

Forest, Bateks, and Degradation: Environmental Representations in a Changing World

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Abstract

This paper offers an alternative way of thinking about the tropical forest, that of the Bateks of Pahang state, Peninsular Malaysia. I will argue that environmental representations are as much about being part of the larger world as they are about the intimate particularities of the local environment. Further, the Bateks' responses to environmental changes are less a sprig of global environmentalism than an independently constructed position, as mediated through their concrete knowledge and sentiments of the place and its history. It is this knowledge, its cognitive and imaginative dimensions, that I explore in this paper. With growing degradation, there is the possibility that people will become more estranged from their geography of knowledge and that, ultimately, landscape lore becomes just lore, history without a place. The conceptual aim is to offer a more imaginative and sensitive understanding of the effects of forest degradation on local communities, their histories, and knowledge.

Introduction

This paper offers an alternative way of thinking about the tropical forest. The ethnographic focus is the environmental idioms and representations of the Bateks of Pahang state, Peninsular Malaysia, who call themselves *batek h̄ap* 'people of the forest'. My assumptions are: environmental knowledge is grounded in experience and perception; the definitions and attributed meanings of the environment are historically and politically situated; local and extra-local knowledge of place are mutually informative and, to a large degree, mutually constitutive. Finally, as environments change so will the conceptual frameworks (indigenous and exogenous) used to think about them. My own conceptual framework is informed by theoretical developments in "landscape" and "place" studies [Feld and Basso 1996; Hirsch and Hanlon 1995].

Current knowledge of the forest is heavily filtered through the protocols and idioms of institutional science. Anthropological contributions, however, have helped to naturalize the position that local concepts can usefully inform scientific investigations [Croll and Parkin 1992; Ellen and Fukui 1996]. There have, for example, been effective challenges to common assumptions about forest dynamics and forest-people relations [Dove 1983; Fairhead and Leach 1996]. Local representations can reveal gaps and weaknesses in the more standard scientific approaches. My study follows in the anthropological tradition of privileging the local. I take

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the position that people shape (modify, alter) the environments they live in. However, local peoples are not isolates; their environments include social and political actors from other places. Environmental representations are as much about being part of this larger world as they are about the intimate particularities of the local environment. In short, I privilege the *processes* of knowing an environment rather than the *products* (bodies of information) customarily associated with studies of local knowledge.

The political context of this study is the trajectory of development, deforestation, and land transformation in Malaysia [the details of the development process may be found in, among others, Aiken and Leigh 1995]. The Bateks' perceptions of their forest home necessarily include many images and scenes of landscape changes and degradation. Unlike Sarawak's Penans [Brosius 1997a; 1999], the Bateks are firmly off the beaten track of international environmentalists and community organizers.¹⁾ Their responses to environmental changes are less a sprig of global environmentalism than an independently constructed position, as mediated through their concrete knowledge and sentiments of the place and its history. It is this knowledge, its cognitive and imaginative dimensions, that I explore in this paper.

My aim is to examine the various representations and experiences of the *həp*, the forest which is the basis of identity. The preliminary discussion will focus on the definitions, roles, and functions of the forest, and the sentiments of home and losing home. The second part of this paper is concerned with belonging: who belongs and who doesn't. This part begins with a sketch of some images of forest and contextualizes forest representations within the Bateks' ecocosmology, their inter-ethnic frames of reference, and the representations by which external actors know the Bateks' forest. I close this discussion with some thoughts on the linkage between forest degradation and the changing nature of local knowledge.

I Ethnographic Profile

The Bateks²⁾ are one of the 21 or so indigenous ethnic minorities of Peninsular Malaysia known collectively as Orang Asli (Malay: original people).³⁾ They are a lowland forest people and probably the last remaining mobile hunter-gatherer society in the Peninsula. The total popula-

1) Other than the Governmental controls placed on research with Malaysian indigenes, one reason is the Bateks' relatively weak interest in political movements.

2) The autonym Batek is shared by three culturally distinct groups of people: the Bateks of this study, the Batek Nōns, and the Batek Tanums (who are sometimes incorrectly identified as Mintil). Administrative practice, however, is to "lump" these groups together in a generic "Batek" category, hence the unreliability of official census results. The Batek Tanums and the Bateks sometimes intermarry; they speak different languages and have separate but converging cultural histories. They are aware of, but unrelated to, the Batek Nōns to the south. My study is drawn from information gathered only from the Bateks of Pahang (excluding the Nōn and Tanum peoples), who are closely related to the more northerly groups studied by the Endicotts (see below). My remarks on the changing nature of perceptions strictly pertain only to this study group.

3) This administrative term screens out a great deal of social, ecological, and political heterogeneity, both within and amongst the societies.

tion, about 800–900, is spread over three states, Pahang, Kelantan, and Terengganu. Before the advent of large-scale logging and land transformation (which began in the early 1970s in Kelantan), the Batek territory⁴⁾ was contiguously forested; roughly two-thirds of that area, Endicott [2000: 110] estimates, is now lost beyond regeneration.

About 450 persons live in Pahang forests (at an altitude of about 500–600 m a.s.l.), though some often move back and forth north to Kelantan. Due to forest loss and Government pressure, half the people in Kelantan and most in Terengganu have become semi-sedentary cash crop farmers.⁵⁾ Of those in Pahang, just over half spend a majority of time in the 4,343 sq. km national park, Taman Negara. Most of the park overlaps with the Bateks' historical territory and it remains the largest unbroken tract of forest still available to them. Outside the park, forest conditions range from advanced secondary to recently logged-over; so long as forest cover remains, the Bateks continue to regard these areas as home.

The Bateks are not restricted by administrative boundaries and all freely travel in and out of the park.⁶⁾ As befitting their politically and sexually egalitarian social structure, inter-group boundaries barely exist, if at all. Groups materialize in the setting of the camp (on which, see below). These camp groups (with an average population of about 38) are not political entities but, rather, associations of people who are united by kinship bonds, friendship, and shared interests; membership is open and fluid [Endicott and Endicott 1986]. Flux is a central characteristic of daily life in camp. Encampments are both fresh ones (set up because people have discovered new resource zones) and established sites where people have lived in the past. A camp group may average two weeks per encampment; the distance between successive camps is about two walking hours or roughly 9–10 km. After three or four months, camp groups disband and splinter groups may disperse to other river valleys, joining and forming groups anew. They do not move randomly through the forest, and follow a well-established network of walking trails (*halbaw*; *harbow*⁷⁾) and other pathways, which incorporate rivers, streams, and logging roads. The encampments and trails are central features and symbols of the landscape.

The Bateks' economy is characterized by flexible and opportunistic shifting from one suite of activities to another as conditions change. As Kirk Endicott [e.g., 1984] has often argued,

4) I use the word "territory" for convenience, to refer to that tract of land which the Bateks recognize as their traditional home and to which they have the strongest claim to ownership (based on transgenerational residence, emotional attachment, and social identity). I agree with the Endicotts [1986], however, that the Bateks' indigenous notion of "territory" (if defined as a "clearly defensible political space") is so weak as to be non-existent and that historically they do not regard forest land as disposable property. Their word for land, "*te*" (see fn. 12 below), indeed does not refer to a type of property but rather the physical stuff, including the soil, on which we stand.

5) The Government, through its agency Jabatan Hal-Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA; Department of Orang Asli Affairs), favors the sedentarization policy for hunter-gatherer peoples and encourages swidden farming for hunter-gatherers and permanent farming for swidden farmers. For more specific policy details, see Carey [1976], Jimin *et al.* [1983] and Nicholas [2000].

6) The park was formally enacted in 1938–1939. Official policy (which is not a statutory provision) is to permit the Bateks to continue living in the park, but not to harvest forest products for sale [Department of Wildlife and National Parks 1987].

7) These are alternative pronunciations; "route" is an additional meaning of the word.

the Bateks like variation in their work and shun monotonous routine. Their ability to mesh new and old economic niches has the added advantage of protecting them against the vagaries, the “busts and booms,” of international resource flows. Throughout the daily, seasonal, and annual changes in production activities, hunting and gathering of forest foods remain important, both as a preferred alternative to buying store-bought foods,⁸⁾ and as valued activities in their own right. These subsistence activities (especially blowpipe hunting and digging for wild tubers) are also central symbols of cultural and gender identity. Importantly, they constitute a critical route through which children develop early foraging skills and come to know the forest.

The important seasonal activities are honey-collecting (both to eat and trade) from May to June/July and fruit-harvesting from June/July to October. Fruits are the Bateks' favorite foods. Collection and trade of forest products, especially *ʔaway* 'rattan; *Calamus* spp.' and *baŋkol* 'gaharu or aromatic woods; *Aquilaria* spp.', provide the major source of income. Other, lesser work activities include guiding for tourists, day laboring, and planting fast-growing food crops (mainly cassava, bananas, and a variety of vegetables). Farming, however, is decidedly the least preferred of the economic options; the Bateks dislike the monotony of the work.

My fieldwork (1993, 1995–1996, 1998, 1999) was limited to Pahang. Kirk and Karen Endicott (who undertook four field trips from 1971 to 1990) worked mostly in Kelantan.

II Approaching the Forest

1. *Defining Həp*

Before going further, the central word of this paper, *həp*, needs more explicit clarification.⁹⁾ As with English “forest,” it is an ecological category. It refers to woodlands: a tree-dominated landscape with certain biophysical and floristic attributes that render it distinct from the non-forested world. As my translation suggests, the category *həp* condenses a great deal of information (still not fully studied) about ecological process, vegetational cover, modes of classification and taxonomy, biotic and landform distinctions, and so on. Because this definition is conceptualized from “inside” the forest, it is always easier to say what forest is *not* than what it is. Following the Bateks' discursive approach, the meaning of forest is more clearly revealed by contrast to the world outside. The primary outside reference markers are from the world of the Malays (*gob*), the politically dominant ethnic majority in Malaysia [Endicott 1979: 86–88].

Cognitively, *həp* is understood at different levels of contrast, which also overlap to some extent with each other:

8) The Bateks often dismiss store-bought foods (other than the critical staple, rice) as *bab habat habat* 'casual foods'. *Habat habat* is the general purpose adjective to describe anything that is “casual, of no consequence, trivial.”

9) What follows is abbreviated from longer discussions in Lye [1997: 211–217; 2000].

- *həp* versus *duŋ* ‘Malay house; village’;¹⁰⁾
- *həp* versus *təm* ‘river’; and
- *həp* versus *hayā*’ ‘lean-to; camp’.

Duŋ in the sense of “house” contrasts with *hayā*’ ‘lean-to’.¹¹⁾ These are ethnic markers, considered the prototypical architectural forms of, respectively, the agrarian and forested environments. This contrast is morally charged with ideas of value.

Rivers, in the sense that they carve out the landscape into distinct conceptual units, are of the forest and yet also apart from it. They are territorial and orientation markers, convenient for the purpose of reckoning direction and position (following the regional pattern in Southeast Asia). Encampments are usually referred to by the names of the rivers or streams flowing by them. Orientation terms overlap with the different levels of contrast and, again, with social and ethnic considerations (most fundamentally, forest=upriver and village=downriver). Hence:

- *sal ba duŋ* ‘go down to village’ contrasts with *cəwoh ba həp* ‘go up to the forest’
- *wək ba hayā*’ ‘return to camp’ contrasts with *cəp ba həp* ‘go to forest’.

To sum up in spatial terms, forest is contrasted to the world “out-there” (village) and the home “in-here” (lean-to; camp). And since the “in-here” is by definition always of *the forest*, never outside it, the forest can never truly be externalized — so long as the perceiver remains in the forest.

2. Roles and Functions of the Forest

My point of departure is the Bateks’ conception that the forest is *təmpət* ’*ipah gəs* ‘place where we dwell’.¹²⁾ Most evidently, they think of the forest in practical and utilitarian terms. The forest is a source of sustenance and useful materials; it provides the necessary shelter (in particular, protection from heat) and enables them to escape external interference by, for example, Government administrators. Probably as a conditioned response to the long history of slave-raiding in the Peninsula [Endicott 1983], followed by the exigencies of war and the Emergency (1948–1960), the Bateks have a highly developed sense of vulnerability against invasive forces. The forest is, in this respect, a refuge to ’ət ‘hide’ in [Dentan 1992].

Withdrawing farther into the forest, drawing on their unrivalled knowledge of its topography and walking routes (*halbəw*), remains the Bateks’ major mode of resolving disagreements with others (e.g., irate employers, forest-edge villagers, or Government administrators). As

10) This word also means “town, city” (in which sense it overlaps with the borrowed term *banar*, from the Malay *bandar*). As a Mon-Khmer etymon, the original meaning of *duŋ* is “town, city, village” [Diffloth 1984: 122]. I am indebted to Geoffrey Benjamin for bringing this point to my attention.

11) The word *hayā*’ is cognate with the Vietnamese *nhà* ‘house’ (Geoffrey Benjamin 2000: personal communication).

12) The word *təmpət* is, in fact, borrowed from the Malay (*tempat*), perhaps to express a covert feeling of an “ontological space.” The closest equivalent Batek term is *te*’; its meanings include: ground, soil (the physical stuff), land, and (controversially) the world. *Te*’ appears in such expressions as: *te*’ *baros* ‘flatlands’; *te*’ *lənəh* ‘montane forestland’; *te*’ *təm hal* ‘land river tracks, a metaphor meaning “widely traveled”’; and *te*’ *təraŋ* ‘hillslope forestlands’.

with hunter-gatherers the world over [Lee and Daly 1999: 4], withdrawal is a survival strategy that evades control by outsiders, preserves political autonomy, and protects physical freedom. However, it feeds into the prejudice that the Bateks are free-roaming nomads without a developed sense of civilization or place [critiqued in Carey 1976: 65]. To anticipate a later discussion, in the critics' admission of themselves as people who could never follow, let alone track down the Bateks,¹³⁾ this prejudice also reveals much about outsiders' failure, conceptually or practically, to "penetrate" the forest. In short, the forest is important to the Bateks' need for freedom of movement and also sustains the reproduction of a characteristically hunter-gatherer mode of social being. That reproduction is linked to the reproduction of the knowledge base: the forest is of abiding intellectual interest. The pursuit and gathering of knowledge both to serve short-term ends and for its own sake is an eminently satisfying source of meaning [Lye 1997].

3. *Narratives of Place*

What does it mean to *gɔs*, dwell in the forest? Here I focus on *sentiments*, the bonds and attachments to places. The mobile way of life, I will show, does not militate against having a strong attachment to place and appreciation of history [Endicott 1997]. Sentiments are at least as important as practical knowledge to the conception of forest. However, at least for Southeast Asia, they are implicitly dismissed, rarely incorporated into studies of forest and knowledge. Accordingly, there is little systematic discussion (above the level of anecdote) of the effects of forest degradation on local sentiments.¹⁴⁾

Affection is implied in the Bateks' sense of what forest is; they use the word, borrowed from the Malay, *sayeŋ* 'love'. *Sayeŋ*, however, also implies the meaning of "not wanting to give up or lose" a thing or person. For example, a request for my machete might be "*Moh sayeŋ ba?*" 'Do you love it?'¹⁵⁾ rather than the more direct gestures of claiming (without requesting) "*Wen ye?*" 'my machete' or "*Yem pani?*" 'I want it.' Further, the Bateks also say "*?Ipah gəh*" 'we refuse to give' in response to encroachment and forest loss. The word *gəh* is commonly used in material transactions (giving and taking of things). Its appearance in this discursive context is a little startling and may suggest an incipient awareness that the forest is a "thing" up for grabs. In short, the Bateks' sentiments of place now include perceptions of loss and bereavement.

In 1993, I was with some people, riding on the back of the rattan trader's truck as it trundled over a vast oil palm plantation estate. The Bateks recalled that this estate used to be forest; that was not too long ago. Neat rows of oil palm trees stood there now, a spread of lines and angles of vegetative sameness. Though shorn of the original floristic diversity and somewhat corroded, the landscape discontinuities (dips, rises, bends, slopes, gullies, stream-

13) This sentiment was often expressed to me or in my presence.

14) An important exception to this trend is Brosius' writings on the Penans of Sarawak [for example, Brosius 1997b].

15) That is, the intended meaning of the sentence is "Are you willing to give this to me?"

beds) were still discernible. Sometimes there was a break from the visual monotony; the far-off mountains would come into view. The men were calling out to each other, pointing here, gesturing there. Ey Toh (a middle-aged man, my then-host) turned to me. They had just identified the spot where his mother's body lay buried. With the outline of the distant hills as the background visual anchor, they had fixed our position by remembering the layout of the old forest routes. While apparently staring blankly out at the passing scenery, some among them, at least, had been recalling the old associations of routes and topographic relief. There was much consultation. In forested conditions the trail is a lot more distinct and the above-ground vegetation provides added landmark features to guide passage. Now, only the most able navigator, Ey Toh's nephew, had the spatial acuity to embed the old conceptual map in this impoverished landscape — to accurately recognize the old locations.¹⁶⁾ As the trader drove us on, Ey Toh muttered, "What a waste, they have cut down our forest."

Three years later, I was moving camp (*jok*) with another group. We were foot-trekking through logged-over forest this time. We would emerge from forest, cross a loggers' access road, enter the forest again. There was a well-defined trail that merged with and branched off from the logging road (*halbaw wiŋ*); we were heading for hillsides that the loggers had long since abandoned. We cut through (*rigel*) an old encampment. The women with me remembered that their friend Na' Kadoy had given birth there. Talk continued; the baby had not survived, was buried elsewhere. One of the young women walking alongside me frowned and announced indignantly that the loggers later clear-cut the baby's place of burial.

The point of these stories is that places are rich with biographical and sentimental associations. Narratives of place also help in cartography, because they provide information that quickly identifies a place and shows how that place is different from any other. There are many place-names which have narrative information encoded in them. But many more places, including the all-important *halbaw*, are unnamed. When people see (*tɔt*), move through (*cɛp*), or think about (*hulkaŋ*) the places where particular activities or incidents occurred, they recollect: "Here is where this happened, there is where that happened." Places give geographic concreteness to memories. Mothers often say that they cannot bear to "see" the places where deceased children once walked and played. The death of a beloved spouse or child usually initiates a move away from the place of death (*dənəm*), at least until the period of grieving is over, and sometimes permanently. A place, then, condenses a wealth of kinship, historical, and iconographic information (on which, see below) which is part of the collective lore of the forest. This relationship between people, memory, and landscape may be realized even more intimately. For example, when children are named for their places of birth (*təmɸet jənadi*)

16) Among the group, he had also spent the most time working outside the forest. He was both old enough to be intimately familiar with the forest routes and young enough to make sense of the new landscape. In 1996, I realized that his knowledge of routes was well regarded by the rest. The talent ran in the family: three brothers, close in age, were superb hunters and natural leaders at whatever they undertook. The point is that there is much inter-individual variation even in this fundamental domain of wayfinding and the knowledge is also dependent on life experience.

‘place of becoming’¹⁷⁾), the name becomes an easy “information storage device.” As long as people think about the person, they remember the place of birth and, through chains of association [Lye 1997: 169–171], the movements of kinship groups; the person embodies the landscape history. And as long as the place itself is thought about, so too the long succession of people who lived, worked, and died there.

There is, then, a reciprocal relationship between places and narratives. As in the examples above, going to or passing through a place “calls up” the lore; the people tell the stories to one another, remember the friends featuring in their stories and the things that happened there. They give concrete social meaning to the place, which is as much a part of recognizing the place as the cognitive activity of wayfinding. And the place itself may be well loved for its own aesthetic qualities, pulling people back time and time again, thus setting the scene for more story-making and becoming ever more familiar. “*ʔIpah jok, ʔipah ʔigit, ʔipah wek* ‘We move away, we remember, we go back’,” says Tebu, a shaman, criticizing a common insult that they are “wild people” who have no landscape attachment. But as landscape deteriorates (the wider context for Tebu’s resentment), the places may be left behind for good. The knowledge becomes cognitive activity alone, bereft of the practical and physical base that gives it continued meaning. The biographical associations, memories, narratives, and conceptual maps are detached from the landscape, becoming history without a place.

III Belonging

In this part of the paper, I will draw out the implications of history *with* a place, as encapsulated in the theme of belonging: the modes and claims of belonging. Following on some issues raised in the foregoing discussion, I will explore some central forest representations to greater depth. These are part of what I have called the iconography of landscape: the images and symbols of forest. In particular, I focus on the most dramatic of these, things that cause worry and fear. These images are then contextualized within the frame of the ecocosmology and the Bateks’ claims, which are related to the changing nature of the forest, that they look after the forest. In the final section of this part, I briefly sketch out some representations implicit or incipient in the claims by which outsiders come to know the forest. The conceptual movement, therefore, is from the immediate experiences of the forest to the global context of biodiversity conservation.

The first concern, however, is the Batek-Malay theme that has recurred throughout this discussion. As I wrote at the outset, environmental representations are as much about being part of the broader world as they are about the environment. As such, we begin with a discussion about the transition from *gob* to *kaben* — from stranger to friend. Since Malays are the primary reference group, they should take precedence in this discussion.

17) Note that the Bateks have a verb, *bɲlus* ‘to be born’. *Jənadi*’, which is used exclusively in this context, is an infixal derivative of the Malay word *jadi* ‘to become’.

1. *Kin and Stranger*

An important component of identity is having *kabɛn* 'kin; friend' in the forest. The Bateks clearly abhor solitary life; to be an orphan (*bəkəpok*) is a condition to be pitied. One who is not *kabɛn* is by definition *gob* 'stranger; outsider'. However, a *gob* is always a potential friend. The transition from one status to another is hedged by pre-established conditions, as will be discussed shortly. If, as we saw earlier, *gob* belongs to the agrarian world, *kabɛn* belongs of the forest. The chain of reasoning (which is my interpretation) goes: if *kabɛn* equals kin (definition), kin is Batek (biology and social relations), and the Bateks call themselves *batek həp* 'people of the forest' (identity), then *kabɛn* is *also* of the forest. Most commonly, *kabɛn* are, indeed, relatives from birth and marriage, but there are connotations of strong friendship, bonding, and companionship: *kabɛn* are preferred travelling and working companions.

The network of *kabɛn* is the community that one belongs to, that gives one an identity (most emphasized linguistically in teknonymy, which identifies people through parent-child relationships). But this community, as I remarked earlier on the nature of groups, has to have porous social boundaries. Otherwise, it would be an infinitely closed society, which it has not been historically or genetically [Endicott 1997]. Hence, there are elements of extended kinship in the *kabɛn* concept, which would permit the Bateks to confer (if fictively) a Batek identity on *gob*.

Without going into the social dynamics and ramifications of this process, it is worth considering the role of the environment in this process. To become *kabɛn* is not only to belong to the forest but to be accepted by, and ipso facto become *part* of, it. When a stranger moves into camp, the initial reserve of the Batek hosts is more than made up for by the thunder god Gubar; either that day or soon afterwards, the arrival of the stranger is marked by thunderstorms.¹⁸⁾ The natural forces, in other words, objectively express what the Bateks, in their social demeanor, cannot directly show: their initial sense of disquiet.¹⁹⁾ The arrival of the stranger, then, is fraught with risk for the Bateks. The stranger, to become *kabɛn*, should adopt the norms and practices that obtain in the forest. Of most relevance here are those pertinent to the ingestion of substances: eating forest foods.

Dietary issues become pressing when strangers stay with the Bateks. The latter eagerly probe their guests about their food preferences, usually framing the questions in a comparative context. Most pertinently, they want to know if the guests have any dietary restrictions like the Malays' Islamic prohibitions. To them, Malays will remain the prototypical *gob*. For the Malays' food prohibitions effectively limit the extent to which they could adopt Batek practices. Since they cannot partake of wild game, they symbolically have to reject the forest from which that food comes. So long as *any* stranger resists participating in food-related

18) I was told that Gubar registered a most clamorous complaint the night after my first visit to the Bateks.

19) It is expressed in body language and a shyness with face-to-face contact, but the Bateks do not turn strangers away. Verbal insults are practically taboo.

norms and practices, they are not *kaben* and cannot belong.

2. *Tigers, Trees, and Threats*

This section focuses on some images and symbols of forest: things that indubitably belong, but cause worry and fear. Again, *gob* will serve as a point of contrast.

To belong to the forest is also to know of its dangers. Endicott [1979: 8, 53] correctly notes that the Bateks “do not fear the forest.” But there are entities within the forest that one should guard against. The Malays are not the only reference markers. There are tigers (*yah*): “when children must be stopped from a dangerous activity, parents must resort to frightening their children by telling them a tiger or a stranger will get them if they continue their behavior” [Endicott, K. L. 1981: 3]. If Malays are prototypical strangers, tigers are prototypical predators. If *gob* virtually means “Malay,” *bēg*, one of the tiger’s 11 names, is synonymous with “predator” (used in referring to all big fierce animals, usually to avoid voicing the actual name of that animal and making it think it is being called). Both are on the boundaries of Batek society and yet integral to it: at the very least, as Karen Endicott observed above, tigers and Malays provide moral frames. If the Malays represent everything strange to the Bateks, the tiger represents everything they fear. But here is the difference: Malays come from outside the forest, tigers from inside it. Thus, Malays symbolize the *dun*, and tigers the *həp*. One of the tiger’s avoidance names, in fact, is *ʔay həp* ‘animal of the forest’.

The tiger is viewed, like other animals of its class, with fear, circumspection, curiosity, and the occasional mockery (“Smelly Claws,” referring to its habit of marking scent with its paws, is one insult that comes to mind). As in their relationship with *gob*, the Bateks’ relationship with the tiger is fraught with ambivalence and ambiguity. *Gob* may be alien, but are providers of goods and jobs. They also have the symbols of wealth: things and property that the Bateks in some sense covet. *Gob* are not disliked for what they are (essential ethnic qualities) but for their rejection of the forest, as shown in their obvious distaste for the Bateks’ food (behavior) and their tendency to want to control the Bateks (politics and economics).

As for the tiger, Endicott [1979: 141] explains:

On the one hand, [the Bateks] they greatly admire [the tigers] for their awesome strength and speed. These qualities make the tiger a very appropriate symbol for the notion of superhuman power on earth, which is personified in man by the shaman. But the Batek greatly fear tigers as well. The identification of the shaman with the tiger seems to be a way of converting the danger of tigers to power for man.

Further, the tiger shares too many characteristics with the Bateks. Belonging to animal society, the tiger properly belongs to the game category and yet it preys and is not preyed upon. Eating tiger meat is not unknown but hunting tigers is simply not done. The tiger also occupies the Bateks’ preferred habitat; it travels along waterways, loves to play in the water, and belongs to the foothills. Not only do the Bateks not hunt tigers, they also situate their camps away from known tiger routes. Hence, though without intending to, they practice game

conservation.²⁰⁾ The conservation problem arising from a man/tiger fight for space does not apply in this case. The Bateks and the tiger inhabit complementary but, as far as possible, not overlapping niches.

A number of myths posit the problems of were-tigers: sometimes a human is revealed to be a tiger in disguise, at other times, a tiger longs for human relationships and assumes human form to achieve it. It is one thing, as with the shamans, for the Bateks to appropriate the tiger's power for benign purposes; it is quite another when the tiger turns that power against people. For then the control is coming from the tiger: the more or less equal co-existence — the partnership between people and tigers — is upset. Things become upside down. The general problem, then, is that the boundary between human and tiger societies is extremely thin, and there is a deeply embedded horror of what would happen should this boundary be crossed for evil purposes [Gianno 1997; Wessing 1986].

I go on now to another problem of living in the forest, which is more immediate: treefall. Nothing is so terrifying in the forest as the sudden collapse of a giant tree [Endicott 1979: 6, 8–9; Needham 1967]. To be killed in a treefall is to the Bateks a prospect filled with horror, linguistically equivalent to death by tiger-attack, interpersonal violence, and a fatal fall. Rainstorms are greeted with constant vigilance and the readiness to flee at the first sound and sign of danger. Running into the rain to seek a clearing far from tall trees is the standard strategy. Siting encampments away from old forest, avoiding the possibility of accident in the first place, is the general coping technique [for a longer discussion, see Lye 1997: Chapter 5].

To talk about the forest is, almost by definition, to talk about trees and other plants [Lye 2000]. As Dentan [1991: 423] points out, there is an unmistakable “arboricentricity” in the intellectual and foraging traditions of Borneo and the Peninsula, as shown in, for example, taste preference for tree crops (especially fruit trees) and the uses of trees as markers of land, property, kinship, and time [see also Dove 1998; Peluso 1996]. There is a depth of cultural sentiment towards trees and the paradox is that the symbols of danger are also things of shelter. According to one origin myth, there was not enough to eat for all the people on earth so half the people became trees for the sustenance of their friends. Trees, from this perspective, share substance with the people — and history and identity. Earlier, I referred to the anxiety that the boundary between humans and tigers could break down. This unease is not extended to plants. It is the crossing of the boundary that originated the forest; one imagines that boundary to be crossed, and the human-plant relationship reiterated, whenever people harvest food to eat [Endicott 1979: 67]. If, originally, people contributed themselves to improve the vitality of the forest, then the continuous harvesting of those plants returns vitality back to the people. Thus, so long as this interaction continues, there is a circulation of nutrients linking people and plants in a relationship going back to the beginning of time.

20) They do not hunt most of the larger fauna either — elephants, bears, rhinoceros, etc. They also rarely hunt wild pigs. They do not collect animal products for the wildlife trade, though if they find animal carcasses, they might offer the commercial parts for sale.

3. *Looking after the Forest*

The forest is subject to a range of normative prescriptions and proscriptions. Endicott [1979: 53] points out that the Bateks “consider their living in the forest to be part of the natural order of things as established by the superhuman beings.” Two clarifying points need to be stated here. One is that the Bateks recognize that human and natural history are part of the *same* “natural order.” In other words, as with many non-industrial societies around the world, the objectification and distancing of nature is taken to be somewhat suspect [Dove 1998; Ingold 1996]. The second point is the prominent role of the superhumans in preserving the natural order and, more specifically, in the generation and regeneration of the forest. It is useful to think of people and forest (that is, all the biotic life associated with it) as constituting a moral community, with the omniscient and omnipotent superhumans squarely in charge. Here the emphasis is on the relational dynamics of *belonging* to the same natural order. This fabric of relationships could not exist without the superhumans, who are protectors, providers, and “moral watchdogs” [see also Endicott 1979: 124–160; Lye 2000].²¹⁾

The relational dynamics, and the lack of distance between people and forest, “culture” and “nature,” was amply demonstrated in the foregoing section. Because these various entities of the forest are members of the same community, they have social qualities that humans can apprehend and empathize with. This is indicated, for example, by the way they are discussed. Thus, if one wanted to know what animals cluster together in the Bateks’ system of classification, the best way to ask is: what are its *kaben*? This is not to deny that these natural entities have objective qualities independent of their sociality; there is even a word, *pisin*, that means “species of.” Rather, it is that the sociality gives them an added identity.

With plants, the sociality can be effectively demonstrated, particularly in descriptions of wild yam roots (*takop*; generally but not exclusively *Dioscorea* spp.). These are indelible features of the Peninsular forests and the main staple if rice were not available. Gathering expeditions are approached with the anticipation we more customarily associate with the hunt. One reason is that the plants have sentient properties as well. The roots do not “grow” in this or that direction, they *cup* ‘walk’. And when a root doesn’t want to *cup* anymore, that’s when you get a stub. And when it changes its mind in mid-course, it *cam* ‘looks for’ another place to *cup*. So these plants even move like the hunter-gatherers that seek them. More than simply have a mind to move along a path, however, the root may have the capacity to apprehend the harvester’s intentions as well: when a dig fails, the yam is deemed to have *tala*’ ‘fled’.

The whole moral community works because there are ongoing relations with the superhuman beings. To abuse these relations, performing proscribed behavior, could bring on ecological danger: unnatural rainstorms and gusts of winds, visits by tigers, flooding, and ground subsidence [Endicott 1979: Chapter 3].²²⁾ Many of these proscriptions (e.g., the mockery of

21) I make no assumptions here about the political distance or status of the superhumans relative to the Bateks. It is enough for present purposes to recognize that the former are very much present in this community.

22) There is a vast range of proscriptions that are of varying importance and significance. Some of the ↗

animals) are not logical when considered out of their cultural context. Without stopping for a more detailed examination, we can find an underlying theme, which is that the prohibitions are about *respecting* the natural order of the world. That humans are capable of hubris is shown, for example, in one petrification myth. Two women built a lean-to so enormous that it blocked out the sky. A superhuman being cut down the lean-to and it was turned into stone. Thus, the myth is both etiology (explaining why this stone pillar exists) and a cautionary lesson against ruining the structure of the world. There is a code of conduct, in short, that mediates relations between people and forest and ensures that human actions do not disrupt the relational complex of the forest.

The Bateks recognize that the forest would collapse if they, its primary dwellers, do not observe the moral codes. Hence they feel, as Endicott [*ibid.*: 82] writes, that they have “a well defined part to play” in the forest. The world of people is never disengaged from the world of the spirits. The Bateks say that they *jaga’ həp* ‘look after the forest’. This assertion shows that they recognize the forest to be a “thing” worth looking after and therefore vulnerable to misuse and/or predation. The claim to stewardship is more forcefully advanced in these times of ecological degradation and tremendous social change, which exacerbate the Bateks’ sense of threat and vulnerability. Thus, as conditions worsen, their notion of the forest as lifeworld is increasingly complemented with a political notion of forest as abstract space.

To render the notion of stewardship more concrete, they cast it in oppositional terms. In response to my probes, some Bateks say that urban peoples are not the stewards, the forest people are. Most particularly, they single out the Malays. “They kill the world the way they live,” says one man. “They only care to get rich,” says another. They point out how they, the Bateks, never clear-cut the forest, only *bət* ‘take’ what they need, and strive to live within ecological constraints. They argue that there is a difference between their dwelling practices and the Malays’ increasing urbanization and promotion of mono-cropping, resource commodification, land transformation, and industrialization. This is, of course, a commentary on the problem of scale, from the point of view of a minority people who are constantly on the edges of that development, feeling its impacts, and thinking of long-term consequences. Thus the conceptual division is here established as one between “us,” people who know the forest best and how to take care of it, looking out at “them,” people who are ignorant and care only to take as much as they want.

One problem for the Bateks is that all peoples properly should observe the behavioral codes discussed earlier: the beings are omniscient everywhere, even outside the forest. But outsiders, whether in their own territories or visiting the forest, have no knowledge of, belief in, or respect for their cosmological rules. The Bateks assert that when people come “up”²³⁾ to the

↘ major complexes include *lawac* (which prohibits the mockery of animals, the mixing of incompatible foods, rowdy noise-making, incest, verbal abuse of natural forces; see Endicott [1979: 70–82]); *tolah* (a loose set incorporating unseemly behavior towards other persons, like addressing them by the wrong name); and *dos* (crushing head lice after eating certain foods).

23) The reference in “up” is to the spatial contrast between upriver and downriver, discussed earlier.

forest, they should observe the norms that obtain therein.²⁴⁾ Otherwise, they endanger themselves, the forest people, and the forest. The poignancy of this assertion is that only in the forest do the Bateks have any confidence that they are in charge.

4. *Making Representations*

A major premise of this discussion is that the Bateks' environmental representations, sense of place, and claims to guardianship are not ahistorical. There are other peoples and other representations. As I have just pointed out, the Bateks' claim to stewardship is both a concrete expression of their cosmology and a response to the growing degradation of their world. The strongest point in favor of the latter is that they asked me, their ethnographer, to tell the world about their problems [Lye 1997: 9–15]. Historically, visitors have turned up frequently; they leave behind physical tracks, memories, stories, and shape the Bateks' impression of how the global community views the forest. The fact that the Bateks' plea for environmental sustainability comes at this historical moment shows their awareness of growing outside sympathy for them, which in turn is in response to the growth of environmentalism and increased accessibility of the forest, both practically and conceptually.

The Batek landscape is one of the final remaining stretches of unbroken lowland forests in Peninsular Malaysia. It has a special significance to many who may never even have experienced or seen it. Taman Negara, in particular, is often touted as a haven for biodiversity protection. The Bateks are publicly known as the park's "aboriginal population" but this is as far as the recognition goes. It is "biodiversity" and not people that the park is associated with [Lye in prep.]. That is, though the park *as the Bateks' home* has a very local character, its wider reputation rests on its national and global status. When one goes to Taman Negara, there is very little symbolic indication of the Bateks' presence. Only some of the many place-names, for example, are recorded as official trail and camp names. Topographic maps clearly mark out the main river systems but the tributary systems between them might as well be a *terra incognita*.

Thus, perhaps unwittingly, one outside construction is the image of the forest as a wilderness, which belies ecological history. The Peninsular forest as we know it today is arguably the product of an ancient history of interaction, exchange, and extraction [Dunn 1975], not only between societies [Benjamin 1985; Noone 1954] but between specific production scenarios and the biophysical environment [Hutterer 1983]. The view that the forests, as empty lands, are only awaiting conversion to a higher use [critiqued in Rambo 1982] can only be taken as a political representation, an ideological support for development and modernization.

It is also a convenient legacy from the colonial experience. Aiken's [1973] exegesis of Frank Swettenham's diaries is revealing in this respect. Swettenham (and other 19th century colonial civil servants and administrators) confronted a variety of emotions towards the

24) Variations on this theme are often reiterated in many different contexts by different individuals, with or without my probing. The idea that only a certain kind of behavior is appropriate in the forest can be considered as a "collective representation," generally held by *all* the Bateks.

forest. Aiken suggests that the observer's physical location was significant. Men like Swettenham enjoyed the forest when they could obtain a view "from *afar*, from a vantage point, while floating on a river or standing in a clearing" [*ibid.*: 143; italics in the original]. At such moments, feelings soared and aesthetic appreciation was possible.²⁵⁾ At other times, Swettenham found the forest "a weird gloomy looking place" [cited in *ibid.*: 142] — "impenetrable gloom" being another phrase he used.

It is one thing, as with the newly arrived colonial, the rank outsider coming from an alien cultural context, to see the forest as sheer emptiness. But long-settled farmers living on forest fringes did not see *nothing*; often, they believed in and respected the power of malevolent spirits living just beyond the pale of human community [see Kato 1991]. They were ambivalent too: the forest to them was distant, deculturated, and yet close enough to pose an ontological danger:

. . . when a party of Malays sets out to drive deer, the commonest of all game, they may go no more than a few hundred yards away from the village; but none the less the leader of the party will utter this preface to his prayer to the spirits:

Hail! All hail!
We crave permission to enter on this domain
and to tie our noose to these trees. [Maxwell 1982 [1907]: 9]

Thus these Malays also had a respect for the powers of the forest, which may be all but lost today.

Part of the Malay classification system very neatly linked forest peoples with their environment, a kind of folk ecological determinism. The Negrito (or Semang) peoples, for example, were considered less than fully human [Endicott 1970: 80–81] and viewed with ambivalence borne of horror, respect, suspicion, and distaste: "The people living around the dwarfs relate among themselves very extraordinary things about these tribes, but always in whispers, lest a dwarf hear. The story goes that they are not men at all, for they suddenly bob out of the ground in the most unexpected places; that they have glowing eyes, are ignorant of the use of fire, and eat everything raw" [Schebesta 1973: 13]. If ordinary folk rarely "penetrated" the forest interior, rare indeed was their intercourse with the forest people, who were cast starkly as either *liar* 'wild' or *jina* 'tame' [Mikluho-Maclay 1878]. "Tame" referred to established trading partners, slaves, or former slaves [Couillard 1984; Dentan 1997]. "Wild" were those unacculturated groups that valued (and feared for) their freedom and autonomy. As I noted above, these images have stuck, and "wild" remains among the insults the Bateks bristle at.

With growing land conversion, the look, shape, sensibility, and perhaps even the biophysical properties of the ecosystems are being altered [Aiken and Leigh 1995; Brookfield *et al.*

25) Geoffrey Benjamin (2000: personal communication) points out that many Temiars (who are highland peoples living to the north of the Bateks) share this colonial appreciation of a good view or opened-up forest: to these swiddeners "*te' lalah* 'clear land' is a general expression of approval."

1997]. As forestland diminishes, perceptions change. Danger now has a romantic air — for that sector of the general public with cash to spend, the forest is inviting. The forest is no longer an indomitable expanse. It is also more accessible, partly because of Government policy to promote tourism (domestic and international) as a revenue earner, the massive advertising campaigns launched to that end, and the infrastructural developments (roads, airports, etc.) that have been laid down [Dentan *et al.* 1997: 103–106]. The sense of space and time — of how easy and desirable it is to get from one place to another — has changed. The forest is no longer just a thing “out there.” There is a growing consciousness of forest as a threatened refuge for wildlife, indigenous peoples, and the pollution-weary urbanite alike. Thus the popularity of ecotourism or adventure tourism. Administrative worries with this developing industry were clearly evident in the mid-1980s [Department of Wildlife and National Parks 1987: 108].²⁶⁾ In the 1990s, there is considerably more interaction than ever before. If before the Bateks’ contacts with visitors were limited to the local *gob*, soldiers, terrorists, and aberrant types, nowadays, depending on where they are, they might encounter a pack of urban Malaysian youths instead.

Consonant with the development of scientific forestry, the forest has for a long time now been viewed as a “cornucopia” [Aiken 1973: 144–146] of resource wealth. Anticipating the modern-day tourist, surveyors, geologists, foresters, researchers, loggers, and assorted entrepreneurial types have long found their way up there [Cooke 1999]. Gazing, mapping, collecting, classifying, extracting, and issuing records and pronouncements, these people have contributed to the contemporary definition of the forest. Most definitive in terms of ordering public perceptions have been the land use classifications (e.g., the instatement of different areas for different forestry, extractive, amenity and protective purposes). It is not too unlikely a stretch to compare these classifications and typologies to the Bateks’ moral codes: both serve the goal of naturalizing a particular way to behave in a particular kind of forest (although, of course, it is debatable the extent to which we could compare *compliance* with the respective rules and codes).

IV Conclusions

This discussion has shown that, just as people’s biographies are grounded in location and geography, so is landscape biography — its history — intimately connected to the people’s capacity to keep in touch with different places. A major theme was that the Bateks’ environmental representations are both a concrete expression of local knowledge of place and a response to the sweeping changes that are altering the landscape. With growing degradation, there is the possibility that people will become more estranged from their geography of knowledge and that, ultimately, landscape lore becomes just lore, history without a place. This the Bateks seem cognizant of. They argue that they know the forest and how to use it because they live in

26) My calculations from 1980–1996 visitor statistics to Taman Negara indicate that the average annual increase of Malaysian tourists was about 18%.

it. Namely, that knowledge of place is contingent upon being *present* and *resident*. This knowledge is a way to assert belonging and authority and therefore is constitutive of identity. Identity, in turn, justifies the claim to stewardship.

But the Bateks are rarely heard. Their “silence” is part of a long history of official dismissal. In official construction of the environment, local communities present a “problem,” either for governance or against forest degradation. Their presence in the forest is deemed to be a threat to sustainability and a problem that prevents them from “progressing.” The “problem” may be constructed for short-term ends (to facilitate land and resource exploitation) or because officials genuinely believe that living in the forest, set apart from the development trajectory, offers the people no reasonable future. For the official position to make sense, then, the forest cannot be perceived as a dwelling place, it has to be peripheralised and conceptualized as culture-free. The problem is that, if one thinks of the forest as culture-free, then one is forced to think of the forest people in the same terms: wild, stupid, ignorant, primitive, and brutish [Ingold 1994: 10–11]. Further, this position seems to be scaffolded by the Malay distrust and abhorrence of the mobile way of life, discussed earlier [Carey 1976]. It becomes natural not to engage in the forest people’s conceptions and somewhat ridiculous to do otherwise. The lack of attention to the Bateks’ voices and concerns, then, is hardly surprising.

Conceptually, my study has demonstrated two issues. First, the customary dichotomy between culture and nature, society and environment, does not take us very far into the study of local knowledge. Analyses that begin by taking people *out* of the environment, and thinking of that environment as a human-free zone, are also representations that deny both landscape biographies and the biographies of the people who live in them. The Bateks see themselves as integral members of their environment and do not have language even to describe “wilderness” qualities. Second, that local knowledge is consistent with change. The Bateks are always looking out, comparing, contrasting, grouping and classifying ideas, people, and phenomena, thinking about what it all means in relation to themselves. And as the landscape changes, there is just a hint that their knowledge base also begins to change. As trees are cut down and forest opened up, the visual qualities of the environment change. New things come into experience, and this would be reflected in local history as well. And new actors come into the scene, giving the Bateks a more developed sense of the global implications of their ideas. Thus the reality is that Batek lives do not fit the popular conception that they are “primitives” lost in time. It is worth challenging these outside constructions, if only to craft a more imaginative and sensitive understanding of the effects of forest degradation.

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