

# Tropes of Fear: the Impact of Globalization on Batek Religious Landscapes

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# Abstract

The Batek are a forest and forest-fringe dwelling population numbering around 1,500 located in Peninsular Malaysia. Most Batek groups were mobile forest-dwelling foragers and collectors until the recent past. The Batek imbue the forest with religious significance that they inscribe onto the landscape through movement, everyday activities, storytelling, trancing and shamanic journeying. However, as processes of globalization transform Malaysian landscapes, many Batek groups have been deterritorialized and relocated to the forest fringes where they are often pressured into converting to world religions, particularly Islam. Batek religious beliefs and practices have been re-shaped by their increasing encounters with global flows of ideologies, technologies, objects, capital and people, as landscapes are opened up to development. This article analyzes the ways these encounters are incorporated into the fabric of the Batek's religious world and how new objects and ideas have been figuratively and literally assimilated into their taboo systems and cosmology. Particular attention is paid to the impacts of globalization as expressed through tropes of fear.

**Keywords:** globalization; Batek; Orang Asli; religious landscape; place; Southeast Asia; Malaysia

## 1. Introduction

The Batek are one of approximately twenty Orang Asli (minority indigenous people) groups of Peninsular Malaysia<sup>1</sup>. Administrators and anthropologists have classified the Batek as part of the Negrito section of the Orang Asli, which also includes the Mendriq, Jahai, Lanoh, Kintak and Kensiu. In 2010, the total Orang Asli population numbered around 178,000, accounting for only 0.6% of the total population of Malaysia, and the total number of Batek was estimated at 1,447<sup>(1)</sup>. The reasons behind the Orang Asli

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropologists and administrators have usually divided the Orang Asli into three major subdivisions: Negritos (or Semang); Senoi; and Aboriginal Malay. In recent years most anthropologists have been using these three broad categories to refer to societal patterns associated with different modes of subsistence rather than racial characteristics that typified earlier anthropological studies. The Malaysian Government has followed this tripartite categorization and defined 18 Orang Asli ethnic subgroups in the Peninsular, with six ethnic groups belonging to each of the three larger categories. As Geoffrey Benjamin and Colin Nicholas have highlighted, this system of classification absorbs certain smaller groups into other ethnicities to create overly neat and tidy categories<sup>(2), (3)</sup>.

<sup>(1)</sup> "JAKOA report." In *Pecahan Penduduk Orang Asli Mengikut Kumpulan Kaum Dan Etnik Bagi Tahun 2010*. Kuala Lumpur: JAKOA, 2010.

<sup>(2)</sup> Geoffrey Benjamin. "On Being Tribal in the Malay World." *Tribal Communities in the Malay World*, 2002, 7–76. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(3)</sup> Colin Nicholas. "Organizing Orang Asli Identity." In *Tribal Communities in the Malay World*. Edited by Geoffrey Benjamin and Cynthia Chou. Singapore: The International Institute for Asian Studies, 2002, p. 121. [[Google Scholar](#)]

constituting such a tiny part of the population are complex including the following historical and sociological factors: ancestors of the Orang Asli becoming Malay peasants; complex historical migrations of large numbers of Malays, Indians and Chinese into the Peninsula; low population densities of Orang Asli groups; sustained enslaving of Orang Asli throughout history; huge influxes of Chinese and Indian immigrants during the British colonial period; and large-scale immigration throughout the post-colonial period, particularly of Indonesians<sup>(4)</sup>—an ethnic group that can easily be absorbed into the Malay sector of society, thus bolstering Malay numerical dominance.

Historically the Batek and other Semang foragers have participated in a wide-range of economic activities including hunting, gathering, occasional wage labor, swidden farming and selling or bartering forest products<sup>(5), (6), (7)</sup>. Despite their small population size, Batek territories have covered a large area of the Malaysian Peninsula in the states of Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan. Large territories and low population densities are necessary for hunter-gatherer populations to ensure they have a low impact on flora and fauna in their territories and do not deplete their resources over the long-term.

Globalization is an extremely complicated process encompassing a wide range of phenomena, which cannot easily be separated into mutually exclusive categories. It includes the incorporation of national, regional and local economies into the worldwide capitalist system and the consequential restructuring of economies, landscapes and legal systems that this entails. Globalization is firmly connected to development, nation-building, resource extraction and the restructuring of landscapes into areas of intense production to meet the ever-growing demands of global capitalism. These forces have resulted in radical environmental transformations and the deterritorialization and marginalization of populations, and the meanings they inscribe upon landscapes. Concomitantly, as theorists such as Arjun Appadurai have highlighted, rapid changes and developments in technologies and infrastructures have led to a rapid increase of cultural flows connecting people across vast distances<sup>(8)</sup>. These flows include: satellite television broadcasts; circulation of DVDs and other media formats; and propagation of institutionalized ideas and ideologies stemming from national education and missionary activity. Throughout this article, the impacts of globalization on the Batek

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<sup>(4)</sup> Prema Letha Nair, and Norhayati Jantan. *International Migration in Malaysia*. Report for Expert Group Meeting on ESCAP Regional Census Programme; 27–28 November 2006, Kuala Lumpur: Department of Statistics, 2006.

<sup>(5)</sup> Geoffrey Benjamin. “On Being Tribal in the Malay World.” *Tribal Communities in the Malay World*, 2002, 7–76. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(6)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(7)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. “Tuck.” In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(8)</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. [[Google Scholar](#)]

religion are examined, with particular focus on how the Batek's religious landscape has been transformed.

The Batek religion is deeply embedded in their local environment, and processes of globalization have transformed that environment radically. Intense global demand for palm-oil, a commodity which has become the most-traded oil seed crop in the world and an ingredient the World Wildlife Fund maintains is found in 50% of all packaged-food products found in supermarkets<sup>(9)</sup>, has driven the conversion of large areas of Batek forested land into immense plantations. Lye Tuck Po has written extensively about landscape degradation<sup>(10)</sup>,<sup>(11)</sup>,<sup>(12)</sup> particularly on how Batek "sentiments of place now include perceptions of loss and bereavement" (<sup>(13)</sup>, p. 170). Radical landscape transformations have been accompanied by huge influxes of people, objects, technologies and ideas creating what Anna Tsing has called "zones of awkward engagement", temporary and dynamic places where cultural "frictions" "arise out of encounters and interactions" and "reappear in new places with changing events" (<sup>(14)</sup>, p. xi). The Batek increasingly have to interact with a wide range of outsiders, which they refer to as *gob*; these include Malay settlers and government workers, loggers, miners, international tourists, heavily-armed Thai, Cambodian and Vietnamese poachers, and Bangladeshi, Indonesian and Nepalese immigrant plantation workers. Some of these complex interactions involve miscommunication, deceit, disrespect, and veiled threats of violence. For example, miners and loggers frequently trick the Batek to move out of certain resource-rich areas with unfulfilled promises of economic compensation<sup>(15)</sup>. The Batek have also reported that Islamic proselytism has involved coercion and occasionally direct threats of violence<sup>2</sup>. The massive palm-oil plantations that dominate the landscape

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<sup>2</sup> During fieldwork in December 2012 several Batek from one community reported to me that during the 1990s their village had been visited three times by Malay Muslim missionaries who wanted them to convert to Islam *en-masse*. After they refused they were visited by a 'powerful' Malay Muslim from a large city who told them that if their entire community did not convert to Islam everyone in the village would be killed. Men from the same village also told me that after Malays had moved into their

<sup>(9)</sup> "WWF global website." 2013. Available online: [http://wwf.panda.org/what\\_we\\_do/foot-print/agriculture/palm\\_oil](http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/foot-print/agriculture/palm_oil) (accessed on 1 March 2013).

<sup>(10)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. "Tuck." In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(11)</sup> Lye Tuck Po. "The Road to Equality? Landscape transformation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia." In *Property and Equality Volume 2: Encapsulation, Commercialisation, Discrimination*. Edited by Thomas Widlok and Wolde Gossa Tadesse. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005, pp. 90–103. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(12)</sup> Lye Tuck Po. "Forest, Bateks, and Degradation: Environmental Representations in a Changing World." *Southeast Asian Studies* 38 (2000): 165–84. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(13)</sup> Lye Tuck Po. "Forest, Bateks, and Degradation: Environmental Representations in a Changing World." *Southeast Asian Studies* 38 (2000): 165–84. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(14)</sup> Anna Tsing. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connections*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. xi–xiv. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(15)</sup> Kirk Endicott, and Karen Endicott. *The Headman was a Woman: The Gender Egalitarian Batek of Malaysia*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2008. [Google Scholar]

outside the Taman Negara national park are home to immigrant workers from Indonesia, Bangladesh and Nepal. After work these, often illegal, workers are restricted to small villages situated within the plantations closely guarded by armed police. Many Batek women fear the proximity of these immigrants and the possibility of sexual abuse or assault. Other instances of cultural frictions can involve less violence but equally complex interactions. For instance, in the protected Taman Negara national park the Batek are visited by hordes of tourists throughout the year and theatrically play-up to stereotypes of the ‘Noble Savage’ to satisfy tourists’ expectations<sup>(16)</sup>.

The Batek’s historical and contemporary experience of globalization, ‘development’ and nation-building has often been violent and terrifying and has had deep and pervasive impacts on their religion, cosmology, economies, and socio-cultural formations. This has been due to the rapidity and scale of changes involved. The Batek’s experience of violence has taken many forms including actual physical violence, threats of violence, and the violence of landscape transformation. Whilst violence and threats of violence are different, the Batek consistently understand their contemporary experiences through the lens of historical experience, particularly in regards to their vivid stories about massacres in the past. It must be emphasized that the Batek are in no ways ‘passive victims’, certain Batek communities are now in the process of formalizing their grievances through statements and complaints to ‘powerful outsiders’ including the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, various NGOs, and Malaysian government departments. Furthermore, as we shall see in this paper, the Batek have figuratively incorporated their experience of the violence of globalization into their cosmology and taboo system in ways which empower both their understanding and experience of the global forces at work within their lives and landscapes. The modes of this figurative incorporation are the very mechanisms that allow the Batek to structure and field their responses to the global forces at play within their world.

The violence of the Batek’s encounter with globalization is by no means an isolated phenomenon. In a comparative study of the political ecology of Southeast Asia, with particular reference to commodification of nature and people, Joseph Nevins and Nancy Lee Peluso note: “State violence, or the threat of it, was foundational to the growth of capitalism in Southeast Asia—a point that has been largely and strangely unexplored

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area in about the 1920s three entire Orang Asli communities (two Batek groups and one Semai group) were mass murdered by Malays. All men, women and children were killed. Endicott has also reported Malay massacres of Batek during the same period although in a different area<sup>(17)</sup>.

<sup>(16)</sup> Kirk Endicott, Lye Tuck-Po, and Nurul Fatanah Zahari. “Batek playing Batek for tourists at Peninsular Malaysia’s national park.” In *Cultural Tourism Movements: New Articulations of Indigenous Identity*. Edited by Alexis Celeste Bunten, Jenny Chio and Nelson Graburn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, book proposal in preparation. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(17)</sup> Kirk Endicott. “Batek History, Inter-ethnic relations, and sub-group dynamics.” In *Indigenous Peoples and the State: Politics, Land, and Ethnicity in the Malayan Peninsula and Borneo*. Edited by Robert L. Winzeler. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1997, pp. 30–50. [Google Scholar]

in comparative studies of the rise of postcolonial economies in the region ... [L]ike primitive accumulation through enclosure, violence in Southeast Asia has not only occurred at some initial moment but recurs or remains a threat, albeit in different forms”<sup>(18)</sup>, p. 4). As Nevins and Peluso highlight, state violence and capitalism are fundamentally linked. However, it is important to note violence was also inherent in state-making in the pre-capitalist and pre-colonial period and has been a fundamental characteristic of Southeast Asian polities since their inception. Contemporary restructuring of the environment in order to meet the demands of global capitalism is a ferocious process. The practice of the State confiscating lands from indigenous peoples and then selling this land to developers to raise money for the state coffers is always backed by violence. This violence takes multiple forms and initiates a variety of often unexpected and complex responses. The precise nature of this violence and the responses it invokes must be properly addressed if we are to understand how aspects of globalization and development can be terrifying for indigenous populations in Malaysia. Discussing land issues and the marginalization of the Orang Asli, Juli Edo has highlighted that during the British colonial period “all land came under the control of the Queen, *vis-à-vis* the colonial government ... [Orang Asli areas] were converted under various legal titles to Forest Reserves, Water Catchment Areas, Game Reserves, agricultural areas, and mining sites”<sup>(19)</sup>, p. iii). The author continues by describing how the post-independence Malaysian government inherited British policy, meaning the Orang Asli have been frequently been regarded as ‘squatters on state land’. Discussing the Orang Asli Act 1954 (Revised 1974), Edo states: “[T]he Orang Asli do not have absolute rights to their land. Most of their land, including those areas where projects, especially agriculture, have been developed by the government for them, still does not belong to Orang Asli, but is considered state land, forest reserve, game reserve, river reserve and so on”<sup>(20)</sup>, p. 2). Lack of land rights is the most important issue the Orang Asli face today and is a major factor behind the transformation of Orang Asli landscapes. State governments frequently pressure Orang Asli groups, like the Batek, into moving from their ancestral territories when they decide to ‘develop’ land by converting forests to palm-oil estates, mining or other ‘economically viable’ activities. Both the federal and the various state governments of Malaysia have shown stubborn reluctance to recognize the Orang Asli’s rights to their customary lands. This has meant that increasingly the Orang Asli have

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<sup>(18)</sup> Joseph Nevins, and Nancy Lee Peluso. “Introduction: Commoditization in Southeast Asia.” In *Taking Southeast Asia to Market: Commodities, Nature and People in the Neoliberal Age*. Edited by Joseph Nevins and Nancy Lee Peluso. Berkeley: Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. 1–24. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(19)</sup> Juli Edo. “Claiming Our Ancestors’ Land: An Ethnohistorical Study of Seng-oi Land Rights in Perak, Malaysia.” Ph.D. Dissertation, Australian National University, Canberra, 1998. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(20)</sup> Juli Edo. “Claiming Our Ancestors’ Land: An Ethnohistorical Study of Seng-oi Land Rights in Perak, Malaysia.” Ph.D. Dissertation, Australian National University, Canberra, 1998. [[Google Scholar](#)]

turned to the courts for justice. However, so far no Batek groups have resorted to legal methods to try to protect their lands.

Ongoing processes such as the destruction of forests and their conversion to plantations; rapidly-increasing flows of global objects, images, people, and capital; social, political and economic marginalization; deterritorialization; forced relocation; sedentism and Islamization have all had profound effects on Batek religion and led to the emergence of what I term ‘tropes of fear’: dynamic, figurative manifestations of collective anxieties about unrelenting and uncontrollable global processes. Whilst both Endicott<sup>(21)</sup> and Lye<sup>(22), (23)</sup> have written on the subject of Batek fear before, neither has analyzed the connections between fears and global processes in detail<sup>3</sup>.

Although the Batek sometimes clearly articulate their fear of global processes in transparent language without recourse to metaphor or other tropes, they most commonly express anxiety and terror through ‘polysemic’ or ‘multivocal’ symbols<sup>(24)</sup> or

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<sup>3</sup> Endicott<sup>(25)</sup> has focused on how fear of both *gob* [strangers] and tigers are used by Batek adults to curb children’s misbehaviour. Lye has also described Batek fears of *gob* and tigers<sup>(26)</sup>. Both authors describe the relation of fear to the breaking of taboos and the punishments involved<sup>(27), (28)</sup>. In “Before a step too far: Walking with Batek hunter-gatherers in the forests of Pahang, Malaysia”<sup>(29)</sup> Lye analyses the connections between fear and knowledge, particularly knowledge gained through movement. In the same article she states the Batek have “generally escaped their fear of *gob*”. During all my fieldwork trips from 2007–2013 in both Kelantan and Pahang this has never been the case. Fear of *gob* was reiterated in every community I visited. In fact I have only met one old Batek man who told me he “was no longer afraid of *gob*”. The difference of observation between Lye’s and my own could be due to the situation worsening for the Batek between Lye’s fieldwork period in the 1990s and my own which began in 2007.

<sup>(21)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(22)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. “Tuck.” In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(23)</sup> Lye Tuck Po. “Before a step too far: Walking with Batek hunter-gatherers in the forests of Pahang, Malaysia.” In *Ways of walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*. Edited by Tim Ingold and Jo. L. Vergunst. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2008, pp. 21–34. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(24)</sup> Victor Turner. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1967. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(25)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(26)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. “Tuck.” In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(27)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(28)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. “Tuck.” In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(29)</sup> Lye Tuck Po. “Before a step too far: Walking with Batek hunter-gatherers in the forests of Pahang, Malaysia.” In *Ways of walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*. Edited by Tim Ingold and Jo. L. Vergunst. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2008, pp. 21–34. [[Google Scholar](#)]



‘tropes of fear’, frequently in reference to the wrath of their thunder deity *Gobar* and the flood-causing rainbow snake *Dranuk*. For example, deforestation and mining activities, which have transformed Batek landscapes, are said to anger these deities who respond by causing terrifying storms and flooding. The anthropologist James Fernandez describes tropes as “figurative devices that lie at the very heart of discourse, defining situations and grounding our sense of what is to be taken as real and objective and, therefore, entitled (by means of the figurative entitlements we employ) to have real consequences” <sup>(30)</sup>, p. 1). Experience of the world can be confusing and chaotic particularly during periods of rapid change. Tropes allow transferal of meanings from areas we understand well to those we do not <sup>(31)</sup>. Batek tropes take many forms and are usually drawn from the flora, fauna, landscape features and weather patterns of their environment. Batek perception, knowledge, memory and identity are built into and negotiated through figurations where sensory experiences are particularly relevant <sup>(32)</sup>. Often tropes are drawn from multi-sensorial signifiers—auditory, olfactory, visual and kinesthetic. As global flows bring new elements into the Batek’s lives, signifiers from the forest combine with those from beyond the forest to create new tropes and more complex multivocal symbols. Throughout this article we shall analyze how the Batek’s experience of globalization and other closely connected dynamics have caused ‘tropes of fear’ to dominate the Batek’s semantic web.

## 2. The Religiosity of Batek Landscapes

The most important frame of reference for the Batek’s semantic web is the forest. This is true whether or not they live in the forest permanently as full-time foragers, or live in villages and camps on its fringes. As Lye Tuck Po describes:

On an everyday level, [the forest] provides practical materials, nourishment, and protection, a sense of community and history, and is central to the Batek’s construction of their identity and ethnicity. It is where one’s friends and relatives live; children’s playground and schoolroom; a place to walk in; to go visiting in; stocked with an abundance of useful resources. It is, among its multiple uses, a source of intellectual sustenance. <sup>(33)</sup>, p. 50)

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<sup>(30)</sup> James W. Fernandez. “Introduction: Confluents of Enquiry.” In *Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology*. Edited by James W. Fernandez. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, pp. 1–16. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(31)</sup> James W. Fernandez. “Introduction: Confluents of Enquiry.” In *Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology*. Edited by James W. Fernandez. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, pp. 1–16. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(32)</sup> Diana Riboli, and Ivan Tacey. “Using Our Senses in the Forest: Multisensoriality as an Ethnographic Tool.” In *Special Issue Man and Society*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2013, Forthcoming. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(33)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. “Tuck.” In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang*,

As Lye suggests, the importance of the forest for the Batek goes far beyond simple economic or territorial concerns. Land is not only a source of subsistence but also the place of their ancestors, an environment overflowing with meanings. Diana Riboli, whose research with the Batek has focused on shamanism and medicine, maintains “the forest represents a shamanic cosmos [...] closely linked to the concept of identity and the sense of ethnic belonging” ([21, p. 94]). Elsewhere she has described it as a “perfect and balanced realm which offers all its creatures protection, shelter, food, water, and medicinal plants” (<sup>(34)</sup>, p. 100). In-other-words, for the Batek the entire forest landscape should be considered as a ‘religious landscape’.

Batek social rules are intrinsically religious and embedded within the local environment, or what Tim Ingold has conceptualized as the ‘weather-world’<sup>(35)</sup>,<sup>(36)</sup>. The concept of ‘weather-world’, inspired by the works of American psychologist James Gibson, encompasses more than either the term environment or landscape, and is particularly useful when discussing the Batek’s phenomenological experience of the forest. The forest is a place of continual environmental change. Small brooks can quickly change into mighty torrents as heavy rainfall gushes down narrow gorges. Paths become overgrown with vines, palms and new saplings, which the Batek cut back with their machetes as they traverse the forest. Travel through the forest is difficult and Lye has detailed the special importance that the *halb9w* (paths and routes) and *t0m* (rivers and streams) which crisscross the forest have for linking camps, villages, forest groves, swiddens, foraging areas and other places. They are, as Lye emphasizes in her book, not just routes between places but also ‘routes of knowledge’ (<sup>(37)</sup>, p. 67). Landscapes are not fixed environments but places of constant transformation resulting from weather, plant growth and human and animal activities. For instance, following animal tracks whilst hunting is dependent on rainfall the night before: without rain, tracks are unperceivable. However, excessive rainfall makes trails dangerously slippery and restricts movement through the forest. As the weather changes so too does the sensorial experience of the forest. During the dry seasons, leaves crunch under foot and previously submerged sand banks and rock formations emerge from rivers. The materiality, odors, colors, and sounds of the rainforest shift throughout the day and over the longer yearly cycles. The whole phenomenological experience of the forest cyclically shifts. As the sun rises in the morning, sunlight pierces the rainforest canopy,

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*Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(34)</sup> Diana Riboli. “Ghosts and Paracetamol: Batek and Jahai Shamanism in a Changing World.” *Shaman* 18 (2010): 99–108. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(35)</sup> Tim Ingold. “Footprints through the weather-world: Walking, breathing, knowing.” Special Issue: Making Knowledge. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (2010): S121–39. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(36)</sup> Tim Ingold. *The Perception of the Environment*. Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 209–88. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(37)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. “Tuck.” In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [Google Scholar]

warming the forest from the coolness of the previous night. Weather patterns play a fundamental role in the lives of the Batek as meteorological conditions constantly alter conditions within the forest. Life-cycles of forest flora and fauna are determined by seasonal conditions. Too little or too much rain can prevent fruit trees from flowering and thus affects both when bees make honey and when fruit trees come into season. When and whether fruit ripens affects animals foraging patterns and thus in turn the Batek's own foraging. The preferred food of the Batek is fruit, and the fruit seasons are always anticipated with impatience. Weather does not only affect practical life in the forest but is also closely connected to Batek religion. The Batek usually mark the beginning and end of the fruit seasons with a *Kensing*<sup>4</sup> ('singing, dancing and trancing ceremony') where they ask and thank the *hala'* ('superhuman beings') for abundant fruit as well as request help for curing sicknesses. When shamans are present at these ceremonies, they may enter trances and go on 'soul journeys' to visit the *hala'*<sup>(38), (39)</sup>. Weather is also fundamentally connected to the activities of the terrifying thunder deity, known as *Gobar*, and the flood-causing dragon known as *Dranuk*, *Naga* or *Ya'*. These deities unleash their fury whenever human activities transgress the established moral order by breaking taboos. Like many other indigenous groups across the world, Batek social relations and ideas of personhood spread beyond humans, into animals, meteorological phenomena, plants and other-than-human beings<sup>(40), (41), (42)</sup>. Thunder storms are a common phenomenon throughout the year in Malaysia and their violence can be extremely frightening. The heavy rain from thunderstorms can quickly lead to flash flooding and landslides, and strong storm winds can reach very high speeds. In a forest environment, storms can soon bring about devastation. The Batek believe severe weather such as thunder storms and flooding are caused by *Gobar* and *Dranuk* punishing humans for breaking certain rules that are codified in Batek taboo systems. Access to globalized media means the Batek are now highly aware of extreme weather events across the planet, which they frequently interpret as being caused by humans breaking these same taboos. Throughout this paper, we shall see the importance weather and these deities play in the Batek's religious interpretations of globalization and how they are pivotal figurative markers within the creation of 'tropes of fear'.

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<sup>4</sup> *Kensing* can also be a verb meaning to dance.

<sup>(38)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(39)</sup> Kirk Endicott, and Karen Endicott. *The Headman was a Woman: The Gender Egalitarian Batek of Malaysia*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2008. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(40)</sup> Phillippe Descola, and Gísli Pálsson, eds. *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*. Routledge: New York, 1996.

<sup>(41)</sup> Eduardo Vivieros de Castro. "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 (1998): 469–88. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(42)</sup> Nurit Bird-David. "Beyond 'the hunting and gathering mode of subsistence': Culture-sensitive observations on the Nayaka and other modern hunter-gatherers." *Man* 27 (1992): 19–24. [[Google Scholar](#)]

### 3. Taboos

Socio-religious rules, in the form of a complex taboo system which includes dietary prescriptions, hunting rules and behavioral norms, firmly link the Batek socially, morally and corporally to their environment. These taboos are categorized under the three categories of *lawac*, *tolah* and *ceman*. *Lawac* ‘taboos’ link game animals, cookery, the *hala’ asal* (superhuman beings), menstruation, incest rules, blood and water through a complex set of visual, auditory, and olfactory symbols. *Ceman* offences are more serious than *lawac* offences and relate to improper sexual behavior such as incest, and *tolah* offences relate largely to inappropriate social behavior, the worst being violence. Other taboo acts include the mockery or impersonation of the *hala’* or anything closely related to them including the rainbow, sun, moon, sky, stars, seasonal fruit and bees. Acts which are considered to be insulting to *Gobar* are specifically those which could be seen as mimicking his powers. These include letting shiny objects flash in the sun like lightning and making any noise said to mimic thunder<sup>(43)</sup>, <sup>(44)</sup>.

Breaking taboos incurs the wrath of *Gobar* and *Dranuk* in the form of tremendous thunder storms and violent flash floods<sup>(45)</sup>. The Batek see *Gobar* as a physically indescribable, incredibly powerful, vengeful, but often stupid force living somewhere in the sky, who unleashes his fury in the form of terrifying storms when any taboos are broken. His counterpart has a tripartite image, she is simultaneously an old woman (*Ya’*), a rainbow (*Dranuk*) and a giant snake or dragon (*Naga*). The Batek use these three terms interchangeably to refer to the rainbow snake. She “supports the earth and keeps it from being dissolved in the underground sea. The old woman is said to ‘hold back’ the underground sea and the *Naga’* is pictured as holding the earth on its back. But the earth deity can deliberately let the waters burst through the earth to punish any Batek who break prohibitions” <sup>(46)</sup>, p. 169). Like rainbow snake imagery across the world *Dranuk* is commonly associated with water and the Batek consider streams to be magical entrances to the underworld realm where she lives. Any blood washed into streams is taken straight to *Dranuk*, at the same time it somehow also reaches *Gobar* who responds through sending thunder storms. Endicott also states: “There are many lesser *naga’*, both male and female, who live in the underground sea, in rivers, and in pools on mountains. Ordinary snakes are said to be special friends of the *naga’*,

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<sup>(43)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(44)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. “Tuck.” In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(45)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(46)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [Google Scholar]

and that is one reason adduced for the prohibition on eating them” <sup>(47)</sup>, p. 168). These two deities feature heavily in mythologies across Southeast Asia and beyond and are most commonly referred to by anthropologists as the ‘thunder complex’ which links them with complex taboos and the associated blood ritual needed for appeasement during storms<sup>(48)</sup>, <sup>(49)</sup>.

The blood ritual consists of cutting the shin with a knife to obtain a small amount of blood. This blood is then mixed with water in a small container, which can be made of plastic but not glass. The mixture must then be moved in a circular motion over a small fire whilst reciting a short incantation. Then the blood/water mixture must then be thrown over the left shoulder, then the right shoulder whilst reciting more words. Finally, the same words must be repeated whilst throwing the blood forward and upwards to the left and right. A variant of this ritual to appease *Gobar* and *Naga* involves rubbing a sweet-smelling leaf on your shin and then burning the leaf on a fire. The Batek stress the importance of using a sweet-smelling leaf as the aromatic odor will rise like smoke and please *Gobar* and the *Naga*, who will then stop their punishments. However, the odor must be *asal* (original) not something brought into the forest such as perfume, hair cream or deodorant, which would further anger these beings.

*Gobar* and *Dranuk* are clear examples of what Victor Turner termed ‘polysemic’ or ‘multivocal’ symbols. They are one of the few dominant or focal symbols of Batek religion and are master signifiers for fear and terror. Turner states a dominant symbol “has a ‘fan’ or ‘spectrum’ of referents, which are interlinked by ... a simple mode of association, its very simplicity enabling it to interconnect with a wide variety of *significata*.” <sup>(50)</sup>, p. 50) The referential spectrum of signifiers for *Gobar/Dranuk* is wide indeed and includes blood, game animals, snakes, behavioral and sexual rules, social conduct, thunder, lightning, water, rainbows, and objects thought to mimic the *Hala’ Asal* particularly *Gobar*. Lye states “Gubar’s wrath (thunderstorms) is often interpreted as a comment on moral conditions in camp, and an immediate supernatural response to human commission of proscribed behavior.” <sup>(51)</sup>, p. 11) Any act that threatens the social order also threatens to return the world back to the primordial chaos of the time of origins.

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<sup>(47)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(48)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(49)</sup> Robert Knox Dentan. “Against the Kingdom of the Beast: Semai Theology, Pre-Aryan religion, and the Dynamics of Abjection in Malaysia.” *Tribal Communities in the Malay World*, 2002, 206–36. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(50)</sup> Victor Turner. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1967. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(51)</sup> Lye Tuck Po. “The Significance of Forest to the Emergence of Batek Knowledge in Pahang,

## 4. Global Flows and Symbolic Boundaries

In this section, the impacts of various global flows on Batek cosmology and practices are analyzed. These global flows encompass new objects which have entered the Batek's lives including pharmaceuticals and foods from outside the forest; sensorial phenomena associated with non-Batek people (sounds and odours); and international media broadcasts of satellite television, principally imagery of other countries' environmental catastrophes. When Kirk Endicott carried out his work on Batek religion in the 1970s—symbols and tropes of this complex taboo system were drawn uniquely from the Batek's forest environment. However, as many Batek groups have now settled in villages and increasing flows of people, objects, images and ideas have entered the Batek's world, a wide variety of new signifiers are being brought into the *lawac* spectrum of referents, particularly those associated with angering the *Hala' Asal*, and causing the wrath of *Gobar* and *Dranuk*. New objects, sounds and activities including pharmaceuticals, shop-bought foods, clothes, perfumes and the noise of tourists are often used by the Batek as signifiers in 'tropes of fear'. For example, poachers' gun shots, miners' dynamite detonations and explosions from Malays fish-bombing are all said to mimic the sound of *Gobar's* thunder, thus invoking his fury in the form of violent storms. Both local and distant activities can enrage *Gobar* and *Dranuk* causing extreme weather conditions. For example, at a local level the Batek believe logging activities in their area have angered *Gobar* who has responded by increasing the frequency of thunder storms and changing weather patterns. Yet they also claim the catastrophic flooding and damage caused by 'Superstorm Sandy' in New York during December 2012 was caused by events which angered these deities, probably because of violent acts carried out in America or in another country by Americans. Any violent acts can invoke the retributive anger of these beings and extreme human violence, such as warfare, can provoke an extreme supernatural response. *Gobar's* wrath is no longer merely a comment on moral conditions within the forest camp but an increasingly manifest commentary on both global events and local landscape transformation as the endgame result of wider forces of globalization.

Globalization's most forcible impact upon the Batek has been the compulsory sedentism imposed on many Batek groups in villages on the forest fringes—to free up their customary land for conversion to plantations or other developments—and the corresponding rapidly-increasing flows of new objects, people and images into the Batek's world<sup>5</sup>. The Batek have reacted to these pressures by augmenting the symbolic boundaries between town/village (historically associated with Malays) and forest (associated

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<sup>5</sup> Forcible sedentism is the result of Malaysian land and resource-use policies and could be, somewhat simplistically, understood on the state or national level. However, it is global demand for timber, palm oil, rubber and other 'resources' which fundamentally shapes these policies. Thus local land transformations must be understood within a global context.

Malaysia." *Southeast Asian Studies* 40 (2002): 3–21. [Google Scholar]

with Batek). Forest/village boundaries have important implications for the religious practices, material culture and social action the Batek consider appropriate inside and outside the forest. All Batek communities express the opposition between these two worlds as being between forest and modernity<sup>6</sup>. The symbolic distinction between forest and village has meant incorporation of non-forest foods, objects and medicines into the Batek's taboo system and the re-imagination of forest foods and medicinal plants as powerful alternatives to shop-bought foods and bio-medicine. The Batek terms of *ji-hut* (to smell something) and *meni'* (odor) are important to understand in this context. These terms are often used to describe dangerous interactions between the forest between human and non-human worlds, but they increasingly concern the intermingling of objects between the forest and non-forest world. Ideas, beliefs and rules associated with the separation of the forest and non-forest worlds differ between Batek communities, and there are variances between ideal models for behavior and what is actually practiced. However, certain ideas are widely accepted among all Batek communities including the belief that the *Hala' Asal* [original superhuman beings] do not like the odors from towns like deodorants, perfumes, foods and other products because they have *meni' jebèc* (bad odors) which are dangerous like the smell of blood. Foods that many Batek say should be avoided being brought into the forest include rice, coffee, tea, sugar and tinned foods. All of these are shop-bought staples bought and consumed on a daily basis by Batek living in villages as well as those living in tourist areas. Though of course the Batek do bring these foods into the forest as hunting success can never be guaranteed and there are various ways of getting around these prohibitions such as ritual cleansing after consumption of shop-bought foods by drinking water from forest streams in bamboo sections used as drinking vessels. However, anything with a non-forest odor has the potential of offending *Gobar* and other *Hala' Asal*.

Forest foods are now often considered by many Batek—as well as neighboring Jahai and Mendriq groups to the north—as being extremely powerful sources of health and strength whilst shop-bought foods are increasingly associated with weakness, disease and death. Certain shop-bought foods such as canned sardines are considered by most groups to be harmful for pregnant women or even to be avoided at all costs. Some Batek say canned sardines are dangerous for pregnant women because the sardines are tightly packed in the cans. They maintain this means an unborn baby could become stuck inside the womb, like the sardines in the can, and the mother-to-be might experience difficulty in delivering the baby. This is similar to a Batek taboo on women eating pangolins during pregnancy, the prohibition this time connected to the animal's defensive tendency of rolling up into a tight ball when threatened, which again is seen as raising the analogous possibility of constriction impeding an easy birth. Furthermore, many Batek say 'modern' pharmaceuticals such as paracetamol or antibiotics should

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<sup>6</sup> The Batek describe many objects from outside the forest as 'modern' and also often refer to themselves as being modern. This is due to the clothes they wear, the fact that many of them now live in villages and because of their ownership of televisions, motorbikes and other 'modern' consumer products.

not be consumed after eating forest game animals with a strong odor of raw meat (*pel'èng*). Otherwise, the individual may suffer from a terrible disease or be the victim of punishment such as being struck by lightning or falling from a tree. Most Batek do not believe that pharmaceutical medicines such as paracetamol are ineffective or dangerous. In fact, they are often sought after and sometimes even given extra potency through the practice of *jampi* (spell incantation)<sup>7</sup>. It is the mixing of forest foods and medicines with ‘modern’ medicines that is usually the cause of danger and not the actual medicines themselves. Interestingly, fears about the dangers of ‘modern’ foods seem to be most prevalent in villages with the greatest interactions with Malays. In one particular village with excessively high levels of infant mortality and illness, many villagers associated death and illness with their reliance on shop-bought foods. These new rules, which are specifically concerned with the prohibition of mixing categories of foods and medicines, show a remarkable similarity to *lawac* rules concerned with the mixing of different categories of foods over the same fire or the mingling of odors that should be kept separate.

## 5. Zones of Awkward Engagement and Topophobia

Anthropologists such as Keith Basso<sup>(52)</sup> and Tim Ingold<sup>(53)</sup> who have helped theorize ‘world-building’ or ‘place-making’, as well as those working in the field of globalization studies such as Arjun Appadurai<sup>(54)</sup> and Anna Tsing<sup>(55)</sup> have frequently emphasized the importance of imagination and memory in their studies. ‘Place-making’ or ‘world-

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<sup>7</sup> *Jampi* spells can be learned in two ways. The first way is when the exact words for incantations are learned and memorized from an older person who already knows the particular spell. After learning a spell from another person the student cannot teach the spell to someone else until the original teacher has died. Furthermore, a period of time ranging from 10 to 15 years must be observed out of respect for the knowledge before the spell can be passed on. A second way of learning magico-religious practices (for instance, the words for *jampi* spells, the medicinal properties of plants and the songs for *kensings*) is from the forest directly. The Batek sometimes travel through the forest alone and occasionally, while sleeping on one of these solitary journeys, they are given magico-religious knowledge through *teween* (dreams or trancing). This kind of knowledge cannot be actively sought as that would be considered selfish and therefore *Tolah*. Rather one’s intentions in the forest must conform to Batek norms. One must move slowly and carefully through the forest with great respect. If the tracks of tigers or elephants—animals which the Batek give human-like attributes to—are encountered the Batek traveller must inform these animals where they are going to avoid confrontations.

<sup>(52)</sup> Keith Basso. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(53)</sup> Tim Ingold. *The Perception of the Environment*. Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 209–88. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(54)</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(55)</sup> Anna Tsing. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connections*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. xi–xiv. [Google Scholar]



building’ and processes of globalization are closely tied to identity formation: as places change, so too do identities. Globalization and place-making both involve dynamic interconnections, where imagination plays a key role in shaping how people think about themselves and their landscapes. Just as global flows of people, images, finance, media and technologies create links over vast distances—and in doing so compress perceptions of space and time—“place-based thoughts about the self lead commonly to thoughts of other things—other places, other people, other times, whole networks of associations that ramify unaccountably within the expanding spheres of awareness that they themselves engender. The experience of sensing places, then, is both thoroughly reciprocal and incorrigibly dynamic.”<sup>(56)</sup>, p. 107) Batek religious expressions of contemporary landscape change and increased global flows must be understood as being fundamentally connected to this dynamic associative reciprocity inherent within globalization. Their ‘place-based thoughts about the self’ are increasingly linked to wider associative networks of people and places. However, the reciprocity of symbol and identity stemming from global flows in the Batek’s contemporary world does not, unfortunately, reflect a mutual associative exchange of benefit. The reality is far from this and can be better described, to modify Anna Tsing’s phrase, as an ‘awkward engagement’.

For the Batek, a key outcome of their contact with globalized processes and the connected flows of people, objects and ideas into their territories has been the emergence of numerous ‘zones of awkward engagement’ and a corresponding augmentation of topophobia—fears relating to specific places and a general fear the forest is becoming a more dangerous place. ‘Zones of awkward engagement’ include: villages where the government has encouraged the Batek to settle in following displacement and deterritorialization from their own territories; specific ‘sacred sites’ that have been dramatically altered by outsiders’ activities or land transformation projects; and even the protected area of the Taman Negara national park due to the intrusive activities of noisy and sometimes dangerous outsiders, such as armed poachers. In this section, we shall look at each of these zones and how they have affected the Batek leading to the emergence of ‘tropes of fear’.

## 6. Landscape: Tropes of Sickness and Fear

The Batek often use the trope of the body when describing landscape and landscape degradation. Tropes of the body vary from description to description. Sometimes the Batek describe the forest as skin and the earth as the body. Lye describes in detail a warning she was given by a Batek shaman about the dangers of forest degradation where the forest was described as the veins and tendons of the Batek’s lives<sup>(57)</sup>. The

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<sup>(56)</sup> Keith Basso. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(57)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. “Tuck.” In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [Google Scholar]

Batek believe the forest keeps the earth at a suitably cool temperature by protecting it from the heat of the sun. They love the forest, its plants and animals but especially its quality of *coolness*. They have regularly commented on the unpredictability of the rain, fruit and honey seasons in recent years, which they blame on the overheating of the world due to deforestation. Some examples from my fieldwork carried out in 2012 help illustrate this more clearly. The first example occurred after visiting an area of Kelantan near the Aring River known as Blok 9 with a Batek friend, Tun<sup>8</sup>. When I first visited this area in 2008, it was the site of a Batek village but the following year it was transformed into a series of open-cast iron-ore mines by local Chinese entrepreneurs. The impact of the landscape's transformation to the Batek is clear from Tun's heartfelt description:

Look at our land [pointing towards the devastated landscape]. The earth is a body. Imagine it was your body. [He scratches at his arms and chest mimicking the action of a digger clawing at his body] We would become sick if we were treated this way, wouldn't we? The earth is sick now because the forest, its skin, has been stripped away. Without the forest it is getting too hot, and now it's being hurt by the mining too. (Tun, November 2012, Block 9)

Tun described landscape transformation linguistically and performatively through the tropes of bodily sickness and pain. Without the protective forest (skin) the earth is vulnerable to sickness and at the same time the body (earth) is being torn apart by development. This is typical of the tropes of fear to which the Batek recourse when discussing their experience of landscape transformations and global flows. In this way, local landscape change is linked to global climate change through a 'play of tropes' concerning sickness, the body and heat. In turn, these tropes are contextually linked to the gamut of referents associated with the master symbols of *Gobar* and *Dranuk*. The belief that the world is getting too hot and perhaps dying is a widespread fear among the Batek and other Orang Asli groups and is firmly connected to landscape transformations and recent changes to seasonal weather patterns. The Batek say forest destruction has angered *Gobar* and many Batek and other Orang Asli see current climatic changes as a sign of the onset of the world's end brought on by devastating human activities<sup>(58)</sup>. Within Batek cosmology heat is an important referent associated with sickness and disease whilst coolness signifies health and well-being<sup>(59)</sup>,<sup>(60)</sup>. The

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<sup>8</sup> The names of all Batek individuals mentioned in this article have been changed to protect their

<sup>(58)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. "Tuck." In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(59)</sup> Kirk Endicott. *Batek Negrito Religion: The Worldview and Rituals of a Hunting and Gathering People of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, Volume 68–82, pp. 163–169. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(60)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. "Tuck." In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang*,

Batek often contrast the coolness of the forest to the heat of villages, towns and plantations. The town/forest dichotomy has various ramifications. Towns and villages are associated with Malays; the forest with the Batek. Both zones are important identity markers. The forest is considered to be safe, except when intruded upon by dangerous ‘outsiders’; while towns are associated with danger and violence. In the current context of landscape transformation the Batek have witnessed the ripping apart of their forests, the bulldozing through of networks of logging roads, the carving up and reshaping of landscapes into terraces suitable for plantation species, and the planting of palm-oil and rubber mono-crops in endless uniform grids. It is hardly surprising they consider the world to be sick.

The following quote is from a conversation I had at another village in Kelantan with two elderly brothers, Dek and Bar Oon, who were much respected by other Batek for their knowledge of Batek history, landscapes and forest knowledge.

There are no original trees [‘kayu asal’] around here anymore. The gob [Malays and Chinese] have cut everything down [he points across the Lebir River]. We love [‘saying’] the forest and the original trees but now it has all gone. I miss/long for [‘ha-ip’] them. This is our land, the land of our parents and our ancestors, we love this land. How can we live without the forest? (Dek, December 2012, Macang)

Dek was particularly upset and made no effort to conceal his anger. He told me story after story about his family’s history and their links to the landscape. After he left, his brother signaled for me to close my notebook and said:

Close the book. That is enough for now. I can’t tell you more today, just a little at a time. I’m frightened of the gob [Malays]. They will get angry if they hear us. Just a little at a time. [I agree and ask if he thinks Dek, his brother, is okay.] He is hot, hot with anger, he is not frightened anymore. (Bar Oon, December 2012, Macang)

This dialogue contains several key tropes of fear:

Firstly, the fear of loss expressed through *ha-ip*, a word used when expressing feelings of longing for friends, relatives, game animals, fruit, and places which have not been seen or visited for a long period. The Batek say even certain birds and animals are said to express *ha-ip* through their songs and calls. In the above-conversation *ha-ip* expresses more than just longing, it is nostalgia of a past time when the landscape was covered in trees, and expresses hopelessness, the loss of something which cannot be regained. Both brothers were born before the outbreak of the Second World War and

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anonymity. New names were chosen by the individual Batek I cited.

*Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [Google Scholar]

remember when the Lebir, Aring, Ciku, Kceau, Relai and Relau River valleys were covered with forest. They also remember when their territories were first being opened through the construction of railways and roads. They told me how their relatives worked for the British and later Malay authorities to clear the land for the railways and main roads, something they would never have done if they knew how this would lead to the near-total destruction of the forests<sup>9</sup>.

Secondly, there is the fear of *gob* (outsiders), which the elder brother, Dek, has now overcome. Batek relations with Malays and other outsiders can be cordial, even friendly on occasions, however, historic experience has meant that commonly *gob* are to be feared and mistrusted. Within villages Batek are often reluctant to talk about a wide-range of issues, including local problems because of the proximity of Malays and the fear they will be punished by them if they hear them complaining about their situation. This fear and mistrust is firmly etched into the social memory of the Batek and other Orang Asli and stems from their history as victims of sporadic but repeated enslaving by the Malays and their ancestors. The enslaving of the Orang Asli's ancestors began in about the middle of the first millennia CE when Indianized polities were established on the coast of the Peninsular and continued until the 1920s when they were finally ended by the British colonial authorities<sup>(61), (62), (63)</sup>. Robert Dentan has convincingly argued how Orang Asli religions were shaped in this traumatic period during the “unpredictable raids by slavers from Hinduized states which represented themselves to their subjects as embodiments of a Hindu God, Siva the Destroyer” <sup>(64)</sup>, p. 172). He reasons the traumatic experience of centuries of repeated violence of slave raids fundamentally helped shape Orang Asli constructs of their thunder deity. Dentan uses the psycho-analytical concept of ‘learned helplessness’ within a historicized

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<sup>9</sup> During the 1920s Batek territories in Pahang and Kelantan were opened up to outsiders through the construction of the north-south railroad line. The railways construction led to an influx of Malays moving into areas where formerly only Batek or other Orang Asli communities lived and the rapid growth of towns like Gua Musang, Bertam, Manek Urai and Kuala Krai<sup>(65)</sup>.

<sup>(61)</sup> Kirk Endicott. “Batek History, Inter-ethnic relations, and sub-group dynamics.” In *Indigenous Peoples and the State: Politics, Land, and Ethnicity in the Malayan Peninsula and Borneo*. Edited by Robert L. Winzeler. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1997, pp. 30–50. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(62)</sup> Kirk Endicott. “The effects of slave raiding on the aborigines of the Malay Peninsula.” In *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*. Edited by Anthony Reid. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983, pp. 216–45. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(63)</sup> Robert Knox Dentan. *Overwhelming Terror: Love, Fear, Peace, and Violence among the Semai of Malaysia*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(64)</sup> Robert Knox Dentan. *Overwhelming Terror: Love, Fear, Peace, and Violence among the Semai of Malaysia*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(65)</sup> Kirk Endicott. “Batek History, Inter-ethnic relations, and sub-group dynamics.” In *Indigenous Peoples and the State: Politics, Land, and Ethnicity in the Malayan Peninsula and Borneo*. Edited by Robert L. Winzeler. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1997, pp. 30–50. [[Google Scholar](#)]

and globalized Durkheimian framework to argue that this violent, uncontrollable, and stupid deity is a personification of the violent dangerous slave-raiding state: “a nuanced and subtle symbolic interpretation of the impact of despotic states on relatively powerless egalitarian indigenes” <sup>(66)</sup>, p. 172). Historically the violence of slave raids was fundamental in shaping Batek cosmology and religion as well as their intense distrust and fear of ‘outsiders’. The Batek’s vivid use of *Gobar* in the contemporary period to increasingly personify the violence inherent in certain global flows is built upon these historical roots.

Thirdly, fear and danger is expressed via Dek being described as ‘hot’ with anger. As previously mentioned, heat is most often considered as dangerous. It can bring about sickness, even death. Batek social rules, in the form of *lawac* and *tolah* taboos, require that violence, anger, jealousy, bossiness, greed, selfishness and other possibly harmful emotions are suppressed. One consequence of this is that although the Batek often complain about their marginalized situation to each other (or visiting anthropologists) they would rarely if ever make an angry complaint to the Malaysian authorities or loggers and miners. This is not to say the Batek never inform the authorities of problems in their villages, they do, but complaints are always made in a calm and ‘cool’ manner. The belief that anger should be avoided at all costs is firmly entrenched in Batek socio-religious rules. Even showing one’s anger can provoke punishment by *Gobar*. The practice of interacting with Malays in such a peaceful manner is also related to past conflicts that characterized Orang Asli-Malay relations prior to the 1920s. It is also closely connected to the economic, social and political marginalization the Batek have experienced throughout the post-colonial period. Marginalization of the Orang Asli takes many forms but the heart of the problem stems from their lack of land rights. The entrenched fear and distrust of Malays coupled with a lack of land rights severely affects the types of political action the Batek can take when faced with problems and grievances.

## 7. Sacred Sites

Whilst the entire forest environment is considered ‘sacred’ by the Batek, certain places have particular importance, including sites of tree-burials; landscape features created by Batek culture heroes during the world’s creation; and caves, mountains and waterfalls often considered as home to various other-than-human beings. These other-than-human beings include usually benevolent spirits, mountain-dwelling *Bawak Gerai* (blood-thirsting, huge ape-like beings which the Batek describe as being like

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<sup>(66)</sup> Robert Knox Dentan. *Overwhelming Terror: Love, Fear, Peace, and Violence among the Semai of Malaysia*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. [Google Scholar]

‘King Kong’<sup>10</sup>), cave-dwelling *Sakai-Pangan*<sup>11</sup> (extremely dangerous tigers which can transform into humans)<sup>(67)</sup>, and forest-dwelling *Orang Pendek* or *Pé* (small human-like beings). ‘Sacred’ sites are neither places of pilgrimage or ritual performance. In some cases they mark the activities of culture-heroes’ exploits in the past and in other cases they mark the dwelling places of other-than-human beings which often become angered and dangerous if these places are polluted or destroyed.

One important site is situated on the Aring River near Baryen, a new Batek village just within the boundaries of Taman Negara. Baryen is composed mainly of Batek from a village called Blok 9 who relocated here because of iron-ore mining at the site of their village. On a bend of the Aring River not far from Baryen two huge boulders lie on the river bank. The Batek say this is the place where long ago a very powerful and dangerous shaman called Tak Kelambai encountered two rhinoceros. As soon as he saw the animals he pointed at them and they were instantly turned to stone becoming the two huge boulders on the river bank. There are many other sites in this area where the Batek say we can see animals and people who were turned to stone by the much-feared Tak Kelambai<sup>12</sup>. One is in the Lebir River where two large rounded rocks protrude from the river. The Batek say these are the breasts of a young Batek maiden who was petrified by the shaman whilst she was bathing in the river. Some Batek have told me these boulders have healing properties for women suffering from fertility problems. Landscape features are not only important geo-historical and religious markers but are often frequently visited sites that have continual importance in the Batek’s everyday lives.

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<sup>10</sup> Whenever I have asked the Batek to describe *Bawak Gerai* they always begin by saying they are like King Kong. When I have shown the Batek books on animals they always compare images of orang-utans and gorillas to these beings. Unlike *Gobar* who is never actually seen, many Batek say they, or someone they know, have encountered the *Bawak* on mountains. Likewise, many Batek claim to have seen *Sakai-Pangan* and the *Orang Pendek*. These encounters are always described as being frightening and involve the Batek fleeing from the area as soon as possible.

<sup>11</sup> The words Sakai and Pangan were both terms Malays used to refer to Orang Asli in the past. The derogatory term Sakai means ‘slave’ or ‘serf’ in Malay and has similar connotations to the word ‘nigger’. Pangan was sometimes used to mean ‘men of the forest’<sup>(68)</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Tak Kelambai has been described to me as a shaman who terrified the Batek and caused chaos in the forest in the distant past. He was eventually tricked by the Batek and forced to leave their area. He is said to be now trapped either underground or ‘far-away’, but he remains a menacing and ever-present reminder of how shamanic power can be misused with terrifying consequences.

<sup>(67)</sup> Diana Riboli. “Of Angry Thunders, Smelly Intruders and Human Tigers. Shamanic Representations of Violence and Conflict in Nonviolent Peoples: the Semang-Negrato (Malaysia).” In *Shamanism and Violence. Power, Repression and Suffering in Indigenous Religious Contexts*. Edited by Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. London: Ashgate Publishers, 2013, forthcoming. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(68)</sup> Diana Riboli. “Of Angry Thunders, Smelly Intruders and Human Tigers. Shamanic Representations of Violence and Conflict in Nonviolent Peoples: the Semang-Negrato (Malaysia).” In *Shamanism and Violence. Power, Repression and Suffering in Indigenous Religious Contexts*. Edited by Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. London: Ashgate Publishers, 2013, forthcoming. [[Google Scholar](#)]

Huge limestone outcrops dominate the landscapes in Pahang and Kelantan near Gua Musang (a small town situated just across from the Pahang border in Kelantan) and are important places in the Batek's religious landscape. The Batek say many of these incredible rock formations were formed by culture heroes in the distant past. Until recently, these giant rocks jutted out from the forest canopy but they now tower over the enormous FELDA oil-palm estates that stretch across the land. In the Ciku River valley, several of these outcrops are important sites in a story mapping the historic movements of two brothers and their grandmother as they travelled across Kelantan to Pahang. Due to their grandmother's age, the small group regularly stopped to build *haya* (lean-to shelters) so their grandmother could rest. The *haya* were then magically transformed into the limestone hills and the caves within them, thus engraving their adventure into the landscape for time immemorial. Even the *haloi* palm leaves used to build the shelters metamorphosed into boulders. The Ciku River valley was previously home to a Batek group who were forced to relocate to the village of Post Lebir when the area was deforested and converted to palm-oil plantations, and holds many other collective memories for the Batek of Kelantan. However, nowadays the landscape is rarely traversed anymore meaning the stories connected to places are recounted less and less and only the older generation is fully aware of their socio-cultural significance.

As resources—most commonly, land, timber and mineral deposits—are appropriated by the state and private enterprise, forests are replaced by palm-oil and rubber plantations, mines, roads and other development projects forcing forest-dwellers to relocate, or be relocated, to other areas. A major effect has been the impact on indigenous people's connections with their ancestral landscapes. Deforestation of landscapes equates with deterritorialization of people; and consequently transforms the meanings attached to specific places. As forests are converted into mono-crop palm-oil plantations, the continual acts of revisiting which Henri Lefebvre, terms "rhythms of being"<sup>(69)</sup> and Yi Fuan Tuan calls "fields of care"<sup>(70)</sup> which result in social and emotional attachment to place disappear. As people are deterritorialized from landscapes, so too is important socio-cultural knowledge. The now deterritorialized fields of meaning often embodied religious and historical significance that was concretely embedded within people's identities. As Lye Tuck Po has noted, transformations of forests into oil-palm plantations and other development projects are literally 'removing the humanity from the landscape.' <sup>(71)</sup>, p. 30) This means landscapes are transformed into areas similar to what Marc Augé has termed 'non-places'—areas or spaces which cannot be defined as 'relational' or 'historical'—places stripped of meanings associated with identity <sup>(72)</sup>,

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<sup>(69)</sup> Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(70)</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(71)</sup> Lye Tuck-Po. "Tuck." In *Changing Pathways: Forest degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(72)</sup> Marc Augé. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, 2nd ed. London and New York:

pp. 77–78). Palm-oil plantations are extreme examples of ‘non-places’, stripped clear of virtually all biological diversity and socio-cultural meaning.

## 8. Topophobia

Until the very recent past most sacred sites, including the homes of the above-mentioned other-than-human beings, were inaccessible to anyone apart from the Batek. As landscapes have been opened up to tourism and development, outsiders have increasingly begun to visit them and radically transform them through polluting acts including graffiti, littering, noise and defecation. As outsiders move closer and closer to Batek villages, and forest cover is reduced year after year, certain places considered as important by the Batek are now situated on the periphery of the forest and are visited by non-Batek outsiders. The interactions of Batek and outsiders are often cause of friction and can radically transform the meanings the Batek give particular places. It is important to document how these very real changes and transformations have given rise to changes within the Batek’s own descriptions of their world.

Though the Batek have kept the location of many ‘sacred’ sites secret, certain places, including those in close proximity to tourist centers, Malay villages and logging camps, have been impossible to protect. The Batek complain outsiders accidentally agitate the dwelling places of non-human beings through their intrusive activities. Sometimes places such as waterfalls—described as *berdet* (beautiful) by the Batek—are located near Batek villages where families would take children for day trips to relax and play in. However, many of these places are now considered as polluted or too dangerous to visit because of the presence and activities of outsiders. During my research, I have documented the transformation of several much-loved waterfalls and rock shelters that have been tainted by outsiders’ activities. A waterfall that villagers from Sungai Rual in Kelantan<sup>13</sup> would regularly visit until just a few years ago is now considered so dangerous that only one man from the village would take me and fellow anthropologist Dr. Diana Riboli to document how it had changed. All other villagers we asked were literally terrified of going there. Even the man that took us there remained nervous and silent until he began describing his memories of how the place was before outsiders began to visit it. The Batek claim the waterfall became dangerous after local Malays and immigrant workers began visiting the spot, littering the area and covering rock faces with graffiti. Many women from Sungai Rual said they were frightened of going to the waterfall because they feared being sexually abused, raped or even killed by outsiders. However, it is not only the physical fear of encountering outsiders that has

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<sup>13</sup> This is a village composed of Jahai, Mendriq and Batek who were regrouped here by the government as their territories were logged over and converted to plantations. The villagers now often refer to themselves as Menraq.



led to heightened fear and anguish about these places but fear that spirits residing within these places have become angered and therefore dangerous. Many Batek believe the anger of spirits residing in these formerly beautiful places is directed at all humans, Batek included. Some Batek say angry spirits can disorientate visitors making it impossible for them to leave the place.

Riboli has described the impact of tourism at another place, Gua Telinga, a cave situated close to Taman Negara's entrance at Kuala Tahan. In 2005, the Batek told her this cave was occupied by *Sakai-Pangan* but on a return visit in 2006 these beings had reportedly fled the cave due to noisy tourist visits. Several years later in 2010 Riboli further discussed the cave with the Batek, who told her there had been unusually violent thunderstorms over the last few months. They also described the extremely unusual and frightening behavior of an old Batek man who had 'gone crazy' and threatened to kill everyone in his camp. Shocked by the old-man's actions the Batek immediately abandoned the camp the next day. Strangely, the night following Riboli's discussion a section of the cave collapsed blocking the caves entrance to any more visitors<sup>(73)</sup>.

Topophobic fears also stem from the activities of Thai eaglewood collectors and heavily-armed Thai, Cambodian and Vietnamese poachers who now roam deep within the Taman Negara national park. Many Batek residing along the Tembeling River on the southern edge of Taman Negara, and also Batek living on the northern fringe near Kuala Koh, have described their fears of poachers. Many Batek are now frightened of venturing into large areas of the forest due to fear of encountering poachers and so prefer to stay on the edges of the forest. Many stories circulate about the violence of these outsiders. In one story the Batek say that after two Thai eaglewood collectors found a large supply one killed the other out of greed. Another story concerns a young female backpacker from Europe or America who disappeared in Taman Negara. Many Batek (and Malays) say she was probably raped and killed by a group of poachers. The Batek also claim poaching activities have made tigers and elephants increasingly aggressive. Many Batek have told me how elephants actively seek revenge after one of their companions has been killed by poachers. The Malaysian government and various NGOs have made great efforts to combat illegal poaching in Taman Negara and elsewhere. The Batek and the Wildlife Department have told me that within Taman Negara both forest rangers and army patrols are actively policing the park. Local police also regularly set up road blocks outside the park to stop and search illegal poachers. However, policing the park is an incredibly difficult job due to the size and feasibility of patrolling such a large area, the numbers of poachers involved, and the fact that poachers are heavily-armed.

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<sup>(73)</sup> Diana Riboli. "Of Angry Thunders, Smelly Intruders and Human Tigers. Shamanic Representations of Violence and Conflict in Nonviolent Peoples: the Semang-Negrto (Malaysia)." In *Shamanism and Violence. Power, Repression and Suffering in Indigenous Religious Contexts*. Edited by Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. London: Ashgate Publishers, 2013, forthcoming. [[Google Scholar](#)]

The Batek have reacted to deforestation, plantation conversion, resource extraction and the rising flows of people and other concomitant pressures of globalization on their landscape by increasingly using tropes of fear to describe specific places, and often the forest in general. Perhaps most revealing is the Batek's topophobia, their total reluctance to return to certain locations which they consider as too dangerous to visit. These fears have radically altered how the Batek perceive the forest. It is no longer a 'perfect and balanced realm'<sup>(74)</sup>. The activities of violent and disruptive outsiders mean fear and danger—previously associated with towns—are now creeping into the forest.

## 9. Village Life and Sly Civility

As forests are converted to palm-oil plantations the Malaysian government has encouraged the Batek to settle in forest-fringe villages and assimilate into the Malay segment of Malaysian society, which involves intense pressure on the Orang Asli to convert to Islam. This means the Batek have been increasingly forced to permanently co-inhabit two radically different socio-cultural worlds, their forest home and the village world (most commonly associated the Malays). Islam is seen by the Orang Asli as a defining feature of 'Malayness', particularly concerning the religious acts of praying, manners of dressing, and food habits. From the Batek's perspective, converting to Islam is tantamount to becoming Malay. In the Malay language, this process is referred to as *Masuk Melayu* (to enter or become Malay).

Operating between two culturally different worlds has been common for minority indigenous people of Southeast Asia (and South Asia) for over a millennium. In dealing with traders and others, indigenous minority peoples have needed to be competent in the socio-cultural worlds of their more powerful neighbors and historically people like the Batek have been adept at operating linguistically, socially, culturally and economically in both their forest homelands and dominant state society. However, in the past these groups were always able to retreat to their forest homes beyond the gaze of the state and dealings with Malays and other outsiders would have been episodic. For Batek living in resettlement villages and camps located near tourist centers, retreat is no longer an option as there is simply not enough forest left.

In many Orang Asli villages, mosques have been constructed by the governmental agency JAKIM (the Department of Islamic Development) who also run regular events to promote Islam in Orang Asli communities. In 1996, the Malaysian government began offering RM10000 (\$3,220) to Muslim missionaries who married Orang Asli women. Other incitements to persuade Muslim missionaries to live in Orang Asli villages include monthly payments of RM1000 (\$322) and a 4 × 4 vehicle<sup>(75)</sup>. Currently,

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<sup>(74)</sup> Diana Riboli. "Ghosts and Paracetamol: Batek and Jahai Shamanism in a Changing World." *Shaman* 18 (2010): 99–108. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(75)</sup> "Incentives for Marrying and Converting Orang Asli." *The Star Online*. 27 June 2006. <http://>

JAKIM continues to organize programs to promote Islam in Batek villages as do other Islamic organizations such as the International Islamic University of Malaysia (Universiti Antarabangsa Islam Malaysia, UAIM). During a recent visit to the Batek village of Post Lebir eighty students from UAIM stayed in the Batek village Post Lebir for one week as part of an “Orang Asli Development Project: Summer Camp” organized by a university club. The Malay students organized various activities and games for Batek children in the village each morning, prepared halal food for the villagers and split up into small groups in the afternoon to visit all the households in the village with the aims of befriending the Batek and teaching them how to pray and follow Islamic rites properly. These kinds of highly intrusive activities are becoming increasingly regular in Orang Asli villages across the Peninsula. Often Islamic students, *Ustaz* (Islamic teachers), local politicians, JAKOA officers, school teachers and other visitors have highly patronizing and paternalistic attitudes in their dealings with the Orang Asli and show little understanding of local cultural practices. Although the motives of the above-mentioned students may be fairly innocent and good-natured, as it was evident they wanted to help the Batek, they must also be seen against a back-drop of highly coercive sustained attempts at Islamizing the Orang Asli and through the Orang Asli’s longer historic experiences as victims of slaving raids.

In Kelantan, many Batek, Mendriq and Jahai communities nominally converted to Islam during the 1980s after an extremely coercive campaign of proselytism and are now considered as Muslims by the Malays. This means they are obliged to behave according to Malay Muslim norms when in the presence of Malays. However, beyond the gaze of Malays, the Batek show absolutely no interest in Islam.

There are many ways in which the Batek appear to conform to the expectations of Malay norms of behavior. Modes of conformation include Batek women in villages often wearing the Malay *hijab*; concealment of the consumption of *haram* forest animals; children attending village schools praying daily; and villagers using a Malay name in any dealings with Malays. Occasionally, when Malay dignitaries or Malays working for the Department of Islamic Development (Jabatan Kemaajuan Islam—JAKIM) visit villages, the Batek will join in cultural performances in acts of collective praying and processions. Within Batek homes framed Islamic prayers written in Arabic script are often hung on the wall of front rooms as a display of religious affiliation to please Malay visitors. This has meant life within certain villages superficially resembles that of a Malay village. However, the reality is far more complicated and this complexity has important ramifications for Batek religion. These acts and performances of conformity can be seen as conscious strategies in the sense that they are calculated attempts of conflict avoidance and are also sometimes used to win material or financial gains from visiting Malays.

These performances are enacted to avoid confrontational situations with Malays and to maintain cordial or civil relations with them in what, to use Homi Bhabha’s terms,

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[/thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2006/6/27/nation/14660015&sec=nation](http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2006/6/27/nation/14660015&sec=nation) (accessed

are acts of ‘sly civility’ or ‘mimicry’<sup>(76)</sup>. Bhabha’s concepts of ‘sly civility’ and ‘mimicry’ describe subtle interactions between the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha states that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference”<sup>(77)</sup>, p. 86). The desire for the colonized to resemble the colonizer always necessitates a slightly distorted doubling, never an exact mirroring. For if the colonized truly became identical to the colonizer, the ideological assumption of the colonizers superiority would disappear. When used by the colonized, ‘sly civility’ and ‘mimicry’ involve deliberate and exaggerated copying of language, culture and manners which often involve a mockery of the colonizer. Alberto Gomes has described Orang Asli ‘sly civility’ as resulting from the imbalanced power relations between the Malays and the Orang Asli. It is used by the Orang Asli as a means of operating between two social universes with different sets of rules and norms<sup>(78)</sup>.

The Bateks’ involvement with Islam means their traditional practices and way of life have been completely marginalized and driven underground. Daily meals within villages normally consist of rice and canned sardines. However, occasionally the Batek eat forest game such as monkeys, siamangs, gibbons, and turtles. Due to fear of Malays witnessing them eating these *haram* foods, they are usually either eaten (by men) within the forest during collecting and hunting trips or after dark with families in the village behind closed doors. Animals brought back to the village are concealed within bags and bones, skin and fur are immediately buried. In most villages situated outside Taman Negara men use scooters and cars to access areas of remaining forest where they collect eaglewood, rattan and other forest products which they then sell on to *toukay* (Chinese or Malay middlemen). In the past women would also access the forest regularly and contribute equally to the household economy<sup>(79)</sup>. However, as areas of the forest containing economic resources are no longer within walking distance women spend most of their time within villages caring for children. This has led to important gendered divisions emerging within Batek village communities including the marginalization of women as economic partners within the household unit and severe limiting of their mobility. Women’s mobility has been further reduced due to increased fear of sexual harassment and rape by Malay villagers or immigrant plantation workers who often live close by.

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on 28 November 2012).

<sup>(76)</sup> Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(77)</sup> Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(78)</sup> Alberto Gomes. “Civility, ‘Double Life’ and Interethnic Relations: Orang Asli (Malaysian Aborigines and Malays in Malaysia.” 2008, unpublished paper. [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>(79)</sup> Kirk Endicott, and Karen Endicott. *The Headman was a Woman: The Gender Egalitarian Batek*

To recap, the Batek's religious life has been transformed in several ways due to sedentary living. Firstly, as previously noted, a major impact of village life has been the augmentation of symbolic boundaries delimiting appropriate social action within the forest and the village. Secondly, the Batek have been forced to act like Malays within villages, often in acts of 'sly civility'. And thirdly, congruous to this 'sly civility' but not simply stemming from it, is the way the Batek are unwilling to perform their own religious rituals in the presence of Malays. Due to the importance of the blood ritual—needed to appease *Gobar* and *Dranuk* following storms—the Batek will perform this ritual in villages quietly if they believe there are no Malays present. However, the Batek will not perform *Kensings* (singing, dancing and trancing ceremonies) in villages as they believe these rituals must be carried out deep within the forest well away from any outsiders. Normally *Kensings* should be carried out several times a year to please the *Hala' Asal* but most Batek living in villages have not participated in these ceremonies for many years due to the constraints of sedentary life.

The extent of the fear of *gob* varies from village to village and depends on local circumstances and history. In villages where there have been violent encounters or threats of violence in the recent past, fear of *gob* is often highly charged. One such village is the previously mentioned resettlement village of Sungai Rual, where in 1993 a group of Orang Asli men from the village killed three Malay men and wounded two others following an argument over land<sup>(80)</sup>. This event was well documented in the national media and became known as the 'Jeli Incident'. It is an extremely rare example of Orang Asli violence. While Sungai Rual is home to a mixture of Orang Asli from the Jahai, Batek and Menraq ethnic groups it seems only Jahai men were involved in this incident. However, due to the situational nature of Orang Asli ethnicity the question of whether the men involved were Jahai, Batek or Mendriq is somewhat irrelevant. In Sungai Rual levels of child mortality and poverty are extremely high, sickness is widespread and stories filled with 'tropes of fear' regularly circulate the village. One such story concerns the fear that local Malays have been using black magic to curse the Orang Asli and cause sickness. In another story, a terrifying headless ghost reportedly killed a man in the village in broad daylight. The inhabitants have no source of regular income and the local economy is based upon men foraging for forest products to collect and sell to middle-men. Due to deforestation men must drive for hours to find areas of forest with remaining resources. The local authorities have opened an *Asram* (hostel) in the village where Orang Asli children can get free-meals if they stay and learn about Islam. Due to extreme poverty, some parents have chosen to send their children to the *Asram* so at least they will be fed. These factors are clearly connected with the topophobic atmosphere of the village and the prevalence of 'tropes of fear'. Many women in this village frequently enter painful and traumatic *teween* trance states.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Batek refer to both lucid dreams and trances as *teween*. This is a common activity that

of *Malaysia*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2008. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(80)</sup> Alberto Gomes. *Modernity and Malaysia: Settling the Menraq Forest Nomads*. New York: Rout-

The impact of sedentary life and Malay attempts of proselytism on the Batek must be seen as highly ambiguous and involves a dialectic whereby as everyday practices and rituals have been driven underground there has been a corresponding augmentation of the Batek's belief in the importance of the forest and its religiosity.

## 10. Media Imagery and Global Fears

Many Batek living in villages outside the forest have televisions in their homes and those living in Taman Negara often get the chance to watch television at tourist restaurants near the park entrance. Increased access to technology and media has had important effects upon Batek religious beliefs. They are well aware of global events and frequently discuss natural catastrophes and wars they hear about through the media. The Batek indigenize these catastrophic world events, interpreting them in the framework of their own cosmology, often through tropes of fear. They do not distinguish between natural and man-made catastrophes in the way I have just done here. Like many indigenous groups, the Batek do not have a straightforward nature/culture dichotomy. During research I conducted in 2008, the Batek often talked about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They believed these wars could lead to even more terrible consequences due to the huge quantities of blood being spilt on the earth. They said the smell of this blood would reach *Gobar* and *Dranuk* angering them and lead them to cause catastrophic storms and flooding as a punishment. Several Batek expressed their belief the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were a kind of divine punishment for Muslims because of past offences (such as the historical enslaving of the Orang Asli). Yet they also believed the flooding and destruction in New Orleans was a punishment against the Americans due to the bloodshed they caused in these very same places.

The Batek interpreted the terrible Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 as the consequence of *Gobar* and *Dranuk's* anger due to Indonesians breaking certain *lawac* or *tolah* taboos. Batek religious beliefs and cosmology are both fluid and dynamic: stories transform in interesting ways as they circulate throughout the Batek area and beyond. In regard to the tsunami story, which taboo was broken depends on who is telling the story. One Batek *bidan* (mid-wife) explained to me that the Tsunami was caused by *Gobar* because in Aceh and other places people were laughing at animals and breaking other *lawac* and *tolah* taboos. A very interesting variation of this story was recounted to

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most Batek can do and is different from the trance states where *Hala'* shaman can transform into the flora and fauna of the forest. In *teween* states the Batek claim they make 'soul journeys' during which they visit places and friends in the forest. Usually these trances are peaceful and enjoyable but they can be distressing. As the forest can no longer be visited physically, due to the above-mentioned constraints on women's mobility, they have responded by increasingly making these soul-journeys to the forest to 'visit' places and friends.

ledge, 2007. [Google Scholar]

Diana Riboli by a young Batek man currently training to become a *hala*' shaman. In this version, trans-national flows are emphasized even more vividly. To quote Riboli:

[He] explained that the tsunami was a terrible punishment sent by Gobar, whose rage had been incurred by the worst offence: the purposeful pouring of menstrual blood into the water of a river or the sea. Together with his friends and relatives, the *halak* explained that some poor Indonesian girl must have been hired as a housemaid in Dubai or Saudi Arabia and had probably decided to take a revenge on her cruel employer for the many abuses and injuries she had suffered by using black magic. They believed she had probably gone to the sea and thrown in a concoction of her menstrual blood mixed with other things, and the consequences of her act had grown out of proportion. Her pain, suffering and rage along with her menstrual blood, transported by strong sea currents, tried to go back to her country of origin: Indonesia. When the menstrual blood crossed the sea close to Malaysia, Gobar smelled it and, offended, but also struck by the attempt and the girl's suffering, transformed it into a devastating force which, combined with the powerful black magic, exploded as soon as it came close to Sumatra. <sup>(81)</sup>, pp. 16–17)

All versions of the story interpret the catastrophe as being caused by the breaking of taboos with consequent supernatural punishment in the form of the devastating tsunami. This interpretation is fairly straightforward as the Batek consider any transgression of the moral order must result in such a punishment. However, as Riboli has noted, the global themes within the story are particularly interesting and need unpacking: the suffering of the Indonesian maid working in the Middle East (a common tragic story repeated regularly in the Malaysian media); Indonesian black-magic (which is widely feared in Malaysia); and the transnational nature of the tsunami's destruction<sup>(82)</sup>. It is these trans-national elements that give us insights into the Batek's problematic confrontation with globalization. As I have already described in earlier sections of this paper, the Batek's encounters with the processes of contemporary globalization have frequently been violent and traumatic. The Batek's interpretation of the Tsunami, as being Gobar's punishment for an act that involved throwing the most dangerous substance, menstrual blood, directly into the ocean (a place which

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<sup>(81)</sup> Diana Riboli. "Of Angry Thunders, Smelly Intruders and Human Tigers. Shamanic Representations of Violence and Conflict in Nonviolent Peoples: the Semang-Negrto (Malaysia)." In *Shamanism and Violence. Power, Repression and Suffering in Indigenous Religious Contexts*. Edited by Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. London: Ashgate Publishers, 2013, forthcoming. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(82)</sup> Diana Riboli. "Of Angry Thunders, Smelly Intruders and Human Tigers. Shamanic Representations of Violence and Conflict in Nonviolent Peoples: the Semang-Negrto (Malaysia)." In *Shamanism and Violence. Power, Repression and Suffering in Indigenous Religious Contexts*. Edited by Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. London: Ashgate Publishers, 2013, forthcoming. [Google Scholar]

transcends all national boundaries) combines multiple global elements (Malaysia, Indonesia, the Middle East, immigrant labor, a transnational catastrophe) and translates them through local cosmology. Riboli comments the “Batek could not explain who was supposed to be the real target of Gobar’s punishment. It had certainly not been directed at the Batek, or the rest of Malaysian population. It had perhaps been directed at the girl, her family and social group, as well as her vicious employer somewhere in Dubai or Saudi Arabia” <sup>(83)</sup>, p. 17). This uncertainty reflects the uncontrollable aspects of Gobar’s rage and stupidity but also the unfathomable and destructive aspects of the Batek’s experience of globalization.

## 11. Conclusions: Globalization, Fear, Anger and Destruction

The Batek’s environment has been radically transformed in a remarkably short period since logging began in the early 1970s. Forests have become logged-over then converted into palm-oil estates and landscapes have been opened up via the infrastructure developments of roads, railways and communications and media technologies to global flows of migrant workers, poachers, tourists, media imagery and objects. The Batek’s experience of these rapid and often violent transformations has been particularly traumatic. Their fears are by no means irrational; they make sense and are well-placed.

The Batek have witnessed the ripping apart of their environment, the continual stripping of their forested homelands and voracious extraction of resources at unprecedented rates. Landscape changes coupled with the Batek’s heightened anxiety to the earth overheating has meant the coolness of the forest—which the Batek associate with well-being and health—is held in opposition to the insufferable heat of tarmacked roads, villages and palm-oil plantations. As landscapes have been transformed and the Batek have been pushed aside they have become acutely aware of their fragile legal position and lack of land rights. They have been given virtually no monetary compensation for any resources found within their customary territories<sup>15</sup> and have been pressured into settling only later to be resettled again. In resettlement villages,

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<sup>15</sup> Kirk and Karen Endicott reported the Batek were given about RM3,000 (at the time equivalent to about US\$1,000) for some Durian trees that were cut down when a plantation was built on the upper Aring<sup>(84)</sup>. The Batek are normally given no economic compensation for their resources when land is logged and converted to plantations or mines.

<sup>(83)</sup> Diana Riboli. “Of Angry Thunders, Smelly Intruders and Human Tigers. Shamanic Representations of Violence and Conflict in Nonviolent Peoples: the Semang-Negrto (Malaysia).” In *Shamanism and Violence. Power, Repression and Suffering in Indigenous Religious Contexts*. Edited by Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. London: Ashgate Publishers, 2013, forthcoming. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(84)</sup> Kirk Endicott, and Karen Endicott. *The Headman was a Woman: The Gender Egalitarian Batek of Malaysia*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2008. [Google Scholar]



they have been subjected to aggressive proselytism. Excluded from political processes, they are forced to live in a world governed by people they have not elected and who they do not trust. While valuable resources like timber and mineral wealth have been extracted, the remaining areas of forested lands have been invaded by heavily-armed international poachers and noisy intrusive tourists. Globalization has also meant an influx of new objects, technologies and images into the Batek's world including an array of global images depicting an extremely violent, dangerous and unstable world. The Batek have reacted to their real and virtual exposure to global violence and the violence of globalization by increasingly expressing their anxieties through 'tropes of fear'. These tropes are primarily used to describe the radical transformations of their immediate environment and to give voice to their topophobia of certain places, which are now actively avoided due to the activities of dangerous outsiders. There has also been a growing fear of the forest in general as it becomes increasingly dangerous due to the activities of poachers deep within the Taman Negara national park. Despite the violence of the transformations the Batek face—to which their tropes of fear bear eloquent witness—their religious cosmology has shown a remarkable robustness and an impressive ability to incorporate whatever global flows come its way.

The Batek articulate landscape change through 'tropes of fear' and incorporate what are at first analysis seemingly unrelated global flows and changes into their *lawac* taboo system. These 'tropes of fear' and the *lawac* system are fluid figurative devices connected to the shifting multi-vocal symbol of *Gobar*, which uncannily brings together disparate global phenomena. While in the past, the multi-vocal symbol of *Gobar* signified the violence of the slave-raiding state, he now can correlate with the devastating power of globalization, a transformed potential of meaning which the tsunami story dramatically illustrates. In Riboli's analysis of the story, she states that "the abuse and violence were so extreme that the consequences enacted by other-than-human-persons somehow mirrored the violent acts perpetrated by humans" <sup>(85)</sup>, p. 17). There is certainly a 'mirroring' or symbolic 'doubling' occurring in the Batek's magico-realist interpretations of catastrophes like the tsunami. However, it seems that rather than these interpretations being a mirror of human violence, they could best be understood as horrific kaleidoscopic refractions where multiple forms of violence—human, environmental and supernatural—collide, reflect and magnify each other in grotesque ways. Rather than pinning down the signification of their symbolism to one particular meaning perhaps they should be seen as texts-in-motion, a 'play of tropes' working at multiple levels, but which must be understood from the Batek's perspective as front-line witnesses to the environmental destruction that has unfolded concomitantly with a dramatic increase in the often frightening flows of globalization.

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<sup>(85)</sup> Diana Riboli. "Of Angry Thunders, Smelly Intruders and Human Tigers. Shamanic Representations of Violence and Conflict in Nonviolent Peoples: the Semang-Negrto (Malaysia)." In *Shamanism and Violence. Power, Repression and Suffering in Indigenous Religious Contexts*. Edited by Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. London: Ashgate Publishers, 2013, forthcoming. [Google Scholar]

Globalization encompasses a wide variety of seemingly disparate phenomena and processes including technological change, large movements of people and rapid flows of capital and media. New social meanings emerge as these phenomena dynamically interact with each other and with the mechanisms of development and nation-building. The tropes and symbols the Batek use to describe their experiences of the changes wrought by globalization are more than what Manfred Steger has termed the ‘discursive dimension’ of globalization; the ‘ideologically charged narratives’ with which people frame the ways globalization is discussed<sup>(86)</sup>. For while Batek ‘tropes of fear’ and topophobia are interesting examples of the ‘plethora of stories that define, describe, and analyze’ globalization<sup>(87)</sup>, they also demonstrate the Batek’s acute awareness and fears of transnational flows. In this way, they offer compelling insights into both phenomenological and socio-political aspects of globalization, particularly of how disenfranchised marginalized groups experience global power.

## Abbreviations

|       |  |
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| DWNP  | Department of Wildlife and National Parks  |
| FELDA | The Federal Land Development Authority   |
| JAKOA | Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli Malaysia (the Department for Orang Asli Development) |
| JAKIM | Jabatan Kemajuan Islam (the Department of Islamic Development)                   |
| NTFP  | Non Timber Forest Product  |

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<sup>(86)</sup> Manfred B. Steger. *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. [Google Scholar]

<sup>(87)</sup> Manfred B. Steger. *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press,

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