

Divorcing the dead, sharing with Others: negotiating alterity at the edges of a Malaysian rainforest

ALICE RUDGE SOAS, *University of London*

This article explores how people formulate alterity as a responsive endeavour as they seek to live well in a context of profound marginality at the edges of a Malaysian rainforest. It argues that Batek people often narrate, encounter, and enact alterity – drawing distinctions between themselves and Others – through and in relation to acts of sharing. By exploring a diverse set of instances in which decisions about how and whether to share produces moments of tension, this article investigates the conditions of alterity that underlie sharing's very possibility. This involves asking not only how alterity is produced among Batek people, but also how it is extended outwards, both to those Batek term *gɔp* (outsiders), and to the dead people who continue to intrude in their lives. Through tracing these everyday moments where alterities are worked out between Batek and *gɔp*, and the living and the dead, it becomes apparent that as people encounter often-unpredictable Others, an attitude of what Renato Rosaldo calls 'social grace' comes to the fore. Retheorizing alterity in the light of 'social grace' demonstrates it to be a responsive, indeterminate process of managing detachment and connection through the immediacy of the diverse encounters and ruptures of everyday life.

In August 2022, while conducting fieldwork with Batek people in Pahang, Malaysia, I received a call from home: my grandmother had died suddenly at home in England.¹ Na? Ktlət immediately got to work, going around each of the dozen or so houses in the village telling them the news. Not having a phone, she told others to call people whom I knew in other villages, and to tell anyone out at work. Though they had never met my grandmother, she explained, because I am someone whom they have known for a long time, and my grandmother someone they had heard about, seen pictures of, and wondered about, people might be *maru?*² if they didn't know that she had died. *Maru?* is a condition that befalls people when someone they know has died but they are keeping them in mind as if they were living, causing them to have confusing and unlucky things happen to them.³ Na? Ktlət, years previously, had told me she was *maru?* when her friend Na? ?Alɔy died but she had yet to be told. She would keep eating, again and again, but straight away be hungry. She just couldn't get full (Rudge 2023: 174-5). The dead person, people say, is still taking some of your food or belongings, confusing you

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mentally and physically. Since you don't know, you have been unable to *bcrey* (divorce)⁴ from them. Divorcing the dead, undoing their belonging to the world of the living, is essential for the well-being both of those who have died and of those left behind. This article focuses on this work of detachment and the indeterminate conceptions of alterity and intimacy that it shapes.⁵

Yet even though divorce is the stated aim, detachment is rarely complete. A few months later, I was walking in the forest with a group of Batek friends, including Na? Ktlət. As we sat resting, a chirruping call sounded from above. I assumed it was a bird, but Na? Ktlət said, 'That's the call of a *sarət ok* [dead person] asking for water. Perhaps it is your grandmother?' I poured some water from my bottle onto the ground, and she called, 'Take some water! Then go away'. The sound stopped. 'It must have been your grandmother!'; Na? Ktlət exclaimed. Later, when we heard the call again, she wondered if this time it was her father, who passed away a decade previously. When she repeated the process of offering water, the call again stopped. Though she had asked them to 'go away', Na? Ktlət also spoke of how she felt both *ha?ip* (longing, yearning, nostalgia) and *kesian* (pity) for these dead people (*sarət*), who clearly also felt the same way about us. This was an encounter that was tinged not only with yearning and pity but also with fear of the uncanny nature of these sounds and their otherworldly resonances with the afterlife. If the dead – whom one is supposed to divorce – continue to haunt the living, the longing can be so intense that the living may be seduced into joining them in death. Thus, though my grandmother and Na? Ktlət's father were now supposed to have been divorced, turned from kin into Others, our relations with them would never *quite* be undone.

In the immediacy of responding to their pressing, uncanny presence that day, sharing (here, of water) was a key means of navigating our ongoing work of detachment from our deceased relatives. The dead are (ideally) no longer responded to because they have been divorced, they have become Others. And yet in the immediacy of this unexpected encounter with them, sharing remained how Na? Ktlət felt we must respond. Among the living, too, sharing is a central means of mediating and refusing relationships. In what follows, I therefore trace such moments where sharing becomes a way to navigate thorny moments of encounter with Others.

Though the arguments have moved through diverse formulations, previous anthropological discussions of sharing (characteristic of ethnographies of 'hunter-gatherer' groups) have often theorized it as being in some way a part of social *orders* (though the order itself may vary). By contrast, this article puts Batek narratives about and acts of sharing into conversation with Renato Rosaldo's theorization of 'social grace' – a form of *indeterminate* sociality that foregrounds the contingency and immediacy of everyday social life (Rosaldo 1993). For Batek, as this article will demonstrate, social grace inheres in the mundane working out of unpredictable alterities: what the terms of one's engagement with Others should and could be. As our relatives showed that day, despite the work of detachment, alterity is rarely complete. Instead, a constant navigation of the twinned processes of detachment and connection is key to how one might respond in encounters with a wide variety of Others.

In looking to how alterity is worked through in one context (death), the alterity of another comes to the fore: Batek interactions with those non-Batek people they term *gɔp* (outsiders, strangers). Though their relations are distinct, *gɔp*, like the dead, must also be negotiated with, and responded to carefully, and they, too, take on differently inflecting alterities in different moments for different people. Both impress themselves

upon living Batek in sometimes unwanted ways, prompting often anxious responses. Through understanding the interlinked ways in which these two separate groups of Others impress themselves upon living Batek, then, this article explores moments of Batek people's anxiety regarding boundary formation and its rupture, whether with the dead or with *gɔp*.

The entanglements of death and strangers are ever-deepening as, today, *gɔp* authorities seek to control Batek relations with their own deceased kin through bureaucratic and punitive measures, facilitated through the conjoined processes of forest loss and resultant sedentarization, that result in what people experience as an increase in *gɔp* surveillance. Sedentarization, in turn, concentrates the dead in one place, which Batek say affects the ecology of what remains of the forest, as the smell of death cannot dissipate. Through exploring these contested entanglements between the dead, strangers, and the forms of alterity thus produced, I demonstrate how various Others are actively theorized as simultaneously both monstrous, strange, and belonging elsewhere and yet often also as objects of pity and longing, and even appear as neighbours, friends, and kin in different moments. In journeying through alterity's contingencies,⁶ I also explore Batek theorizations of the nature of alterity itself. Alterity emerges as a graceful, indeterminate *process* repeatedly reformulated anew in interactions that are always responsive, rather than being a fixed property of persons or things, as the potential for connection haunts – like the dead the living – attempts at detachment and separation.

This has implications for anthropological understandings of what it means to (attempt to) undo relations in contexts of power and coercion. In a context of marginality (Tsing 1993) and profound change, where Others – whether the dead, missionaries, foreign anthropologists and their far-flung relatives, other Indigenous groups, or local non-Batek Malaysians – imprint their presences upon you in constantly unexpected and sometimes unwanted ways, how one negotiates alterity must be similarly responsive. Thus conceived, alterity emerges as a worthy subject of ethnographic investigation (Stasch 2009), not least as it forms a contrast to the binary notions of alterity and affinity that have long underlain anthropological research (Bessire 2014; Bessire & Bond 2014; Chua 2015; Chua & Mathur 2018; Navarro, Williams & Ahmad 2013; Ntarangwi 2010; Trouillot 1991).

In what follows, I trace the patchy, unpredictable moments in which alterity is configured through twinned processes of detachment and connection in everyday encounters with 'outsiders' and with the dead and narratives about these encounters (Chua 2015). This often takes the form of fleeting comments or gossip about the workings out of both new and ongoing relations and unexpected encounters with Others such as that day our deceased relatives appeared,⁷ as well as more profoundly violent encounters with alterity and its denial. I argue that how people reflect on, discuss, and act upon such encounters, very often through sharing, is reflective of a broader 'texture' (Das 2020) of responsiveness fundamental to alterity itself.

I develop this position through four sections. First, I explore the current conditions of everyday Batek life that mean that properly divorcing the dead is becoming increasingly difficult. Second, and with this context in mind, I demonstrate how, amid such constraints, Batek conceptions of a good life remain formulated through responsive interactions with kin that centre on the sharing of food, space, and time.⁸ This goes hand in hand with how people conceptualize the end of life and the undoing of belonging as an ethical imperative rarely realized in full. Third, I explore Batek theories of alterity, situating these within pre-existing literature on relations between

Oran Asli and non-Orang Asli.⁹ In contrast to this literature, Batek theories of *gɔp* do not presume an a priori alterity. Instead, difference emerges through responsive and indeterminate encounters. Fourth, I situate Batek theories within their historical experiences of predation and prejudice, before concluding with a vignette that illustrates how Batek formulations of Others are shaped by the working out of their ongoing entanglement.

Becoming settled

As recently as the 1990s, moving regularly through the forest and living for the most part from hunting, gathering, and informal trade and casual labour was standard for Batek groups in both Pahang and Kelantan (Endicott 1979; Endicott & Endicott 2008; Lye 2005). Now, residential mobility is limited. Most Batek live in semi-permanent settlements at the edges of their rainforest, part of which is enshrined within Taman Negara ('national park'), the park created by the colonial British government in 1938. It was set up as a sanctuary for wildlife in the interests of hunting, and early administrators permitted Batek to remain there as they were considered by them to be *orang liar* (wild people): an amalgamation of Malay and British assumptions (Lye 2011).¹⁰ Today, the forests surrounding the national park have almost disappeared, and there have been many attempts to further shrink the park's area by constructing dams and roads (Kathirithamby-Wells 2005). Though the forest enshrined within the borders of the park remains, it is filled with *gɔp*: tourists, foreign Thai and local poachers, armed guards, Indonesian road builders, Bangladeshi migrant workers, conservation officials, police, and more. Much of the park itself, including sacred rivers, is now off-limits to Batek, who are prohibited from hunting, foraging for, and trading certain species from within the park's borders. 'We are few, and the *gɔp* in the forest are many', people now often say.¹¹

Dwelling on the park's edges allows some to find work more easily, perhaps as labourers on oil palm plantations, tour guides, parking attendants, civil defence force members, wildlife department workers, or conservation NGO animal trackers, while still maintaining a degree of separation from those they term *gɔp*. Though there is diversity, with some preferring to live more remotely a few hours' walk into the forest, some next to the oil palm plantations, and some within easy boat or car access to tourism hubs and schools, this broader context generally means that moving from place to place within the forest becomes much harder as a sustained lifeway. Even for those who spend more of their lives in the forest, kinship ties to those who are more settled, as well as fear of living in very small groups in very remote locations due to the increased presence of strangers, mean that at least part of their time is spent in the settlement. Similarly, as the forests surrounding the national park are steadily razed, this creates a need for cash: it is harder to sustain oneself from an ever-degrading ecosystem.

Schools and missionaries are part of this process of sedentization. After unsuccessful attempts to encourage Batek children to attend school in the 1990s, where they were subjected to racism and prejudice, and after a few subsequent false starts, schooling was reintroduced to a few Batek villages in around 2018. In some locations, this is run by a local NGO who sponsor a combination of boats and cars to pick children up from Batek villages and take them to attend the local day school a few days a week until they are 16. This means that parents are tied to this location so that their children can be picked up. In locations that border the oil palm plantations, which are often more remote in terms of access to roads (sometimes a couple of hours away from

towns on plantation tracks), missionaries run Christian boarding houses that give room and board so children can attend local schools. Parents are rarely allowed to see their children. They are prohibited from visiting them at sports days or events. People are often afraid to leave the settlement while their children are gone – what if something happened to them and they needed to be contacted? What if the children were finally allowed home for a few days and they weren't there? Constraints on mobility have long been present, but such factors mean that they are now felt with increasing intensity.

Sedenterization also creates a tenor of anxiety regarding the dead. One central part of divorcing from the dead is being able to enact appropriate funerary practices. This involves placing bodies in a tall tree in the forest where it is light and open, and then moving someplace far away. From this position, the dead can see their way clearly to the afterlife, and the living are able to move on. Cremation and burial are both abhorrent: people often wonder about how people will find their way to the afterlife if they are under the ground in the dark or turned into ashes (Rudge 2023: 176). But these practices are becoming harder to maintain as various factors force Batek out of their mobile forest-based lifestyle.

Not only is it harder to move away from dead people when you cannot so easily move away yourself, but also living in a settled way means that your practices become much more visible to the state and hence subject to surveillance and control. A few months prior to my grandmother's death, Na? ?Aliw's great uncle died. She called me to tell me that they had placed him in the nearby forest in the treetops, but that five days later they were confronted by *gɔp* authorities, who said they assumed suspicious activities had taken place, though it seems no one understood what these were supposed to have been. The authorities ordered them to climb the tree and remove the five-day-old corpse. They then took his body away for examination and didn't return it for a further five days. Upon its return, they ordered Batek to bury the by now rapidly decomposing body of their beloved relative in the ground, close by to their settlement, among the oil palms on the neighbouring plantation. State coercion is here shown in the immediacy of its full, visceral horror, and both personal and structural violence, as people were confronted with not only their own forced assimilation into the state and its illegible bureaucracies but also the cruel violation of the very boundary between life and death.¹²

Undoing joined lives

Anxieties about separating from the dead are not new concerns, even though the constraints felt today have a new intensity deepened by sedenterization. People say that it has always been the case that too much thinking about the dead can cause them to appear in your dreams or in the forest, running the risk that they will take you back with them to the land of the dead. The dying also enact this concern about separation from their living loved ones. In the aftermath of my grandmother's death, Na? ?Aliw spoke of how her own grandfather had asked her to go and get her some food from the forest. When she was out, he slipped off quietly to pass away alone in the forest. He hadn't wanted her to be present in case it was too hard for her to say goodbye.

Separation is also enacted linguistically: dead people are referred to as *sarɔt*. After she died, my grandmother was now spoken of as *sarɔt ya? mɔh* (the *sarɔt* of your grandmother), or even simply *sarɔt*. The dead are almost never spoken of by their name alone, but with the prefix of *sarɔt*, if their name is used at all, as the *sarɔt* may 'recognize' their name and 'come for' the utterer, carrying them back to the realm of the dead, causing sickness or death. And intensifying their alterity, while the dead evoke

pity and longing, they are also spoken about with disgust and fear. *Sarət* can linger in a place until it becomes impossible to dwell in, their putrescence is said to affect the ecology of the forest itself, and they are both the topic of disgusting, sexually violent stories that are considered hilarious and the butt of everyday jokes.¹³ When driving Batek companions to visit at another Orang Asli village a few hours away, where they wanted to see if they could find resin for blowpipe making, we got horribly lost, going up and down the same road for hours. ?Ey Tɛn kept laughing through his frustration and saying that we *must* be being followed by a *sarət*. Following an everyday misfortune like this, or losing something or falling over, things were often humorously blamed on *sarət*. These jokes serve to further formulate *sarət* as different, separate, even revolting, always creating problems for the living.

Separation is also about the living caring for the dead. If a person is dying, one should not cry. Crying could make it too difficult for the dead to leave this world, causing them to be stuck in limbo, their body rotting around a living mind. I was told for this reason that I should try to stop crying that day I heard the news of my grandmother. As Na? ?Aliw put it to me gently a few weeks later, when someone dies, you must already *blasey* – a term she defined by saying ‘*ney Batek t = pawəd klaŋes, ney ta? saŋkut pawəd dŋan ?o? dah*’ (‘there’s no Batek to pull down your heart, you don’t catch onto and pull down with them now’). In the moment of death, you want the breath to leave your body quickly – you don’t want them to be *tnnlen* (prevented from dying due to needing to see someone one last time). If this were to happen, then your final breath cannot be exhaled until you see that person, a state of great distress for both living and dead. I was lucky, she said, that I had been able to see my grandmother just before I travelled to Malaysia – or she may have had the same experience. Allowing the dead to separate in a *bt?et* (good, right, beautiful) manner is a practice of care.¹⁴

Defined expansively, Batek kinship can be thought of as generated through sharing food, substance, and presence (Carsten 1995), and through ‘participation in one another’s existence’ (Sahlins 2013: 18; see also Roy 2020). But encounters with the dead show how without sufficient detachment, the ‘joined lives’ that constitute kin (Bird-David 2017) can become dangerous, causing sickness, death, or misfortune. Permitting them to leave through offering the clear, light path to the afterlife from the treetops, and separating oneself substantially from them through the avoidance of their names, as well as (trying to) avoid tearful longing, demonstrates, by contrast, how people are entangled intimately in life. Death thus necessitates this work of detachment. The way to ‘make death good’ (Engelke 2019: 30) for both living and dead is to undo life’s relations. The dead must be allowed to leave, and the living must ‘divorce’ themselves from the memory, substance, and physical presence of the dead. In this light, Na? ?Aliw’s traumatic experience of re-burying her great uncle is shown in its full violence as the extreme opposite of a ‘good death’.

Seeking to understand the dynamics of such ‘joined lives’, Kirk and Karen Endicott described Batek life in Kelantan as shaped by a set of ‘ethical principles’, including ‘personal autonomy’, ‘respecting others’, ‘helping others’, ‘sharing food’, ‘nonviolence’, and ‘noncompetition’ (2008: 43–51). They term this ‘cooperative autonomy’ (Endicott 2011), in which the sharing of goods, but also of time and space, emerges as central to a good and autonomous life. This focus on the ethical was reinforced by my Batek hosts, who also often speak of sharing in the strongest terms. Though people sometimes try to avoid sharing, Batek people who routinely don’t share are described as bad and wrong (*jbec*). Covert accusations of ‘bad’ natures often surrounded those whom people

believed shared less than they should. Sharing is the natural condition of coexistence, of the nature of sociality – *not* sharing is a deviation. This, in turn, becomes wrapped up in how Batek identity is conceptualized: Na? ?Aliw laughed about how the *gɔp* boarding house master of the house where her children lived while they were at school called them to complain that her children kept spending their pocket money too quickly: ‘He said that they kept buying things for all their school friends as soon as they were given the money, but of course they do, they are Batek, it is their ?*akal* [nature]’. The idea that sharing needed to be *explained* was, to her, laughable.

The joining of lives is facilitated by – and helps to shape – particular forms of spatial and social configurations,¹⁵ which mean that one is constantly aware of what others are up to, their needs, and most aspects of their lives. Forest dwellings have three sides open, so you are always visible to others. In settlements, people build more permanent dwellings, usually with four walls and a door. But closing this door during the day would be viewed with suspicion, an indicator of sickness or madness. Cooking often takes place outside, where everyone can see. Visiting, both in the settlement and in the forest, is a fundamental part of everyday sociality.

This practical co-presence means you cannot satisfy your own demands without being aware that if you do not share, others will be left unsatisfied. Whenever anyone goes to the shop, it is frowned upon not to buy extra to share, even if it is just small packets of crisps or sweets for the children, or kaya-filled bread divided up into tiny mouthfuls among each adult. Walking back with a bulging plastic bag of goods without offering any of its contents to those whom you walk past, live next to, spent time with that day, went to the shop with, or whatever else, becomes unthinkable, even if you do not share everything equally among everyone all the time (Endicott 1988). If you met a windfall on a collecting trip where materials were being gathered for trade, how could you look your companions that day in the eye without sharing with them? As is well documented, the same goes for foraging or hunting trips (Endicott 2011; Endicott & Endicott 2008). Forest meats and fruits are shared particularly carefully (Lye 2005). Of course, people also ask for things, either verbally or by showing up at someone’s house when they are eating, and though people may sometimes avoid sharing by hiding things, a direct request is rarely refused.¹⁶

A sense of your own demands is always *limited* by your knowledge of the demands and desires of those close to you (Widlok 2016: xvii). Sharing relations are made possible by your intimate relationships with others, yet they are also a means by which these relationships are maintained and tested. Sharing involves understanding the self as limited: as Batek say, each lives ‘alone’ (?o? *bla?*) (Rudge 2019). Reflecting the ‘autonomy’ in Endicott’s formulation, for Batek the person is finite – each has their ‘own’ demands that one should help to fulfil. People joke, therefore, that unlike *gɔp*, who want to gather a lot of things and become rich, Batek ‘don’t know how to be rich’, because money is spent immediately on things for everyone. Implicitly and explicitly, this becomes an ethical contrast: Batek’s ways are ‘good’, *gɔp*’s are not.

I have not focused on the mechanics of sharing: who gives what to whom and when. This puts my approach at odds with previous accounts of ‘hunter-gatherer’ sharing, such as Woodburn (1982) or Sahlins (2017). Their brilliant and influential ideas of ‘immediate return’ societies, ‘original affluent societies’, and ‘generalized reciprocity’ all run the risk of making sharing into a ‘stable fund of meaning’ (Corsín Jiménez & Willerslev 2007: 531; see also Lounela 2019). Concepts (like sharing), in those arguments, may inadvertently ‘create their own limits’ of meaning – here a fixed

relation between sharing, kinship, economy, and holistic, unchanging notions of 'Batek' society.

Batek sharing practices are less about this kind of economic calculation or score-keeping and more akin to what Rosaldo, on ethnography with Ilongot, has called 'social grace': indeterminate, creative, and open-ended sociality that foregrounds 'responsiveness to whims, desires, and contingencies, whether these emanate from one's own heart or from those of one's partners in action' (Rosaldo 1993: 257). Particularly when co-ordinating among autonomous individuals, social grace 'requires a particularly high degree of flexibility and responsiveness because of cultural notions that make it difficult to predict another's conduct' (1993: 260), and thus is characterized by a 'fluid *response* to the contingencies of everyday life' (1993: 262, emphasis added). Rosaldo contrasts social grace with Bourdieu's habitus, arguing that he makes reciprocity among Algerian peasants (Bourdieu 1993 [1977]) seem like a strategy, or 'an aesthetic of martial arts' that may not reflect reality (Rosaldo 1993: 267-8).¹⁷ By contrast, for Batek, sharing is *responsive* and highly flexible (Endicott 2011: 71). Rather than concerns about reciprocity, rules, and obligation, there are concerns about the *immediacy* of relationality: the ever-present question of how to respond to Others in moments that are always unique. Sharing emerges as voluntary (Macdonald 2011: 26), rather than being governed by rules and obligations (Howell 2011),¹⁸ a contrast to Durkheimian rule-based social and moral orders (see Endicott 2011: 63; Macdonald 2011; Rudge 2019; 2023). That the main way that people avoid sharing (or try to) is by hiding things rather than by directly refusing a request demonstrates it is the recognition of the Other, the responsivity of the interpersonal encounter, that is key in fostering the need to share.¹⁹

Sharing also intertwines with an understanding of the finitude of life – the work of detachment that will eventually take place to turn kin into Others. Sharing is a responsive encounter to the presence and needs of another, while the dead are (ideally if not actually) no longer responded to. According to Widlok, it is this acceptance and knowledge of the finiteness of human life which *permits* the very existence of sharing economies: 'Sharing theory asserts the universal experience that human life is finite and that humans may be capable of gaining things but are incapable of clinging on to them forever as life proceeds' (2016: 81). You cannot take things with you to the top of the tree when you die, just the few things that may be necessary for your kin to recognize you in the afterlife, perhaps a ring or a comb, and some flowers that will fade. Thus, the caring *separation* of the dead – as reinforced by an ethic of detachment towards them – is an important part of what facilitates 'co-operative autonomy' among the living. In the knowledge that one's life does not and *should not* extend infinitely (Roy 2020), sharing is the obvious way to behave, as Na? ?Aliw expressed so clearly with her laugh at the boarding master's comment. Why should you not share when you can't keep all your possessions and money anyway? The dead are not shared with, graves are not visited, names do not stay the same across generations, ancestors are not worshipped. Though it doesn't always work out neatly and perfectly, the dead *should* stay dead, without interference in the world of the living, whom they *should* no longer press for shares.

The link between intimate kinship and the finitude of life is laid bare: 'kinship is the sharing of being' and 'if being is finite, then kinship is the sharing of finitude' (Roy 2020: 504).²⁰ An everyday texture of responsive social grace is *something to be eventually undone*. But the borders of life and death are messy. The dead do interfere with the

living if they are caught unawares, as they did with Na? Ktlət and me that day in the forest. In such moments, the dead's alterity is represented in how this intimacy becomes murderous. They can kill you by loving you, by wanting you to be with them in the afterlife. Substances of connection – places, sounds, smells, or foods you once shared with them – all take on a sinister new significance.

The messy intertwinedness of the end of life and the limits of sharing is made clear by how the Batek people with whom I conducted my fieldwork speak about a nearby group of linguistically distinct Orang Asli – those we happened to be visiting in the car the day we got lost. According to Batek gossip I was privy to in the lead-up to and wake of this visit, this group 'refuse to share'. Though this was not the case on our visit, some commented that if you go there, you must pay to stay, even among family. Others said how if you want to go to the forest there, to work, or to forage or hunt, you must pay them. Over the coming weeks, it repeatedly came up in casual conversation how apparently if you show up, they won't offer you refreshment, they won't chat to you, won't invite you in. Some said that if you fell sick while you were with them, you would be thrown out before you even died. The conclusion of this, people agreed, is that they may be reanimated corpses. These moments of everyday gossip about a particular group of people theorized by Batek as 'Others' shows how, for them, to not share creates concurrent assumptions of an uncanny Otherness, a refusal of the social grace that characterizes an ethical or *bt?et* life, that can be only compared to another form of Otherness – that inherent in death. And yet this is not a *good* death: these people have supposedly not been allowed to die with the grace of detachment; perhaps they have even been thrown out into the forest while still half-living.

Seen through the lens of sharing as the ordinary outcome of social grace, personhood emerges as always finite. That group of Orang Asli were thus seen to possess an ambiguous personhood: in the Batek view, they do not share, and thus neither can they die; their uncanny persons continue to exist on and on in limbo. Yet despite this, and demonstrating the messy contingencies of Batek formulations of alterity, many people – including the gossipers – maintain friendships and have family ties with this group, though these relationships can be uneasy. This further reflects the alterity of the dead themselves – who, though ideally kept separate, intrude in the lives of the living in ways that are sometimes (but not always) unwanted.

Alterity as response

Reconsidering sharing as responding to the immediacy of the needs of an Other has implications for how alterity itself might be understood as processual. This reflects arguments put forward by Leistle:

In our relation to the Other, we are always in delay ... [W]e can't anticipate when we are called to respond ... sudden events don't announce themselves and then unfold – they happen to us. They compel us to respond through our perception, cognition and behavior. To hear a call means to have already heard it, and to have heard it means to have to respond to it ... [R]esponding begins in the sphere of otherness ... it eludes the grasp of the self which nevertheless is constituted in the act of responding (2016: 12).

While responses may be in relation to prevailing social orders, they always display an ambiguity that suspends the binary of predetermination and unencumbered will (Leistle 2016: 14). Such phenomenological understandings of alterity offer an interesting parallel with Batek theories. When asking about sharing or asking questions relating to who shares what with whom and when, people were often hesitant to

speculate without concrete examples of a time when people did or didn't share. In short, it is impossible to predict in advance if someone will share, whether someone who has been to the shop will bring back crisps (they often do), whether a dead relative might press you for shares of water when out in the forest (as they did for Na? Ktlət and me), or whether another Orang Asli group will share or not (they in fact did offer us tea). Sharing as ethical praxis, or what is considered a *bt?et* nature for a Batek person (as opposed to a stranger, or a dead person), is formulated ad hoc in the interstices of such responses to Others and their needs.

This responsiveness that characterizes the diversity of Batek approaches to sharing comes to the fore when people speak about *gɔp*. The term *gɔp* can be translated as meaning 'outsiders' or 'strangers', but within this Batek people use it to refer specifically to Malays. It is both descriptive and slightly derogatory, being often used to even refer blanketly to people whom Batek may have known their whole lives and in some cases are friends with. One couple who regularly come to sell goods at a Batek settlement accessible only by an hour-long drive on rough plantation roads were the first port of call when a young Batek man fell off his motorbike and was badly injured on a remote and difficult-to-reach road somewhere within the plantation. It was the middle of the night, and the middle of a storm, but the *gɔp* friends got there and helped him get to the hospital. Despite this, they are never referred to by name (though people did know their names). The husband, wife, and their children were all instead routinely referred to as *gɔp* *roti* (bread *gɔp*) – named as such as they often sell (but don't share) bread amongst the other goods they bring in the back of their car. As has been noted by other scholars of Orang Asli life (Dentan 1975; Endicott 1983; Howell 2011; Lye 2013), the division between Batek and *gɔp* is thus a central way that they carve up the social landscape, defined in strongly ethical terms (Howell 2011; Rudge 2019). Yet demonstrating alterity as a responsive process, just like people's engagement with the Otherness of death, is how the alterity of *gɔp* shifts in different moments.

Another example makes this clear. Since 2018, a Christian missionary has been living in a Batek settlement. She herself is an Indigenous woman of Sarawak, who is in the employ of a Malaysian Chinese-run Pentecostal Christian organization. Initially, she simply lived in a house nearby but slightly apart from the Batek houses. A few years after that, Batek recounted how Japanese missionaries with whom the organization was in collaboration came to build a school in the settlement, causing great fear to many people who felt that were they to object, they may be bombed by the Japanese, recalling their grandparents' experiences in the Second World War (Rudge 2023: 93). Now, the missionary teaches the younger children (who are yet to join senior school and be taken away to the boarding house) in the concrete block that was built. She occupies a complex position in the settlement.

Gifts, such as sarongs, that these missionaries initially gave were kept for a long time in their plastic wrappers. People wanted to be able to return them in case they were used as tools of coercion into baptism later down the line. But while initially she was referred to as *gɔp* – with the caveat that she was not *quite gɔp* as she was also Indigenous but from Sarawak (*batek Sarawak*) – now the missionary is more commonly referred to as *cikgu*, the Malay word for teacher. While many people maintain friendly relations with her, others are more wary, and a central site of wariness is regarding the sharing of food. In the autumn of 2022, *cikgu* made a dish which involves fermenting raw fish and rice grains. Giving containers of this to the children, she ordered them to distribute it among their parents. I sat with Na? ?Aliw as her daughter handed over the tub of fermented

fish. Though it was sealed, the smell was still strong, and as her daughter explained what it was, Na? ?Aliw wrinkled her nose. She said that she was 'disgusted' by it: it hadn't been cooked, and hence had a very strong *plʔeŋ* smell – a smell term denoting smells like raw fish, urine, blood, or food that has just begun to go off. She put it to one side. The next day, I was leaving for Kuala Lumpur. As she walked me to the car, Na? ?Aliw whispered that I should take extra care driving. She recounted that last night, as she'd been visiting at some of the other houses, she and the others had smelled a strong *plʔeŋ* smell rising from the earth. This can indicate that one might be *dos* – a condition arising from the breaking of certain taboos that might cause unluckiness, danger, and susceptibility to predators. Referring back to her cousin – the man who had fallen from his motorbike a few days previously and been helped by the 'bread *gɔp*' – she wondered if he, too, had been caused to be *dos*. The root of the issue, she speculated, was the *plʔeŋ* smell of the fermented fish that *cikgu* had given her: it was causing everyone to be unlucky. I must, she urged, take extra care in case I was *dos* on the long drive back. Reflecting this and similar concerns, many in fact simply refuse to eat food that *cikgu* offers them.

Cikgu thus occupied an ambiguous position. Was she *gɔp*, or was she not *gɔp*? Friend or foe? Could one accept food from her? If one did, what might the consequences be? Her food, at odds with the Batek view that things that are highly *plʔeŋ* should not be consumed, was an example of her alterity, and yet the food was accepted (if not eaten). She was not considered *apart*. Though people may have felt they had little choice in the matter, she was still *there*, and her actions and her presence had ramifications for Batek life. Indeed, perhaps she *was* Batek too, even if, people sometimes emphasized, she was *Batek pɔw* (different Batek). Tellingly, she had never been turned away – for some out of fear, for others out of pity; for some out of a desire for what she was offering, and for others out of social grace: a flexible, contingent responsiveness to her presence.

The complexities of how people negotiate this uncertain situation reflect the canon of Batek stories in which Batek find themselves in situations sharing with or being hosted by terrifying cannibals. In such stories, things always turn out to be not what they seem. In one, the meat offered to a woman turns out to be the butchered corpse of her husband (Rudge 2023: 64–70). In another, the soup they are offered turns out to be the faeces of the Batek grandmother after she is boiled alive in a broth, her arms *jijjan* (waving about) as she is cooked (Rudge 2023: 182). Such stories are considered both hilarious and sad, but more importantly they demonstrate the semiotic uncertainty that is always present in engagements with the Other. This fear of sharing with certain strangers demonstrates a sense of vulnerability to Others, in which relations might become based on predation (Kricheff 2019: 41). But it also demonstrates an ongoing social grace towards those Others – one that has facilitated this dangerous context in which people are sharing with them in the first place. Literature from Amazonia also explores this relation between commensality and alterity in which nonhuman persons must be made into objects so that they can become food and create commensality among humans (Fausto 2007; Vilaça 2002). Here, Batek are made into objects to create commensality among Others in a form of semiotic reversal: shares of meat could become the butchered corpse of your husband, or the soup offered by a stranger your grandmother's faeces cooked as she boils alive. In real-life examples, a gift of a sarong from a missionary flips to a tool of coercion; a school no longer a place of learning but a bombsite; a share of food becomes a rancid harbinger of ill fortune. So too in death, reminders of a loved one become not a reminder of intimacy but a site of danger – one in which you yourself might be tricked into returning with them to the land of the dead.

Taking ethics *not* as Durkheimian moral order (Durkheim 1953 [1906]), but as produced responsively and subjectively by individuals in accordance with their shifting ideals of a good life (Fassin 2012; Rudge 2019; Scheele 2015), navigating alterity emerges as an ethically oriented process filled with inherent uncertainty. In some moments, identification comes to the fore, and in others, a dangerous difference. Alterity – like ethics themselves – is not a property of people or things that can be defined in advance, but one formulated responsively by individuals as they attempt to navigate how to live well among Others, whether living or dead, Batek or *gɔp*, or something in between. Reformulating alterity as such, it becomes clear how the potential for identification always inheres within it, and vice versa: the potential for alterity lurks always within connection – even among kin.

Philosophical anthropologists have noted this contradiction, as demonstrated in the act of naming an Other as such: ‘When my consciousness creates the Other as a perceptual object, when I assign a meaning to this Other ... the Other ceases to be truly Other ... it is appropriated by me, even if only by becoming part of my experiencing’ (Leistle 2016: 2). This is based on the phenomenology of Waldenfels, whose theorization of ‘the alien’ demonstrates how this category is not one solely of delimitation, but emerges from simultaneous inclusion and exclusion: the ‘alien always refers to ourselves’ (Waldenfels 2007: 9). Moments that make this liminality of Otherness clear include death, or other times when the threshold of Otherness is brought into awareness (Waldenfels 2007: 17). So too in Batek theorizations, it is in these moments of encounter that Otherness becomes both known and named as an ethical delimitation: living vs dead, Batek vs *gɔp*. Yet at the same time, in this very act of naming an Other as such, dead or alive, *sarɔt* or *gɔp*, a situation of entanglement, of connection, of the nature of your relation to them, is brought to life.

Linguistic and verbal practices regarding *sarɔt* aim to simultaneously distance and homogenize within this fearful category, while at the same time leaving space for individual grief and responsivity to the dead who continue to make their presences felt to the living. And so too are Batek responses to *gɔp* both ultimately derogatory and homogenizing, and at the same time heterogeneous – encompassing occasional friendships, productive relations, and mutual reliance among a diverse category of people. Within this, sharing and the refusal of sharing emerge as central means by which one both responds to and learns about Others. A final ethnographic vignette brings to the fore the centrality of sharing for navigating this ambiguity.

Troubled boundaries

As *hari raya* (Eid Al-Fitr) approached towards the end of Ramadan in 2016, the night market nearby to a settlement where many Batek live was increasingly filled with colourful Malay sweet snacks. These were priced far beyond what Batek people could afford, yet those who went to the Wednesday night market had to walk past them every time they went shopping for their usual supplies. Faced with how *gɔp* were not sharing this bounty with Batek, people became intensely worried that they would be *pɔnen*. *Pɔnen* refers to the risk that a person runs if someone doesn’t share something with them.²¹ Causing someone else to be *pɔnen* is of great concern. The symptoms are to do with being unlucky; perhaps they will fall over and hurt themselves, be in a car accident, or get bitten by a snake. On the day of *hari raya* itself, a few families bought coconuts and rice, and others gathered bamboo and firewood. The whole day was spent making coconut milk, soaking the rice, and building a huge fire before stuffing the bamboo

with coconut, rice, and sugar, and roasting it over the fire to make desserts like those at the market. The sweets made were referred to as the *bap pɔnen* (*pɔnen* food). Once complete, it was ensured everyone had some: by everyone sharing in this *bap pɔnen*, it was hoped that the dangerous effects of *gɔp*'s refusal to share with Batek could be mitigated.²² Sharing can therefore be used to generate intimacy and social grace among Others, but also as a form of refusal or detachment. By sharing, people asserted their own difference from *gɔp* even as the issue had been caused by their entanglement.

Thinking with ethnographies that have taken conceptions of Otherness as their starting point (Bashkow 2006; Rutherford 2018; Stasch 2009) and reflecting phenomenological approaches to alterity, it becomes clear how moments of ambiguity are indicative of what Otherness is to the Batek. This puts Batek theories at odds with some ethnographies of Orang Asli peoples, which have tended to portray the insider-outsider relation as a duality. Howell relates how the Chewong do not include outsiders in their circle of *punan* and *maru* and thus argues that 'outsiders do not fall within this circle of responsibility and obligation; the Chewong do not include them in their world of ontological sociality' (2011: 48). To do so, she argues, would 'threaten the meaning of "us people" in a world already fragile in its premises for solidarity' (2011: 48).²³ Among other Southeast Asian groups, scholars have focused on the existence of dual or composite systems of economy or forms of sociality or civility (Dove 2011; Gomes 2011; Sellato 1994), in which people inhabit two economies (and, it is implied, social worlds) at once: the world of trade and outsiders, and the internal economy of sharing and kinship. Other scholars, however, have argued that Orang Asli practices of autonomy cannot be understood without seeing them in relation to long-term contact with external forces (Benjamin 2011), a debate also central to Gibson and Sillander's edited volume *Anarchic solidarity* (2011), which discusses the balance between internal and external influences of practices such as sharing among what they refer to as 'egalitarian' or 'open-aggregated' societies, including Orang Asli. As this article has similarly shown, Batek formulations of what it is to encounter alterity are not neat. Not only may they have moved in and out of different economies for a very long time (Andaya 2002; Burenhult 2020), they are also remarkably adept at 'making friends in the rainforest' (Lye 2013).

Batek sharing emerges as an ethical practice not indicative of a dual economy, or a divide between us and them, but as a way of navigating *processual* alterity in a complex field of social relations that are always already entangled. Batek often shared narratives with me in which while *gɔp* were feared and denounced as Batek's ethical opposites, they were also entangled with Batek lives and histories, speaking at length regarding how in the past *gɔp* were more like them. Then, it is said, *gɔp* were also not 'rich', they also used coconut shells as containers for their water or food, they also needed mats woven from pandanus, and some even hid in the forest with Batek during the War of Independence.²⁴ Given this material, practical, and historical co-presence, Batek ethical lives are filled with quandaries regarding the terms of their interactions with *gɔp* (Lambek 2010; Mattingly 2014). These Batek narratives demonstrate an intense and vivid awareness of constant entanglements with Others and express how fear and a constant desire for separation and autonomy can be simultaneously interwoven with a desire for connection, based on knowledge of a shared past.

For Stasch (2009), attention to the internal alterity of Korowai – the methods of detachment that they find among one another – challenges the Otherness with which they are seen by external actors (which manifests itself in a view of Korowai

as homogeneously relational). This applies to Batek too, with an extension. Seeking to understand the dead and outsiders through the shared processes of alterity-making that they prompt reveals the porosity of concepts of internal and external. Looking at the dead and outsiders together shows that how Batek people navigate alterity challenges the perceptions of boundaries and borders that have been particularly common in ethnographies of Orang Asli and others labelled ‘hunter-gatherers’ worldwide. Batek engage with the attempts at coercion from external *gɔp* by attempting to detach at the same time as recognizing and responding to their intimate entanglement. Batek forms of generating detachment and producing alterity are grounded in a *shared* lived world and history and a demand for the recognition of this. Internal strategies for dealing with differences, like detaching from the dead by making them strange, are here extended externally, muddying the borders between what is internal and external in the first place.

Conclusion: Undoing belonging

Today, as the state tries to make Batek legible, a process facilitated by sedenterization, this legibility might be seen as a *denial* of Batek’s carefully cultivated alterity.²⁵ Batek are considered too different – and in the eyes of the state, they must become more the same. This causes fear – demonstrated by the semiotic uncertainty inherent in Batek encounters with fearsome Others who often in turn remain illegible to Batek (Buitron & Steinmüller 2021; Das & Poole 2004). Not only do state actors deny alterity, but the assumptions thus made are abhorrent and prejudiced – resulting in highly traumatic outcomes that deny not only the autonomy of the living, but also the Otherness of the dead. Despite this, Batek attempts to assert their own forms of alterity – through sharing and its refusal – are not only about ‘not being governed’ (Scott 2009), but also about navigating the immediacy of their field of social relations as they try to respond to Others with social grace.

The topic of ‘Otherness’ emerged from my fieldwork because people speak so often about what it is to be Batek, framing this as being in ethical relation to *gɔp*. And myself inhabiting the ambiguous boundary between *gɔp* and *kaben* (friend), I became intensely aware of how alterity can shift from moment to moment as alignments shift according to context (Chua 2015). In responding to kin, strangers, or the dead, it is in the immediacy of interaction that alterity is formulated. In a context where an ethic of social grace demands responsiveness to encounters with Others, belonging must sometimes be *undone* – whether from the dead at the end of life, or from harmful *gɔp* who seek to trick, control, coerce, or inadvertently harm. While theorized by them as the opposite of what it is to be *gɔp*, this definition is never totally equivalent to an outlook on the world. Instead, it is lived as a texture of understanding oneself as both connected to and separate from Others in different moments (Rudge 2021). This has proven a way to follow Batek strategies in thinking beyond anthropology’s preconceived binaries of familiarity and strangeness, without denying that designations of Otherness *are* of central, ethical concern to Batek people.

Alterity can manifest as violence and marginalization. It is their perceived alterity that means that Batek are seen as needing conversion and development and are plagued by missionaries and *gɔp* authorities. But alterity is also valued. The eventual Otherness that people gain in death is what facilitates intimacy and sharing during life. And asserting the alterity of strange Others in certain moments is a way that people attempt to live well among them. Yet even in such assertions, boundaries are always being troubled. Rather than evaluating Batek in terms of their relative alterity, it is therefore

of more relevance to ask a different question: how do concepts of alterity and affinity intertwine with and change with people's lived experiences of coercion in a marginal place as they seek to live their lives in the best way possible? Answering this question can only happen through ethnographic attention to alterity not as a category or concept but as a process that always involves *both* the work of undoing *and* the work of connection. In a discipline characterized by its 'romance with alterity' (Ntarangwi 2010: xii), it may be that a more nuanced, Batek-inspired approach to the textures of *how* one encounters Otherness, which takes account of alterity's simultaneous indeterminacies, possibilities, contingencies, *and* potential violences, is an important way forward.

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NOTES

¹ This article is based on twenty months of fieldwork between 2014 and 2018, and a further four months between 2022 and 2023.

² Batek terms are in *italics*, Malay terms are underlined.

³ Batek understandings of *maru?* are distinct from Chewong's, despite using the same term (Howell 2011: 47).

⁴ Malay loan from cerai (divorce).

⁵ The terms 'alterity' and 'Otherness' are used interchangeably.

⁶ See Rudge (2023) for a fuller discussion of these contingencies.

⁷ Besnier (2009) and Brenneis (1987) have theorized the relation between gossip, political life, and the aesthetics of social interaction.

⁸ See Macdonald (2011) and Lavi & Friesem (2019) for discussion of considering sharing beyond material goods.

⁹ Orang Asli, or 'Original People', being the blanket term used in Malay to describe the Indigenous peoples of the Peninsula.

¹⁰ See Noor (2011) on these trends within Pahang's political history.

¹¹ Batek number around 1,500 in total, across the states of Pahang, Terengganu, and Kelantan.

¹² As Nixon argues, 'Imposed official landscapes typically discount spiritualized vernacular landscapes ... treating the landscape as if it were uninhabited by the living, the unborn, and the animate deceased' (2011: 17).

¹³ See *Sensing Others* for more detailed examples (Rudge 2023).

¹⁴ Endicott also describes a situation in Kelantan whereby an inability to die properly was sent as a punishment for violence (2011: 74).

¹⁵ In Richeff's formulation, these are 'the underlying circumstances of people's lives which make sharing possible' (2019: 97).

¹⁶ See also Gomes (2011: 152) for similar examples among Semai.

¹⁷ See Laidlaw (2014) for a similar critique of Bourdieu, and Crapanzano for a critique of the ‘mechanization of relations of exchange’ (2016: 85).

¹⁸ Howell states, by contrast, that ‘sharing edible jungle products is one of the few acts that holds no element of choice’ (2011: 49).

¹⁹ Endicott also describes inherent conflicts in Batek ethical life (2011: 66).

²⁰ See work by Conklin (2011) and Fausto (2007) on death, care, and finitude in Amazonia and Graeber (1995) in Madagascar.

²¹ Similarly named ‘taboos’ are present among other Orang Asli groups (Dentan 2008: 117; Endicott 1988: 117; Gomes 2011; Howell 1981; Van der Sluys 2006).

²² This vignette from 2016 also appears in an earlier form in *Sensing Others* (Rudge 2023: 186-7). In 2023, Batek children were not permitted home from school for *hari raya* itself, but returned instead a few days afterwards. They therefore missed the cooking of the *bap pōnen*, which happened with similar contours to the events described in 2016. On returning, they noticed the remains of the fire used to cook the *bap pōnen* a few days previously, necessitating that the whole process from a few days earlier be repeated in case the children were in turn made *pōnen* by their parents having not shared with them.

²³ Howell also argues that consumer goods are not subject to ‘pūnen’ (2011: 54).

²⁴ See Rudge (2023: 35-63) for a full discussion of these memories.

²⁵ See Povinelli (2002) for how this sits with ideas of liberal multiculturalism in an Australian context.

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Divorcer des morts, partager avec les Autres : négociations de l'altérité à l'orée de la forêt tropicale de Malaisie

Résumé

Cet article interroge la façon dont les habitants vivant à l'orée d'une forêt tropicale malaise forment l'altérité comme une entreprise responsive alors qu'ils recherchent la bonne vie dans un contexte de grande marginalité. Les Batek font souvent le récit, la rencontre et la mise en actes de l'altérité (en établissant une distinction entre eux-mêmes et les Autres) à travers des actes de partage et en relation avec ceux-ci. En explorant des cas divers dans lesquels la décision de partager ou non et le choix de la manière de procéder créent des moments de tension, l'auteur étudie les conditions de l'altérité qui sous-tendent chaque possibilité de partage. Il lui faut, pour cela, se demander comment l'altérité est produite, non

seulement entre les Batek mais aussi vis-à-vis de l'extérieur, envers ceux qu'ils appellent *gɔp* (« ceux de l'extérieur ») aussi bien qu'envers les morts qui continuent à faire intrusion dans leur vie. En retraçant ces moments quotidiens d'élaboration d'altérités entre eux et les *gɔp* et entre les vivants et les morts, il apparaît que, lorsqu'ils rencontrent des Autres souvent imprévisibles, les Batek manifestent une attitude que Renato Rosaldo appelle la « grâce sociale ». Théoriser l'altérité sous le nouvel éclairage de cette « grâce sociale » permet de montrer qu'elle est un processus responsif et indéterminé de gestion du détachement et de l'attachement, à travers l'immédiateté des diverses rencontres et ruptures de la vie quotidienne.

Alice Rudge is a Lecturer in Anthropology at SOAS, University of London. Her monograph *Sensing Others: voicing Batek ethical lives at the edge of a Malaysian rainforest* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023) examines Indigenous conceptions of alterity through exploring questions of ethics, sensory meaning-making, and voice.

Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS, University of London, 10 Thornhaugh Street, London WC1H 0XG, UK. ar80@soas.ac.uk