6. Property, power and conflict among the Batek of Malaysia

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Introduction

This chapter is a description and discussion of the ideas and practices of the Batek De' of Malaysia concerning the rights of people over material things.[1] It also explores the political concomitants of Batek views of property. I make limited comparisons with other Semang (Malayan Negrito) groups when they shed light on the Batek material.

The Batek De' are a dialect group of Semang inhabiting the watershed of the Lebir river in the interior of the state of Kelantan in Peninsular Malaysia (see Map 6.1).[2] The Semang are distinguishable from the other populations of the Malay Peninsula in their 'negroid' physical features, which include dark skin, curly hair and broad, flat noses. The language of the Batek De' is in the Mon Khmer family, but it also contains numerous loan words from Malay, an Austronesian language. The Batek population in 1975-6 was about 300, of which roughly 200 were nomadic foragers and traders of forest produce. The nomadic Batek had access to approximately 1870 square kilometers of rain forest, giving them a population density of about one person per 9.3 square kilometers.

The area inhabited by the nomadic Batek until 1976 was almost entirely covered with primary and old secondary rain forest. In recent years, however, the area has been subject to intensive logging, and it is likely that by 1990 little or no primary forest will be left outside the national park (Taman Negara) (Endicott 1982). Before the Second

1. For additional discussion of Batek ideas of rights to land and resources, see K. Endicott and K.L. Endicott (1987).

2. The information on the Batek is based on eighteen months of fieldwork done in three field trips in 1971-2, 1975-6 and 1981. I am grateful to the National Institute of Mental Health (U.S.A.) for financing the first field trip (Predoctoral Fellowship no. 7FOI MH 33054-OlA2) and to the Australian National University for supporting the second two. I also wish to thank the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli for permission to do the research and my wife Karen, who accompanied me in 1975--6, for her help and ideas.

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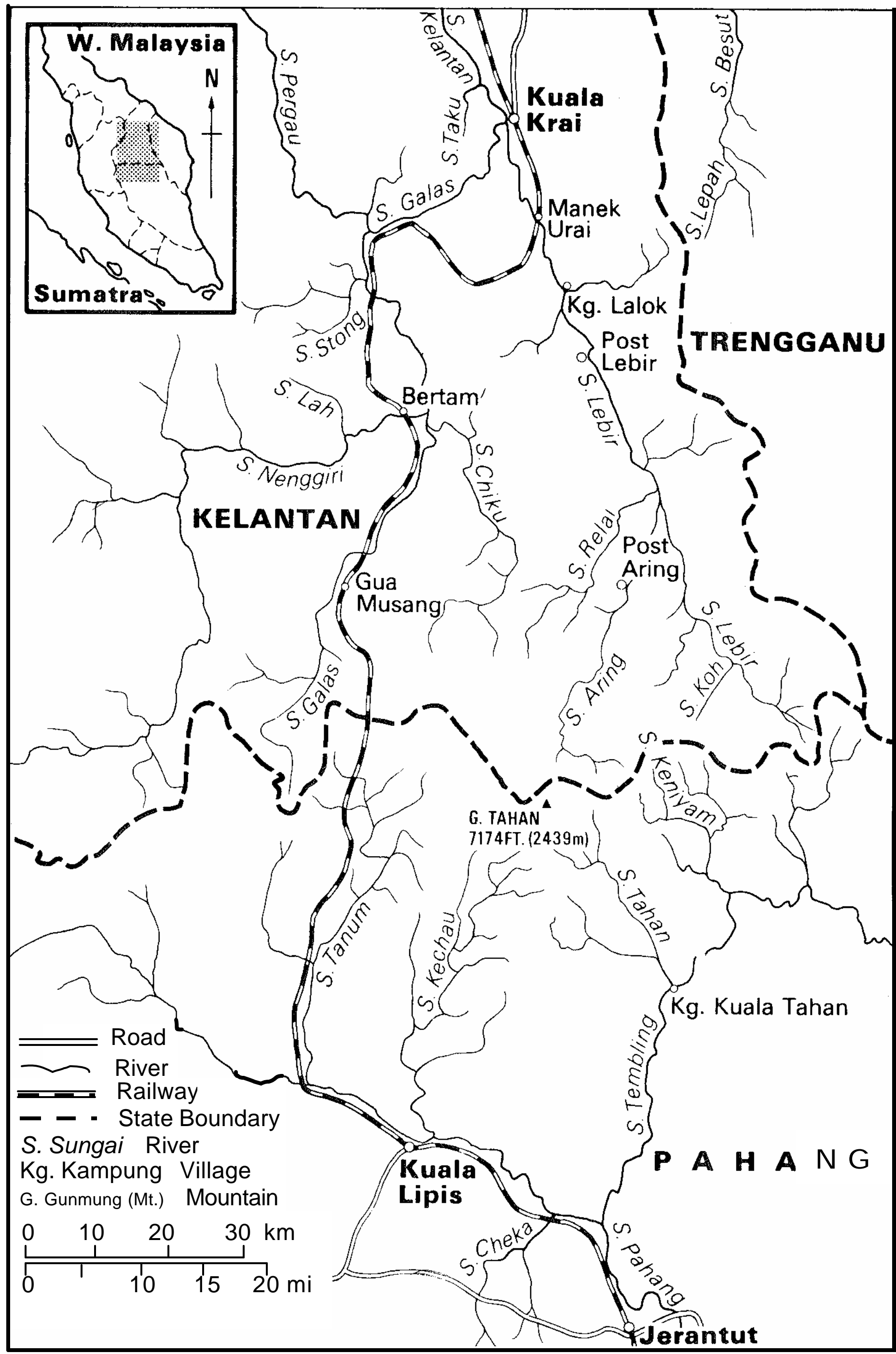

Map 6.1: The Batek area

World War, there were numerous villages of Malay farmers scattered along the Lebir and Aring rivers, but these people were resettled by the government in 'new villages' on the lower Lebir soon after the war ended, as a means of protecting them from communist insurgents who were based in the deep forest. The departure of the Malays opened up a larger area for exploitation by the Batek and made available many domesticated fruit orchards that had been planted by the Malays, but it also removed a source of cultivated crops and manufactured goods, as the Malay farmers had once supplied such things in return for forest produce or work in their gardens.

The economy of the nomadic Batek is very complex, combining hunting, gathering, the collection and trade of forest products, and the occasional small-scale planting of crops (Endicott 1984). It is based on the exploitation of wild foods, most importantly wild yams (*Dioscorea* spp.), fruit, and small game, such as monkeys and gibbons, which they kill with blowpipes and poisoned darts. But the Batek also engage energetically in trading forest products, such as rattan and fragrant woods, with itinerant Malay traders, for rice, flour, tobacco, cloth, iron tools and other manufactured goods. Before the Malays were removed from the area, the Batek occasionally made small clearings and planted a few crops, using seeds and shoots obtained from the local Malay farmers, and in recent years they have participated from time to time in farming projects sponsored by the Malaysian Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli). The Batek switch frequently between these different types of activity as opportunities change, but the pattern of switching is not random. Aside from fish and game, which they pursue alongside the extraction of all the other food sources, they tend to exploit the various available resources in the following order of priority: (1) wild fruit and honey; (2) purchased food (usually obtained by trading forest products); (3) wild tubers; and (4) self-grown crops. This order seems to correlate with the number of calories that can be obtained per hour of work, the most productive resources being exploited first (Endicott 1984).

The basic unit of Batek society is the conjugal family. Each married couple is politically independent and relatively self-sufficient economically, although normally living in camps consisting of two to fifteen related families. The composition of a camp may change daily, as some families leave and new ones join, and the entire group will move to a new location about once per week. The unity of a camp is based not on political organization — leadership is informal and based on personal influence alone (see below) — but on a moral obligation incumbent on each family to share food with all other families in the camp. There are no enduring corporate groups above the level of the conjugal family, although the Batek see themselves as being divided into three 'river valley groups' (which are culturally almost indistinguishable) according

to whether they habitually live in the Aring (a major tributary of the Lebir), upper Lebir or lower Lebir watersheds.

Categories of property

In the Batek De' language, the possessive is formed simply by following the term for the thing possessed by a noun or pronoun indicating the possessor (for example, *belaw ye',* 'blowpipe me', i.e. 'my blowpipe'). This construction expresses approximately the same range of meanings as the possessive construction in English, thus telling us little about the content of the relationship between the person and the thing. There do not seem to be special terms for different types of 'ownership' in Batek, although the kinds of rights that a person can hold over things vary enormously for different kinds of 'property'.

Land

The idea of exclusive ownership of land is an absurdity to the Batek. They say: 'Only the Batek *hala'* [superhuman beings] can own [Malay: *punya]* the land'. They believe the land was created for all people to use, both Batek and non-Batek, and no one has the right to exclude anyone else from living or working anywhere they wish. The Batek do, however, recognize a special connection between each individual and a certain place or places which they call *pesaka'* (cf. Malay: *pesaka,* 'inheritance'). The *pesaka',* which is normally indicated by the name of a river or stream, is basically the area in which a person grew up, the primary place of residence of the parents during the person's childhood. The term *pesaka'* can refer to the person's actual place of birth, a whole river valley, or a vaguely-defined region, depending on the context of discussion. It seems never to be conceptualized as a clearly bounded tract of land, however. It is an area to which people have strong sentimental ties, even though they may be living far away from it. All Batek have a right to live in their *pesaka',* but it is no different from their right to live anywhere else in the forest. There is no sense in which the persons who share a *pesaka'* claim collective rights of ownership or custodianship over it.

The absence of individual or group ownership of land among the Batek contrasts markedly with the situation among the western Semang. Schebesta reports that in the west each 'tribe' (dialect group) owns a clearly defined tract of forest and each family has a limited tract within it. Persons may normally wander over the whole of the tribal area, but only by virtue of their being related by blood or marriage to the owners of its subdivisions (1954: 229-30). Berkeley reports that the Jahai 'are careful to avoid encroaching on the territory of their neigh-

bors, even if their neighbors have ripe jungle fruit and they have none and there is only a little stream dividing them' (quoted in Wilkinson 1926: 12). Most likely the idea of and concern with bounded tracts of land was due to the western Semang groups being hemmed in between the Temiar and the constantly advancing Malays (Schebesta 1954: 232). The horticultural Mendriq on the Nenggiri river also have the idea of bounded territories (called *saka')* and exclusive ownership of them. They usually live in the *saka'* of the group's headman (Malay: *penghulu),* who is seen as the owner of the land, and he parcels it out to his followers for planting. The Mendriq think of the *saka'* of their headman as theirs even when they are not using it (that is, when it is fallow), and in some cases the Department of Aboriginal Affairs has helped them get legal recognition of their claim. Like the western Semang, the Mendriq are located in a fairly densely settled area and must compete for land with Malay and Temiar farmers. The Batek De' have not been subject to such pressure and in fact have gained land with the resettlement of the up country Malays (Endicott 1974: 173-4).

Unharvested resources

The Batek also regard all unharvested naturally-occurring resources as being unownable. All the wild foods, forest produce and raw materials they use are considered freely available to anyone who wants to harvest them, regardless of where they are located or who found them. For example, if a man discovers a *ceh* tree *(Antiaris toxicaria;* Malay: *ipuh),* the sap of which is used to make dart poison, he will freely share with the group the knowledge of where it is to be found and will not attempt to extract any reward for his discovery. There is no need even to ask the discoverer's permission before tapping it. Similarly, the location of a newly discovered wild fruit tree is relayed to the entire group, and it thereafter becomes available to anyone, although occasionally Batek claim they would forbid outsiders, such as Malays, from harvesting it. The orchards that were planted by Malay or Chinese farmers in the past are treated in the same way as naturally occurring fruit trees, and even trees that have been planted by known Batek individuals are considered available to anyone who wants the fruit. Only after resources have been harvested do they become personal property, and then they are subject to certain sharing rules (see below).

Contradicting this general rule, however, there is a vague feeling that the fruit orchards belong to the river valley group on whose river they lie. Batek from the upper Lebir, for example, would be very resentful if Aring Batek utilized orchards on the Lebir without first asking permission — because, it is said, the Aring people have ample fruit trees on their own river. In fact, because the orchards in both rivers are so abundantly productive, such 'poaching' never actually occurs, but it is

interesting that the river valley groups assert, at any rate, exclusive rights over certain orchards.

Generally speaking, all Batek have the right to collect rattan and other forest produce in any area, but if two or more camps are collecting in the same vicinity, they may informally agree that each group will harvest the rattan only in the watershed of the stream on which it is camped. This prevents parties from wasting their time searching in areas that have already been harvested by persons from the other camp. These agreements are only temporary and do not compromise the rights of anyone to exploit those areas for food or forest produce at a future time.

Again, the attitude of the Batek De' toward unharvested resources contrasts strongly with that of the western Semang. In the west, both fruit trees and poison trees are owned by the individuals who planted or discovered them. No one may tap the poison trees or climb the fruit trees without first getting the permission of the owner, although any fruit that has fallen is free to all. The trees are inherited by the owner's children or even handed over individually during the owner's lifetime (Schebesta 1954: 230-3). The horticultural Batek Nong of north-central Pahang regard *ipuh* trees as free to all, but consider certain perennial fruit trees to be owned by them as a group, by virtue of their having been planted by the common group of grandfathers *(ta').* This is a somewhat stronger notion of ownership than that of the Batek De' in that it seems to exclude strangers and other ethnic groups from access to the fruit, although the Batek Nong themselves eat it as a *kongsi,* 'a partnership' or 'society' (the term is Chinese). The Batek Nong have some rubber trees, however, which are owned individually by the persons who planted them or their descendants. With regard to seasonal fruit trees, it would be reasonable to term the Batek Nong custom 'communal' ownership; but the Batek De' system is the lack of any ownership at all. It appears that the Batek De' have such an abundance of fruit and poison trees for their small population — more than they can fully utilize — they have no need for exclusive rights over them (Endicott 1974: 174-5).

Food

Foods become personal property when they have been harvested or purchased. The person who 'extracts' the resource from nature — for example, by digging up a tuber or cutting down a bees' nest — is its owner. If a different person found it, the person who actually procures it would make a special effort to give the finder a share, but this is not an obligation distinguished from the general obligation to share food. In the case of blowpipe hunting, it is technically the owner of the blowpipe, not the hunter, who is the owner of the animal killed, a

situation occasionally arising when the hunter borrows someone else's blowpipe (darts are also borrowed, but do not affect ownership of the kill). Yet, in practice, the blowpipe owner would have no reason to assert his right to ownership of the meat, as it must be shared according to strict rules anyway. With a few foods, such as honey, ownership does make a difference, however, because the owner has the option of selling to Malay traders.

The Batek expect people to share any food they obtain with other members of a camp, and they adhere closely to this expectation. The general principle is that they must give shares first to their own children and spouse, then to any parents-in-law or parents present, and finally to all other families in camp. Thus, if they obtain only a small amount of food, it will be consumed within the procurer's conjugal family, but if there is more than the family needs, they will share it with other families. They make no attempt to save food unless everyone in camp already has enough. The portions given out are large enough to make a reasonable contribution to a meal — a plate of tubers, a leg of a monkey, for example. Thus, if a family obtains only a small excess of food, this will normally be shared with a few other families, usually those in adjacent shelters, rather than minute portions being given to all the families in camp. Generally speaking, the amounts of food that are received are roughly the same for each family, regardless of its size. Sometimes a second stage of sharing will then take place, with the smaller families passing on part of what they have received to still other families. The result is that all families end up with some food, though not necessarily the same amount, even on days when very little is brought into camp. Yet even when food is abundant, the sharing goes on according to the same principles, thus taking on a ritualized aspect as each family gives portions of its excess food to other families and receives portions — sometimes of the same kind of food — in turn (see also Schebesta 1954: 231). This apparently unnecessary distribution confirms that sharing of food is a dominant value in Batek culture (cf. Gibson, this volume).

This general sharing principle applies to both vegetable foods and meat, but differences in the actual distribution arise from the different characteristics of the foods and the ways they are obtained. Vegetable foods, especially wild yams, are a reliable food source, and usually anyone who looks for them will get some, although the amount obtained would seldom be more than three times the needs of a single family. Thus, there are usually several sources of vegetable food in the sharing network on any given day, and each source family will supply between one and three other families.

The Batek obtain animals less regularly than vegetable foods and in sizes that vary from less than an ounce to about sixteen pounds. Small animals, such as fish, frogs, birds, bats, bamboo rats, are usually

consumed by the family that catches them, unless its members get a large number, while bigger animals are most often shared with the entire camp. The sharing of monkeys and gibbons, the largest animals normally obtained, is a strict obligation, and in a normal sized camp (between five and eight families) the hunter will usually give portions to every family, even when his own family's vegetable food supply is inadequate. Often the hunter will gut and partially roast the kill in the forest, and he and his companions will eat the tail and internal organs, which are the parts that cook fastest. All food collectors eat some of what they find if they get hungry, and no one begrudges them this right. The hunter cuts the rest of the monkey apart at the major joints — with the head, back, and tail forming separate segments — so that it yields about thirteen chunks of meat. If there are more families than that in camp, he may divide it further, or the families who receive the original pieces will share them in turn with other families in a second distribution. If there are fewer families, or several monkeys are brought in on the same day, larger portions or more than one portion will be distributed to each family. Some attempt is made to fit the size of the piece given to the size of the family, and women may be given slightly larger portions than men to compensate them for the prohibition on eating meat which they must observe during their menstrual periods.

Sharing food is an absolute obligation to the Batek, not something the giver has much discretion over. As one hunter said: 'If I didn't take the meat back to camp, everyone would be angry at me'. A person with excess food is expected to share it and if this is not done others do not hesitate to ask for some. And it would be virtually impossible for someone to hoard food in the open shelters of a Batek camp without everyone else knowing about it. Recipients treat the food they are given as a right; no expression of thanks is expected or forthcoming (see also Schebesta 1928: 22), presumably because that would imply that the donor had the right to withhold it. If someone were hoarding food, it would not be considered 'stealing' *(maling)* for others to help themselves to it. The Aring Batek became notorious in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs for stealing food from the medical field staff officers who were stationed at Post Aring, and I had some of my food stolen when I first stayed with the Aring people. Their attitude seems to be that it is more immoral to withhold food from those who need it than to take it without permission. The obligation to give whatever is asked for is reinforced by a belief that to refuse a reasonable request for something can cause harm to the person refused. This is called *pohnen* and is similar to the *punan* of the Semai (Dentan 1968: 55). If a person refuses to give a man food or tobacco (for example) when that man goes to work, he is likely to cut himself or be bitten by a centipede or suffer some other misfortune. Then the victim and the group in general will be angry at the offender, who will come under diffuse social pressure to

grant the request. This is related to a general belief that intense emotional upset *(ke'oy)* will cause a person to become sick with fever — perhaps an accurate conception of a type of psychosomatic illness (Endicott 1974: 177-80).

The Batek share purchased or gift foods and nonfood consumables, such as tobacco and kerosene, according to the same principles as wild foods unless they are obtained in unusually large amounts. Quantities of purchased food similar to those obtained by gathering are doled out to the other families in a camp, and any left over will be shared again on following days until it is all gone. I saw no evidence of the purchasers retaining larger shares for themselves, as Howell reports for the Chewong (1983: 70). But sometimes people will buy whole gunny sacks of rice (over 100 lbs each) and other large amounts of food from village shops or Malay traders, either with cash or on credit — given for a promised future delivery of forest produce. The buyer will then resell portions of the food obtained to other Batek at cost, thus becoming, in effect, the purchasing agent for the group as a whole.

The general obligation among the Batek to share food is linked with an expectation that all members of the group will do their best to support themselves. The basic flow of food is from the environment (and traders) to the individual conjugal families, not to the group as a whole to be redistributed among the families. As everyone, except the blind and the very old, has equal access to the resources, it is expected that each family will be basically independent. Because this expectation is generally upheld, the ideal of sharing can be maintained without undue strain on any particular person or family. The Batek themselves explain that they may give food to someone else one day, but on another day they may receive it from the same person, and that this balances out over the long run. Blind and old people are helped by everyone, but especially by their close relatives. Sick persons can also expect assistance from persons outside their conjugal family if needed (Endicott 1974: 181). This system of sharing is obviously open to the possibility of abuse by people who are simply lazy, and there were at least three able-bodied adults among the upper Lebir Batek in 1975-6 who seemed to take more out of the sharing network than they put in. However, the spouses of the two of them who were married (one man and one woman) seemed to make a special effort to contribute, perhaps in compensation for the lazy partner. I once asked why the group did not tell one man, whose laziness was causing some resentment, to leave the group. The horrified answer was: 'Because he is a Batek'. The implication was that they simply could not do such a callous thing to another Batek, whatever his transgressions might be.

Forest produce

The Batek consider forest produce collected for trade to be the property of the person who procures it. That person can dispose of it as he or she sees fit, and anyone who takes it without tacit or expressed permission could be accused of stealing. Trade agreements are normally made between individual Malay traders and individual Batek, not with the group as a whole. If several people work together to collect forest produce, they keep what they get separate, or, if it is joint work, they divide the proceeds according to the amount of work each put in. There is usually no difficulty in arriving at mutually acceptable proportions, and no formal system of calculation is used. If a Batek hires another to perform a particular job, such as building a raft to carry out some rattan, he agrees in advance to pay a fixed wage or share of the profits. It is only after the forest produce has been converted into food or personal possessions that sharing rules may come into play (Endicott 1974: 183).

Personal possessions

Batek own personally anything they make, receive as a gift, or buy with their own money, forest produce or labor. Such personal possessions usually include — for a man — a few clothes, a blowpipe, some musical instruments, some pandanus pouches, a cigarette lighter and possibly a watch or radio-cassette player, and — for a woman — a digging-stick blade, some clothes, baskets, pouches and decorative combs. A couple normally owns jointly some cooking pots, sleeping mats and a bush knife. Ownership of such items is only transferred, except between close relatives, in some sort of immediate or delayed exchange. The partners in such an exchange do not bargain or seek an advantage over each other, but they expect to arrive at a fair equivalence of values regardless of the social relations between them. The only exceptions I know of are that parents and step-parents can claim things their children acquire. If someone has helped a person or given him something in the past, he may lay claim to something that that person acquires much later, if the values are about even. Money is also considered a personal possession, and a person can save it without pressure to share it with anyone else (Endicott 1974: 175-6, 183).

Although ownership is normally transferred only by exchange, personal possessions are very freely loaned and borrowed when not being used by the owners. Among friends or relatives it is not even necessary to ask permission. Thus, things like clothes, tools, and even toothbrushes, may be used by a whole group without their ownership shifting. The continuous circulation of clothes has been a problem for the medical section of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs because it

tends to increase the spread of skin diseases (Endicott 1974: 183).

Some durable personal goods may be inherited, although a few of the deceased's tools and ornaments are usually left with the body. Theoretically, inherited things pass first to the spouse, then, when the spouse dies, to the oldest child of either sex. When the oldest child dies, they go to his or her spouse and then their children, but, if no spouse or child exists, to the next oldest child of the original family. In practice, the widow or widower is likely to divide the things up among the children immediately, and few possessions would survive through more than one transfer anyway. Again, the Batek De' contrast with the western Semang, among whom the 'parents bequeath all their moveable and immoveable goods to their children; if there are no children, the siblings inherit, not the wife. If the wife dies, her children and her siblings inherit, not her husband' (Schebesta 1954: 235). The difference may be more apparent than real, however. Since the Batek do not own immovable property and most personal possessions are not suited to the opposite sex (for example, blowpipes, hair combs), the surviving spouse will usually pass them along to a child of the same sex as the deceased, who can use them. The basic tools of living, such as cooking pots and bush knives, are jointly owned and so stay in the hands of the widow or widower (Endicott 1974: 176).

Discussion

The Batek themselves recognize the importance of food-sharing for group survival. They are well aware of the vagaries of the food quest and the ever-present possibility that they might fall ill and be unable to forage for themselves. The Batek system of ownership and distribution ensures that the basic unit of production and consumption, the conjugal family, is relatively independent, yet still has the security of knowing that it can get help when needed. The independence is derived from having free access to all resources in the environment, and the security from the obligation of all Batek to share food with all others whenever there is enough. Thus security is won without a substantial loss of flexibility or of freedom to move and reorganize, unlike the case with communal ownership and a system of redistribution. Obligations to specific relatives only define the pattern of sharing to be followed if such relatives are present; they do not force those relatives to live together (Endicott 1974: 183-4).

The casual attitude of the Batek toward the borrowing and lending of personal possessions is probably related to the general perishability of material things in the tropical rain forest. Things made from natural materials are continually threatened by rot because of the constant dampness. Thus, men must take apart their blowpipes every week or ten days and dry out the tubes, or the weapons will disintegrate.

Manufactured items such as radios soon succumb to the dampness, insects and the battering of the nomadic life. The Batek do not expect things to last forever or even for very long, so they simply enjoy them while they last and throw them away when they get broken. Their attitude is that they can easily make new things (if they are manufactured from natural materials), can buy others (if they are trade goods), and most things are not necessary to their survival anyway (cf. Woodburn 1982a: 444). I was amazed at the relaxed attitude of one man when his two-year-old son began using as a hammer the bamboo flute the man had just made. To my anxious report of what the boy was doing, he responded simply: 'It doesn't matter. I can make another one'.

Property and Power

Power — which can be defined very simply as the ability to force others to do one's bidding — is connected with property in two ways. First, a person or group must have power in order to hold exclusive rights over something, that is, the owner must be able to prevent others from taking or using the thing that is owned. Second, people who have exclusive control over a resource necessary for survival gain further power by being in a position selectively to withhold that resource from those who depend on them for it. Not surprisingly, the Batek system of ownership and sharing is associated with a political system in which individuals have very little power, and the power of the group over the individual, while substantial, is clearly circumscribed.

Woodburn, in his article 'Egalitarian societies' (1982a; see also Cashdan 1980), delineates the main reasons why 'immediate-return' foraging societies — societies that do not store food or engage in protracted production processes — are egalitarian, actively suppressing distinctions of wealth, power and status, at least between adult males (relations between the sexes and between different generations vary from one group to another). Political equality, it appears, is due largely to the absence of any basis for individuals exercising power or authority over others. One reason is that these groups are highly nomadic, and this permits people to move away 'at a moment's notice from constraint which others may seek to impose on them' (Woodburn 1982a: 436). Also all men have access to lethal hunting weapons, so anyone subjected to coercive pressure would be able to hurt or kill his would-be oppressor, if not in a face-to-face fight then in an ambush or a sneak attack (ibid.: 436). And finally, in these societies individuals are not dependent upon others for the basic necessities of life.

> Whatever the system of territorial rights, in practice in their own areas and in other areas with which they have ties, people have free and equal access to

> wild foods and water; to all the various raw materials they need for making shelters, tools, weapons and ornaments; to whatever wild resources they use, processed or unprocessed, for trade. (ibid.: 437)

Consequently, individuals make most decisions affecting themselves autonomously, and 'there are either no leaders at all or leaders who are very elaborately constrained to prevent them from exercising authority or using their influence to acquire wealth or prestige' (ibid.: 444).

The Batek, who are 'immediate-return' foragers by Woodburn's definition, fit this characterization well. There is nothing to constrain Batek from moving to another camp if someone tries to force them to do something they do not want to do, and movement to avoid potential or real conflict is common. Even the semi-sedentary Mendriq, who have headmen, say that the headman must deal with his followers fairly, or they will desert him.

Although the Batek, like the !Kung and Hadza cited by Woodburn, have ready access to lethal weapons, the Batek attitude toward violence makes it unlikely that potential tyrants would be restrained by a fear of their victims revenging themselves aggressively. Like the nearby Semai (Dentan 1968), the Batek abhor interpersonal violence and have generally fled from their enemies rather than fighting back. I once asked a Batek man why their ancestors had not shot the Malay slave-raiders, who plagued them until the 1920s (Endicott 1983), with poisoned blowpipe darts. His shocked answer was: 'Because it would kill them!' Yet, I would argue that the sheer unacceptability of aggressive behavior suppresses attempted coercion as effectively as the threat of violent retribution, since all Batek know that if they acted belligerently the entire group would abandon them. One notable result of the Batek prohibition of violence is that women as well as men enjoy freedom from the threat of physical coercion.

Batek ideas about rights to resources, their sharing obligations, and the nature of the resources themselves work to prevent any individual or group from establishing a monopoly over some necessity of life and using that monopoly to gain control over other Batek. What Woodburn says about immediate-return foragers in general applies perfectly to the Batek: 'Adults of either sex can readily, if they choose, obtain enough food to feed themselves adequately and are, in spite of the rules of the division of labour, *potentially* autonomous' (emphasis in original, 1982a: 438). The easy accessibility of food to all and the camp-wide sharing network ensure that no adult Batek is dependent upon a particular other individual for food; and even children have rights to food from the general pool and could readily turn to other relatives were their parents to withhold food from them. Thus the threat of withdrawing food or some other essential resource as a means to power simply does not exist.

If the political system is defined in terms of the use of power, then

the Batek can hardly be said to have one. Even defined more broadly, as the means by which a people make group decisions and coordinate collective actions, the Batek political system is exceedingly rudimentary. The conjugal family is the only corporate group in Batek society, and the husband and wife together make any decisions concerning the family's activities and movements. They may consult other persons and take account of what others are doing, but their decisions are ultimately independent. A camp is merely a collection of politically autonomous families whose interests have converged enough to cause them to camp in the same place. Group activities, whether involving a few people or more rarely — as in the poisoning of fish — a large number, are coordinated very informally. None requires an elaborate division of labor or careful scheduling, and usually most of the participants know very well what to do. People may well defer to someone who has special knowledge or skills relating to the task at hand, but such acquiescence is strictly voluntary and limited to that particular activity.

Although decisions are ultimately made by individuals or couples, there is often extensive discussion before people make decisions about matters affecting the camp as a whole, such as whether to move. In these discussions, some persons seem to have more influence than others. These persons, who can be termed 'natural leaders', are usually older people, of either sex, who are respected for their intelligence, experience and good judgment. Other Batek often turn to them for advice, and there seems to be a tendency for younger adults to associate themselves with one of these natural leaders, usually, but not always, a fairly close relative. But there is no formal status of leader in Batek society, and many camps do not contain such a person. The ability of natural leaders to influence others depends on the persuasiveness of their arguments; they could not impose their will on others even if they wanted to.

Surprisingly, however, there are a number of Batek men who are called *penghulu,* the Malay term for headman. In fact all current bearers of this title were appointed as such by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. There is some evidence that this and similar titles were found even before the advent of the Department, but it seems certain that they were always bestowed on Batek individuals by outsiders. It appears that traders and, later, government agencies felt the need to have identifiable leaders among the Batek with whom they could deal and whom they could hold responsible for the people's actions. When officials of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs first designated certain Batek as *penghulu,* they attempted to select what I have termed 'natural leaders' for the positions, and in many, but not all cases, they were successful. The main functions of the *penghulu*, then, are to act as a spokesman for the group in dealings with outsiders and to convey the

wishes of the outsiders to the Batek. But whatever influence the *penghulu* has internally depends almost entirely on his qualities as a natural leader. In principle, the *penghulu* should derive some authority from his role as intermediary with government agencies, but since the Batek do not necessarily follow what the government orders them to do, any such derived authority is negligible.

In fact, the only power found in the Batek political system resides in the group and in the superhuman beings. Social pressure is strong in enforcing the behaviors thought crucial to the survival and well-being of the group: the sharing of food, care for the sick and elderly, suppression of violence, and so on. Property rights, such as they are, are enforced by public opinion and social pressure alone. If someone steals a personal possession of another, the group will ostracize the thief until he or she either returns the object or compensates the victim. Outside these areas, however, the behavior of individuals is relatively unconstrained by social pressure. The Batek tolerate a wide degree of individual freedom and eccentricity as long as it does not threaten the well being of the group.

The most formal rules of proper conduct are the religious prohibitions, termed *lawac* (Endicott 1979). These disallow such acts as incest, mocking certain animals and mixing foods of various categories. People breaking these rules are punished by the thundergod Gobar, who sends a violent thunderstorm to crush the offenders under falling trees, and the earth deity, who sends upwelling floods to drown them. Gobar may also punish offenders by means of diseases or accidents. The power to enforce these rules, then, is projected on to the superhuman beings. It is tempting to view the alleged power of the thundergod and the earth deity as a Durkheimian personification of the power of society over the individual and to suggest that the need for such a mystical means of enforcement lies in the absence of sufficient power in the secular political system.

Conflict over property

Conflict in the traditional system

The traditional Batek system of ownership and sharing works smoothly as a general rule, but there are a few ambiguities in the rules that can lead to disputes, and occasionally someone will break the rules entirely. One source of some strain is the obligation of children-in-law to support their aged parents-in-law. Most Batek share ungrudgingly with their parents and parents-in-law, but a few seem to resent the constant pressure to gather extra food which this obligation imposes. Another occasional cause of conflict is the ambiguity over whether shares of food brought into camp should be saved for camp members who are

absent at the time. Because the Batek do not have fixed mealtimes, they will often distribute, cook and eat food as soon as it is brought in, and they may neglect to save any for people who are still away working. There is always an element of randomness in who is given a family's extra food, and it often seems to favor the persons who just happen to be there when the distribution is made. This, too, can occasionally cause hurt feelings. The upper Lebir Batek also believe that they would have arguments with the Aring people if the latter came and camped with them in the Lebir river orchards during the fruit season. Whether this hypothetical conflict would be over the 'ownership' of the fruit or a result of the clash of personalities that can occur in an overly large camp is unclear.

Very occasionally, a person may refuse to share food for some reason. One Aring man who was married to a Lebir woman once left her about eight pounds of rice and instructed her to keep it for herself and their children while he was away working for some Malays. This caused resentment among the other camp members who claimed, correctly, that they had always shared with her. The husband was a man who had developed a reputation for antisocial behavior. He had spent some time working for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and for Malays, and he seemed to have adopted some of the values of a wage-earner. The stealing of another Batek's forest produce or personal possessions happens very rarely, probably because it would be virtually impossible to conceal the theft.

Conflict due to recent changes

In the mid-1970s, some of the Aring river Batek De' tried to plant good-sized fields of rice and other crops with the help and encouragement of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. One of the problems they confronted was that the traditional Batek principles of ownership and sharing are inappropriate to agriculture (cf. Woodburn 1982a: 447). The nomadic Batek De' regarded the cultivated food as having exactly the same status as wild food and therefore as being free to anyone who cared to collect it. Consequently, they flocked to the clearings of their industrious kinsmen at the time of the harvest and felt perfectly within their rights eating the crops as long as they harvested them themselves. Those who arrived too late for the harvest simply appealed to the traditional Batek obligation for those who have food to share it with those who do not. One of the farmers said the problem was so serious in 1972 that he finally 'ran away' from his sponging relatives with only a few bags of rice left from the 500 gallons (Malay: *gantang)* of rice heads he had harvested. He moved to Post Lebir, a Department-sponsored settlement on the lower Lebir, and joined the local Batek Teh who had taken up farming a few years before. Of course the Batek who want to

take up farming would like to gain the full benefit of their labors, but in order to do so they would have to adopt an idea of privately owned swidden plots and crops and repudiate the obligation to share any food they have that is excess to their immediate needs. Because the foraging and farming ways of life demand opposing principles of ownership and distribution, there is likely to be continuing conflict and misunderstanding between the followers of these two economic systems (Endicott 1974: 176-7).

Another area of potential conflict between Batek arises out of the increasing importance of trade in the Batek economy. In the early 1980s the price of *gaharu* wood, a resinous wood used in incense, rose dramatically because of demand in the Middle East. This led to a proliferation of luxury goods, such as cassette-recorders, in the hands of the young Batek, mostly men, who were able to do the strenuous work of finding and cutting down the trees. Although most Batek benefited from the high price of *gaharu* wood, the benefits were not evenly spread over the population. One man in particular became very well off, by Batek standards, by becoming a middleman in the *gaharu* wood trade. In 1981, he had a large Malay-style house at Post Lebir with elaborate furnishings (such as linoleum on the floor) and two boats, one with an outboard motor. The Batek *gaharu* wood collectors preferred to trade with him, rather than the Malay traders, because he gave them a good price and did not cheat them in weighing the wood. He also continued to fulfil his obligations to share food, and he helped other Batek in their dealings with outsiders. Although at the time there did not seem to be any bad feelings toward him, the potential for jealousy and conflict was there. Yet, in the past, the frequent fluctuations in the prices given for forest produce and the rapid disintegration of things bought have made differences in wealth short-lived. And soon the destruction of the forest will bring both the foraging economy and the trade in forest produce to an end. The Batek will then be forced to live as peasant farmers on the small resettlement projects that have been established by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and most likely they will all fall back to a common level of poverty. But perhaps other sources of cash income, such as the salaries of the young Batek men who have recently joined the army, will replace trade as a cause of wealth differentials in the future.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the Batek De' ideas and practices relating to property, and the relationship of these to their political system. The traditional Batek notions that all natural resources are unowned until collected and that any food obtained in excess of the

needs of the procurer's family must be shared with other families seem well suited to a nomadic foraging life, but wholly unsuited to the peasant farming they are now being forced to adopt. Yet giving up that set of ideas and practices would be psychologically very difficult for them to do, as the obligation to share food is one of the fundamental components of Batek self-identity and one of the main bonds that link Batek families together as a society. This suggests that the transition of a people from hunting and gathering to agriculture presents social and ideological problems that are at least as great a barrier as the technical problems of learning a new way to produce food (see also Woodburn 1982a: 447).

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