Batek Childrearing and Morality
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Although contemporary and recent nomadic hunting and gathering societies are not living fossils from the Stone Age, as they are sometimes depicted in popular media, they do provide the closest analogy we have to the way of life our ancient ancestors followed before the advent of agriculture about 10,000 years ago. Understanding that way of life is crucial to our understanding of human nature, for it is the context in which the biology and behavior of our species evolved. Archaeologists, human paleontologists, and geneticists have made great strides in extracting information from the physical remains of early hominins and ancient cultures, but many gaps remain in what we can know from such evidence alone. We believe that the ethnographic analogy, if used carefully, can generate testable hypotheses and plausible reconstructions that can help to fill some of those gaps (but see Wylie, 1985, on the limitations of the ethnographic analogy in archaeology). In this chapter, we describe the childrearing practices and their consequences of the Batek people of Peninsular Malaysia, many of whom continue to follow a nomadic hunting and gathering way of life, in hope of casting some light on the probable practices of our remote ancestors.

The Batek

The Batek are 1 of 19 cultural-linguistic groups of Orang Asli (Malay for “original people”) in Peninsular Malaysia. They live in the lowland tropical rainforest in a contiguous area where the states of Pahang, Kelantan, and Terengganu meet, an area that encompasses the 4343-square kilometer national park, Taman Negara. Since the 1970s, the forests in the Batek homeland outside Taman Negara have been clear-cut or selectively logged and replaced by oil palm plantations or degraded secondary forest. Now roughly one-third of the approximately 1500 Batek De’ (the largest language group called Batek) live in temporary camps in the primary rainforest of Taman Negara at any one time, and the other two-thirds live in settlements on the periphery of the park, although many individuals move back and forth between the two environments from time to time (Tacey, 2013, p. 240; T. P. Lye, personal communication, March 16, 2013).
This chapter is based mainly on 5 months of research we carried out over a
9-month period in 1975 to 1976 in the upper Lebir River watershed of Kelantan,
which was then mostly covered by primary rainforest. In those days, the 84 Batek
living there were fully nomadic. They occupied two to four camps that changed size
and composition continually as people moved in and out of existing camps and as
camp groups split and merged and moved to new locations every week to 10 days.
The average population of the camps we lived in was 34, including 11 adult men,
9 adult women, and 14 children younger than age 14. At that time the Batek were
relatively isolated from the outside world. The only regular contact they had with
outsiders was with small parties of Malay traders, who came up the river in out-
board motorboats about once a month to obtain forest products, and with employ-
ees of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, who came less frequently at irregular
intervals. Few of the Batek had spent any substantial amount of time outside the
forest, and only one boy had spent a few months at school at a government settle-
ment on the lower Lebir River. Certainly most Batek knew little or nothing about
the childrearing practices of the Malays or other non-Orang Asli Malaysian ethnic
groups.

The Batek economy was based on a mixture of hunting and gathering and col-
lecting forest products—mostly large- and small-diameter rattan, the vine-like
stems of climbing palms—which they traded for such goods as rice, flour, sugar,
tea, tobacco, cloth, and metal pots and knives (see K. M. Endicott, 1984, 1995,
2005; Endicott and Bellwood, 1991; Endicott and Endicott, 2008, for details of the
Batek economy). Batek have long traded forest products to outsiders, although the
particular products in demand have varied over the years. In March and April of
1976, they participated briefly in a Department of Aboriginal Affairs-sponsored
horticulture project, clearing a patch of forest and planting a few fast-growing
crops such as maize, but they abandoned the project as soon as the rations pro-
vided ran out. Their main source of protein was arboreal game, such as leaf mon-
eys, gibbons, squirrels, and birds, which men—alone or in small groups—killed by
means of bamboo blowpipes and poisoned darts. Although women were not pro-
hibited from blowpipe hunting, few of them pursued it after childhood. However,
women did bring in appreciable amounts of meat in the form of small burrowing
animals, such as bamboo rats, and fish, which they caught with hooks and lines
obtained through trade. The carbohydrate staples of the foraging diet were wild
tubers (Dioscorea spp.) and vegetables, such as mushrooms and palm hearts, and
seasonal fruits and honey. Women in small parties of three or four, together with
their small children, gathered wild tubers almost daily. Men also dug up tubers
if they came across a promising source while hunting or collecting rattan. Men,
who slightly outnumbered women in the adult population, brought in 34% of the
tubers by weight, whereas women accounted for the remaining 66% (Endicott and
Endicott, 2008, p. 87). Most adult men and adolescent boys also took part in col-
lecting rattan, and some women who did not have young, dependent children did
so as well. Small-diameter rattans could simply be pulled down from the forest
canopy and cut into standardized lengths, but large-diameter rattan required someone (usually a man) to climb a tree and cut the vine loose from its crown of leaves. They alternated collecting rattan with hunting and gathering wild foods, and both activities were integrated smoothly within the nomadic foraging round. During the study period, the upper Lebir Batek obtained about 58% of their calories from wild sources and 42% from traded foods, mainly rice (Endicott and Endicott, 2008, p. 97). The Batek economy in 1975 and 1976 differed most significantly from the economies of our ancient ancestors in including cultivated foods, metal tools, and cloth obtained through trade with outsiders.

The basic unit of Batek society was the conjugal family, consisting of a married couple and their dependent children. (For details of Batek marriage and divorce, see below.) Couples were potentially independent economically, at least for limited periods of time, and husbands and wives together decided where to live and what kind of work to do. However, the unit of long-term survival was the camp, which usually consisted of five to eight conjugal families living in separate palm-thatched lean-to shelters. Although camp composition changed almost continually, camps had a moral unity that was expressed most vividly in the obligation to share any food—animal or vegetable, foraged or traded—that people obtained in excess of their daily needs. We often saw children carrying portions of food from one shelter to another, even when the occupants already had their own supply. The direct participation of each individual in the camp sharing network enabled unmarried, divorced, or widowed persons to augment their own food-getting efforts and gain direct access to foods they may not have been able to procure themselves, and it provided people with food when their own food-getting labors failed, a frequent enough occurrence in foraging societies.

Although Batek highly valued their individual autonomy, they also cooperated voluntarily in many work and social activities, including performing rituals (K. M. Endicott, 1979). No one had any authority over anyone else, but there were some informal leaders—who might be men or women—who exercised some influence in group decisions. However, no one had the right to coerce anyone else in any way, and violence of any kind was absolutely forbidden. Thus the social environment in which Batek children grew up was one in which everyone had great personal autonomy, but also an obligation to respect, help, and cooperate with others regardless of age or gender (K. M. Endicott, 2011; Endicott and Endicott, 2008).

**Batek Childrearing Practices**

During pregnancy, there were no prohibitions on a woman’s eating habits or on her activities. She continued her normal activities, including sexual relations, for as long into her pregnancy as she felt able.

Although we did not have the opportunity to observe a birth during our fieldwork, people explained their practices to us. Unless labor began unexpectedly,
Batek babies were born in special lean-to shelters set in the forest away from the camp. The shelter had a floor of split bamboo, sticks, or bark and some sticks stuck diagonally through the floor for the expectant mother to lean against. She sat with her knees drawn up and a cloth covering her abdomen and thighs. A midwife, usually an experienced older woman, and a few other women assisted in bringing the baby into the world. The midwife massaged the mother's abdomen and received the baby in her hands when the mother pushed it out. The midwife placed the baby between the mother's feet and then bathed the mother and baby with cool water to prevent fever. She cut the umbilical cord with a splinter of bamboo, wrapped the baby in a cloth, and placed it at the mother's breast. When the mother felt strong enough to walk, she returned to her family shelter in camp. For the next 3 or 4 days, she returned regularly to the birth hut to keep a fire burning beside the placenta, which was left covered by a pandanus leaf mat, to prevent the mother or baby from incurring a fever.

Infancy (birth to 18 months) was a time of indulgence and constant physical contact for children of both sexes. An infant's cries were always heeded by a parent or any adult or child nearby. The infant spent most of its time with its mother, being carried in a cloth sling on the mother's back or at her breast so that the baby could nurse on demand. At night, the infant slept next to the mother. Breastfeeding might continue for 3 or 4 years unless a subsequent pregnancy caused the mother's milk supply to dry up. Otherwise, children were allowed to take the breast as long as they wanted to, although soft foods and later solid foods were added to their diets as soon as their teeth began to come in.

Fathers also played an important part in the social life of infants (K. L. Endicott, 1992). Fathers held, cuddled, and chattered to their sons and daughters with as much obvious enjoyment as mothers showed. Fathers as well as mothers bathed their children, cleaned up their excrement, and took them outside camp to relieve themselves. They often made toys—such as blowpipes, swings, and climbing ladders—for their children's amusement. While in camp, fathers often carried their babies in a sling on their back and let the babies sit on their laps while sitting in their shelters. Other camp members also took an active interest in the babies, admiring and cuddling them, reciting rhymes for their amusement, and lavishing affection on them. The Batek said they desire male and female babies equally, and their affectionate behavior toward infants of each sex supports this claim.

From about 2 to 6 years old, boys and girls spent much time together doing the same activities. Two- and three-year-olds of both sexes tended to stay close to their mothers. Mothers at this time, however, began to foster independence in their children by not heeding every cry, letting children deal with their own minor frustrations and difficulties, and intervening primarily when their cries indicated pain, fear, or intense frustration. Children were not cuddled quite as frequently as during infancy, especially if the mother had a new baby. By about 3½ to 4 years of age, most children ranged farther from their mothers, playing in mixed-sex groups, often with 5- and 6-year-olds, without direct supervision from adults or older children.
As long as the children remained within earshot, they were allowed to do almost anything they pleased. Activities included chopping trees with bush knives, building fires, pretending to cook or actually cooking small amounts of rice or other food, digging as if digging for tubers, climbing trees, gathering sticks as if they were rattan, "moving camp," building miniature shelters, and other activities imitative of the skills they saw performed by adults inside and outside camp. Adults did not normally participate in children's play activities. Both boys and girls learned various skills by imitation and practice, without direct instruction or suggestion from adults. During these early years, children also began to participate directly in the sharing network of the camp by helping to distribute plates of food to other families in camp. This was one of the few jobs young children were actively given.

All young boys and girls frequently accompanied their mothers on tubercollecting trips, babies being carried and older children walking behind. Although the presence of children did not usually hinder the women's foraging success, mothers sometimes tried to leave some of their children behind in camp. Adults who were resting or working in camp were usually happy to look after other families' children. Batek sometimes spoke of the children in camp as if they belonged to the camp group as a whole, referring to all of them as "our children." However, older children were not called on to look after younger ones, mainly because parents considered the older children unreliable and likely to leave their young charges unattended.

Play and play groups were flexible. Whenever children decided to do a particular activity, other interested children spontaneously joined in. No child was excluded from play by other children. Youngsters who could not keep up because of their age and more limited abilities simply dropped out of the play and found something else to do. Sometimes one child consistently initiated an activity, but often play flowed from one activity to the next, according to the whim of the ever-changing group. A typical sequence of play began with the children swimming in a shallow stream, changed to jumping off logs into the stream, shifted to running after each other in a "tiger chasing Batek" game (children switched roles at will), reverted back to swimming, and ended up with pretending to be motorboats traveling up and downstream until the children gradually drifted off to their own or each other's shelters to rest. Each activity in this sequence lasted about 10 minutes. (See the DVD packaged with Endicott and Endicott, 2008, for scenes of children at play.) Leisure activities in camp included grooming each other and singing. There was little parental interference in play, except to correct children if they were breaking prohibitions against particular acts (termed lawwe), such as laughing at butterflies which were thought to provoke the thundertgod, Gobar, and the earth deity, Ya, into causing a devastating thunderstorm and flood (K. M. Endicott, 1979). This was a major way children learned about the Batek world view.

Children's play was strikingly noncompetitive. Games did not have actual rules; children simply created and then repeated activity patterns as they went along. Play was not structured to produce teams of winners and losers. Even in constructive play, when children made darts or other items, there was little if any concern with
producing "the best" objects, each child simply working at his or her own level of proficiency. The noncompetitive nature of play paralleled the noncompetitive nature of adult work activities, on which most play was based.

From about 6 to 8 years old, children practiced more intensively the skills they would later use as adults, learning more about their environment and culture through direct observation and questioning of adults and some informal instruction from them. In camp they observed hunters making blowpipes and darts, and they saw them shooting birds and squirrels nearby. The children, including girls, tried to make darts and might borrow someone's blowpipe to try them out close to camp. They also practiced fishing, digging tubers, catching frogs, and other food-getting activities, often with considerable success. Although parents did not expect children to produce food, the youngsters enjoyed doing so when they could, and they also enjoyed cooking and sharing it with their friends. Swimming, pretending to move camp, singing, dancing, and other activities done in early childhood continued to form part of the activities of the older children. Imitating animal sounds, learned from hunters, was a favorite activity. As in their early years, the older children spent much of their time in mixed-sex groups because they had similar interests.

Between ages 8 and 10, children usually moved out of the family shelter. This was often a practical necessity because the floor space of the typical lean-to shelter measured only about 5 by 7 feet, and younger siblings would take precedence in the family bed. At first the older children would construct a small shelter near or even attached to the family shelter and would continue to eat at the family hearth. Adolescents often banded together in separate shelters, where they sometimes cooked their own food, while at other times eating with their natal families. The occupants of these adolescent group-shelters might be all boys, all girls, or a mixture of both. During adolescence, youngsters began experimental sexual relations, which sometimes led to "trial marriages" of varying durations. Parents expected this to happen and were not greatly concerned. Parents expected their children to become more independent as they physically matured.

By 8 to 9 years of age, a change in the interests and activity-group composition could be seen. Boys spent more and more of their time hunting birds and squirrels increasingly far from camp and spent more of their in-camp hours making darts and drying their blowpipes. After about age 10, boys also began to accompany older boys or men on the hunt. Girls gradually spent less time making darts as the boys increased their out-of-camp hunting activities. Instead, girls accompanied women more frequently on gathering trips, not as children tagging along, but rather as workers in their own right. Often girls went with women other than their own mothers. In camp, girls began to be taught (not necessarily by their mothers) how to weave baskets and mats of pandanus leaves, a skill that required considerable practice.

By about 12 years of age, the frequency of boys accompanying hunters and girls going with women on their activities was so great that they were essentially already
following adult behavior patterns. Some girls continued to hunt casually near camp, but as far as we know, they rarely if ever actually accompanied skilled hunters on hunts. Batek believed that females had naturally weaker breath than males and were therefore less suited than males to becoming serious blowpipe hunters. Boys still accompanied their mothers on gathering trips whenever they wished, but they usually took along their blowpipes and spent their time shooting at birds and squirrels, rather than digging for tubers. Boys and girls also began to participate in rattan work during this time.

A striking characteristic of the gradual change from the mixed-sex play groups and identical activities of childhood to the frequently single-sex work groups and complementary activities of adulthood was that it happened without overt pressure, coercion, or direct influence from adults. Children seemed to adopt appropriate gender-role behaviors of their own accord. They were undoubtedly influenced by seeing very positive role models in women as well as men. Batek were gender egalitarian in the sense that neither males nor females as groups had control over the other sex and neither sex was accorded greater value than the other by society as a whole (K. L. Endicott, 1979; Endicott and Endicott, 2008). Both men and women appeared to be self-confident, enthusiastic about their activities, high spirited, and generally satisfied with their work and lives. Batek did not downgrade or differentially evaluate the activities of either sex, nor did they impose gender-specific behaviors on individuals. Batek children, then, had no obvious reason not to readily adopt the behavior patterns of their own sex group, even though the activities usually associated with the other sex were not actually prohibited to them.

For Batek, the transition from childhood to adulthood was unmarked by puberty ceremonies, challenges, or deals, religious inductions, or secret ceremonies, which serve to differentiatize stages of life and separate the sexes in many other societies. Growing up entailed the acquisition of adult skills and eventually a change to the role of spouse. The life stages were noted linguistically rather than ceremonially. There were separate terms for infant, child, female youth, male youth, parent of young children, and old person. The only gender-specific terms were those used when a person underwent obvious physical maturation.

By about 14 to 16 years of age, the Batek were no longer just children and novices in their activities, but rather were essentially adults. By then, they lived in separate shelters from their parents, and they had begun to engage in trial marriages. Their food-getting activities took a serious turn from the practice and play of the early years to the productivity expected of adults.

By their late teens or early 20s, most Batek entered into socially recognized marriages (Endicott and Endicott 2008, pp. 55–61). These often followed a series of trial marriages and sexual liaisons. Although parents sometimes tried to influence their children's marriage choices, people made their own decisions about whom to marry. They said that marriages were based on mutual attraction, love (sayegn), and physical desire (hawa). Marriage was defined by a couple moving in together in a separate lean-to shelter and accepting the responsibilities of
married life, not necessarily by means of a ritual. They began to cooperate in food getting and to share their meals, and they started to use respectful terms of reference and address for their affines and to follow proper avoidance behaviors toward them. At the beginning of a marriage, the couple might provide a small feast for camp members, exchange small gifts, and give gifts to their new parents-in-law, whom they were obligated to help for the first few years of marriage, but this too was up to the wishes of the individuals involved. Often the newly married couple lived near the wife’s parents for the first year, but later they might move to the husband’s parents’ camp (if different) or to another camp entirely.

Divorce, which was marked mainly by the couple ceasing to live together, was almost as frequent as marriage in the early years of adulthood. Although couples were less likely to divorce after having children, that was not unusual either. When a couple with children divorced, breastfeeding infants and very young children remained with the mother, whereas older children would choose which parent to live with or might alternate between them. Because the parents often lived in the same camp, the children’s access to both parents was easy. When the parents remarried, as they almost always did, the new spouse took on a parental role toward the children that continued even if they in turn divorced. Children normally called their parents’ new spouses bah (“uncle, male relative of parents’ generation”) or be’ (“aunt, female relative of parents’ generation”), but referred to them as their pa’ tiri’ (“stepfather”) or na’ tiri’ (“stepmother”). Thus, the more divorces and remarriages their biological parents went through, the more quasi parents the children acquired, which no doubt enhanced the security of children in a society in which either or both parents might die at any time.

SOCIALIZATION INTO NONAGGRESSION

A striking feature of adult Batek society, and one to which children had to be socialized, was the absence of aggression and violence (K. L. Endicott, 1979; K. M. Endicott, 2013). Writers on nonaggressive and nonviolent societies generally accept that all people, even those living in nonviolent societies, experience aggressive feelings at some point during their lives (see, e.g., Dentan, 1978; Draper, 1978; Marshall, 1976, p. 288; Montagu 1978). The earliest training in nonaggression that Batek children received took place between the ages of 1 and 2 years. Children of this age who hit out at each other in annoyance or even in the wild animation of play were simply retrieved by their mothers or other adults and separated. This was done without comment from the mothers, who then tried to interest each child in some new activity. With toddlers and older children, parents might explicitly tell them not to annoy each other and might intervene to separate them if necessary.

Batek toddlers seemed to have “classic” toddler tendencies. They might act possessively about an object, be it a stick or a portion of food, and might hit others
who came too close while they had the object. Children gradually learned to overcome this aggressive possessiveness, however. Parents did not generally admonish children about being possessive, which would have drawn attention to it, but simply ignored it. They said that young children did not know any better, that they were *bulo' lagi*, “still ignorant.” Parents seemed to think that children would simply grow out of possessiveness and aggressive behavior. Sometimes they laughed at aggressive behavior, making what seemed important to the child appear to be trivial and amusing. This also served to ease the tension of the situation. Aggression could also be calmed by others distracting the child. If a child was seen to be about to hit someone, others might cry out *"ula!"* which roughly means “Hey!” Whatever method was used, no direct comments about the aggressive act or lessons about the right or wrong of the act were made. Parents normally did not punish children for aggressive acts, although very occasionally, one might strike a child to teach her not to hit others. The Batek appeared to think that a better way of handling children’s aggression was to minimize reaction to it and let children learn at their own pace that acting aggressively was just not something people do. As children became more cognizant of adult behavior, they realized that adults did not hit each other or act possessively about food or objects. They also saw that adults vented their anger or frustration verbally rather than physically. The absence of an adult aggression model for Batek children to follow was probably the greatest factor in socializing children to be nonaggressive.

**THE BASAL HUMAN CHILDERARING PATTERN**

Recently, scholars have tried to determine which childrearing practices are most common in nomadic hunting and gathering societies, with the implication that they probably also existed in early hominin and archaic *Homo sapiens* groups. Narvaez and Gleason, drawing on studies by such scholars as Melvin Konner (2010), summarize those features thus:

“...early life experience for hominids involved (1) touch, being held or kept near others constantly; (2) caregiver prompt and appropriate responses to fusses, cries, and needs; (3) breastfeeding on demand frequently (2 to 3 times/hour initially) and on average 2 to 5 years; (4) cosleeping close to caregivers; (5) multiple alloparents, that is, frequent care by individuals other than mothers (fathers and grandmothers in particular); (6) multiage free-play groups in nature; (7) high social embeddedness; and (8) natural childbirth....” (2013, p. 314; see also Hewlett and Lamb 2005, p. 15)

Batek childrearing practices fit that pattern closely. The question is: Why?

The Batek we knew did not express a coherent, all-inclusive theory or philosophy of how children should be raised. The closest term in Batek to our term “childrearing” is *perigos*, which means merely “to give life.” Our impression is that they viewed most, if not all, of their childrearing practices as common-sense solutions
to practical problems of life. They had no alternatives to such practices as natural childbirth and breastfeeding, and they would have seen no reason to limit breastfeeding to a fixed schedule. Similarly, the alternatives to carrying babies and sleeping with them in the family shelter would have unnecessarily exposed the babies to hazards, given the absence of clean, safe places to put them. Alloparenting helped solve the practical problem of how to care for children when a parent had to be away, although it also expressed the Batek feeling that the health and survival of babies was partially the responsibility of the entire camp group and the baby’s kin group. Batek sometimes expressed anxiety about the possible decline in their population, referring especially to such continuing threats as malaria and occasional epidemics of communicable diseases. Multiage play groups seemed inevitable given the small child population of a forest camp, and people would have seen no reason to separate children by age. The only listed feature on which the Batek presented a partial exception was that of caregivers promptly responding to babies’ fusses, cries, and needs. Certainly Batek did so during the first year or so of a baby’s life, but after that, they gradually began to let the child cope with minor problems on its own. This may have reflected a deliberate policy of letting children learn by doing and helping them to achieve greater independence from adults. We were surprised that parents allowed babies not yet able to walk to play with bush knives and fire, a practice that has been noted for some other nomadic hunter-gatherers (Hewlett and Lamb, 2005, p. 15). No doubt this sometimes led to cuts and burns, but it also resulted in children becoming incredibly good at practical skills at an early age.

**Child, Adolescent, and Adult Relationships**

The basic relationship between Batek children and adults was one of mutual affection and respect. Parents and other adults were very caring and protective toward young children, but they also gave them the freedom to do what they wanted to do. Parents were indulgent toward their children, never denying them anything that they wanted or that the parents themselves enjoyed. For example, we were astonished at first to see toddlers smoking miniature cigarettes. If a child ruined some family possession in the course of play, the parents simply shrugged it off.

Children were openly affectionate toward both parents. Attachments to fathers appeared to be equal in intensity to those with mothers. It was not uncommon for a man’s young son or daughter to wail despairingly for him when he left camp to hunt. Such cries went up for mothers, too, if they tried to go off to work without taking their children along.

Although parents molded their children’s behavior through example, verbal correction, or spontaneous reactions, parents had no real authority over their children. Parents expected that children would not obey them if they did not want to. This was accepted in much the same way that Western parents accept that “boys will be boys.” Batek parents normally did not strike their children, unless they felt it was a
last resort for teaching children not to hit others. When children’s behavior annoyed parents, they might yell at them to stop, but this often had no effect. Children were more likely to heed if a parent said he or she was upset or angry about the behavior. Fathers were no more successful at controlling their children’s behavior than mothers.

The main way parents in this largely nonviolent society tried to control the behavior of their children was by invoking the authority Batek culture projected onto nonhuman or non-Batek third parties: the thundergod Gobar, tigers, and outsiders. Gobar was the authority figure for both adults and children because he punishes transgressions of the proper social and cultural order with thunderstorms. Parents reminded children, often while they were playing, that certain acts were prohibited (lawac), and gradually children learned to avoid those acts. Parents also used the tiger as an authority figure and bogeyman to prompt or scare children into proper behavior. Although the fear of tigers had some basis in the real physical threat tigers posed to the Batek, it was also intensified by the use of the tiger as a bogey figure. If a child wandered too far from camp, for example, a parent might call out “Tiger, tiger!” so that the child would run back to camp. This taught children to be aware of potentially dangerous situations and also served as a means of controlling children. The other bogeyman parents used to influence children’s behavior was the outsider (gob), a role in which we were sometimes cast. Parents might tell a child that the gob would come, or if present, was watching, if a child did certain things or continued to misbehave.

Adults generally respected the autonomy of adolescents. Some parents tried to influence their children’s choices of spouses, but it was up to the youngster to decide whether to obey. Some did, and others did not. Occasionally, we heard an adult lecturing a group of adolescents about something he or she thought they should do. The youngsters would listen and then do whatever they wished.

**Social Personality**

We did not conduct any standardized personality tests on the Batek, so our observations on this topic are impressionistic. Although most Batek shared personality traits promoted by their socialization practices—such as adventurousness, independence, friendliness, cheerfulness, and generosity—there was also a tolerance for personal quirks and eccentricities. Nevertheless, the range of personality types was probably narrower than that found in modern complex societies, in which people come from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. Unlike in societies in which the two sexes are treated and valued differently, in Batek society there were no obvious male or female personality types. The intolerance of aggression prevented males from developing aggressive or dominating personalities, as is common in many societies. Conversely, women were not submissive or meek. Their socialization led individuals toward a confident independence coupled with a sense of
responsibility toward others, rather than creating vastly different masculine and feminine personality types.

People seemed to tolerate some cases of antisocial behavior, probably for the sake of group solidarity. For example, one man who had once worked for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was considered somewhat “wicked” (Malay jahat) because he and his wife kept a small supply of rice for emergencies rather than sharing it with the camp group. One man was said to sometimes lie to get his way and to be irresponsible. He ran up a large debt with a rattan trader and then expected other relatives to help him pay it off. We heard of one case of a mother beating one of her young children unconscious with a piece of bamboo when she was angry with her husband for supposedly making advances toward another woman. We were told that she had actually killed two of her children in the past in similar fashion. People said that she was somewhat “insane,” and that she was prone to losing all self-control when angry. Most of the time, however, she seemed very sweet and caring, and before hearing of that incident, we had considered her a model mother.

**Moral Culture**

All human societies develop rules of proper behavior—some explicit, and others implicit. Proper behavior is encouraged and rewarded by social approval, whereas improper behavior is condemned and punished by human agents, superhuman beings, or invisible forces. Moral rules, according to some Western scholars, prohibit actions that are wrong in some absolute sense. Philosopher Bernard Gert (2005, p. 10) distinguishes moral rules from legal, religious, and prudential rules and from codes of conduct of specific groups, which may actually be immoral (e.g., Nazi “morality”). However, in actual practice such moral rules are often entwined with other kinds of rules, as when they are justified by religious beliefs and enforced by laws. For our purposes, we regard morality as “concerned with the behavior of people insofar as that behavior affects others; it prohibits the kind of conduct that harms others and encourages the kind of conduct that helps them” (Gert, 2005, p. 9; see also De Waal, 1996, pp. 207–208).

The behavior of well-socialized Batek could be seen as governed—or at least strongly influenced—by a set of explicit and implicit moral rules, some in the form of prosocial obligations, and others in the form of prohibitions against antisocial behavior. Both obligations and prohibitions were enforced by diffuse social pressure and divine punishments meted out by superhuman beings. Some teasing was used, but only in good humor, because seriously hurting another person’s feelings was thought to cause them physical harm (see below).

Batek did not express their obligations to others in the form of an explicit list, but they can be deduced from childrearing practices, approval and disapproval of
certain actions, sanctions against certain actions, and observable behaviors. Batek "ethical principles" or "moral obligations" appear to be the following: respect others, help others (including share food), be self-reliant, be nonviolent, and be non-competitive (K. M. Endicott, 2011, pp. 66–75; see also Endicott and Endicott, 2008, pp. 42–51). Our discussion above of Batek childrearing practices gives some idea of how children internalized these obligations as they grew up. Because no Batek person had formal authority over anyone else, no one was in a position to punish anyone else for failing to fulfill any of these moral obligations. However, Batek were sensitive to the opinions of others and were susceptible to pressure from negative talk and direct criticism. We were told that for a serious offense, such as killing someone, the group would abandon the offender, running away if necessary. In addition, Batek believed that if a person mistreated someone else, the victim might incur a disease called ke'oy, in which the heart becomes hot and the person falls into deep depression (K. M. Endicott, 1979, pp. 107, 109–110; 2011, p. 68; Endicott and Endicott, 2008, pp. 45–46). People believed that ke'oy could lead to physical breakdown and death if untreated. The most effective treatment for ke'oy was for someone, preferably the offender, to lightly cut his own leg, wipe some blood on some leaves, rub the leaves on the chest of the ailing person to cool the heart, and then throw away the leaves, taking the poison of the disease with them. People's fear of being accused of causing someone to suffer an attack of ke'oy served as a powerful incentive to avoid mistreating others.

Batek also observed a large number of prohibitions against acts that were thought to offend the superhuman beings. Lawac acts were thought to anger the thundergod, who would cause a violent thunderstorm to strike the offender's camp, and the earth deity, who would cause a flood to well up from the underground sea and dissolve the earth beneath the camp. The prohibited acts included laughing at certain animals (e.g., leeches), cooking certain combinations of foods over a single fire, pouring certain kinds of blood into streams, flashing a mirror in the sun, and making a booming sound by banging a section of bamboo on the surface of a stream. It was also lawac for anyone to have sexual relations with a relative closer than first cousin. (Unlike some other Orang Asli groups, Batek allowed marriage between first cousins.) The thundergod was thought to punish sexual breaches by sending a thunderstorm or a crippling disease to afflict the offender. To stop punitive thunderstorms, people—usually the offender—performed a "blood sacrifice," scratching their shin with a knife, mixing some blood with water, and throwing the mixture upward to the thundergod and downward to the earth deity (K. M. Endicott, 1979, pp. 68–79).

Another category of prohibited acts, called tolah (Malay tutah), included a large number of socially disruptive and disrespectful acts, such as spitting on someone, urinating in a stream above a bathing place, and calling an older relative by her personal name rather than a kin term or teknonym. Violence was considered a tolah act and, if serious, lawac as well. Tolah acts were punished by the creator god, Tohan (cf. Malay tuhan), causing the offender to have an accident.
or sending a disease that would cause the offender to become paralyzed and eventually die. If the offense were serious, the superhuman beings would refuse to take the person’s shadow-soul after death, thus dooming the offender to roam the earth as a ghost.

**Moral Behavior**

The Batek system of moral obligations encouraged a behavior pattern that we term “cooperative autonomy,” as distinct from the “competitive autonomy” of such peoples as the New Guinea highlanders and what Americans call “rugged individualism”—self-reliance unhampered by obligations to others. Although Batek were free in principle to do whatever they might have wanted without interference from others, their long-term survival depended on the support of a group that would help them in times of need. Anyone who chose to violate one of their moral obligations risked angering their camp group. The habit of helping others (e.g., sharing surplus food) was engrained in people by the time they reached maturity. People had empathy for others and concern for the welfare of others, especially fellow camp members and close relatives who might have been living elsewhere. This does not mean that there was no room for disputes and differences of opinion. The moral principles were not entirely consistent with each other. For example, the right to move at will to another camp would sometimes conflict with a person’s obligation to help close relatives in the original camp. There were also some ambiguities in how the principles should be applied. For example, we heard an argument between two adolescent girls and two boys who had been living in the same shelter over whether the girls should have saved some fruit for the boys, who were out hunting when the fruit came into camp. Individuals and couples usually took account of what other camp members wanted to do before making their own decisions, if only to ensure that they did not end up camping alone, which would have been dangerous. Discussions took place every day in camp about what people wanted to do and where they wanted to go, and the composition of work groups varied from day to day.

Because the Batek did not have leaders with the authority to settle disputes, people usually thrashed out their complaints verbally, in public arguments to which anyone could contribute. If a consensus developed that one disputant was in the wrong, camp members would try to convince that person to alter their behavior or to make amends to the other disputant, but applying too much pressure always risked causing the person who was blamed to incur ke’oy. If bad feelings persisted, the disputants always had the option of moving to another camp, the classic escape valve in nomadic foraging societies. Violence between adults was almost nonexistent. We heard that two men had once gotten into a physical fight over the wife of one of the men, but respected elders managed to calm the conflict and convince the men to let the woman decide.
Wellbeing

Batek childrearing methods and social practices seem to have produced well-adjusted individuals who were generally happy, emotionally secure, and self-confident. Of course, individuals were subject to emotional ups and downs depending on events in their lives, such as the death of a child. (We estimated that about 25% of Batek children were stillborn or died within the first 2 years after birth, usually from malaria or gastrointestinal problems.) But whenever someone suffered such a misfortune, they could count on the emotional support of the other members of the camp group.

The tone of everyday life in Batek camps and work parties was usually upbeat (see the DVD packaged with Endicott and Endicott, 2008, for scenes from daily life). An element of adventure pervaded daily activities, and people did not make a firm distinction between work and play (cf. Gray, 2009). People seemed to enjoy the challenges of hunting, fishing, and searching for and harvesting wild foods. On average, men worked at food-getting only about 29 hours a week and women about 20 hours, thus leaving plenty of time for leisure activities in camp. Adults could be as playful as children. For example, once a couple of men drew mustaches and beards on their faces with charcoal and pretended to be Tamil shopkeepers. In the evenings, after eating, people usually sat by their fires, repairing their blowpipes, making darts, weaving mats, or grooming each other’s hair to remove lice. They also visited back and forth at each other’s shelters. Sometimes small groups would sing into the night. The fear of punitive thunderstorms did not fill people with constant dread. Few thunderstorms passed directly over a camp, and in any case, people seemed confident that performing the blood sacrifice would cause any that did to abate. They normally ignored thunder in the distance.

One important activity that reinforced their group solidarity and confidence was the singing and trancing sessions that they usually performed before the fruit season, to ask the superhuman beings for abundant fruit, and at the end of the fruit season, to thank them for the fruit that had been sent (K. M. Endicott, 1979, pp. 150–155). Such rituals were also performed occasionally to solicit the help of the superhuman beings in treating a seriously ill person. These rituals engaged almost everyone in camp, and preparations took as long as a week. Men and women together constructed a huge thatch lean-to shelter over a large dancing platform made of logs and sheets of tree bark. Men also constructed a log drum, a green log about 5 inches in diameter suspended from rattan straps, which was beaten with sticks. Women made body decorations of rattan, pandanus, fragrant leaves, and flowers. By the night of the ritual, the camp had swollen in size as people from other camps on the upper Lebir assembled at the ritual site. During the ritual, two or three people would beat a rhythm on the log drum, and a large number of other people would dance around the platform in a circle while singing songs to the superhuman beings. The songs and the fragrant odors
of the body decorations were thought to attract the superhuman beings to the ceremony. Shamans and others would sit in the center and eventually go into trance, sending their shadow-souls on journeys to the land of the superhuman beings above the firmament and beneath the earth, where they would ask the superhuman beings for fruit or help in curing. These singing sessions might last for the entire night. They left the participants with a renewed feeling of security and confidence in the support of the superhuman beings.

Conclusion

We have shown how the Batek prepared their children for the cooperative autonomy that helped them thrive as nomadic forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers and traders. The Batek seemed very satisfied with their way of life, and they rejected attempts by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to induce them to settle down and become swidden farmers. Many people told us that when we came back in the future, we would always find them deep in the forest, not in government-sponsored settlements.

The Batek childrearing method corresponds closely to the model that has been hypothesized to have been followed by our ancient hominin ancestors. The Batek case study also should alert us to the probable importance of religious beliefs in the moral systems of archaic Homo sapiens, even though hard evidence of early religions is hard to find. The elaborate religions of the Aboriginal Australians give ample evidence that hunter-gatherers with simple technologies can have complex systems of beliefs and rituals (see, e.g., Tonkinson, 1991). In the absence of political hierarchy, supernatural sanctions punishing antisocial behavior may well have been crucial for maintaining the social cohesion necessary for survival in the world of ancient humans. The universal existence of religion in human cultures attests to the tendency of humans to project meaning onto places, objects, and events in the world around them. It is but a small further step to imagine that the cosmos is populated by superhuman beings who take note of human actions and can punish misbehavior by means of accidents, illness, death, and even thunderstorms.

Acknowledgments

Our research in 1975 and 1976 was generously funded by the Department of Anthropology in the Research School of Pacific Studies at The Australian National University. In Malaysia, the research was made possible by the kind permission of the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli and the Economic Planning Unit. We sincerely thank our Batek friends who made that research and our earlier and later research trips possible.
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