The Vanishing Batak Tribe

by Antonio Graceffo

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Lorenzo Batak stands about five feet tall, and wears the traditional loin cloth, made from bark. At fifty-four years of age he is one of the most respected tribal elders. His face is lined. His curly black hair has gone completely gray, and his teeth are disappearing, making him look much older than he really is. Of late, he has been plagued by a constant cough and shortness of breath. Lung infections are rampant among the tribal people, living in their jungle community. The homes are lean-tos composed of leaves and bamboo, centered around a fire pit. The makeshift dwellings are suitable for the Batak, a nomadic people, accustomed to abandoning their village, and relocating. In the past, their relocations were conducted in a rhythm with the natural ecosystem. They would move, so as not to deplete the forest resources, which have sustained their people for centuries. Lately, most of their relocations have been a reaction to forced incursions by lowlanders.

Today, the entire community has turned out to greet the outreach mission from Tag Balay, an NGO, lead by Marifi Nitor-Pablico of Tag Balay Foundation. Lorenzo recognizes me from a previous visit to another Batak village and he smiles broadly, slapping me on the chest. The tribe is much more excited to see Marifi and her team of volunteers who are bringing food and medicine. Perhaps the most important member of the team is Dr. Richard LaGuardia, an American Filipino doctor, living in Puerto Princesa, who donated his time and medical assistance. The young students from Palwan State University follow behind, carrying crates of donated medicines.

Batak women, wearing sarongs, bare-breasted squat in a line, at the long tribal drums, made from hollowed out tree trunks. They pound out a joyful rhythm with heavy club-like drum sticks.

The Batak, believed to be the oldest inhabitants of the Philippines, are one of three principal tribes, located in Puerto Princesa City, on Palawan Island. In the far south of the island is the Palawan tribe, who still live as cave dwellers, hunting in the forest with blowguns. Inside the limits of Puerto Princesa City are the Batak and Tagbanua. The Tagbanua are by far the largest of the Palawan tribes. Population estimates range from 15-25,000 persons. The Tagbanua are largely integrated, living in communities, raising rice crops, and sending their children to church and school, much as their Filipino neighbors. (Note: all tribes in the Philippines are more or less indigenous and are entitled to Philippine citizenship. The term Filipino here refers to the modern, non-tribal, majority of Filipinos.) The Batak still live largely as they have for centuries, as semi-nomadic hunter gatherers. They are by far the smallest tribe, both in stature and in numbers. The average Batak man barely stands five feet tall. The tribal population is estimated at 360 members.

The Batak are a negrito people, with kinky (curly) hair and dark skin. Their mother-tongue is called Binatak and is related to other regional languages of Malayic origin. While the Palawan and the Tagbanua tribes developed a unique alphabet, the Batak have never had a writing system. Anthropologists believe the Batak to be related to the Aeta people, found in other parts of the Philippines. The Batak also bear a resemblance to the Semang and Sakai tribes of the Malay
Peninsula. As the Batak do not have a written history, much of the explanation of their origin is based on guess work. Dr. Carlos Fernandez, a retired professor of anthropology in Puerto Princesa and a leading authority on the Palawan tribes, explained that a commonly held theory is that Borneo was once connected to Palawan by a land bridge. The Batak and other tribes are believed to have migrated from Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, centuries ago. The theory goes on to suggest that the ultimate origin of these tribes may be from Madagascar.

In her book on the tribe, *Bakas (an ethnographic documentation of the Batak indigenous people in Sitio Kayasan, Barangay Tagabenit, Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, Philippines)*, Marifi Nitor-Pablico recounts the legend which the Batak use to explain their own origin.

Long ago while a mother was sleeping, her four sons came in the house. The eldest son lifted her skirt and laughed at his mother’s nakedness. The second son also laughed but not as much. The third son did not laugh at all. The fourth son covered his mother with cloth. The father stepped in the room, and told the children this had been a test, and they had each won an award. To the oldest son he gave a stick used to beat bark for making cloth. To the second son, he gave a piece of torn cloth. To the third son he gave a piece of new cloth. And to the youngest he gave a piece of iron. From the oldest son came the Batak people. From the second, the Tagbanua. From the third, the Moro (rich Muslim traders). And from the fourth came the Spaniards.

Binatak, the dialect of the Batak, is classified as an Austronesian Malayo-Polynesian Meso-Philippine Palawano language. Due to contact with outsiders the Batak language has become the recipient of many loan words from Tagbanua, Tagalog/Filipino, Spanish, and English. Although illiteracy is extremely high, nearly 100% of Batak speak Filipino, the lingua franca of the Philippines. The distance to the primary school is identified as primary reason why illiteracy can’t be combated among the Batak.

“Violence is not part of their code of ethos.” Explained Dr. Fernandez. “They deal with conflict by running away. They avoided contact with foreigners. Historically, their only means of defense was moving deeper in to the forest.”

Aside from the fact that it was historically easy for lowlanders to steal Batak land, simply by driving them into the jungle, Marifi explained that as the Batak push deeper and deeper into inaccessible jungle, they move further and further away from schools and medical aid stations. Even if they lived closer to a school, however, Batak families are extremely poor and would be unable to pay tuition fees.

Unlike tribal people in other countries, Batak enjoy full rights of citizenship, including land ownership. Under the Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan (ADSDPP) the Batak are gaining land rights. But they are still extremely shy about dealing with outsiders and run from confrontation. As a result, sending them medical supplies, teaching them agriculture, or giving them land rights are nearly ineffective in helping to preserve this vanishing race of people.

Lack of access to doctors adds to their staggering rate of infant mortality. Several Batak women confirmed that the average number of babies born per family was eight, but normally only two would live.
The Batak are hunter gatherers, so their diet consisted largely of forest products and meat. In the last thirty years, the forest cover of the Philippines has decreased from 70% to 3%. Only three percent of the Philippine Islands are covered in old growth forest. Thanks to the efforts of the environmentally minded Mayor Edward Hagedorn, Puerto Princesa City, with 49% old growth forest coverage, is referred to as “the cleanest and greenest” city in the Philippines, and possibly in the world. Even with the protectionist measures, the environment of the Batak is shrinking. Today, there is very little large game left on Palawan Island. The largest animal they could hope to kill in the forest is a wild pig, and they are now becoming rare.

The Batak have made some changes to their diet, adapting the eating of rice to supplement the diminishing forest products. They buy additional foods from lowlanders when they have money. This has forced them into a market economy which they have very little understanding of. Batak are often cheated by the middlemen, whether they be Muslim, Chinese, or Filipino. They sell their products to local buyer at a fraction of their fair market value, because they have no direct access to the end-user markets in the city.

My first contact with the Batak was at Kalakwasa Village, a one hour walk from the paved road. When I met Lorenzo, an elder, I just assumed he would be the headman, and my point of contact. Instead, however, I was introduced to a much younger man, Elisio, age 42, who claimed he was headman. Elisio claimed the village had been in its present location for 32 years. Nomads don’t normally stay in one place for 32 years. I had trouble believing this and many other of his answers. “Before. We moved a lot. But now, we have settled here because no one came to help us when we lived deep in the forest.” The Batak were living in houses, with woven walls, raised up on stilts. Elisio explained that these were not traditional Batak houses. “Before, our houses were made of natural materials. Now, we use wooden prefab materials provided by government.” The new, permanent houses meant the tribe could no longer move.

Noticing that one of the buildings had a cross on the roof, I asked if it was a church. “Yes, we converted to Christianity (not Catholicism) ten years ago.”

That single statement of fact explained the Disney-like look of the village. Typical Filipino houses on stilts with woven walls were not typical for nomads. The fact that a young man was the leader also made no sense. But then Elisio explained.

“I worked with the missionaries. They taught me to speak Tagalog and to read. So, now I am the leader.”

It would later turn out that not only was Elisio not the headman, but he was not even a Batak. He was a Tagbanua who had set himself up in business as guide and interpreter for foreign visitors to the tribe.

Dr. Fernandez explained that historically, the main outside influence on the Batak were the Muslim merchants who the Batak traded with when they were living in coastal regions. For the most part, however, the Batak were and are xenophobic, which is why the Spanish language and Catholicism never caught on. Traditionally, the Batak followed an animist religion. They believed in spirits that lived in the forest, trees, rivers, and animals. Their value system was based on this belief system.
Recently, however, foreign missionaries, generally from Protestant sects, had been successfully converting villages. Once a village converts, every aspect of tribal identity disappears. In asking further questions about tribal customs and beliefs, Elisio either didn’t know, didn’t want to say, or just outright lied, so that he could provide us with the standard Christian answers which would have been no different than if we had remained in town and interviewed any Filipino working in a bank in Puerto Princesa.

Example: “What is the average marriage age of the tribe?”

“Eighteen,” Answered Elisio.

This answer is a clear fabrication. Rural Filipinos don’t even wait till eighteen to marry. For tribal people, the answer should be closer to twelve. Dr. Fernandez would later confirm that the onset of puberty is the signal that the child is ready for marriage.

“How many children do most families have?”

“How many wives do the tribal people have?”

“Only one,” Answered Elisio, dutifully lying.

The Batak traditionally allowed polygamy, but it didn’t come up very often because the man had to be wealthy enough to support the additional wives and children. After Christian conversion, this practice became taboo.

Tribal people, nearly everywhere, live in harmony with nature. Their existence is one of delicate balance. If any element is taken from the equation, if any changes are made to the eco system, they could go extinct. If researched and studied deeply, every aspect of their cultural belief system is normally found to have practical and positive applications. Said another way, all that they do, they do in order that the tribe may continue to exist.

In choosing a mate, women will choose the man who is the best provider. If asked, she knows that this increases the chances of survival of her children. But modern researchers will also see a kind of social Darwinism in this practice. The best provider will probably be the biggest, the strongest, the healthiest or the cleverest man. By marrying and fathering children, these desirable genes are perpetuated. And the tribe as a whole becomes stronger. If the feeblest men married the feeblest women, they would produce feeble children who would not survive. Polygamy could really only be practiced by men who were super providers. There is an implication that they were carrying genes for unusually desirable traits, and so, polygamy gave them the opportunity to produce as many offspring as possible.

Another important function of polygamy is that the tribal people know that siblings shouldn’t marry. Most tribes also discourage first cousins from marrying, but if there are no other spouses available
even first cousins will marry. Polygamy would increase the marriage pool, so that men who were already married wouldn't be off the list of potential husbands.

Once the tribe converted to Christianity, they stopped practicing polygamy. The marriage pool decreased in size and women were often forced to marry “undesirable” men.

“Do cousins marry?”

“Never,” said Elicio. “We go to the other village to find a wife if none is available here.”

This was again a near lie. Cousins did marry, because of the ever shrinking gene pool. If 30 families live in a village, and each have only two children, it doesn’t take long for everyone to be related. As for finding a wife in another village, Marifi explained that this often meant marrying a Tagbanua. Because of so many intermarriages, the Batak are being slowly bred out of existence.

Dr. Fernandez said that as a result of poor diet and disease, Batak men have become very small. “In Asia,” he said. “Women can marry up or they can marry at the same level, but they cannot marry down. Batak men are becoming undesirable candidates for marriage, so many of the Batak women are marrying Tagbanua.”

The Tagbanua just looked healthier and stronger than Batak men. They were also richer. A large percentage of them farmed rice and lived in or near the city. Some even had regular jobs.

Marifi confirmed, “It is getting harder and harder for Batak men to marry.”

“What do you do with your dead?” I asked Elicio.

“We bury them in a coffin.”

Once again, the Christian answer was given. In reality, tribal people usually have a number of superstitions and rituals associated with death. Some tribes actually relocate the entire village if one person dies. According to Dr. Fernandez, the Batak would burn the house where the dead person had lived, and no one would live in that house again. This superstition had the practical function of preventing the spread of communicable diseases. Now that they lived in pre-fab houses bought in the city, I wondered how quick they would be to burn them. And would not burning the home of the deceased result in more deaths?

The part of his story that was believable was that the pastor hadn’t been to the village in ages. This was so common and frustrating among tribal people. Missionaries convert them, destroy the culture, and then leave.

Elisio told me that the church also served as a school for the Batak children. The teacher only came on Mondays and Tuesdays and taught first and second grade. As a result, although the church/school had been there for ten years, nearly everyone was still illiterate.

In most tribes babies are delivered at home, by midwives. As is the custom of the Batak. In many tribes it is customary to cut the umbilical cord with bamboo, a practice which leads to infection and threatens the life of the mother and infant. When I asked Elicio about this, he answered.
“The midwife uses scissors and she boils them for thirty minutes to sterilize them first.”

This was one more answered that had been programmed into him by the missionaries. And of course, it turned out not to be true. In questioning Batak women in another village, I found out that they use bamboo to cut the umbilical cord.

According to Elicio there were 33 families, 140 people living in the village. Dr. Fernandez explained that the political organization of the Batak was very loose, much simpler than the organization of say the Native Americans. Native Americans had chiefs and councils. They had political units and sub units. But with the Batak there isn’t even a chief, just a village headman, who is consulted and whose opinion weighs more than that of the others, but he is not the boss. This type of structure can only work for about 90 people. Native Americans, on the other hand, were able to organize thousands and even tens of thousands of members in their nations. For the Batak, when the limit, of about 90, is reached, they would split off and form a new village.

According to this information, Elicio’s village was way past being due for a split. Once again, this was putting unusual pressure on the forest resources to sustain this unnaturally large group of people.

Elicio was wearing basketball shorts and a T-shirt. Only the very old men seemed to be wearing a loin cloth. Many of the adolescents and even up to their thirties were wearing jeans. I asked if the missionaries had introduced the wearing of clothes. But Elicio answered, “No, we want to look like city people.” Whether this was the case of not, the tribal culture was clearly dying out.

“Do you still hunt in the jungle with bows and arrows?” I asked.

Elicio assured me that they did. Always interested in primitive weaponry I asked to see them. Elicio turned to Lorenzo and, ostensibly, asked in Batak language, for the bows.

“Our bows are already at the museum,” answered Lorenzo.

Elicio said the tribe ate a diet of fruits, vegetables, and meat they hunted. The lack of bows suggested they weren’t doing any hunting. And fruits and vegetables don’t grow so readily in the wild. Even if they did, they would be depleted by the tribe’s lack of mobility. I would later find out that the Batak ate a diet which consisted almost exclusively of a tuber called kudot. It looks like a white root, which is so tough that it should be inedible. But the Batak would pound it and boil it for hours, till it had a consistency of mashed-potatoes mixed with saw dust. The resultant goo was absolutely tasteless, which was probably a good thing. If there was any nutritional value at all in kudot, it was most likely a source of carbohydrates but nothing else.

While Elicio and I did our interview on the porch of the main house, the elders sat inside talking. Across the way, a group of women huddled around a fire, with a number of children clinging to their bodies. All of them, the men, women, and children looked extremely unhealthy. And they looked unbelievably poor.

I didn’t believe a word that Elicio was telling me, but his presence, his attitude, the presence of the church, and the artificiality of the whole situation signaled that this was the end of the Batak. Or even more accurately, the end of the Batak had come and gone. I was looking at the last few hold
outs. And what was it exactly they were holding out for? Were they trying to preserve their culture? Their culture was already gone. The language was all that remained. Do you doom yourself and your children to lives of abject poverty, ridden with disease and living with hunger on a daily basis just to preserve a language?

Catching a moment alone with Lorenzo, I asked him what the worst problem was that tribe was facing. “The worst problem is that we get sick and there is no doctor. And sometimes we don’t have food.” He smiled and added, “But that is why foreigners are fat. You have a lot of food, so your bodies are good.”

Three Filipino teenagers entered the village with sports bags full of digital watches. “We trade watches to the Batak for chickens,” Explained one of the boys.

Why did the Batak need watches? They had no concept of time? Time was measured by seasons, each associated with a particular activity. For example, Tagpulot (honey season) is the time when they gather honey.

Besides not understanding hours and minutes, it isn’t like their social calendars were full and they needed expert chronography.

I asked Elisio why the Batak needed watches. His answer was a bit strange. “Because they think the city people are rich.”

I assume he meant that wearing a watch made them more like city people and thus made them appear rich.

I ducked around the house, to see what the Filipino boys were up to. Somehow I suspected they would be laundering money, dealing arms, trafficking narcotics — anything but selling watches. But there they were, with huge handfuls of watches, showing off their wares to a crowd of wide-eyed Batak. Behind the house, I found an old bolt-action rifle under a shed which had been converted into a muzzle loader.

“We fill it with five packs of matches and BOOM!” explained one of the Filipino boys.

Dr. Fernandez told me the tribal people also had a new invention called a pig bomb. They cut the heads off of several packs of matches and wrapped them in tape with broken glass. The lethal bundle was then inserted into a piece of fruit and left in the jungle. When an animal bites it, his head explodes.

The village had recently enacted a program of collecting a nominal entrance fee from guests, which we gladly paid. We had also brought several kilos of rice, coffee, and sugar as gifts. Additionally, we had to pay Elicio 300 pesos for the interview. I also paid one old man for sitting for a portrait. As we were leaving Elicio informed me that we were expected to pay 100 pesos per photo we shot in the village. There were four of us with digital cameras, snapping away. I am all in favor of tribes earning money, but this was outrageous. I made a donation of several hundred pesos to the community coffers, and signaled that this was the end of the interview. As we drove back to town, I wondered if the Batak would get any of that money or if Elicio was raiding the cash register.
My second contact with the Batak was more positive. The Tag Balay volunteers set up a make-shift medical aid station, for Dr. La Guardia, another station for gifts, and a third for food. After Lorenzo and I said our hellos, the next person I talked to was Burt, a Tagbanua. He wore a blousy shirt, like a pirate, and loose trousers, with a huge bolo knife on his belt. Burt was noticeably taller than the Batak. In addition to being literate in Tagalog, he spoke excellent English.

“I was born in a tribal village like this one.” He told me, with a kind of nostalgia. The tone of his voice, and the fact that he was hanging around the Batak village, suggested that he missed some aspects of the wild, natural days of his youth. “I had no shirt and no pants until I went to the Catholic school. They taught me to read and write and to wear clothes.”

Now Burt is a farmer, with his own house, in the Tagbanua village, near the highway. “The Batak still live in the jungle, but the Tagbanua moved to town because we want to live like everyone else.”

Lorenzo and some other old men were doing their war dance, waving their wooden bolos, dancing around the drumming women. As a martial artist, it was interesting to me that the postures and positions of the war dance, done with two large bolos, one in each hand, looked like the Filipino stick-fighting martial art of Arnis (also called Kali or Escrima). What was interesting, however, was that the dance was only ceremonial, and the men would never practice striking with the bolo. In fact, the martial art, if they had ever known it, had been lost long ago, and only this vestige remained.

“Mayor Hagedorn is a good man, he does everything for the people. I am glad Tag Balay comes here to help them.” Said Burt. “Last time I came here they were all passed out on the floor, sick with malaria.”

The farmer’s life was obviously healthier than living in the jungle. Burt looked to be half as old as Lorenzo, but in actuality, they were probably about the same age. He told me he had 14 children by five wives. “They are all grown now. Some live in Manila, and some in Canada. We live exactly like city people now.”

Marifi’s team of volunteers were handing out toys to the Batak children and cookies to everyone. Very interesting was that as soon as they saw the toys, the children knew they were for them. But, coming from a society that had absolutely nothing, the kids had no clue how to play with toys. Action Rangers, cars, baby dolls, yo-yos and balls had no place in the jungle. The children were walking around holding them and looking at them. In most of the lean-tos the entire family was gathered around staring at the new toys, in their decorative packages. There were also rattles and shaking and grasping toys for the infants. But no one knew which ones were for babies and they would just as likely be played with by a middle-aged head of a family. Or more accurately, they would be held and stared at by a middle-aged head of a family.

The bright colors were such a stark contrast to the green and brown of the forest. One boy had a ball but didn’t know to play catch. He just carried it around from family to family, showing it off. One of the Tag Balay college kids took the ball and threw it to the boy. But the boy had no concept of catching. The ball just hit him, bounced off his chest and fell on the ground. A little girl had a baby doll, which she tried to play with, in spite of it still being in the plastic bag. It made crinkling noises when she hugged it. The same was true of the toy cars which were never removed from their packages.
One of the Tag Balay guys told me. “I brought some toys to a village two years ago. When we came back, a year later, the toys were still new. They were still in the original packages and the family just displayed them, like a decoration in their lean-to.”

I took the Power Ranger from one boy and made it fly, making “Woosh! Woosh!” noises. The whole family laughed hysterically and then the boy tried to imitate me. Soon the whole troupe of children were trying it. I decided they thought flying, with “woosh” noises was the only game that could be played with a Power Ranger. Maybe two years later, they would still be doing the “woosh.” Maybe they would call it the Antonio Game. Perhaps it would become a cult, and I could be the leader of a movement…. My imagination tends to run away from me when I am in the jungle for more than ten minutes.

Marifi told me a lesson she learned from the Batak. “In a nomadic society, possessions are a burden.”

On some level, wasn’t this true for all of us? The things you own end up owning you. You become a slave to your car or house, working to make payments. A monk once taught me that possessions were a chain that prevented your soul from reaching the next level.

A lesson I learned from the Batak children was that it didn’t occurred to them to make Power Rangers fight. Dr. Fernandez words rang true. “Violence is just not a part of their ethos.”

While the Tag Balay guys tried to teach the children to play yo-yo, most of the Batak adults lined up to be examined by Dr. LaGuardia.

“The most common problems in communal living situations like these are infectious diseases like TB, and then disease specific to living in the jungle like malaria,” explained Dr. LaGuardia. “Internal and external parasites are also to be expected. They all have skin diseases, but we didn’t receive a donation of skin medicines.” The doctor confided in me, only half jokingly, “I am afraid to leave the Batak with ointments and pills because they may forget my instructions and start eating the ointment.”

All the children had a runny nose and most adults had a cough. “They are vitamin deficient from their poor diet,” diagnosed Dr. LaGuardia. He estimated the average weight of the Batak men to be about 40 kg which was less than all but the smallest Filipina women in our party. It was less than half of my own body weight.

Lorenzo was running a fever and complained of difficulty breathing. Most patients turned out to have lung infections. Dr. LaGuardia said, “It could be from environment. It could be from the smoky fire. Many of these diseases would disappear if they would learn to wash with soap and water.”

Not to be insulting, but most of the tribal people smelled as if they didn’t bathe often, if at all. In the winter, when it didn’t rain, the river was completely dry, so obtaining water just for drinking must already have been a hardship. Bathing would have been out of the question. And of course a lack of water brings up the questions of where were they getting their drinking water. And, was it clean?
Dr. LaGuardia was dispensing a lot of multivitamins and antibiotics. “They all seem to have lung infections. We don’t have a field test kit for TB, but we can treat it with antibiotics.”

The Batak must also chew a lot of betel nut because they had terrible teeth, black, red, and missing.

In the end, the doctor estimated that 80% of the patients were severely anemic. Dr. LaGuardia peeled back the lower eye-lid of one man and showed me. “The tissue here should be red.” Instead, the man’s tissue was completely white. “This is a sign of anemia.” The man, Willis, was a muscular guy, who looked like the healthiest person in the village. But in actuality, he was one of the sickest.

When asked about his diet Willis said, “I wish I could eat more meat, but I can’t afford it.”

“We can treat the anemia with courses of multivitamins,” said Dr. LaGuardia, explaining to the Batak patients how many pills they should take and for how many days. “But how can we be sure they will take them once we leave?”

“In prescribing medicines for tribal people you have to be careful about dosages. First, they are very small in stature. And second, they have never taken any medicine in their life. Luckily, with multivitamins we don’t have to worry about vitamin toxicity. It would be different, however, if we were giving them A or E by itself because it accumulates in the body.”

Trying to discover the source of the anemia, we quizzed the Batak about their diet. The story from all of them was the same. Kudot was the staple of the diet. The only meat they got was from small animals. Squirrels were often trapped in holes in hollow tree trunks and killed with a stick.

Francis, 21 years old, a Tagbanua working for the Tag Balay foundation, told me he had lived his whole life in a Filipino style village. He even went to university for several years but had to stop because of financial constraints. Now, he was helping the tribes and doing translation. Francis had a gentle, kind spirit and seemed so at home in the village talking to everyone.

“I feel very happy to come here,” said Francis. “I have more in common with these people than I do with city people.”

Dr. LaGuardia suggested that someone should teach the Batak to domesticate chickens. “Chickens are easy to keep and feed. And that would eliminate the problem with anemia.”

But Marifi said, “No, they are nomadic. They can’t domesticate animals and continue to live as nomads.”

Dr. Fernandez explained further about the migratory habits of the tribe. “The Batak can replant forest foods closer to the village but they do very little actual agriculture. Nomadic is perhaps not the right word. They do move if they deplete the resources in a particular part of the forest. In recent years moving has been a means of dealing with encroachment from lowlanders. The Tagbanua are more sophisticated. They have had contact with Muslims since the early 1900’s. They traded with Muslim seaborne traders who exploited them. They also had contact with Muslim pirates who committed raids.” The Tagbanua were able to embrace the outsiders, or at least, deal with them in a constructive fashion. “Tagbanua women marry Muslim men. There have been attempts made to
convert them to Islam, but it hasn’t taken hold, although you do find some Muslim goods in their homes.”

“The Batak, on the other hand, engage in conflict resolution by fission, moving away from trouble. This behavior is very common among hunter gatherers.”

As for the acquisition of Muslim goods or houses among the Batak, Dr. Fernandez reiterated, “Material wealth is a burden to hunter gatherers.”

As a rule, the Batak, unlike other ethnic minorities, don’t make any attempt to go to the city and find jobs.

“They know they are always welcome at Tag Balay.” Explained Marifi. “And they sometimes walk all the way into the city when they have a problem. We keep beds for them in the back of the office, so they can sleep if they need to, but we don’t encourage them to move into town.”

Other than a few of the children, the youngest man wearing traditional garments was in his late thirties. The rest of the men were wearing jeans. Even in the most traditional of Batak villages, the culture was dying.

A little Batak boy named Jonus had just traded his loin cloth for basketball shorts and was trying to master his new yo-yo. He looked so much like a city kid, Marifi asked him, “Do you want to go to school?”

“No.” He answered, without even a moment’s hesitation.

“Why not?” asked Marifi.

“My family is too poor. We can’t pay for school.”

“What if someone paid for you?”

“No, I am too old for school, now.”

Jonus looked like he was nine, but in actuality he was 13.

My experiences with the tribes in Thailand and Burma told me that tribal kids like being tribal kids. They like playing in the wilderness and hunting and gathering. They have no chores, or duties, or schedules apart from what is necessary to live. Also the apprenticeship for a hunter gatherer is much shorter than for a city dweller. Where it takes us 25 years to complete an education, and be able to support ourselves, and live as adults, tribal kids can learn all they need to know, and get married by their mid teens.

When it was time for us to go, Lorenzo stood before the entire assembly and in a very dignified manner, befitting a polished statesman, made a lengthy speech of thanks to Marifi, Tag Balay, and Mayor Hagedorn.

The Batak women banged the drum as we made our way back to our vehicles.
Both Marifi and Dr. Fernandez were in agreement that the Batak were on their last legs. As proof, they both cited the book, *The Road to Extinction*, by James Eder. Mr. Eder outlines several causes why the tribal people, all over the world, are dying out: Deterioration of resources, loss of land or forced relocation, diet, diminished fertility, infant mortality, and malnutrition. The lack of preferred spouses forces them to marry undesirable husbands and promote undesirable genes. Finally, the long term stress of foraging and worrying about food destroys the health of the hunter gatherers. Additional stress comes from worrying about being eaten by animals and stress caused by the threat of encroachment by outsiders.

As the tribe disappeared in the rearview mirror, I realized that soon they would disappear forever. Did that mean little Jonus would die, never having attended school? Lorenzo would surely be one of the first to go. Then who would be the leader of the tiny enclave that would be left? Would people like Elicio come and exploit them further?


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