In May 2010 I spent four weeks trekking in the rainforests of Borneo with the semi nomadic Penan – one of the last surviving hunter-gatherer tribes in South-East Asia and acknowledged masters of tracking and hunting. The aim was to obtain point of view (POV) video footage of a Penan hunter’s solo journey through dense jungle near Ba Jawi, one of Borneo’s last remaining pristine rainforest wildernesses. Unsurprisingly, given that they have lived their entire life in the forest, the Penan are exceptionally in tune with their surroundings, alert to even the smallest sound or movement and I wanted to attempt to capture a view of the forest from the perspective of the Penan who move incredibly fluidly, gracefully, swiftly and almost silently whilst navigating the tangled jungle environment and tracking their prey.

Ba Jawi, a remote, sparsely populated region located close to the mountainous Sarawak/Kalimantan border, home to pristine rivers, prolific bird life and many of Sarawak’s rare and protected mammal species is culturally important to the Penan who have used this mystical area for hunting, traditional ceremonies and burial sites for generations. One small family currently lives there in semi-isolation from other family members who, through marriage or for economic reasons, have chosen to settle in neighbouring villages several days walk away. With only occasional visits from outsiders bringing resupplies of modern day luxuries such as soap, salt, tobacco, modern clothing and plastic kitchenware, they obtain almost everything they need from the surrounding forest. They practice
‘molong’ meaning they harvest resources from the forest with care, never taking more than is necessary in order that it will regenerate and are exceptionally resourceful, reusing and almost endlessly repairing their few modern possessions. They survive predominantly on a diet of harvested jungle plants and fruits, the carbohydrate-providing sago and tapioca root, river fish, and meat such as wild boar and barking deer which they hunt with handmade blowpipes equipped with poison darts. The family at Ba Jawi live without electricity, telephones, a postal service or the internet - the only means of communication is in person, or via a messenger prepared to travel for several days on foot over rough terrain.

The Penan have a complex visual sign language for use in the forest. They maintain a dialogue with others by means of arranging sticks, branches, and leaves to convey messages. These signs are virtually invisible or unintelligible to the uninitiated, and can track a journey in great detail. They can be used to tell other tribes of their travel route, indicate whether food is available, identify burial sites and alert others of danger. One of my aims during this trip, in addition to obtaining the POV footage, was to observe and learn more about this way of communicating.

I spent almost a year planning the logistics of my trip, developing my creative ideas and testing and ‘jungle proofing’ the specialist equipment I would take with me. I made regular trips to Epping Forest to familiarize myself with operating the POV cameras, worked with a electrical engineer to develop a solution for obtaining enough power in the jungle to run my laptop, sound and camera equipment, and liaised with the Penan via a mutual contact in Borneo, to work out the logistics of reaching Ba Jawi. I attended a Wilderness First Aid course and began to learn Penan by studying a photocopied version of Ian Mackenzie’s difficult to obtain Penan/English dictionary. I created risk assessments to obtain
specialist insurance, bought a satellite phone and planned emergency evacuation routes. I received an Arts Council England Grants for the Arts Award which was the primary source of funding for the project, but without a partner organization to support me during this self initiated project I needed to be confident I’d covered all bases when it came to my preparation.

I met Sia, my Penan guide, in Long Banga – a tiny jungle airstrip frequented, (when the weather conditions allow), twice weekly by a 19 seater Twin Otter plane which flies inland from the coast over acres of deforested land and palm oil plantations before approaching the mountainous interior. From the airstrip we traveled deeper into Penan territory – a bumpy 4WD journey along dusty logging roads took us to a point in the river where two Penan boatmen were waiting to take us upstream by canoe to an isolated Penan settlement to meet the other members of our team. Here there were no more logging roads – our journey to Ba Jawi would continue by river and on foot.

My filming equipment, laptop and solar panel, all sealed in specialist, military grade, ‘watertight, crushproof and dustproof’ cases, were divided between five Penan men to pack in their homemade rattan backpacks and load onto a pair of canoes. Personal jungle kit comprised of an individual sleeping system made up of a hammock, mosquito net, sleeping bag and tarpaulin; a substantial first aid kit; two sets of clothes - one wet set to walk in and one dry set to sleep in; jungle boots and plenty of mosquito repellent. Everyone (including me) carried a parang (machete). Dennis, a skilled Penan hunter, took his keleput (blowpipe) and a number of homemade darts dipped in poisonous latex from a tajem (poisonous dart) tree and Gerald carried a homemade gun with three bullets and our food rations for the trip: three cardboard boxes packed with tinned tuna, noodles, condiments, and dried fruit and vegetables. Misa, a Penan who grew up in Ba Jawi and his fifteen year old son carried between them two cooking pots and our 20kg rice ration.
We navigated a course encompassing several tributaries before leaving the river and canoes and continuing our three day journey into the forest on foot. The terrain was truly awe inspiring – along the banks of the river was a dense, seemingly impenetrable tangle of vegetation, but once we climbed up the bank sides we entered a forest dominated by massive hardwood trees and more open and inviting. I struggled to clamber over/under huge fallen trees which crisscrossed our path and hesitantly edged along mossy, mostly rotten and fungus ridden tree trunks creating makeshift bridges over steep sided ravines, sceptical of their ability to hold my weight. We hacked routes through dense foliage with our parangs and waded waist-deep through countless rivers fighting fierce currents, careful to avoid slipping on boulders out of sight under the water’s surface.

There was a stark contrast between my awkward and hesitant progress through the forest and rivers and that of the Penan who seemed to flow effortlessly, like proficient Parkour athletes, across every obstacle they encountered. It was precisely this effortless of movement, stemming from an intimate knowledge of and comfort with their surroundings that I was eager to capture in the POV footage. I had brought with me a tiny high definition video camera which was small enough to be sewn into a cap and worn by Misa and Dennis during hunting trips with the blowpipe. Although I had tested the equipment in the UK, I had no way of knowing if it would perform well in this humid environment.

Much of our team’s navigation was done through their acute sense of direction and incredible memory, rather than an intimate knowledge of the route. So few people visit the area that any trails are often very overgrown, difficult for anyone other skilled forest navigators such as the Penan, to find and follow. To my untrained eye the rainforest looked like a infinite mass of green vegetation, hanging lianas and buttress roots - frequently I would assume we were just travelling in a general direction rather than following a particular trail - however I realised that when I looked closer I could see regrowth on saplings and scars on overhead vines chopped down by locals over time – evidence of previous thoroughfares. From the extent of the re-growth it was possible to estimate the passage of time between ‘chops’ – often it seemed that we were the first people to come that way for several months, perhaps years.
I logged our progress on my GPS and had with me the best map I could acquire of the region - a 1:500,000 Tactical Pilot Chart created by the UK Ministry of Defence in 1973, over parts of which were printed less than reassuring texts: ‘relief data incomplete’, ‘position approximate’ and ‘no adequate information exists to portray clearings’. The TCP chart gave only a general overview of the region and the GPS data was meaningless without detailed local information so, interested in seeing how the Penan might visualise our journey, I asked Dennis to draw a map of the area in order that I could better understand and place myself in my surroundings. He accurately drew our route from memory, detailing and giving the Penan name for every tiny tributary we’d crossed, even though he’d never been to that part of the forest before. Throughout the project Dennis continued to map our progress and later I compared his drawings to the information contained in my GPS - they were startlingly accurate.

Map making is a newly acquired skill for Dennis who is one of several Penan involved in mapping the boundaries of Penan territory in order to provide evidence in Sarawak’s courts of their ancestral lands and protect their Native Customary Rights in the hope of preventing and deterring illegal logging of their forests. For more than twenty years, the Penan have been warding off the destruction of their rainforests with peaceful blockades of logging roads, yet the timber industry is penetrating ever deeper into their territories, a situation which several months before my visit, began to threaten the pristine forest at Ba Jawi.
On reaching Ba Jawi we created a succession of ‘base camps’ from which the Penan hunters made solo journeys tracking game deep into the forest wearing the POV equipment. One huge chore in camp was harnessing enough power from the sun to keep my audio visual equipment running – the thick canopy above us allowed only a small percentage of available light through to the forest floor – subsequently much of the day was spent chasing rare sunspots with the solar panel. During their time in camp the Penan would whittle and construct new poison darts for their next hunting trip and on occasions teach me the intricacies of combining cut twigs and folded leaves to create stick sign messages. For three weeks we remained in the region, staying in each camp for a few days before moving on in order to vary the type of terrain, flora and fauna featuring in the footage. I used the time spent walking between base camps as thinking space to plan the next shoot – although this did create a strange tension between being lost in ones thoughts and maintaining the concentration required not to fall over.

Creating work in collaboration with the Penan was a challenging process as there were many cultural differences to understand and work around and the requirements of the project needed to be juggled with the many unpredictable demands of day to day jungle living - yet despite the obstacles, the opportunity to work with the Penan, arguably the world’s ultimate jungle navigators, was hugely rewarding. I felt excited to leave the forest with a waterproof case packed with dozens of memory cards – the images and sounds of Ba Jawi burned onto them. The unique footage I obtained documents a Penan’s eye view of the forest and their remarkably fluid passage through it. The varied pace of the hunter’s journey as he silently searches for prey, carefully tracks it, before raising his blowpipe and shooting it, is reflected in the footage - a mixture of blurred forest scenes and almost stationary durational observations interspersed with glimpses of the blowpipe’s speared tip. The footage also documents a fragile habitat and endangered way of life.
This project was primarily funded by an Arts Council England Grants for Artists Award

Further information on the artist:
http://www.laylacurtis.com

Further information on the project:

- 017/07/10 (10.30am) Sandi Toksvig interviewed Layla Curtis about her trip. Listen to interview on BBC Radio4’s website

Further information on the Penan available at:

Survival International website
Film maker Hilary Chiew’s ‘Penusah Tana - the forgotten struggle’
Linguist, and ethnographer Ian Mackenzie’s homepage
The Last Nomads film
BBC’s Tribe featuring Bruce Parry
The Borneo Project