenous land struggles in Southeast Asia, their historical, local and
transnational interconnections are documented variously in human rights literature and
development studies (Ashworth 1980; Burger, 1987; Colchester 1989; Cooper, 1978; Dorall,
1990; Hong, 1987; ICIHI, 1987; IWGIA, 1987). They are all "indigenous" or "ethnic
minorities" both in official accounting statistics and social status. They are conventionally
cast as "hunters-gatherers" or semi-nomadic and their current struggles share common
features with the Semai. They are all, geographically, "hill-people" or "interior-people" and
local-perjorative names are still commonly used in reference to them, for example the "Kha"
in Thailand and Laos, the "Pnong" in Cambodia, the "Moi" in Vietnam "Igorot" or "Manobo"
in the Philippines, the "Orang Ulu" or "Dayak" in Borneo, "Toraja" in Sulawesi, and the list
goes on. As the Asian Indigenous Peoples' Pact, an organization where many of these
indigenous groups are represented, has explained, these groups are engaged in campaigns of
sorts to claim for cultural-political rights over their customary lands, resources, recognition as
indigenous, etc. As in the Semai situation, while their struggles are primarily directed at the
state, there is a global dimension to their struggles in terms of the language used in their
campaigns, their communication and solidarity with human-rights, tribal, developmental and
ecological movements, as well as inter-governmental authorities. In the last decade especially there has been several joint conferences bringing together these indigenous representatives to discuss common strategies and share ideas regarding their land struggles. Of note is the setting up of first, the Asian Indigenous Peoples' Pact in 1989 and then the Asia Indigenous Women's Network in 1993, the latter having been represented in 1995 Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing. But behind these formal organizations are a host of intermediate agencies, cultural workers, social activists, NGOs, religion-based movements, social researchers, etc. working at a range of scales in processes which we can safely assume, are impinging on local struggles in different places.

In Chapter Two, I mentioned that despite the lack of consensus at arriving at a universal definition of indigenous peoples there is a common agreement, across the board as it were, of one contradistinctive feature of this social category of peoples. This distinguishing feature is the "special" relationship of indigenous peoples to the land. This "special" relationship has been variously described as "traditional", "ancestral", "religious-sacred", "fully-fledged", etc. However it is described, the thrust of these explanations is to impress on the reader the fact that there is a unique and prominent relationship which indigenous people have with land and the meanings of which cannot be adequately captured in the familiar language of "sovereignty", "property" and "jurisdiction". A clear example in point is the present state of affairs in the indigenous land rights debate. Indigenous groups the world over are insisting on land rights which encompass this "sense of place" associated with the designations of their land as "traditional", "ancestral", "religious-sacred", "fully-fledged", etc. (Moody, 1988; Burger, 1987; Vlist, 1994). In fact, in a 1992 statement indigenous peoples' representatives from around the world decided that:

We must never use the term "land claims". It is the non-indigenous people which do not have any land. All the land is our land. It is non-indigenous peoples who are making claims to our lands. We are not making claims to our lands (The Kari-Oca Declaration and Indigenous Peoples Earth Charter, World Conference of Indigenous Peoples on Territory, Environment and Development, Kari-Oca 25-30 May 1992).

However, international and national state agencies that wield the power to grant such "claims" insist on discussing them in terms of western notions of private law (Brolmann & Zieck, 1993). The terms "usufruct", "tenure", "possession", "property", "ownership", etc., terms that are currently constituting the framework for negotiating indigenous land rights all
belong to the realm of private law. What this implies, therefore, is that whatever titles to land ultimately granted to indigenous peoples the possibility of expropriation of the land by the state will always be there (Ibid.). Moreover, even if the land is not expropriated, lands titles that are granted in this fashion does not include subsurface rights (Ibid.).

The difficulty at understanding indigenous peoples relationship to the land in terms of western notions of property, and thereby the nature of their land struggles, holds true for not only the Semai case but other indigenous groups in Southeast Asia. Take the example of the Mangyan people of the Philippines who wrote this letter some twenty years ago:

We are 200 representatives of the Alangan Tribe of the Mangyan people of Mindoro who have met for two days here in the sitio of Paitan, Calapan, Mindoro, at the foot of the Halcon mountain.

We have discussed many things which we wish to share in this fertile plain around Calapan that is said to be as big as the province of Bulacan. We planted and harvested in peace, We thought we were the only people in the world (Mangyan means Man) and we were proud and contented. A hundred years or so ago the Tagalog and later Ilocano settlers came to take our land. We retreated because it seemed to us there was enough land for all and we are not a warrior people as everyone can tell you. But the land is not unlimited. We have been forced up into the mountains. Still the settlers come. If we plant a few trees, a Tagalog or Ilocano will come and claim them. There is no place for us to settle down. Don't believe that we are contented roaming the mountains building temporary huts, living by kaingin. We are not a nomadic mountain people. We have been forced up to the mountains. We know such a life is no life for our families: half the children die, there are no schools, no medicine.

We have met these days to discuss our problems, not as a small group but as a whole tribe, for we know that a solution is possible only if we have union. These days together we have felt the warmth and strength our tribal unity brings. We are happy to be Mangyans.

Here are our needs:
1. We want land for our tribe, enough for all of us, a piece of land that is titled and secure, that others cannot steal. We are willing to take any land, provided it is secure and adequate for our families. We will not retreat anymore.
2. We want our own way of life. We are willing to live side by side with others but we want to live our own culture and traditions. We are losing these since we live as isolated small groups browbeaten by Christians. We want our own secure land, our own place, where we can come together and find again what are really our way of life, our beliefs and traditions. We want to protect what is left of our culture, as you protect a small flame till it grows into a strong fire. Our traditions are peaceful as everyone can tell you. To us they are like life itself. If we lose our own way, what are we? We need our own place to become the people we are supposed to be. Time is running out.
3. Lastly, we need schools for our children where they can study in peace and not be insulted as they are now in the lowland schools. We want them to learn
your ways which have so much to offer, but we want them to be true Mangyans also. We want your schools, but on our terms, in our place. We older Mangyans are illiterate. Of the 200 meeting here only 26 can sign their names. We do not want to stay this way because such ignorance is harmful to us. We want adult education courses. We want to learn. But above all, we want to know our rights.

(The Philippine Times, Open Letter to the Filipino people, 1-15 January 1977)

Perhaps the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1974) has put it rightly that a reductionistic view of spatialization has entered into western social science that disables scholars to examine the fuller meanings of land as a spatial category. The "commonsensical" world that we inherited from the enlightenment "space" has little concreteness and as it is unobservable as such, it is presumed not to exist. However what exists in the imagination of people and affects their everyday decisions must be considered in social science.

Using a place-making process to examine indigenous land struggles of the kind that are happening in Southeast Asia has several advantages which I have already demonstrated in the case of the Semai. Several dimensions of the land rights struggle can be grasped all at the same time yet avoiding either a romanticized or derogatory characterization of indigenous social relations. First, the place can be materially specified - it is the geography of the customary lands which the indigenous group is claiming. Second, if "place" is, as Massey defines, particular articulations of the "stretched out" relations of social networks across all spatial scales then it is possible to understand how the indigenous land rights struggle is about the construction of particular social relations. And this construction of social relations is interconnected with articulations of relations in places that lie beyond the particular locale as is characteristic of indigenous land struggles the world over. In other words, the indigenous land struggles cannot be understood as merely isolated affairs at the "local" scale. Neither is it the case, as most governments would put it (Armitage and Kenedy, 1989), that when indigenous peoples engage in land struggles it is because they are agitated by "outsiders" or "foreigners". In other words the indigenous land struggles cannot be read off from just one spatial scale. It is the necessary concomitant of the inter-relation of social processes on different scales that "come together" or are mediated through the specific practices of particular places.
In the case of the Southeast Asian indigenous groups there is an added challenge to their organizing efforts which may be clarified in a place-making analysis of their changing social relations. As they take their struggle into the international circuit, Southeast Asian indigenous groups are also experiencing difficulties locating their place in the more established indigenous trans-national networks which are dominating the global arena (Bose, 1995). North American, Latin American and more recently the Australian Aboriginal/Indian lobbies have clearly established their places and set the indigenous agenda in the international fora. In contrast, Southeast Asian indigenous organizations are "newcomers" to these transnational indigenous politics. As such they have to contend not only with the above-mentioned groups but their equally well established support groups such as the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, the latter which has demonstrated reluctance to admit indigenous groups which are not campaigning for an autonomous state.

Case studies of different indigenous land struggles is beyond the scope of this text but perhaps one example may indicate the spatially "stretched out relations" of indigenous peoples and the implications for their local land struggles:

In the spring of 1992 some thirty over indigenous representatives from different parts of the world travelled around Europe bringing their land issues to the attention of European politicians, business corporations, non-governmental organizations and consumers. This group of indigenous leaders included five representatives from Southeast Asian countries. This campaign, called the "Symbolic Discovery of Europe", was mainly organized by the Dutch Centre for Indigenous Peoples but was launched with the sponsorship and support of several other European organizations. It was also intended to coincide not only with the UN Year for the Indigenous Peoples but the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio. Many exchanges happened not only between the indigenous leaders and European parties but also among the indigenous representatives themselves. One particularly significant exchange for me was a conversation between the Lil'wat representative from Canada and the Kenyah person from Malaysia. The Lil'wat representative was explaining some history of his community's land struggles and the role that literacy campaigns played in raising people's consciousness. He was especially interested in the indigenous groups of Malaysia because, according to him, the literacy campaign in his community was initiated some twenty years ago as a result of a visit by a Lil'wat woman to an Orang Asli community in Malaysia. Apparently, the Lil'wat woman had come across an Orang Asli group which was engaged in a literacy project and upon her return to Canada brought back with her some "interesting literacy training skills" which she then introduced to her community.
Travelling provides a means for conceptualizing the interplay among peoples that were never so separate or inaccessible one to another as their relations have been represented. Travel erodes the brittleness and rigidity of spatial boundaries and suggests social, political and cultural identity as an amalgam, the intricacy of which defies the comparative simplicity of "identity" but the implications of which can be adequately traced in the specific places of the travellers. Concerned primarily with traveling theory and traveling cultures, James Clifford has been among the most thoughtful of proponents of travel metaphors. As terms of cultural comparison and a means of comparative knowledge, travel for Clifford (1989) moves us beyond the fixity of singular locations as he suggests in:

"Location", here is not a matter of finding a stable 'home' or discovering a common experience. Rather it is a matter of being aware of the difference that makes a difference in concrete situations, of recognizing the various inscriptions, 'places', or 'histories' that both empower and inhibit the construction of... categories like 'Woman'... [and I may add indigenous]... categories essential to political action as well as to serious comparative knowledge. 'Location' is thus, concretely, a series of locations and encounters, travel within diverse but limited spaces... (Ibid. p. 82)

There is a danger in this idealizing of "travelling cultures/ politics" which is characteristic of the frequent fliers and jetsetters and projecting it on to indigenous activists. And it is attempting to think of Clifford's travellers as these individuals who accumulate culture along with "air miles" while gazing down on the topographical lands below. But I am referring to indigenous groups such as the Semai, the Aetas, the Mangyan, etc. who in their process of travelling come back to place-making. And their place-making challenges some influential conceptualizations of placed politics. Since the 1980s the world has seen the recrudescence of exclusivist claims to places - nationalist, regionalists and localist. All of them have been attempts, like the "blood and soil" immigration policies of many countries, to fix the meaning of particular places, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one's own. Within the academic literature as well there has been a continuation of the tendency to identify places as necessary sites of nostalgia, of the ongoing opting-out from Progress and History. But if place-making, as Semai examples have shown, are not based on timeless identities or purely internal histories and not exclusive claims to places then there are possibilities for a re-envisioning alternative geo-political imaginations.