

The Gender Egalitarian Batek of Malaysia



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The Headman Was a Woman was written cooperatively by Kirk and Karen Endicott, after several years of study of the Batek of Malaysia. This book outlines many aspects of these people's lives and how it shapes the gender roles, or lack thereof that is evident in their society. When these anthropologists arrived in Malaysia they were expecting a general division of labor and life based on gender. This expectation was based on countless observations of other hunter-gatherer nations that show gender inequalities. However, upon arrival they were greeted by a society that largely represents what is now thought to be a gender egalitarian way of life.

The writers of this book approached the explanation of this society by breaking it up into seven chapters, each of which deals with a certain aspect of society and how it relates to and helps shape the equality of the genders. In order to clearly explain the major themes of this book I two, will be arranging this paper according in a similar manner.

### **Encountering the Unexpected**

This original chapter was mainly an account of the arrival to Malaysia and then a description of the Batek according to earlier research. This is where all background information is obtained in order to familiarize ourselves with the Batek.

The group of the Batek that were most extensively covered in this book are those that live upriver from the town Post Aring next to the Lebir river, and because of their location are noted as the Lebir Batek. However, these people generally refer to themselves as the Batek Teh, which translates to "forest people".

Here the Endicott's encountered and defined what a gender egalitarian society is. Many anthropologists maintain that there is no such society as one that is gender egalitarian, in fact many societies that are considered egalitarian are only classified as so because the relationships between man and woman, and adults and children are

excluded from the analysis. However, in recent history many have conceded that gender egalitarian societies do exist, although they are rare.

The Batek are a nomadic hunter-gatherer society in the rain forest of Malaysia which altogether number about 800 members. Despite their small numbers they are a linguistically distinct ethnic group. There are about nineteen such groups of aboriginal people that are non-Malay speakers in this area, and the Batek are the smallest of these groups.

The Batek are classified as the negrito division of the Orang Asli. This group totals about 3,500 people and is identified by having physical characteristics similar to one another, <sup>6</sup> such as a broad, flat nose, thick curly hair, dark skin color, and they were generally of short stature.

The Batek language is grouped into a category known as the semang languages, and dialects. The people categorized as semang speakers are direct descendents of the Hoabinhian people, which occupied the coasts and interior of the Malay Peninsula from about 10,000 to 1,000 B.C. These people are a wide variety of wild plants and animals, a tradition which is continued today by modern Batek.

The Batek seem to be similar in many ways to the Yanomamo which we have studied throughout the semester in their ways of subsistence, although there are a few areas of important differences. Much like the Yanomamo, the Batek's main form of protein comes from wild game that is hunted on an opportunistic basis. However, unlike the Yanomamo, <sup>who</sup> ~~which~~ hunt mainly with bows and arrows, the staple hunting technique of the Batek is a blowgun and poisoned darts. <sup>Again, similar to the</sup> ~~Much like the~~ Yanomamo, the Batek have a staple plant, but unlike the Yanomamo, <sup>who</sup> ~~which~~ use plantains more than any other plant, the Batek mainly rely on wild tubers which are searched for a dug up

on a daily basis. The Batek also seem to use their supply of fish to a greater extent than the Yanomamo.

### **Batek Views of the Sexes**

The term gender is generally used to define culturally defined categories, meanings, and behavioral expectations that are imposed based on the physiological sex of the individual. While many cultures focus on the difference of the two (sometimes more than two sexes) and use this as an explanation as to why there is an inequality between the genders, the Batek focus on the similarities between the genders and consider their differences as trivial. The Batek did recognize that there were differences between the genders, but mainly recognized physiological differences and did not consider these large enough to make one gender subordinate to the other.

In the Batek's social classification of one another (kinship terms) there are very few distinctions made between males and females. Children are all called the same thing before the onset of puberty regardless of sex. After puberty they are referred to as either young man or young woman, and there are no official puberty rituals, they are simply considered adults as they begin to autonomously take on adult roles. In fact, in the vast twenty kinship terms that the Batek have, only eight specify sex.

Unlike the Yanomamo, there is very little or no stigma surrounding the first menses of a woman. They are not avoided or confined to any area during it like the women in the Yanomamo village, which are confined to their sleeping quarters and are fed by a stick. The only taboos that are observed are abstaining from meat, and some Batek do not allow menstrual blood to enter the river for fear that the smell could offend their god.

As in all societies the Batek have origin stories, which explains how everything was originally created. In many gender in-equal societies they use these stories to endow men with a divine creation, which allows him to rule over women. A good example of this would be the Christian story of Adam and Eve, in which God made Adam first and then made Eve from a piece of Adam in order to give him some entertainment.

However, in the Batek's origin story there is no innate reason for man to rule women. In fact in their story men and women are made at the same time, from the same materials. The bodies were shaped from the earth by two brothers, the older shaped man and the younger woman. This distinction is interesting because in Batek culture the younger sibling is generally regarded as wiser. The bodies were then given life by the gift of wind life-soul. Each sex was made in the exact same way so that the only differences were physiological, so that neither sex had domain over the other.

Batek considered man and woman to both have two different souls; the wind life-soul and a shadow soul, the only differences that they observed were manifested in the physical features of the body. These differences led to a slight division of labor simply because one gender was more physically capable than the other. This however did not mean that any activity was off limits to any gender.

One example of this is hunting with blowpipes. This job was generally left to men because they had "stronger breath" and were therefore better equipped to shooting the darts long distances. However, many girls practiced blowpipe hunting in young age for fun in the company of both other girls and boys their age. Endicott also gave a specific example of a teenage girl named Chinloy who continued to hunt into adulthood; this clearly shows that there are no social rules prohibiting women from

hunting. This is different from the Yanomamo which specifically allocate hunting as a male job.

This trend continues in many aspects of Batek life. Although roles such as natural leader, shamans etc are dominated by males there is no law prohibiting women from taking on these roles. Tagynon was a woman in the group that Endicott spent most of their time in. She was noted as a headman and was very involved in religious activities.

Men and women alike participated fully in their religious ceremonies. The largest of these was a singing and trance festival which was randomly practiced. Both sexes participate in the construction of the dancing hall to whatever extent they wish and they generally do the tasks that they are most skilled at. Once the festival begins both men and women can lead the singing and all who want to participate are allowed.

During the late 1970's the general dress for men and women differed a little bit but generally men and women could wear similar clothing and decorations. Men generally wore a loincloth and women wore loincloths that were held up by a rattan belt. Women generally had pierced ears and also occasionally pierced their septum. Although no men pierced their ears several had their septum pierced. When they wanted to decorate themselves they made elaborate headdresses and arm bands from flowers, because this is what the Gods wore. Men and women wore identical decorations during their festivals.

### **Social Life**

The Batek are a nomadic people, generally living in one place for only a few days to a couple of weeks. Their camps range from just a few families to as many as 25 families during the abundant fruit season, but the average camp contains around ten families. Their camps are made quickly through cooperation between the husband

and wife in constructing the shelter. The general shelter was a lean-to with three poles for support and a thatch roof. Generally the men put the bamboo poles in the ground and then rushed off to hunt before the game was scared away and then the women wove the thatch roof.

The Batek social system was based on three general principles, self autonomy, respecting others, and helping others. The first and the final principles seem to clash but indeed they actually work within one another to make a harmonious social environment. The general ideal is that every person is autonomous in that they can decide to do whatever they want without fear of coercion but by general social standards and through a network of sharing every person is innately responsible to make sure that everyone has enough.

The basic principle of self autonomy is basically defined as any person can choose to do whatever they want as long as it does not conflict with the other two principles. The basic unit of life in the Batek is the family and any family can decide when and where they want to move, what work they will do that day etc. with no fear of consequences from the rest of their village. This doesn't mean that they never work together, work groups often form through a general consensus of several people as to what they want to do, but each person decides for themselves whether or not they want to join the group.

This idea of personal autonomy contradicts the Yanomamo very drastically in the area of marriage. In the Yanomamo the parents decide who their children will marry and often use them as pawns to create or maintain peace amongst the different groups. The Batek parents have no say in who their children marry and they are not needed as pawns to maintain peace because the Batek, have no war. There is no war because a violent act is seen as coercion and it violates all of their basic human

principles. By using force you violate their right to autonomy, you also disrespect them and are obviously damaging the social sharing network that allows them to survive. If there is a disagreement between people that cannot verbally be resolved they usually just part ways. Dealing with an indiscretion in a violent way is considered abhorrent.

Divorce among the Batek also differs from the idea of divorce among the Yanomamo. In Yanomamo society the only way a woman can initiate a divorce is by fleeing to another village, which is a very dangerous act. In the Batek society any person can initiate a divorce for any reason, and they often end on good terms and remain within the same group.

If a divorce happens when there are children involved it actually works to add to the care network that a child had, rather than subtract from it. Because each subsequent spouse of the parent becomes emotionally invested in the child and remains so even after a divorce. This means that if a child's parents die and it has step parents or even ex-step parents they are very likely to care for the child.

The values of respect and help of one another basically go hand in hand. Although every person has the right to their own decisions, it is also the responsibility of the group to share all that is gathered in order to ensure that everyone has enough to live. This is necessary because some endeavors such as trading do not yield immediate results and so people engaging in this need to be supported while doing it. Once they receive their trades however, they then share amongst the group and thus introduce new foods and commodities that would be impossible to get without the sharing network.

This mentality that everyone is entitled to a share is very similar to that of the Netsilik. One anthropologist thanked a Netsilik for a share of seal meat and he was



told never to thank because it was his right to receive his share and by thanking you endow the giver with power over you. Similarly, when Endicott asked a Batek man why he shared so much of his rice with a new group he simply responded that it is the Batek way. Without this inherent sharing system no one would be able to survive as a hunter-gatherer.

### **Sharing the Work**

Although there does appear to be a fairly general division of labor amongst the Batek, as was stated above this is simply because they generally gravitate towards activities that they are physically capable of. This means that men are the major blowpipe hunters and women are the major root gatherers. However, this is by no means culturally enforced.

Many women engage in what is known as opportunistic hunting, such as hunting bamboo rats. This is done when a woman hears a rat while digging for tubers. She then locates the rats' hole and uses her digging stick to kill and drag it out of the hole.

Similarly, there are many instances of males working in the tuber gathering area. Because blowpipe hunting is a rather hard skill to learn men often leave it up to those that are naturally talented at it. The men that tend to be worse at hunting do other tasks such as collecting rattan, digging tubers, fishing and caring for children. It is also common place for older men that are no longer skilled hunters to take to gathering tubers in their free time.

The Batek did all of their tasks in mixed gender work groups. They have no taboos about certain genders, whether married or single, working with the other gender. In fact it is common for males and females that are attracted to one another to work closely in supporting one another even if they are married to other people. This

tendency towards mixed gender work groups begins at a very early age, as both sexes play together from the time that they are old enough to socialize.

In general it seemed that men contributed a little larger percentage of the food, and they contributed a very large portion of the meat but this did not endow them with any rights over women. In non-food acquiring activities men and women tended to participate fairly equally. Such as in the area of water and firewood gathering, whoever noticed that the family was low would simply go out and gather more. Men and women also tended to be experts in making the tools and equipment that they used most. For example men made blowpipes and women made pandanus mats, although this didn't mean that some did the opposite activity.

### **Growing up Batek**

Batek believed that in order to conceive the couple needed to copulate many times in order to make the menstrual blood coagulate into a fetus before it is expelled. During the pregnancy of a woman there are no taboos followed and the woman can continue doing her work for as long as she considers it safe. Once labor is begun a mid-wife builds a separate lean-to in the woods where the birth takes place. Either men or women can be mid-wives you simply need to be familiar with the birthing process.

Usually the mid-wife, the husband, and a few other women are present at the birth although there is no taboo saying that other men cannot be pregnant. Once the child is born the only person that can go back to the birthing hut is the mother in order to keep its fire going until the afterbirth is dried up so as to prevent the child from developing a fever.

Batek women allow the child to nurse as long and as often as the child wants to and if there is no other conceptions the child may nurse for up to four years. Having two children close to one another is thought of as a hardship, but there are no sex taboos after birth and unlike the Yanomamo and the Netsilik, infanticide is not practiced.

Once the child is born, the woman carries it on her breast in a sling and it comes along on her gathering efforts. This is not to say that men do not invest a lot of time in the care of their child, men invest hours of play and care to each child and neither husband nor wife professes a desire for one sex of child over the other. Other than its parents a child has a vast network of care that extends to all Batek. Tagynon was a mother that had several grown children and could often be seen rushing to someone else's crying child in order to comfort it.

Both sexes were treated the same as they grew up, they played in mixed sex groups and were allowed to accompany their parents on their work groups. Parents also had no power of coercion over their children, much like the Zapotec they would tell their wishes to the child but it was not uncommon for the child to simply respond no. This was shrugged off and explained as the child was too young to understand, as the child aged it began to develop respect for elders and would therefore be more likely for respect their wishes.

Parents did however have a few ways to get children to comply with their wishes without having to actually force them too. They could do this by saying invoking the fear of tigers, outsiders, or the God's wrath. If a child would wander to an unsafe distance the parent could simply yell that there was a tiger near and the child would run back, this enforced the very real need to be careful of tigers. In a

similar manner the parents could invoke the child's fear of the God's or outsiders to get them to cease undesirable behavior.

As the children entered adolescence and adulthood they would naturally gravitate to the roles that they were physically capable of doing with no coercion from their parents to do so. However, as they did gravitate towards the jobs that they were best able to perform they still continued their playful ways, such as in the example of Chinloy continually blowpipe hunting.

### **Continuity and Change in Batek Gender**

In the late 1970's large scale logging and plantation forming was started in the Batek area and by the year 1990 much of their natural habitat had been cleared and the Malaysian government was paying them to settle down and begin farming. Endicott went back in order to determine whether or not the Batek would follow the general path that as groups became sedentary horticulturist the value of women would decline. However, after living with groups that maintain the same level of nomadism, groups that were semi-sedentary and groups that were completely sedentary, he determined that the role of women as equals had declined very little if at all.

In conclusion although Endicott was presented with a situation very different from the one that was expected when they arrived it is clear that the Batek fit a very narrow and rare category of gender egalitarian people. It seems the very fact that they are gender egalitarian is the thought that other than physical differences men and women are the same and therefore neither should be subservient to the to the other. Whether or not this mentality will remain the same or if the changing environment and increased interaction with the Muslim Malays will change this is yet to be seen, but we can only hope that this rare and beautiful society can remain unchanged by their non-egalitarian neighbors.