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Batek Transnational Shamanism: Countering Marginalization through Weaving Alliances with Cosmic Partners and Global Politicians

Ivan Tacey

This chapter focuses on how the Batek Tanum have realigned their religious and moral geographies in an increasingly globalized world. Under constant pressure from political, social and economic marginalization, stemming principally from being displaced from ancestral landscapes, they have demonstrated remarkable adaptability by incorporating new ideas, events and imagery into their religious practices and beliefs (Riboli 2013; Tacey 2013). This adaptability has allowed for change to occur while social and ontological continuity is maintained. The ability to transform the fabric of their religious landscape within the contemporary context of massive environmental degradation, territorial loss and social pressure constitutes an effective strategy of empowerment, a counter to the threats of marginalization. Examination of the ways these transformations take on a global dimension allows us to delineate the threads of Batek Tanum resistance

to the devastating effects of transnational forces at work within their environment.

The Batek Tanum live to the west of the Batek Dè' and lay claim to a distinct traditional territory stretching across the states of Pahang and Kelantan in the Tanum, Yu, Relau, Galas and Tuang River Valleys. (Some Batek Tanum also live with Batek Dè' at the village of Marem which lies on the south-western border of the Taman Negara national park.) The Batek Tanum differentiate themselves from other Batek and Orang Asli and should be considered as a separate ethnic group, and this is not only due to their distinct territorial claims. Batek Tanum language differs considerably from Batek Dè' and other Orang Asli dialects, and the Tanum people also have a different history and cultural practices from other Batek groups. Lastly, the Batek Tanum only began to auto-identify as Batek following several massacres in the early 20th century (see below). Prior to this they called themselves Orang Maia (Maia People).

The Batek Tanum's experience with global actors is by no means restricted to the contemporary period. Present Batek perceptions of marginalization are framed by historical experience, as memories of past events and encounters feed into new experiences with Malays, Chinese, British, Japanese, and others. This inevitable temporal translation of the present through the past prefigures how Batek strategies to counteract marginalization can be constructed and imagined. The situation is complex, as the Batek Tanum's on-going modes and means of resistance to marginalization exist in a blurred domain where religious and political realms coexist, interlace and collide. In such a space, understanding of the present undergoes perpetual redefinition in response to spatially and temporally distant places and people.

The Batek Tanum actively seek to articulate alliances with international actors and groups they consider potential "powerful" partners to help them recover ancestral territories and resist social, economic and political marginalization. These alliances involve acting on an international stage at both earthly and cosmic levels. Worldly alliances are sought by sending letters and messages to human rights organizations, non-governmental organizations and foreign politicians via cultural intermediaries such as anthropologists, environmentalists and lawyers fighting for indigenous peoples' rights. Cosmic alliances

are forged through dreams, shamanic journeys and relationships with human and “other-than-human persons” (Hallowell 1960). Batek leaders and shamans (*hala?*) are showing signs of acting at a transnational level, of becoming agents within a globalizing world. However, political and religious realities cannot be clearly differentiated as certain political acts take place at a cosmic level, and political allies are often encountered in dream states in the same way that other-than-human persons are. Everyday life and cosmic realms form an integrated reality for the Batek. The unbroken bonds that exist between the everyday world and the invisible world have profound implications for any understanding of Batek modes of empowerment.

TRANSNATIONAL SHAMANISM

A few days before I left the field in June 2013,¹ ?ey Wow, a headman from Becah Kelubi, one of three Batek Tanum villages situated in northwest Pahang, recounted the following account of Batek² shamanic response to the Japanese 2011 tsunami:

Our shaman went to Japan today, he looked at the earth. The earth over there is broken. If the earth is fixed, there is no problem. In Japan, they have accepted the help of our Batek shaman. He went and looked at the earth below Japan today. There are many *Ey Dzum* [other-than-human persons with extraordinary powers] over there, *Ey Dzum* in the underworld and in the upper world. The Batek shaman made cosmic threads. Like the threads I told you about. [?ey Wow illustrates by drawing a picture in my notebook]. This is Japan. Before, there was a huge tsunami over there. However, the Batek shaman took the threads, he took them here, and here, everywhere threads, like a spider’s web [draws multiple threads like a web]. All the threads he took and weaved together. He saw the broken earth and he fixed the earth together. That is what the shaman did. Over there, in Japan.

Baji [the underground rainbow snake] can’t writhe anymore. I tell you *Baji* is now held firmly in place, the threads he made, all those threads, threads, threads ... Threads here and threads there, everywhere he made threads. Now *Baji* is stuck in one place. She can’t writhe anymore. The Japanese territory is now safe, it’s good.

Keep a lookout this year, in the next few months, the shaman said it is safe now. The old man went to Japan. I heard he came back now. You check the newspapers. The Batek shaman helped. But if the Japanese can help the Batek, that will be good, they will be safe. But if they don't want to help us, maybe it is finished for them in the future.

How should we interpret this feat of transnational support for the Japanese people? Why would a Batek shaman go to the effort of aiding a people he has never met by fixing the damaged fabric of their underworld? Yey Wow's words also contain a hint of menace that the Japanese may need to reciprocate help for the Batek to avoid future problems. Why would such a threat be suggested? The description's implications for understanding Batek positioning of self-identity on a global scale can be defined more clearly through the lens of Batek religion. The unpacking and interpretation of its meaning must also be situated within the Batek's contemporary experience of severe social, political and economic marginalization, environmental degradation and ever-increasing global flows.

Globalization theorists such as Roland Robertson have closely examined the effects of globalization on social relations and the way the world is increasingly experienced as a "single place" (Robertson 1992: 6). John Tomlinson describes this phenomenon as "unicity" or "complex connectivity" (Tomlinson 1999) while Anthony Giddens similarly addresses globalization's "stretching of social relations across distance" (Giddens 1990). The Batek shaman's dealings with the Japanese on a cosmic level present an intriguing modality of the complex connectivity of globalization. Tomlinson has remarked "[a]s connectivity reaches into localities, it transforms local lived experience but it also confronts people with a world in which their fates undeniably *are* bound together in a single global frame" (Tomlinson 1999: 12). Notably, the Batek choose to situate themselves as key agents on a cosmological level within this global frame. The shaman's act of weaving the cosmic threads which hold the world in place aptly figures the way the Batek bring together myriad images of faraway people, places and events within the very fabric of their own ontology and cosmology.

BATEK TANUM RELIGION

Batek Tanum shamans are specialists in weaving cosmic threads into gigantic webs which structure the architecture of the cosmos. One web holds the heavens in place to stop them crashing down to earth. Another supports the earth from collapsing into the underground sea below. And another holds the underground dragon or rainbow snake *Baji* in place. The Tanum people say that in the beginning there was just one thread which stretched through the centre of the cosmos connecting the upper-worlds, earth and lower worlds. Since then, their shamans have been continually weaving together more and more of these threads to create the underlying and invisible fabric of the cosmos. Threads are obtained from a class of beings called *Ey Dzum* which shamans meet in altered states of consciousness, including trance and dream states. This concept of shamanic weaving of cosmic threads is unique to the Batek Tanum. Notably, Batek Dè' cosmology features descriptions of the thunder lord sending wind, rain, thunder and lightning down special cords or rope (*tali?*) (Endicott 1979: 69). Another Orang Asli people, the Semelai, believe that after a violent death a departing soul follows a red wind thread to the land of the dead. They also claim dangerous *p?re?* spirits “attach threads between the victim and perpetrator of an impending accident” (see Gianni, this volume). However, these strands function in a more delimited way to the Batek Tanum's woven webs of cosmic cohesion that necessitate two-way movement between the realms of the real and invisible. Like shamans of other Orang Asli groups, Tanum shamans are said to be able to travel anywhere in the cosmos during their soul journeys and communicate with various other-than-human persons (Endicott 1979; Riboli 2008, 2009). Shamans slip through space instantaneously, travelling to far corners of the cosmos in a split-second, annihilating limits of space and time, thus embodying globalized interconnectivity. The Batek Tanum's cosmic threads were globalized long before the term “interconnectivity” was coined to describe the links, structures and networks inherent in globalization. Like the networks of international finance and the cybernetic webs which disseminate media imagery via satellites, cables and the Internet, the Batek Tanum's cosmic webs are invisible. However, rather than disseminating data, Batek webs hold the world together.

Cosmos

The Batek's tripartite conception of the cosmos divides into an upper-world, earth and lower world. Certain other-than-human beings such as the *Cenil*, the original creator beings, are said to dwell in both the upper and lower worlds, though they are most commonly associated with the lower world. The upper-world is the home of *Karei*, the thunder lord, and the place of the dead. In the underworld dwells *Baji*, the rainbow snake, and directly below her is the home of *Capoi*, an old woman closely associated with the rainbow snake. The Batek Tanum say *Capoi* is the mother of the sky-dwelling lord of thunder, *Karei*, while the Batek Aring call her *Ya'* or *'Aroc* and say she is his aunt (Endicott 1979: 168). Any transgression of ritual prohibitions (*talajj*) infuriates the lord of thunder and the rainbow snake who respond by meting out devastating punishment. *Karei* sends thunderstorms and the rainbow snake writhes in anger, breaking free of the cosmic threads which hold her in place and releasing the waters of the underground sea, which surge through the earth's crust causing devastating floods.

Batek Tanum ritual prohibitions, like those of the nearby Batek Dè', vary from group to group and seem to change over time. Some of the most important concern avoidance of the following: eating or laughing at certain classes of animals; letting blood flow into streams, particularly menstrual blood, blood from childbirth or the blood of tabooed animals; mixing the odours of certain species of plants and animals through cooking them on the same hearth; mocking or imitating other-than-human persons or anything associated with them; and improper sexual or social behaviour, especially violence (Endicott 1979: 67–82). Olfaction is a key means of communicating with other-than-human persons, and it is the flow of odours which principally anger and placate the rainbow-snake and thunder lord when taboos are broken and appeasement rituals are later performed (Endicott 1979; Lye 2004; Burenhult and Majid 2011; Riboli 2013; Tacey 2013).

Myths, stories and religious rules are frequently embedded within the landscape itself. As I have highlighted elsewhere, Batek "sacred sites are neither places of pilgrimage or ritual performance. In some

Plate 16.1 Batek Tanum elders with sacred site in background



(Photo credit: Ivan Tacey)

cases they mark the activities of culture-heroes' exploits in the past and in other cases the dwelling places of other-than-human beings which often become angered and dangerous if these sites are polluted or destroyed" (Tacey 2013: 254). Thus, displacement from their land and environmental degradation are closely connected with religious change.

The Tanum people, like other Batek communities, are increasingly claiming the thunder lord and the rainbow snake are angered not only by localized taboo-breaking but by contemporary destruction of the

environment (Lye 2004) and transgression of ritual prohibitions by people in distant places (Riboli 2013; Tacey 2013). The Batek learn about world events from television, radio and newspapers, and they interpret these events in terms of their own religious practices and beliefs. For example, the Batek Dè' blamed the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami 2004 on the rainbow snake and thunder lord's anger for Indonesian taboo breaking. In one explicatory account of the tsunami Indonesians were blamed for mocking animals (Tacey 2013). In another version, an Indonesian maid working in the Middle East, angry with her employers for abusing her, attempted to punish them through black magic and poured menstrual blood into a river or the sea, hence violating a major taboo and causing the wrath of the rainbow snake and thunder lord (Riboli 2013). Similarly, many Batek say Hurricane Sandy, which hit New York in winter 2012, was caused because the thunder lord and rainbow snake were angry at American violence in Iraq and Afghanistan. The 2011 Japanese tsunami was also said to be caused by the Japanese breaking taboos. Furthermore, these beings are increasingly angered at local landscape degradation, particularly by the destruction of forests which has taken on epic proportions in the Batek area and in the wider Southeast Asia region. By incorporating distant people and places into their cosmology the Batek are effectively expanding their concept of "moral community" (Endicott 1979; Lye 2004) to a global scale. Like ʔey Wow's story of the Tanum shaman fixing the underworld in Japan through weaving together cosmic threads, these interpretations of global catastrophes demonstrate the globalization of Batek religion and cosmology. Faced with the wholesale destruction of forests and their replacement with homogenous palm-oil plantations—consequences of global demands for timber and palm oil—and with social, economic and political marginalization at a local level, the Batek now situate local problems alongside the seeming increased frequency of extreme weather and "natural" cataclysms that occur at a global level. As Batek Tanum shamans have been given the responsibility of weaving together the cosmic webs which hold the cosmos together and restrain the rainbow snake in the underworld they now identify themselves as key actors in this global struggle.

Plate 16.2 Mining has devastated Batek Tanum landscapes



(Photo credit: Ivan Tacey)

Alliances with Other-than-human-persons

The Batek mediate social relations with other-than-human persons in a number of ways. In dreams and trance states, the Batek say each person's dreaming soul—*semangat* in the Batek Tanum and Mendriq languages, *bayang* in Batek Dè'—leaves the body and visits various places where they can encounter these persons. For non-shamans this is normally the local environment of the forest. For shamans it also

includes the upper and lower worlds and anywhere else they choose to visit in the cosmos. Batek Tanum shamans enter trances through rhythmically rocking [*tiwjiw*], and, once in a trance-state, other-than-human persons (*Ey Dzum*) are said to enter the house (*hāya?*) within the shaman's body. Then the shaman's soul leaves his/her body and can travel anywhere in the cosmos, even down to the depths of the underworld where powerful shamans can ride the rainbow snake. While shamans are the most adept at dreaming and trancing, encountering other-than-human persons in these states is not strictly restricted to shamans.

The Batek Tanum divide other-than-human persons into three main classes: *Cenil*—the original creator beings; *Ey Dzum*—the personification of animals, rivers, mountains, waterfalls, fruit trees and other living things or landscape features whose help can be enlisted by shamans; and dangerous, often monstrous, disease-causing *Penyakit*, which hunt down human souls to devour.

Penyakit are divided into two further classes: *Penyakit batak* and *Penyakit djinn*. The terms *Penyakit* and *Djinn* are both loan words from Malay; the former can either mean disease or a disease-causing spirit, while the latter, originating from Arabic, literally means “hidden from sight”. The word *Batak* is a collective ethonym used for several ethnic groups from the Lake Toba area in Sumatra who were infamous for practising cannibalism and for slave raiding other ethnic groups across the Malay-Indonesian world. The Batek often identify the Batak as murderous agents of the historical slave raids which targeted Orang Asli groups in the Peninsula until the 1930s. Thus the Batek's historical encounters with violent outsiders reverberates through the names given to the dangerous other-than-human beings associated with causing disease and death.

The *Cenil* appear in many Batek Tanum origin stories and are similar to the *Hala? Asal* of the Batek Dè' (Endicott 1979: 126). They heavily feature in Batek cosmogonical myths and are credited with creating the landscapes of the earth in the mythical past and teaching humans how to live. When the *Cenil* lived with humans in the past they were said to look like humans until they were tricked by the mouse deer and took on animal forms. Shortly after this the animals'

souls became invisible and went to live in a beautiful place under the earth. Although most *Cenil* are associated with animals, the sun and the moon are also described in this category.

While *Cenil* are said to live in either the underworld or the upperworld, *Ey Dzum* are said to live all around us. Shamans form long-lasting alliances with *Ey Dzum* in order to battle *Penyakit* and as helpers in weaving the cosmic threads that hold the cosmos together. The most powerful *Ey Dzum* is *Te?* (the earth being). Other important *Ai Dzum* include the rainbow snake and the water being. The Batek can learn ritual knowledge from the *Ey Dzum* and can communicate, marry and form long-lasting alliances with them. The Batek, like other Orang Asli groups, do not describe relations with other-than-human beings in figurative, metaphorical terms; instead these relationships are seen as having the same veracity as human-to-human relations (Endicott 1979; Dentan 2008; Howell 2011).

Plate 16.3 New technologies mean the Batek Tanum are connected to the wider world



(Photo credit: Ivan Tacey)

Plate 16.4 The Batek Tanum are becoming increasingly media savvy

(Photo credit: Ivan Tacey)

BATEK MARGINALIZATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Kampung Ke Ying is the home to one of three Batek Tanum communities living between Kuala Lipis and Gua Musang. It is a typical Orang Asli resettlement village of about 60 people who live in 20 rundown government-built houses and a few traditional lean-tos scattered around the village. Houses in the village are sparse and often shared by more than one family. Possessions are limited to a few plates and dishes, some cooking pots, clothes and sarongs, a mattress or two, and a few tools. In many homes, NGO posters outlining Orang Asli rights are displayed, most of which have not been implemented. A small number of families own televisions, and in the evening friends and families often gather to watch shows, documentaries and films broadcasted via the Malaysian satellite television company Astro. The globalized-media imagery that flows into the community via satellite televisions, DVDs and newspapers has a powerful effect on how the Batek see the outside

world. News coverage means the Batek are well aware of international catastrophes, wars, and extreme environmental and climatic phenomenon such as tsunamis, flooding, hurricanes and earthquakes. These types of events are consistently interpreted within the framework of Batek cosmology as punishments meted out by cosmic beings for the transgression of taboos. Entertainment programmes also bring direct evidence of other peoples' transgression of Batek taboos, such as mocking animals, committing violent acts and so on.

The authorities provided the Batek with no economic opportunities after settling them at Becah Kelubi, and life is extremely hard. The nearest area of primary rainforest is the Taman Negara national park which lies about 20 miles to the east, too far away for people to access on foot, and in any case the Batek are frequently told by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (PERHILITAN) they can no longer forage in the park despite a major part of their ancestral territory falling within park boundaries. The village is encapsulated by Malay communities and a Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) palm-oil estate. A government body, which the Batek claim is associated with JAKOA (the Department of Orang Asli Development), gives each Batek household RM600 (US\$188) per month as compensation for the use of this land, but the Batek consider this amount far too low for their needs. Northwest of the FELDA estate, the Batek can still access an island of logged-over secondary forest on foot where they fish, hunt and collect forest products. The area is said to be home to many benevolent other-than-human beings (*Ey Dzum*). Other forest islands, situated to the east of the Kuala Lipis-to-Gua Musang railway line—within the fragmented landscape that has been carved up by FELDA palm oil plantations, rubber estates and open-cast mines—are regularly accessed by a few men from the village who go on scooters to collect rattan, hardwoods and other forest products. These men often camp out for weeks until they have collected all available rattan or other forest resources to sell to Chinese or Malay middle-men. Women, children and the elderly spend most of their time within the village except when making short trips to the forest near the village to fish, forage and collect flowers for bodily adornment.

Many Batek communities have now been obliged to settle in marginal forest-fringe villages like Becah Kelubi on the periphery of Taman Negara due to areas outside the national park being deforested and converted to oil-palm plantations and rubber estates. In resettlement villages, the Batek and other Orang Asli are under tremendous pressure to assimilate into mainstream Malaysian society, particularly via coercive attempts to Islamize the Orang Asli (Nicholas 2000; Gomes 2007; Endicott and Endicott 2008; Nobuta 2008). Like many other Batek resettlement villages, the Tanum people at Becah Kelubi converted to Islam en masse in the 1990s. Villagers claim conversion followed several visits from local Malays who aggressively coerced them to convert. After refusing conversion three times the villagers finally gave in when threatened with extreme violence. Batek in Kelantan also complain they were coerced into joining Islam, but not under the threat of violence (Endicott and Endicott 2008; Tacey 2013). Islam has had a more pervasive effect on the Batek of Kelantan than on communities in Pahang, where, for the moment at least, the only noticeable signs of Islam are Batek using Muslim Malay names when dealing with outsiders (Tacey 2013).

The key factor behind Batek marginalization, and that of the Orang Asli more generally, has been displacement and the loss of massive areas of their ancestral territories (see Subramaniam, this volume). No legal titles acknowledging the Batek people's ownership of their traditional territory have been recognized by the states of Pahang, Kelantan or the national Malaysian government. This places people in an extremely fragile legal position. Malaysian bio-political classifications of people and places, which allocates land rights and economic advantages to Malays while denying them to others, have resulted in many Orang Asli communities being relocated from their ancestral lands to resettlement villages like Becah Kelubi. Administrative landscape classifications, used to determine land use and rights of access, are another major factor behind Orang Asli marginalization, displacement and the intense environmental degradation of their landscapes. Administrative demarcations such as "National Parks", "Malay Reservations", "State Parks", "Forest Reserves", "Protection

Forests”, “Water Catchment Areas”, “Forested State Land”, “Game Reserves”, “Agricultural Areas” and “Mining Sites” have implications as to where the Orang Asli have a legal right to dwell, forage and collect forest resources. A pertinent example of this concerns the Batek and Taman Negara. While Batek communities living near the entrances to Taman Negara at Kuala Koh in Kelantan and Kuala Tahan in Pahang have been told by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks that they are allowed to forage for plants and animals within park boundaries, the Batek Tanum living near the Sungai Relau park entrance are forbidden to forage for any flora and fauna within the park. No Batek are allowed to collect forest products from the park to sell, which severely restricts economic choices and further pushes them into extreme poverty. A common complaint the Batek articulated during my fieldwork can be summarized in the following words of a headman:

The Malays are getting rich, the Chinese are getting rich. Everyone is getting rich except us. This is our land, why aren't we getting rich?

Grievances like this are endemic among Orang Asli communities (Dentan et al. 1997) and will not abate until the Malaysian government recognizes the Orang Asli as the traditional owners of their ancestral lands. However, Batek complaints about environmental degradation and marginalization should not be mistakenly regarded as simply a desire to reap financial rewards via the economic development of landscapes. While some Batek do clearly pronounce their aspiration to collaborate as equal economic partners—with the British, Chinese, Japanese or Americans—the Batek are acutely aware of the dangers of uncontrolled development and environmental degradation. They frequently present these dangers within the framework of their cosmology and claim the repercussions of uncontrolled development will eventually result in the world's end, when the rainbow snake and thunder lord destroy the world in a final fit of anger at human actions on earth (Lye 2004). The Batek Tanum say they will be the only people saved as they enter the earth to join the *Cenil* (original creator beings) in the underground world.

GLOBAL POLITICAL ALLIANCES

It is within this context of territorial loss, severe marginalization and increased global flows that attempts to forge alliances with various powerful entities including foreign governments, politicians and companies must be understood. Immediately upon my arrival in the village of Kampung Ke Ying in November 2012, the Batek began articulating their grievances against the Malaysian government and their desire to create alliances of equality with national and international actors. They handed me piles of letters addressed to NGOs and human rights groups—including the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM), the Malaysian Bar Council and also foreign governments and their leaders—in the hope that someone would be able to help them. The aims of the requests were far-reaching: autonomy from the Malaysian government, legal rights, recognition of their ancestral lands, and collaboration on equal terms with international partners to develop local resources. The over-arching struggle which the Batek Tanum articulate is that of regaining control over the ownership of their ancestral lands.

Batek attempts to form alliances continually blur the boundaries between literal political acts, religious experiences and the interpretation of transnational media flows. Literal political acts principally consist of writing letters to foreign governments and NGOs outlining grievances and asking for aid. Within the cosmic realm, alliances are sought through the religious experiences of shamanic soul journeys and individual revelations in dreams. Both the content of the letters and the imagery of the religious experiences are imbued with the Batek's interpretation of global media flows. Throughout my research, the Batek Tanum have articulated a fantastical desire for collaborative mining or timber projects with President Obama. Dream revelations are described where the Batek meet Obama, who communicates that he will soon be coming to Malaysia to help them. These dreams take a similar form to shamanic soul journeys where alliances are forged with other-than-human persons. However, the dreams in which President Obama is encountered and premonitions about American intervention in Malaysia are not just restricted to shamans, but are received by many Batek men and women. Dream revelations and premonitions

also foretell Americans soon coming to the aid of the Batek, expelling the Malays, and assuming governance of Malaysia. The Batek support the validity of these dreams by referring to news events seen on television offering “proof” of Obama’s imminent arrival. Naïve though they may seem at first encounter, the aspirational weaving together of desires, transnational media flows and potential international alliances within the Batek’s everyday discourse and dreams should be seen as a mode of resistance, a counter to their contemporary social, economic and political marginalization. They represent a means of imagining resistance, a way of figuring out lines of positive force from the everyday encounters and features of their lives. But why have the Batek chosen the British, Americans, Chinese and Japanese as potential partners? Their choice can only be understood as an outcome of the Batek’s perceptions of these peoples, which stem from historical experience with specific actors from these places—transformed and expanded into ethnic stereotypes—and of perceptions which have intensified in the contemporary period via the decoding of transnational media flows.

HISTORY AND GLOBALIZATION IN BATEK RESISTANCE

The Batek are well aware of Malaysian history in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras and are able to express in eloquent terms how historical events and encounters with different peoples have led to their gradual marginalization. Batek Tanum encounters with Chinese, Malays, British and Japanese have radically affected their contemporary impressions of these peoples as potential allies. However, contemporary global media flows continue to inform Batek perspectives of these peoples and have radically transformed strategies for forming alliances.

The Batek Tanum claim that three entire Orang Asli communities in the Merapoh area—the Jelai People, the Bia? People and the Kiho? People—were slaughtered by Malays who moved into Batek lands in the early 20th century. They say if it wasn’t for the British sending in the army at this time, all their ancestors would have been exterminated by the Malays. After these massacres the Tanum people split into three

separate communities and adopted Batek ethnic identity as a strategy to avoid annihilation. Previously, the Batek in this area had been known as Orang Maia. Villagers told me the decision to switch from Maia to Batek ethnicity was to prevent Malays from targeting them as Orang Maia. Sadly, it is unlikely this strategy would have changed anything as Batek in Kelantan had also been targeted during slave raids in this period (Endicott 1997: 42) as had other Orang Asli communities across the Peninsula (Endicott 1983).

It is likely that, as is the case with other Batek communities, the Tanum people intermittently traded with Malays prior to the 20th century in times of peace and fled from them during the periods of slave raiding, which culminated in the massacres of the 1920s and 1930s (Endicott 1983, 1997). Batek Tanum encounters with most outsiders were probably of a fairly low frequency until the 1930s, following the construction of the Gemas-to-Tumpat railway line by the British colonial government. The railway's construction meant a rapid increase of Malays settling along the route and expansion of the towns of Gua Musang, Bertam, Manek Urai and Kuala Krai in previously Orang Asli dominant areas (Endicott 1997: 38). By the 1950s, large numbers of Malay farmers, mainly immigrants from Kelantan, were opening up agricultural land, encapsulating Batek communities and evicting the Batek from their ancestral landscapes. Malays are still greatly feared and mistrusted especially as violence continues through acts of coercive Islamization, territorial conflicts and institutionalized harassment. In contrast, the British are remembered as a powerful but benevolent people who stopped Malay aggression in the area. Repercussions of the past echo through statements such as the following from a Batek elder at Becah Kelubi:

I want my country back; I want you to help me with your people, with your government. The *gob* [Malays] aren't from here. I'm frightened of the *gob*. I could blowpipe one or two but that wouldn't be enough. Come back with the British army. The *gob* should go back to Kalimantan, Sumatra and Thailand. I want them to go back to their countries.

The key point in the above quotation is that the Batek wish to regain the lands which have been forcibly taken from them. However, they know any form of armed resistance would be futile without the

Plate 16.5 ?ey Wow describes an attack on a Batek Tanum settlement near Kampung Pulau



(Photo credit: Ivan Tacey)

help of outsiders due to the massive imbalance of size between Batek and Malay populations. Representations of others that use the past are always history strategically rebuilt in the present. The Batek's choice of imagined future alliances speaks clearly of how they have chosen to pin their present hopes of security upon peaceable relations with powerful others from the past.

Due to fears of enslavement, the Batek Tanum kept their distance from most outsiders except the Chinese living at Kampung Pulau to the north, with whom they had close and peaceful relations ever since Chinese settlers moved into the Galas river valley looking for gold about 400 years ago. The Batek claim the Chinese were the first outsiders to settle in the area, and Batek-Chinese relations are always described as being peaceful. Chinese settlers ate the same forest foods as the Batek, are said to have learnt the Batek language and to have intermarried with the Batek. Oral accounts and archival research compiled by Tan Teng Phee (2012: 90–2) confirm what I was told

by the Batek Tanum living at Becah Kelubi in 2012 and 2013 concerning Batek-Chinese ethnic relations in the Merapoh area. Like Batek-Malay relations, Chinese-Malay relations have been historically marred by violence. In 1825, following a quarrel over taxes, Malay forces slaughtered thousands of Pulai Chinese, after which “the river ran red with blood and the stench of decaying bodies polluted the air for miles” (Tan 2012: 91). Secondly, the Batek Tanum vividly remember a Malay attack on Kampung Pulai and a neighbouring Batek village in the post-colonial period. One Batek elder from Becah Kelubi described the attack as follows:

At about 7pm in the evening mortar fire began raining down on the Batek. Boom, boom, boom! Fruit trees and crops were burning throughout the village. The people were terrified. Children were screaming and clutching onto their parents. The people decided to run. However, the shaman said “Stop! I can hold them off until the morning!” He conjured up a huge magical shield to protect the villagers. Bullets and mortar fire bounced off the shield all night long until fire ceased in the morning at around 8am. All the attacks were deflected by the shield. If we didn’t have the Batek shaman we’d all be dead. Then, in the light of day, we all fled south through the forests towards Cegah Perah and set up camp there.

Despite confusion over the exact historical details of these events, the most important factor for the present discussion is the shaping of Batek perceptions of Chinese as “peaceful friends” versus Malays as “violent foes”; the perception is that to a certain degree the Chinese have been violently persecuted in the same way as the Orang Asli.

The Tanum people had only brief interactions with the Japanese during World War Two when the Japanese invaded Malaysia in 1941 and forced out the British colonial government until September 1945. However, the Japanese invasion meant the Batek became aware of Japan as a major global power capable of defeating the British, who in Batek eyes were already considered as immensely powerful.

Perceptions of Japanese, British, Chinese and Americans as potential allies are also greatly influenced by media flows. Although they have had no direct historical encounters with Americans, the Batek are well aware of American military power via media imagery of US wars ostensibly against Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan. Imagery of

American military might has also been greatly exaggerated through Hollywood cinema and entertainment programmes. The Batek see Americans as anti-Muslim, therefore anti-Malay, and therefore highly desirable potential allies. Likewise, the British, Chinese and Japanese are seen as either non-Muslims or anti-Muslim and thus anti-Malay. It is within such a hotbed of distorted magnification of perceived similarities and stereotyped mutual oppositions that Batek ideas of potential international partnerships have been forged.

CONCLUSION

While British, Chinese, Americans and Japanese are seen as potential allies due to their perceived might, the Batek Tanum, like other Batek groups, frequently emphasize the weaknesses of these nations in the face of cataclysmic events caused by the transgression of taboos by people in these distant places. The Batek highlight the role they can play within the gap between the incredible military, political and socio-economic power of these nation states and the inability of these very same nations to prevent catastrophes such as flooding, hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis. The Batek believe they know the precise causes of these events (violence, environmental destruction, mocking of animals and so on), and the Batek Tanum claim they can repair the damage caused to the fabric of the cosmos and underworld by these disasters and can even prevent disasters from occurring through holding the rainbow snake in place with their cosmic threads.

Despite their marginalization and precarious legal position, the Batek have managed to remain as distinct ethnic groups, continued to live as foragers, and their religion has unequivocally retained its form, all while continually incorporating ideas from an ever-more-globalized environment. Rather than disappearing, Batek religion, like the Batek economy, incorporates change within its complex discursive fabric. How is this possible? Indigenous peoples are often considered as living a fragile existence in the shadow of the nation-state, under the constant threat of disappearance through assimilation. I argue that, far from being fragile, Batek descriptions of their society and religion should be considered as “antifragile” (Talib 2012). As Nassim Talib has highlighted, antifragility should not be confused with mere strength or

resistance; it is “beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better” (2012: 19). Via promethean-like adaption Batek religion has been able not only to recover from but also analyze and incorporate the external shocks it increasingly encounters. This is not to say the Batek’s contemporary social position is not precarious because it certainly is. However, Batek religion has an in-built hydra-like antifragility which demonstrates a unique prowess for adaptation, a defiant ability to intelligently respond and reinvent itself under immense external pressure.

The basis for this antifragility results from the myriad plasticity of Batek social forms. Linguistic porosity of dialect groups, fluidity of group composition, complex shifting economies, open aggregation and shifting ethnicity have all been previously documented by anthropologists working with the Batek Dè’ (Endicott 1979; Lye 2004) as well as anthropologists working with many other indigenous groups in Southeast Asia (Benjamin 2002; Scott 2009; Gibson and Sillander 2011). Notably, Batek religious beliefs and practices exhibit remarkable plasticity and fluidity. Far from being the only option left open to the weak, this prowess for adjustment and incorporation should be recognized as an effective countering manoeuvre against marginalization. It allows for change to occur while preventing the fragility associated with reification and standardization; things which become crystallized are easy to shatter. Clear recognition of the political strategies contained within such adaptability allow us to gain new insights into the modes of action that disenfranchised groups can utilize as means of maintaining social, cultural and ontological continuity. Batek political strategies are crystal clear in this respect. Faced with huge territorial loss, the Batek goal of creating political alliances aims to re-establish their claims to the ownership of their ancestral lands, areas which have been contested since Malays began moving into the area in the early 20th century.

Many of the metaphors commonly used to describe globalization are apposite to the Batek’s contemporary experience of global encounters and resemble their own descriptions. Certainly the Batek Tanum’s cosmic-threaded web of interconnectivity lends itself to such a reading. Yet such a seemingly close match must be approached with caution. Apparent metaphoric overlap between the descriptions may well just be that, “apparent”. For within the self-descriptions of Batek religion

and cosmology, extended “metaphors” are much more than elaborate rhetorical devices and are thoroughly embedded within underlying understandings of the world’s structure. Indeed it could be argued that Batek figurations of their cosmology and religious experiences are not metaphoric at all in that they are literal descriptions of reality, albeit a reality which exists in an other-worldly sphere.

As locally-constructed meanings take new forms within a world of increasing global flows, it becomes necessary, as John Tomlinson highlights, to examine “how [globalization] affects people’s sense of identity, the experience of place, and of the self in relation to place, how it impacts on the shared understandings, values, desires, myths, hopes and fears that have developed around locally situated life” (1999: 20). The Batek’s exposure to current forces of globalization, informed by historical encounters with a variety of global actors, has radically affected their experience of place and the way their “desires, myths, hopes and fears” are imagined and articulated. In so many ways the dynamic of globalization exists just as forcibly as a mode of description as it does as a material process. Undoubtedly, Batek marginalization is the result of concrete global processes, yet it is also affected by the way these processes are represented in different discourses. Marginalization can reside as much within the discursive dimension of reality as within the literal. By carving out their own understanding of global pressures within the safe space of their cosmology, the Batek are able to imagine new ways to circumvent marginalization. Realigning their religious practice and belief in response to change has provided a means to explore the lines of force, both negative and positive, in their lives. With this in mind, there is much to learn from picking up the Batek Tanum’s global threads and taking their critique of our fragile interconnected world seriously.

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2. Henceforth, any reference to Batek will mean Batek Tanum unless specified otherwise.

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