

书评

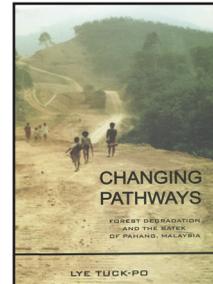
*Book Review*



# Changing Pathways

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Lye Tuck-Po, **Changing Pathways: Forest Degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia**, Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2005 (Lexington Book-Malaysian Version).



In this ethnography of a landscape, Lye shares her personal experiences and insightful knowledge of the Batek, who are referred together with a score of other ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia as orang asli (Malay: original people). As the forest-homes of these hunter-gatherers are being rapidly damaged due to commercial logging and crop plantation, the author expresses with a sense of urgency that cultural losses would go along with the disappearance of the forest. Her work is laden with humane feelings that one does not always find in many other research pieces.

Born and raised in Malaysia herself, Tuck-Po believes that Batek foragers have an important message for the rest of the world. She reminds us that development has been fueled by the liquidation of natural assets and that the Batek forests have been targeted since the 1960s for large scale rural development. This national strategy has resulted in the fragmentation of the forest landscape and few lowland dipterocarp forests are left outside the protected areas.

In this respect, the author is challenging the forest policy and administration because of her knowledge grounded in the affected people.

As part of her anthropological studies, Lye began with collection of stories of the Batek during her field work in 1993 in north central Pahang state, Malaysia. She takes shaman Tebu's mythical narratives and thoughts as her main source of inspiration. The approach itself informs the conventional "scientific view" that local knowledge is as important as the expert's.

The book informs us that the Batek suffer from the degradation of land and water

conditions. Tebu as the “local” communicates with the “global” through a succinct message that humanity can destroy the world. Different from the Penan of Sarawak who hold both logging company and the government responsible for the present situation, the Batek seem more exposed to subtleties in the persuasion by the government machinery and the JHEOA’s (Jabatan Hal-Ehwal Orang Asli or Department of Orang Asli Affairs). Since the Batek have not organized protests against logging, their plight is less known both locally and abroad compared to the Penan.

For Tebu, “to take away the forest, the world ends”. Like many forest dwellers, the Batek depend on the forest for sustenance, or *cam hab* (equivalent to Malay *cari makan*, meaning, keeping hunger at bay). Conversion of forest for oil palm cultivation has been a main threat not just in the material sense but also cuts deep into the soul of the Batek who regard trees as soul dwelling places and the forest as the veins and tendons of life. Like most descriptions of traditional knowledge systems, the Batek are embedded in the social, cultural, and moral milieu of their particular community. Such a world-view contrasts sharply with the modern system of knowledge that seeks to distinguish very clearly between the different dimensions. The creation of a dichotomy between subject and object is bound to result in a “de-souling of nature”, to borrow psychologist James Hillman’s phrase.

To the Batek, *Gob*, the Malays, represent the Powers-that-be who have a materialistic conception of the forest. The Batek’s world view is in no way a conventional one. Tebu challenges commonsense notions of development that threaten the health of the forest.

Landscape changes have given rise to fear of flooding among the Orang Asli. However, what worried Tebu most was that there are Batek who want to get rich by detaching themselves from the forest.

The author spells out flatly that the perspective of this book is biased in favour of the Batek. She goes on to present the Batek’s categories of place, involving world, land, forest, land types, vegetation, rivers, animals, and plant; demonstrates her rich knowledge of natural sciences which forms an important component of the metaphysical world of the Batek. The anthropologist has no doubt internalized her empirical recognition with the Batek’s.

In the subsequent chapters, Lye further recites the narratives of Batek’s mythology back to the time of creation. She demonstrates that stories or memories of the past play a vital role in reinserting meaning or identity of the Batek, especially in this time of

“changing pathways”. For the Batek, places have biographical, temporal, and sentimental associations. Lye argues that place as recalled in stories is evocative of history. The importance of preservation of environmental memories is having a place to return to. It is far too costly for a community to lose the place since their identity will go with it.

The author moves on to the biological richness of this place and the use values of the forest. She examines how the Batek exploit wild yam and seasonal fruits. That leads to the question of what will happen if access to these resources is lost. She is of the view that Batek’s “light-impact” foraging strategy alters and in turn is altered by the forest ecosystem. Conscious readers might notice that Batek’s eco-footprints do not cause as much damage as the modern consumerist lifestyles.

The author also examines the perceptual knowledge as signaled by the images that are seen and noises that are heard in this place. As compared with her own childhood experiences, she found herself lacking the Batek child’s lively encounter with nature. Humorously, she tells us how the Batek teach her to learn ‘on the job’ while joining her host in tuber harvesting. In the same way, Batek children follow their father to hunt or mother to forage. One could ask if this is not a better concept of apprenticeship compared to the present national education system in which children suffer from overloaded books and tuition.

Lye argues that the forest landscape cannot be marginalized as just an environment independent of the activities of people in it. While emphasizing the importance of forest as “place”, she illustrates that the Batek marked the forest with many salient and knowable features as history and community. As long as the landscape remains, the Batek would continue to return to those pathways to continue their stories. In this respect, we all seem to have lost our roots as nature becomes too distant from urbanites.

In the concluding chapter, the author returns to the title: changing pathways, and leaves it ambiguous. Open questions are asked, such as: Who should change? What are the pathways? What are the mechanisms preventing change? What are the prospects of improving communication between the Batek and the state? These are indeed very big questions that a single anthropologist could raise more than just for the urbanized society to ponder with, but also require answers urgently before the forest and its people are gone forever.

The book challenges external constructions of the forest and the forest people, such as those examples reflected in the Malay folk ideas about Orang Asli as wild people and *Sakai* (slave) as well as the Cantonese Chinese reference to them as *samfan* or

forest barbarian.

Lye's study demonstrates two issues conceptually. First, the customary dichotomy between culture and nature, society and environment, does not take us far into the study of local knowledge. By taking people out of the environment is to deny both the biographies of the people who live in it and the landscape biography. Second, that local knowledge is consistent with change. "The Batek are always looking out, comparing, contrasting, grouping and classifying ideas, people, and phenomena, thinking about what it all means in relation to themselves." At the end of the book, the author sends a strong message to the larger society that the Batek do not fit the popular conception of "primitives" lost in time.

The message no doubt leaves one to wonder if the detached society has anything to learn from local knowledge. Should the urban society take lessons from the indigenous people? Can the trend of both environmental degradation and disintegration of humanity be reversed?

This book is a valuable resource for sociological, environmental and anthropological students as well as for forest managers. Despite the author's rather personal expression of emotion attachment, it is devoid of romantic sentiments.