

*Beyond the Green Myth: Borneo's Hunter-gatherers in the Twenty-first Century.* Edited by Peter Sercombe and Bernard Sellato. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2007. 384 pp.

It is refreshing to come across a book about hunter-gatherers that does not paint them as rainbow warriors protecting the last few acres of rainforest from the brutal encroachments of the outside world. They never were, and reading this collection of papers leaves one with the impression that the Swiss ideologue Bruno Manser, who did so much to promote this idealistic image, did the Borneo hunter-gatherers a great disservice.

*Beyond the Green Myth* goes a long way to clearing up this misconception and presents what is a far more impartial and honest take on the situation. The inclusion of the voices of hunter-gatherers in two of the articles (Klimut and Puri, and Mering Ngo) is an added strength as it places a different slant on the way that data is interpreted.

Far from being protectors of the rainforest, several of the papers (Sellato and Sercombe; Sellato; and Klimut and Puri, for example) show that the hunter-gatherers have demonstrated a remarkable ignorance of sustainability and will strip the forest of whatever resources that will fetch a decent price. The Bornean hunter-gatherers are — by and large — a group of people whose way of life may be characterized as one of immediate return. It is this mindset that is the threat to the forest.

The hunter-gatherers are, it has to be recognized, also responding to outside market demands, and are inevitably as exploited by the traders who are reaping the real profits as they themselves are exploiting the forest. Indeed, by the end of the volume it becomes apparent that the hunting-gathering way of life is one that is fast become untenable and is only a matter of time before it ceases to be a defining feature of these groups. It also becomes clear that the hunter-gatherers are being forced to make major adjustments in order to survive. The volume explores some of the reasons behind these changes.

Before even going into the issues faced by this diverse group of people in the twenty-first century, the volume begins by raising the question of who the hunter-gatherers are. The introduction by the two editors is a comprehensive overview that could be used by any anthropology class introducing the hunter-gatherers to a class of undergrads. It also raises the question of ethnic identity, demonstrating that they are not a coherent or unified group of people. Rather their diversity is what makes them such an interesting group to study. Not only do many of the groups regard themselves as independent entities, speaking different dialects and languages, they have become increasingly aware of their difference from other groups. Shanthi Thambiah, in her paper, traces the emergence of one such ethnic category, that of the Bhuket. She traces the historical-political events that led to this, and argues that the overarching term “Punan” fails to recognize the differences that exist between the different groups.

The recognition of “ethnic” difference is expressed in a very different way in Lars Kaskija’s paper in which he discusses the Punan Malinau’s perception of themselves as “Stuck at the Bottom”. It is in some ways the most interesting paper in terms of hunter-gatherer identity, as it places them very firmly in the context of the different groups they are surrounded by — the Dayak, the townspeople, and state agencies — demonstrating that they are often subject to prejudicial treatment through the denial of opportunities, among other things. Kaskija makes the point that the Punan Malinau see everyone as coming to “take from them” — the traders who want the forest products, the government who wants the land for timber exploitation, and even the anthropologist who wants to take data from them.

Kaskija’s article throws up another important issue, that of survival strategies adopted by the hunter-gatherer groups. It is an issue touched on before by writers, recognizing that the hunter-gatherers are quick to familiarize themselves with the language and values of neighbouring groups in a process that is referred to as

“code-switching”. Moreover, the hunter-gatherers are fast learning to negotiate with the various agencies — both government and non-governmental organizations — that have made their presence felt. In his article on the “Resourceful Children of the Rainforest”, Sellato discusses briefly the way that the non-governmental organizations promoted and marketed the concept of a traditional people and, could be seen, in this respect, as exploiting them for their own ends. It was, nevertheless, an act supported by the hunter-gatherers, who saw that they could use this image to their own advantage.

The changes and developments that have taken place in Kalimantan and the Malaysian part of Borneo have afforded some opportunities for the hunting-gathering peoples in terms of improved job options, although they are still “stuck at the bottom” in many ways. Many have changed their strategy from one of hunting-gathering to one of agriculture, and this has, to a large extent, changed their relationship with the Dayak people who are also farmers. It is often the money they earn that maintains them, for in many cases they have proved to be inept at farming. This does, though, tie them to a relationship of credit with the traders who take their products in return for food and other equipment in an exchange system that rarely is to the advantage of the hunter-gatherers.

The adoption of agriculture is also a strategy that has allowed the former hunter-gatherers to continue exploiting the rainforest for more commercial products as a means of making cash. Chan’s paper goes into some depth examining how, over the last hundred years, the Punan Vuhang have adapted to agriculture having been driven from their ancestral territory by encroaching Dayak groups. This led to major changes in the kind of relationship these people have had with the land on which they settled. The concept of ownership — previously absent — came to the fore. It is a situation that has had an impact on many of the hunting-gathering and former hunting-gathering people, who are being forced to fight to have their rights to the land recognized in the face of timber exploitation, for example.

*Beyond the Green Myth* is arguably the first book that really comes to terms with the issues facing the hunter-gathering cultures of Borneo. As such it is a volume that should become a mainstay for any library that deals with Borneo studies, with hunting-gathering economies, and with developmental issues.

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