

# Lawad, Ye' Yo' and Tum Yap : The manifestation of forest in the lives of the Bateks in Taman Negara National Park<sup>1</sup>

Nurul Fatanah Kamarul Zahari, Mustaffa Omar & Salleh Daim

*Centre of Applied Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Development (CABCSD),  
Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, UiTM, Shah Alam, Malaysia  
nurulfatanah@yahoo.com*

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## Abstract

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This paper attempts to explore the manifestations of the forest in the lives of the Bateks who reside within the vast region of the Taman Negara National Park in Pahang, Peninsular Malaysia. Such manifestations emerged from the mutual relationship between the Bateks and their surroundings of the forest. In the Bateks belief system, there exist the concept of Lawad, Ye' Yo' and Tum Yap; all of which represent the Bateks' unique way of giving value to the forest. Lawad, Ye' Yo' and Tum Yap are the manifestations of how the Bateks navigate themselves in the forest. The Bateks see that the forest represents a dynamic dimension which has to be calmed through good spirits and behavior because the physical environment is a medium for the spiritual world to express its feelings, thinking, decisions, and punishments. This belief is to them the best way in endearing themselves to the environment. To the Bateks, all concerns for the forest could be settled through this belief.

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**Keywords:** Environment-behaviour, indigenous people, Orang Asli, Orang Batek, taboos, Taman Negara, National Park.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The Bateks.

Orang Asli is a term used by the Malaysian Government in referring to the aborigines in Peninsular Malaysia. Under the Orang Asli Act (Act 134) 1954 which has been revised once in 1974, a person is considered as an Orang Asli if one of his/her parents is a member of an Orang Asli ethnic group and lives according to the laws, beliefs, and rituals of that group. Carey (1976) has divided the Orang Asli in Malaysia into three main groups which are Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay (refer to Table 1). As for today, there are 18 ethnic groups of Orang Asli in Malaysia; 37.2% of the total population is still living in remote areas or in the forest, 61.4% is still living in rural areas, and only 1.4.% of the Orang Asli is living in or near urban areas (Nicholas 2007).

**Table 1 :** Orang Asli ethnic groups according to Carey (1976)

ORANG ASLI		
NEGRITO	SENOI	PROTO-MALAY
Kensiu	Semai	Temuan
Kintak	Temiar	Semelai
Jahai	Jah Hut	Jakun
Lanoh	Che Wong	Orang Kanaq
Mendriq	Mah Meri	Orang Kuala
Batek	Semaq Beri	Orang Seletar

The Bateks are one of the aboriginal people found in Peninsular Malaysia and they are categorized as Negritos. The Negritos are the smallest group of aborigines found here, being approximately 3% of the whole population of Orang Asli. Under the language category, the Negritos are placed under the Northern Aslian group, which is one division of the Mon-Khmer language group (Nicholas 2007). In Spanish, Negrito means “the black pygmy” (Lye 2005) with small, short, and dark physical characteristics<sup>2</sup>. The word ‘Batek’ is frequently misused as the ‘batik’ cloth; generally used by the Malays and the Bateks themselves. Actually, ‘Batek’ means ‘people of our group’ (Endicott 1979) or generally known as ‘people’ (Lye 2005). According to early anthropologists’ writings, the Bateks is referred to as Bateg, Bateq and Ngok (see Schebesta 1973, Evans 1937, and

2 It is to be remembered that black skin does not mean dark skin. But the Bateks are dark-brown skinned, totally different from the Negroes of Africa.

Carey 1976). However, they later agreed to use the name 'Batek' so as to avoid any negative impressions which may arise later on.

The Bateks are a group of egalitarian hunters and gatherers (see Endicott 1981 and Endicott & Endicott 2008), living a nomadic lifestyle in the forest. Most of the Batek people still live in the forest and as Negritos in Peninsular Malaysia, they have no involvement at all with the sea<sup>3</sup>. Endicott (1979) was the first to classify the Bateks into groups. This classification, more or less, distributes the Bateks encampments into different niches. The Bateks separate themselves into different **bangsa**' (Malay *bangsa* which means race). This is due to the fact that there are minor differences in their dialects. The Bateks loved to associate their group more to the river than to the land. There are 5 groups of Orang Batek as suggested by Endicott (1979) which are the Batek De', Batek Iga, Batek Nong, Batek Teh, and Batek Te'. Whatever classification given by Endicott, the Bateks believed that they are all one big group of Orang Batek. In Pahang, only 2 groups of Batek are found which are Batek Iga and Batek Te'<sup>4</sup>.

The Bateks' social organization is simple and is based on the conjugal family. The conjugal family is a basic unit in the family system of the Bateks which influence the stability of their group. In the Bateks' encampments, the members are mainly those who have blood relationship among the groups. As hunters and gatherers, the Bateks move in small groups. When a movement happens due to climatic changes, hunting or death, they usually move with their own conjugal family. There are times also when they move together as a big group with the other conjugal families. Endicott (1979) believes that the Batek economy system is rather complex for they are involved not only in different economic activities but their economic system changes from one activity to the other. Generally, the Bateks collect food from the jungle as a way of feeding the community. Forest products in the form of wild yams and wild potatoes form the main carbohydrate source for the Bateks. For protein, the Bateks rely on animal hunting in the forest using blowpipes, spears, and traps. Not all of the animals in the forest could be hunted because they believe in some taboo among themselves. Nonetheless, their favourite foods come in the form of birds, monkeys, fish, deer, etc.

There are also non-timber forest products such as rattan, sandalwoods, and herbs which are collected or sold or barter-traded with the gob; who are outsiders, mainly referred as the Malays or buyers who are mainly Chinese. This usually brings about easy catch for the Bateks. The Bateks also practise food cultivation

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- 3 Nonetheless, there are a few Negritos which are found at the Andaman Island in the Philippines working as fishermen and Carey (1976) believed that the Negritos could have been seamen.
  - 4 At present, Batek Te' are better known as Batek Koh in conjunction with the Koh River Valley in Kelantan in which they inhabit (Lye 2005). Te' in Batek means 'the earth' or 'ground'. Lye (2005) added one more group in Pahang that is the Batek Tanum, occupying the Sungai Tanum region in Lipis and they were formerly classified as the 'Mintil' group.

in a small scale, not for sale but for their own use in a short term period. Other than that, the Bateks work with the outsiders or by themselves as tourist guides or boat operators or just doing odd jobs for the Malays nearby. They are also involved in the selling of handmade crafts to tourists. At the moment, the Orang Batek economy is geared towards the tourism sector, even though it is on a small scale and basically involves the men.

## **1.2 The Bateks of Taman Negara**

The Taman Negara in Peninsular Malaysia is an area of dense tropical rainforest with a diversity of flora and fauna species in it. Estimated to be 130 million years old, it is the oldest tropical rainforest in the world (UNESCO 2007). Situated in the middle part of Peninsular Malaysia, the Taman Negara National Park covers an area which includes 3 states which are Pahang, Kelantan, and Terengganu. The highest mountain in Peninsular Malaysia, Mt. Tahan which is 2187 meters high, is also found in it. Taman Negara is a fully protected area by the Government of Malaysia so that its natural biodiversity region is permanently protected. According to an international conservation agency known as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN 2007), a protected region is defined as, "...an area dedicated primarily to the protection and enjoyment of natural or cultural heritage, maintenance of biodiversity, and/or maintenance of ecological life-support services..." In 2003, Taman Negara is listed as the ASEAN Heritage Park (ASEAN 2008). Taman Negara is now placed under Category II of the protected area management issued by the IUCN<sup>5</sup>. Category II means that the tourism industry. Under the Taman Negara Act 1980, it is stated that the objective of the formation of Taman Negara in Peninsular Malaysia is to protect and preserve wildlife and plants, and for the importance of geological, archeological, historical, and ecological researches. This includes its importance from the scientific, aesthetic, educational, health, and recreation aspects.

It would be incomplete if the Orang Asli is not included in the history of Taman Negara. They are believed to have inhabited the inner forest region since 2000 years ago. Nik Hassan Shuhaimi (1997) stated that the Malays and other indigenous peoples have been living here for more than 30 000 years. In fact, there are other views which say that the Negritos came to Peninsular Malaysia some 25 000 years ago (Carey 1976). Benjamin (1997) argued that the Orang Asli of today is a major community which descended from the Hoabinh and the Neolithic peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. Archeologists often say that the prehistory of the Peninsular Malaysia is also the prehistory of the Orang Asli. What is meant by this prehistorical context is that the change from the dependence of hunting,

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5 IUCN Red List is a level or status indicator of the endangered species of flora and fauna worldwide.

gathering, and the nomadic lifestyle to the agricultural activities is only sedentary in character (Adi 1997).

Amongst the earliest record of the findings of the Batek community, which before that was almost unheard of, was recorded by Mikluho-Maclay and Schebesta in 1928 (Schebesta 1973). According to Endicott (1979), the Negritos, especially the Bateks are of the Paleo-Melanesian race at one time long ago who transversed South East Asia and headed for Melanesia (the Malay Archipelago). The Bateks are therefore the survivors from that known race which settled in the Peninsular Malaysia. Before the existence of the Malay community along the Tembeling River, the Bateks have long inhabited the area known today as Taman Negara. According to a Batek respondent at Taman Negara, their ancestors made an early settlement at the banks of the tributaries of Tembeling River, but since the appearance of the gob or the Malays who opened up new settlements nearby, the Bateks have been hardpressed to move further inland and with the major migration of the Malay community from Kelantan to Ulu Tembeling during the Japanese occupation of Malaya in the years 1943-1945, the Malay populations have gathered momentum and now outnumbered the Bateks (personal communication with the people of Kuala Tahan).

There are now a number of settlements or villages of the Bateks in and around the boundaries of Taman Negara. Some of the villages have existed traditionally, planned, or existed on demand of the tourism industry which is picking up fast at Taman Negara. The traditional existence of the Bateks in the region of Taman Negara means that it was built on a traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle. In other words, it is a settlement built on the initiative of the Bateks themselves which follows the needs of the time as found at Kuala Trenggan encampments. The planned settlement which existed at Kampung Kuala Atok, an area which borders the Taman Negara forest, was built by the assistance of the Department of the Orang Asli Affairs or JHEOA (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli) which provided the necessary infrastructure for the permanent settlement for the Bateks. Although it is regarded as a permanent settlement, the inhabitants are not. This is due to the natural nomadic instinct of going into the forest at certain times and returning to the settlement at other times. The existence of a permanent settlement due to the growing tourism industry is more of a traditional settlement which changes into a permanent settlement when it becomes a tourist attraction such as the Gua Telinga and Dedari encampments. Yet again, these are not permanent settlements because it is obvious that the Bateks need to move around in the forest of Taman Negara. It is only the places of tourist attractions such as the Gua Telinga and Dedari encampments that are not left totally uninhabited due to the tourism industry there.

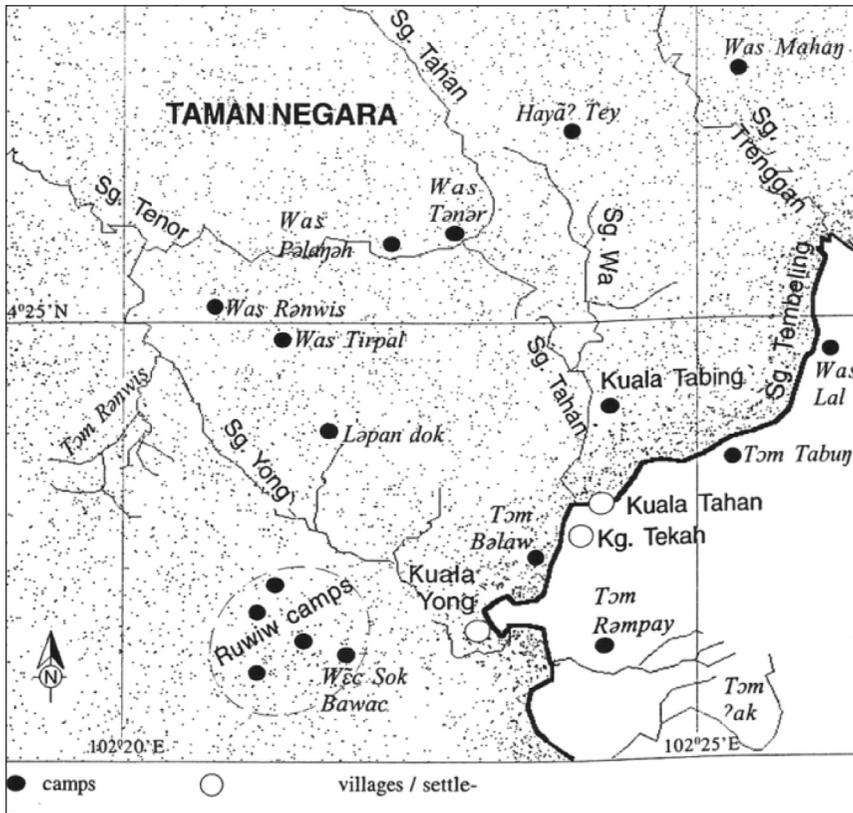


Figure 1 : Orang Batek encampments in Taman Negara (Lye 2005)

## 2. Man and the Forest

The pattern of human life is in reality a manifestation of the influence of the natural environment upon human beings which moulds the thinking and behavior of the people who inhabit the realm of human existence. There has always been a man-environment connection since the beginning of human history which has been accepted by anthropologists and psychologists who agree that the elements has a deep influence upon the extrinsic and intrinsic human behavior (Firth et al. 1963). Firth stressed the importance of the elements in propagating human living cultures through the geographical factors.

Firstly, it influences humankind in determining a hospitable habitation which would provide the survival of the inhabitants. Secondly, it allows humankind to better promote their living cultures through the utilization of whatever is provided. Suryono et al. (2003) proved that the history of development in the civilization around the Merapi volcanic mountain in Jogjakarta, Indonesia was immensely

influenced by the active volcanic activities which successfully determined the primitive culture and religious belief of the known Hindu Mataram Kingdom in Central Java. Firth et al. (1963) again stressed that the ancient human population not only managed to determine its survival of the elements, but also adapted the environmental factors to their own advantage in procuring a high standard of civilization with the assistance of a high technical knowledge in the utilization of the resources available then.

For the Malaysian Orang Asli, researchers (see Adi 1991,1997) discovered the artifacts of the prehistoric people left behind in caves and inhabited areas that showed the functions of the artifacts in the efforts of prehistoric man to mingle with their own environment. It is interesting to note that archeological researchers such as these managed to determine that the Orang Asli invariably was the descendants of those prehistoric people. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that the culture and the way of life of the Orang Asli community of today is actually an inheritance from the earlier peoples as regard to their natural relationships with the elements.

Hood Salleh (2003) in his study on the environmental influence upon the variable esthetical characteristics also stressed the importance of the elements in determining the basic cultures of the Bateks who see that the social and cultural values which complete their lives actually develop their very own identity. This fact is also agreed upon by Nicholas (2004) and Badrul Redzuan (2004) who said that the continuation of the cultures developed through the influence of the environment has been passed down through generations by the oral traditional handover.

### 3. Lawad, Ye' Yo' And Tum Yap

Almost all the Bateks community believed that the **hep** (the forest) is their only **denya'** (world; Malay *dunia*). The *denya'* has a wider scope in its meaning as it does not only mean that it is a provider for the physical needs of the Bateks but also as an emotional and spiritual fulfillment for themselves. So what is the function of the forest to the Bateks? There are too many indeed which could be divided into four main definitions that is as a living quarter, subsistence source of living, spiritual realm, and as an ancestral legacy. Endicott (1979) in his study said that the Bateks believe that whosoever leaves the hep will inevitably invoke a catastrophe upon humankind. The Bateks believe that they are the **jaga' hep** (the guardians of the jungle). Psychologically when they took to themselves as the guardians of the forest, a feeling of love towards the forest exists in their hearts. And not only that, they also possess the feeling of wanting to protect the forest as a heritage of immense value.

It is interesting to enquire whether the Bateks have any religion at all. In reality, the Bateks believe in the existence of a powerful entity which they called **Hala' Asal, Tohan, and Hala'** (Endicott 1979). They are by no means an atheistic

society for they believe that all which has happened, was planned by the Creator. In the Batek community, the most important culture is the **lawad** (prohibitions, crime or taboo). This is necessary in order to maintain the stability of their social life which could provide peace and stability in the forest. The main element of the lawad is the **Ye' Yo'** which represents a physical manifestation of their existence in the forest. **Ye' Yo'** is a negative attitude where one laughs at, or makes a fool of, or degrades any living plants or animals in the vicinity. **Ye' Yo'** thus becomes the harshest lawad for the Bateks, for they believe that in certain living plants and animals there exist an entity called the **bayang** (spirit) because the bayang itself originates from **Hala'** who disguises itself into plants and animals. So it is totally forbidden to **ye' yo'** any living creature because the **bayang Hala'** could presumably be in the form of the creature mentioned. It is not only in defiance of their primitive beliefs and taboos but it shows a kind of disrespect one has towards the existence of the forest, animals, and plants.

What would happen if man were to defy the **lawad**? The answer is easy enough as it could bring down the anger of the spiritualistic world. This defiance of the **lawad** is usually associated with the anger of **Gobar** (one of the supernatural entities). This has been approved and written by Endicott (1979) and Lye (2005), if for instance the thunder rolls and lightning strikes, the Batek will chant "**Gobar, Gobar!**" in their frightened intonation. According to one of the Batek respondents, the thunder is a manifestation of the angry **Gobar** because there has been one who has defied the **lawad**. If the thunder is heard from far away, it shows that the inhabitant of the Batek encampments from that far away distance has defied the lawad. If the thunder is near and loud it shows that somebody nearby is the culprit. If **Gobar** is angry, the Bateks will have a **Tum Yap** or blood sacrifice ceremony in their own community.

**Tum** (water) **Yap** (blood) is a ceremonial 'throwing of the blood taken from the shin and mixing it with rainwater or river water to the sky' (Needham 1964). Needham (1964) stated that some anthropologists have also noted such ceremonies in their studies such as Maxwell for the "wild tribes" of Perak in 1879, Skeat and Blagden for the Semang in 1906, and Schebesta also for the Semang in 1929; of which all refer more to the Negritos. However, this ceremony is also practised by the hunters and gatherers community from other tribes such as the Penan of Sarawak as mentioned by Needham (1964). All these anthropologists stated almost the same passage of Tum Yap ritual, "...during a storm, lightning and thunder, the people will cut their legs or draw a few drops of blood from the shin with a knife (or sometimes with a sharp bamboo) and then mix it with a little water in a bamboo case and throw the mixture up to the sky; sometimes shouting 'Go! Go!' or 'Stop!'; all of these done for one reason which is to calm down the angry supernatural entities...". Needham (1964) added that for the Penan in Sarawak, the ceremony is usually accompanied with some 'magic spells'. Anyone who feels that he has defied the lawad may perform the **Tum Yap** ceremony, but according to one Batek man, usually the culprits who insulted Gobar do not come individually but in a group. If the culprit is not in the area at the time of the

ceremony, a replacement should be taken from a witness of the defiance who is present.

For indigenous tribes like the Bateks, blood is a sacred thing either taken from man or animals. Blood itself represents life. It is a rare occasion for the Bateks to simply withdraw their own blood. As stressed by Needham (1964), "...blood is an archetypal symbol, variously employed but universally attributed with a special significance..." For a ceremony like **Tum Yap** which requires ones' blood to be offered to the supernatural, it shows that the defiance of lawad, especially **Ye' Yo'** is a serious crime to nature and the one who has insulted the supernatural by defying it should be punished with the highest punishment; the blood offering. **Lawad, Ye' Yo'** and **Tum Yap** are the manifestations of how the Bateks navigate themselves in the forest. They are the manifestations of the forest in the lives of these people who reside in the region of Taman Negara. The Bateks see that the forest represents a dynamic dimension which has to be calmed through good spirits and behavior. The physical environment is a medium for the spiritual world to express its feelings, thinking, decisions, and punishments. Therefore, the community believes that anything valuable such as a spiritual realm needs some sacrificial blood in order to maintain peace and stability of the region.

#### 4. Summary

At a meeting with Diana Riboli<sup>6</sup> in the vicinity of the Bateks settlement, Taman Negara in 2008, she said, "...the life of the Bateks is the forest and the life of the forest is the Bateks...", shows the different manifestation of life as applied by the Bateks. In reality, they do not wholly worship the forest but see it as a starting point in their understanding of the world. This has been agreed upon by Endicott (1974), "...in spite of their feeling at home in the jungle, the Bateks do not feel any special reverence for the jungle as such, as do the African Pygmies...". Through this definition of the forest as a place for settlement, as a source of income, and as a need for physical and spiritual fulfillment, we can see that the community practically relates to the forest for all aspects of living. They are not ready to be taken out of the forest of Taman Negara. It is an ancestral sentiment that they continue to defend the forest and not to bow to external pressure. The Bateks believe that the world has a powerful Creator who determines the working of the world and this belief is manifested in the various ceremonies which renew and refresh the spirits of the forest and the whole world back to the the original 'Owner', ceremonies like the **Tum Yap** which is seen as an effort to appease the Highest Spirit who controls everything. It is also regarded as a last effort in

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6 Diana Riboli is a Professor of Anthropology at the Panteion University, Greece.

their begging for forgiveness for having insulted the feelings of the forest through their defiance of the prohibitions. This belief is to them the best way in endearing themselves to the environment. To the Bateks, all concerns for the forest could be settled through this belief. For example, if there is a storm, their simplistic understanding is that it is the manifestation of the angry Gobar towards the Bateks' defiance of the lawad. It is because of this deep belief of the Gobar that the Batek cannot be severed from the influence of the forest.

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