

The batek of malaysia research paper sample

[Sociology](#), [Community](#)



The Betek people belong to a group known as Semang which occupies the areas around Lebir River in the Kelantan state in Peninsular Malaysia.

Foraging as their primary mode of foraging is based on the exploitation of wild foods, fruits and small wild animals such as gibbons and monkeys, which they kill with blowpipes and poisoned darts. The group moves in and out of the forests to take advantage of the emerging opportunities including trade in forest products and participation in tourism activities. The mode of subsistence has significantly impacted on the social, economic and political organization of the Batek people. Involvement of the Batek people in foraging has extremely undermined their political organization as depicted by the limited individual leadership and political representation.

Economically, the Batek people have continued to depend on natural resources in the forests as well as participation in limited trade with the Malay people.

Key words: Foraging, subsistence, economic, political representation, individual leadership, Betek.

The Batek of Malaysia

Human societies across the world have developed a cultural practice capable of supporting their survival depending on the natural resources at their disposal. The mode of life chosen by different human societies is greatly influenced by its compatibility with the natural resources available within the limitation of various habitats (Haviland, Prins, McBride & Walrath, 2010). However, the mode of subsistence characteristic of a given culture is not only influenced by the resources available but also the technology or skills required for effective exploitation of the resources to meet the society's

<https://assignbuster.com/the-batek-of-malaysia-research-paper-sample/>

needs. Foraging is perhaps the oldest and universal mode of subsistence practiced by numerous human societies (Dove, Sajise & Doolittle, 2011). Foraging is a mode of subsistence which entails some combination of hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plant foods.

Despite existence of this practice universally several decades ago, lands that support this mode of subsistence have been claimed by farming societies, and more recently by industrial and postindustrial societies. As a result, today at most a quarter of a million people still support themselves mainly as foragers. Anthropologists have revealed that foragers, despite being few, rarely experience severe famine than farmers and have plenty of leisure time for concentrating on family ties, social life, and spiritual development (Haviland, Prins, McBride & Walrath, 2010). Over the years, people ascribing to foraging as a primary mode of subsistence have now become part of a larger system with social, economic, and political relations extending far beyond regional and national boundaries.

This paper identifies and classifies the primary mode subsistence among the Batek people and its impact on economic, social and political organization.

Overview of Batek's Mode of Life

The Batek are recognized as a "boundary" people owing to their classical mode of life in which they retreat into the forest interior to practice hunting and gathering at their convenience. Therefore, the primary mode of existence associated with their culture can be classified as foraging.

Although the Batek people move out of the forests to take advantage of emerging economic activities such as trading and tourism, they practice

foraging as their primary mode of subsistence (Bisht & Bankoti, 2004). The Batek people belong to a group known as Semang which occupies the areas around Lebir River in the Kelantan state in Malaysia. The group is significantly different from other populations of the Malay Peninsula, notably in their 'negroid' physical features which distinguish them from other populations (Dove, Sajise & Doolittle, 2011). Despite their small population, about three quarters of the population were nomadic foragers and traders of the forest produce. The area inhabited by the nomadic Batek foragers was previously almost entirely covered with primary and old secondary rain forest.

However, recent years have seen subjection of such forests to intensive logging with only little primary forest currently left outside the national park. In recognition of hunting and gathering as their primary mode of subsistence, establishment of parks in Malaysia has considered the culture of these people, permitting the Batek to move freely throughout and in and out the parks without restrictions (Dove, Sajise & Doolittle, 2011). However, the policy guaranteeing this group people the much needed freedom of movement and the right to practice their foraging mode of subsistence provides limitations where optimum tolerance levels must be maintained. Without such a policy in place, the Batek's capacity to pursue their chosen mode of life and maintenance of their sociocultural norms would have been seriously compromised. Establishment of parks has played a critical role in preserving areas capable of sustaining the foraging mode of subsistence among the Batek. In absence of the parks, their lands that support their

mode of subsistence would have been claimed by local Malays, commoditized, increasingly fragmented or opened up.

Impact on Their Economic Organization

The economy of the Batek people is quite complex, combining hunting, gathering, the collection and trade of forest products, and the occasional small-scale planting of crops. Foraging as their primary mode of foraging is based on the exploitation of wild foods, fruits and small wild animals such as gibbons and monkeys, which they kill with blowpipes and poisoned darts (Ingold, Riches & Woodburn, 1997). The Batek people also participate in trade through the exchange of forest products with Malay traders, for good not found through the foraging process that are deemed as essential in supplementing their foraging practices. Nevertheless, interaction with the Malays has led to some Batek people occasionally clearing small areas in the forests and planting a few crops, using seeds and shoots obtained from the Malay farmers.

Recent years have seen majority of the Batek people participate in farming projects initiated by the Malaysian Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

Progressive depletion of the forests has compelled the Batek to switch frequently between the different economic activities depending on the opportunities available (Haviland, Prins, McBride & Walrath, 2010). This group also exploits various resources at their disposal such as wild fruit and honey, wild tubers, and self grown crops as well as manufactured goods supplied by the Malay traders.

Following the establishment of parks to conserve the wildlife and promotion of tourism in Malaysia, the Batek people have greatly benefited from tourism programs aimed at conserving wildlife due to their close association (Bisht & Bankoti, 2004). Batek is the only group that has been legally allowed to move freely in and out of the parks without restriction. The wildlife conservation agencies recognize their dependence on the forests for their survival and their right to practice and propagate their culture. The tourism sector has also realized the potential in exploiting the culture of the Batek people to attract tourists thereby creating another economic activity for the people in their culture.

Social Organization

The conjugal family forms the basic unity of the Batek society with every married couples emerging as politically and economically independent despite living in cluster camps of two to fifteen related families (Ingold, Riches & Woodburn, 1997). Owing to their nomadic foraging mode of life, the composition of the camps change routinely, as some families leave and new ones join, and the entire group move to new locations depending on the available resources (Dove, Sajise & Doolittle, 2011). Although the Batek society lacks an enduring corporate group above the level of the conjugal family, they group themselves divided into three valley groups but almost culturally indistinguishable (Ingold, Riches & Woodburn, 1997).

The foraging mode of subsistence has influenced the concept of property ownership in which they believe that the entire Malay land solely belongs to them. They believe that the land was created for all people to use, both

Batek and non-Batek , and no one has the right to exclude anyone else from living wherever they wish (Dove, Sajise & Doolittle, 2011). They however, recognize a special connection between each individual and the place they live known as pesaka. All Batek have a right to live in their pesaka, but it is no different from their right to live anywhere else in the forest. Unlike other Malay communities, Batek lacks individual or family ownership of land. Contradicting the general rule on property and land ownership is the vague feeling that the fruit orchards belong to the river valley group on whose side they lie. Therefore, groups from other areas must seek permission to access the orchards, although pouching never occurs because each side is abundantly productive.

Men, women, and children carry out different roles in the society with women and children participating in collecting and transporting the materials and men doing the most challenging tasks such as climbing. One socially disruptive effect of losing vast amounts of land and resources has been to force Batek to live closer together than ever before (Ingold, Riches & Woodburn, 1997). This has culminated caused social tensions, especially between longtime residents of Taman Negara and Kelantan Batek migrating into the park. The different Batek family groups have found it hard to maintain amicable relations after being thrown together in close proximity.

Traditionally, the basic remedy for such conflict was for disputants to move apart, but that has emerged no longer feasible. The Batek social harmony and cultural survival have been greatly threatened by deliberate government efforts to destroy their culture and assimilate them into the Malay ethnic

group (Dove, Sajise & Doolittle, 2011). The government justifies the intention to settle the Batek as necessary for efficiently providing social services, such as health care and economic improvement.

Impact on Political Organization

The lack of political representation has left the Batek people with few means to resist the powers of the state and to those of wealthy, politically connected business people. The foragers nearly always lose their land and end up living in poverty on small reservations or even as marginalized day laborers or beggars on the fringes of modern society. For political reasons, governments often try to force such people to make fundamental changes in their cultures and particularly to adopt the ways of the dominant group in the society (Bisht & Bankoti, 2004). In this case, pressures experienced by the Batek people including the push towards their assimilation could be attributed to the lack of political representatives to express their views and guard their interests.

Discrimination and lack of education, skills, resources, and political power are some of the factors that have condemned this people to the lowest positions in the society. Conservative Batek people believe that it is their duty to continue the way of life laid out for them by the superhuman beings (Dove, Sajise & Doolittle, 2011). For this reason, their political participation has remained significantly low in Malaysia with most decisions about their welfare being made by the majority Malay groups. Batek have remain reluctant to work with minority groups such as the pro-Orang Asli organizations that promote the Orang Asli rights and interests at the national

level, and the Center for Orang Asli Concerns among others (Haviland, Prins, McBride & Walrath, 2010). This particularly explains the reason why the group shows limited political organization and participation. The lack of a permanent place of settlement basically explains the inability of the Batek people to form any substantial organization.

Conclusion

The Batek people of Malaysia exercise foraging as their primary mode of subsistence despite indulging in other economic activities such as trade and limited farming. Foraging is perhaps the oldest and universal mode of subsistence practiced by numerous human societies which entails some combination of hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plant foods. Despite the change of events over the years, Batek have been reluctant to abandon their culture and the practice of foraging. The group moves in and out of the forests to take advantage of the emerging opportunities including trade in forest products and participation in tourism activities. The mode of subsistence has significantly impacted on the social, economic and political organization of the Batek people. Economically, the Batek people have continued to depend on natural resources in the forests as well as participation in limited trade with the Malay people. The social organization for these people is still based on the conjugal family without any significant organization of large social groups. Finally, involvement of the Batek people in foraging has extremely undermined their political organization as depicted by the limited individual leadership and political representation.

Bisht, N & Bankoti, T. (2004). Encyclopaedia of the South-East Asian ethnography: Communities and tribes. New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing Ho.

Dove, M., Sajise, P & Doolittle, A. (2011). Beyond the sacred forest:

Complicating conservation

in Southeast Asia. Durham: Duke University Press.

Haviland, W., Prins, H., McBride, B & Walrath, D. (2010). Cultural

anthropology: The human

challenge(13th ed.). Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning.

Ingold, T., Riches, D & Woodburn, J. (1997). Hunters and gatherers, volume

II: Property,

power and ideology. London: Berg Publishers.