

The batek of malaysia



Human Culture is as an integrated pattern of human belief, knowledge and behavior that is learnt and transmitted from one generation to another. Culture unifies people and forms a basis of recognition. Cultures are differentiated through the way different people conduct their life; for example, the food they consume, dressing mode, languages, customs as well as the beliefs they hold. The primary mode of subsistence plays a significant role in determining different aspects of cultural behaviors and practices. Researches have revealed that a culture acts as it does majorly depending on how it makes a living. This essay will discuss how primary mode of existence of The Batek of Malaysia impacts on different aspects of their life.

Origin of the Batek

The Batek community is one of the diverse cultural groups of the Orang Asli people of Central Malaysia. In his book *The Batek of Peninsular Malaysia*, Endicott (2004) describes the Bateks as the indigenous people living in the rainforest of Peninsular, Malaysia. According to Endicott, the word 'Batek' was used for the first time by the Austronesian-speaking settlers. These settlers arrived by boat and came from the islands of Southeast Asia. Today the Batek largely inhabit the Taman Negara National Park, as a result of intrusion. They are nomadic hunters as well as gatherers whose their exact locations of settlements are primarily determined by the general confines of the area they inhabit. The Batek have existed for centuries as nomadic community and foraging-gatherer society who have established and sustained a considerably unique culture from the socio-structural precepts of the general Malaysian community (Endicott, 2004; Endicott, 1974).

The Batek's way of Life and their Primary mode of Subsistence

In several researches conducted on the Bateks, it is revealed that their primary mode of subsistence is though hunting, gathering, fishing and trading forest products (Cashdan, 1980; Endicott and Karen, 1987). Bateks gathers tubers, fruit and leaves for their food. Hunting of small game such as the monkeys also supplements their food. The Bateks living near water sources like streams and rivers do fishing to further supplement the food already gathered. They also collect and sell forest products like wood to earn their living. Forests encroachment and commercial activities like logging and construction have compelled the Batek to shift their mode of subsistence to farming. The Bateks are emerging as agriculturalists as a result of land encroachment. This provides them with cash and serves as an alternative to hunting and gathering. Their utilization of wild food sources has decreased over time. The Malaysian Government agency has also provided them with a small herd of cows as a start for a different life style (Wilkinson, 2006). The Bateks also collect Rattan and Gaharu wood. Purchased foods such as rice and flour have over time formed an alternative source of food, supplementing their primary mode of subsistence; hunting and gathering.

Most of Bateks' income comes from the collection and trade of forest produce. Rivers and streams also play a vital role in Batek's life. They use the water for their household uses like bathing and cooking. Rivers act as a source of their food (through collecting of fish) as well as natural territorial boundaries for the Bateks. Because of these reasons, the Batek people prefer to reside within the vicinity of a stream or river. They also trade forest

products for agricultural products and manufactured goods. According to Endicott and Karen (1987), Batek's territory was a shared resource between them and the Malay farmers who resided on major river banks between the late 1800s and during the final days of World War II period. During the 1970s, a number of Batek families migrated to Post Lebir, which was a federal resettlement project that was sponsored by the Malaysian Department of Aboriginal Affairs. This was caused by the high threat risk of the Communist guerillas that were operating in the remote jungle areas. Since 1950s, the Bateks have remained as the only permanent people in this area (Endicott and Karen, 1987). However, Wilkinson (2006) points out that Bateks do not have any legal titles, documents or any form of control over this land. The State presumes that it owns the land and that the Bateks are only unlawful tenants. Nonetheless, the government has permitted them to occupy state land when it is not being used.

Impacts of the Batek's Primary mode of subsistence

Social organization

Traditionally, Bateks are nomads who rely on hunting and gathering as their main mode of survival. The Batek have a moral obligation to share food which they have acquired. This has shaped their way of living and kept the community strong. The person who collects and gathers food items first shares it with his immediate family members. He then shares it with his extended family and finally to the rest of the camp. Everyone is given food so that everybody has food to eat, even if his family was unable to gather or acquire food. In many occasions, the camp may have a large amount of food because of hunting activities. The Batek has formal and ritualistic way of

dividing it. For example if a monkey is caught the hunters eat the tail and the offals, and then the cooked meat is sub-divided into portions fitting the sizes of the family so that each family within the camp gets an almost equal share. For the Bateks, sharing of resources is not an act of kindness; they believe that the owner of food items originating from the forest is morally obligated to share it. Their dwellings are not made with much storing capacity as they do not hoard food without others knowing about it. Somebody who is hungry can take food from another members' place, as it is not considered as an action of theft (Endicott, 1988; Endicott, 1974).

At Post Lebir, they merged with a small number of Batek from other dialect groups who had settled and lived there. According to Endicott (1979), about 160 Batek were living there by 1981. The Government has built a medical post, a school and other facilities at Post Lebir. It has also supplied the settlers with seeds and other facilities to facilitate the growing of rubber trees and various food crops. Many of the men from Post Lebir spend most of their times harvesting forest produce. Some Batek women also assist in the collection of forest products. The remainder of the Batek has continued to lead a fully nomadic subsistence in the upper areas of Lebir and Relai rivers (Endicott, 1979).

After independence in 1963, the natural rain forest in the Malay Peninsula has been replaced with commercial export-producing crops like rubber trees and oil palms as a part of development of the area. Evidently, the loss of forest can bring difficulties to the Batek and probably lead to a decline in their standards of living. Wilkinson (2006) suggests two possible avenue of retreat. Those who are willing to agree to a sedentary way of life can join

their settled relatives at Post Lebir so that the Government will arrange additional land there to accommodate them. There the Batek has to suffer an increased intervention from outsiders and government agencies. For the Post Lebir Batek, the end of the forests means the end of their major sources of cash. They will further force them to subsist solely on the Government supplements and their own crops. Such a situation may easily lead general demoralization, malnutrition and the young Bateks' to leave the settlement. The traditional Batek person who lives along the headwaters of the rivers may not be comfortable in seeking these new environments. He will continue to follow a system of mixed foraging and trade in forest produce for his subsistence as it has been within his culture. As the forest is cut, the Batek are gradually retreating and some groups have to spend much of their time within the national park. Their possibility of continuing their preferred life style depends on the Government's decisions about logging of forest and agriculture developments.

Taman Negara national park is one of Malaysia's oldest parks. In his PhD dissertation dubbed Batek Negrito: Economy and Social Organization, Endicott (1974) points out that this park was established in 1939 and it is located in the interior of the Malay Peninsula and occupies around 1, 300 kms. In the late 1960s, tourism activities in Taman Negara started to increase progressively. This attracted many of the Batek's into jungle guides job at Kuala Tahan. In 1979, the Malaysian government began evicting and relocating the Batek to a government-subsidized settlement scheme established at Kuala Atok, outside the park boundaries. There are several factors behind this government decision. The first concern was that, with

their semi-nomadic existence, Batek would intermix with communist terrorists hiding in the jungle and be forced to offer them intelligence and economic backing. The Government authorities perceived their semi-nomadic existence as primitive and another goal of the development project was to persuade the Batek to give up their life style. Yet another reason was to remove the Batek from Taman Negara as the collection and selling of natural resources do not conform to park regulations. This move had negative repercussions to both the social organization of the Bateks and their cultural means of existence as they were compelled to abandon their hunting and gathering way of life (Wilkinson, 2006; Cashdan, 1980).

During a certain course of time, one of the Batek's primary sources of revenue was jungle-guiding. At first, the Batek had a monopoly over this as there was no competition for this work. Jungle guiding was the most rewarding short term work for the Batek as it amounted to almost US \$ 15 per day (Cashdan, 1980). As local Malays obtained experience as guides, the Bateks found themselves in the difficulty and got fewer work opportunities. Cashdan (1980) points out that the Batek rarely work as guides because this work has been taken by the local Malay people of Kuala Tahan. It also states that Batek now spends more time in settlements outside the Park boundary where the government has given them land to cultivate.

The Malaysian law has assigned certain special rights to the indigenous population. Endicott (2004) notes that one of the rights given to the Bateks is hunting protected game species for their own consumption. Because of this exclusion, The Game Department which manages the national park has embraced a lenient approach to the Batek. They do not object their

exploiting the natural food products or their peaceful living in the park. Presently they are not even prohibited from extracting rattan and gaharu wood for trade. However, the case may not be the same if the number of Batek families' increases there. If more people live permanently in the park with their traditional lifestyle of hunting and gathering, it may greatly affect the ecology of the park. In such a situation, the wild life department would have regulate or prohibit the Batek activities. It means they may be prohibited from those activities which are the essentials of their nomadic subsistence. Then most of them would be forced to settle at Post Lebir. Others might join another group of Batek people who works as firewood collectors in the national park headquarters located in Kuala Tahan. So it is almost sure that, in the face of deforestation, national park cannot prevent the termination of the traditional Batek way of life persisting there. Nevertheless, Bateks' primary mode of existence has shaped and strengthened their social-cultural organization.

b. Political Organization

The Bateks normally live in domestic groups in tents and lean-tos forming a camp of about ten families. The Bateks do not have a perception of private land ownership. Though each encampment has the power over the land immediately around it, they consider themselves as the caretakers of the land, and not its owners. Batek normally lead a peaceful life. Their nomadic culture and their primary way of existence (hunting and gathering) have shaped their political organization. There is no internal leader or adjudication system, each adult member of the camp is equal. Bateks do not have a formal procedure of resolving conflicts. If a conflict arises amongst any of the

members, the matter is discussed privately. If still it persists, each person will publicly share his opinion over the matter to enable other members of the camp to suggest a resolution. If a solution does not come out, one party usually moves away until tempers cool. Once, the usable wild plants supplies have been used up they migrate to another area, but it must be located within their habitats. The Batek economy is very complex and distinct one. They have no right of ownership of some things such as land. Other properties like man's blowgun, tobaccos, radios, or a woman's hair comb are perceived to be personal properties. However, it is common for them to be lent or even borrowed without the owner's knowledge. Social norms guide them to share many things with the entire society such as food found by foraging.

Bateks laid emphasis on the autonomy of individuals and nuclear families. Nobody in the group is assigned with a certain position of power or any authority over the rest of others. Though there is always a coordination and consultation among the members, Couples take their decisions on their work and moving. Sometimes someone who is an expert in a certain activity may emerge as leader although the community does not require leaders to perform their activities. A Government agency, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs appoints ' headmen' as liaisons between the Government and the Batek. The Government always chooses somebody who is agreeable to the Government's goals. It is noted that these liaisons do not have much influence in the Batek. They can influence the Batek mostly if they are the natural leaders of the Batek.

c. Gender Relations

The male-female relations of the Batek are highly egalitarian. Their primary mode of subsistence, hunting and gathering has influence in their gender concepts as it has in many other concepts. Endicott and Karen (2008) explain that both women and men among the Batek procure and share food. Additionally, Batek women usually gather vegetable foods and men concentrate on hunting of games and collection of other forest products. Still, if any woman wishes to go for hunting she can do so and a man can collect fruits and vegetables if he wants. The Batek further values contribution of each sex towards food supply. Individuals have direct and equal role in the sharing system that distributes food in a camp. The activities of the Batek are not separated between the sexes by any rigid rules. If at all a leader is emerged from the group, the criterion is personality and ability. For leadership purposes, gender is not considered as a criterion. Trading of rattan is another main source economic activity. When the Batek are willing to join the Government's schemes, both sexes participate equally in agricultural activities.

The egalitarian structure of their culture obviously reflects in the nature of marriage among the Batek. Adult men and women select their own spouses on the grounds of compatibility and affection. The husband and wife jointly make decisions about food-gathering and camp movements. Men and women live highly integrated lives often working together and spending time together. Mostly spouses tend to be good friends and coworkers. When the relationship breaks down, either spouse may initiate divorce. After divorce, both men and women manage themselves with the sharing network of the

camp. Either of them may build shelters and their children also will be supported by others in the camp. The cultural and religious beliefs of the Batek presume that women and men play equal roles within the society as designated by the natural order. In brief, Egalitarian sex relations are an integral part of Batek life.

d. Values and Beliefs

The Batek believe that various superhuman created the earth as a disk of land surrounded by the sea (Endicott, 1979). They believe that the superpowers created the humanity on earth and separated the Batek from other people. These super humans created the plants and animals of the forest to meet their needs. The Bateks have attributed some values and beliefs in their ways of life. For example, they believe that the super humans provide abundant food products to them, and they thank them for sending it. They believe that to deny a request can compel super-natural harm to attack the person who refuses to comply. The Batek hold believe that if one refuses to honor a requested favour, a misfortune harms not only the single person, but the whole camp gets affected. The Batek also believe in powerful shamans who have tiger bodies. They believe that at night, when a shaman sleeps his soul enters into the tiger's body. The tiger shaman takes care for his companions from attacks from other wild animals.

Conclusion

The Bateks of Malaysia portrays a good case study of how primary mode of existence impacts on other aspects of cultural behaviors. Their Kinship, social organization, political organizations, gender relations and beliefs are products of Batek's hunting and gathering way of life. Over the years, their

interest of maintaining mobility and flexibility has made them minor entrepreneurs rather than subsistence farmers. Agriculture is not mostly practiced by the Batek since it requires a lot of time and energy before the results are achieved. They prefer to do wage-labor as it is paid at the end of the day after work. This shows that they accept changes in such a way maintaining the important elements of their culture. To maintain their culture, the Batek should be allowed to enjoy the positive benefits of development. Decisions such as subsistence strategies and relocation must not be forcefully implemented against them. They should be informed on the benefits of living in integration with the larger Malaysian society and allowed to take decisions on their own. If they choose to continue with their hunting and gathering type of existence within their ancestral lands, they should be allowed to do so.

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