

LESSONS FROM PRIMITIVE NEGRITO

In Clark Field, Mount Pinatubo Negritos are teaching Vietnam-bound American pilots the art of staying alive in the jungle. In his book *The Art of Survival*, Cord Christian Troebst wrote: "It might almost seem as if, with the aid of modern equipment and science, man had overcome natural hazards. But this is an illusion, the very illusion by which most amateur adventure-seekers are deceived . . . When mentally and physically unprepared people are forced into desperate situations, they very often die because of their own inexperience and helplessness, plus the fear and despair to which these give rise . . . Leave your ordinary city dweller on an island and it is most improbable that he would still be alive after a few weeks . . . But the art of survival can be learned."

What can we learn from the Negritos? Way back in 1953, Dr. Robert B. Fox wrote on the useful plants and material culture of the

Pinatubo Negritos. Fox said: ". . . a characteristic which strikingly demarcates them from the surrounding Christian lowlanders is their inexhaustible knowledge of the plant and animal kingdoms. This lore includes not only a specific recognition of a phenomenal number of plants, birds, animals, and insects, but also includes a knowledge of the habits and behavior of each. This inclusive knowledge of nature is, of course, a product of their way of life; continual hunting, mobility, dependency upon vegetation, as well as a survival of their historical associations. The Negrito is an intrinsic part of his environment, and what is still more important, continually studies his surroundings. Many times I have seen a Negrito, who, when not being certain of the identification of a particular plant, will taste the fruit, smell the leaves, break and examine the stems, comment on its habitat, and only after all of this, pronounce whe-

ther he did or did not know the plant.

"In addition, the intimate familiarity of the Negrito with nature is the result of a thorough and sensitive ecological awareness. Many plants have no direct use or value in themselves, but are important to the Negrito because of the relationship of the plant with the animal and insect world. The fruits of some trees are eaten only by birds, but are still important to the pygmies, for it is in or near these that bird blinds are built.

"The acute observation of the pygmies and their awareness of the interrelationships between the plant and animal life giving them an ecological picture of their environment, is strikingly pointed out by their discussions of the living habits of bats. The *tididin* lives on the dry leaves of palms, the *dikidik* on the underside of the leaves of the wild banana, the *litlit* in bamboo clumps, the *kolum-*

boy in holes of trees, the *konanaba* in dark thickets, and so forth. In this summer, the Pinatubo Negrito can distinguish the habits of more than 15 species of bats.

"Most Negrito men can with ease enumerate the specific or descriptive names of at least 450 plants, 75 birds, most of the snakes, fish, insects, and animals, and of even 20 species of ants. Moreover, each Negrito man can give a description of the colors, habits, food, calls, etc., of all the animal, insect and bird life known to him. An unusually intelligent and observant individual can give even more natural history information, and the botanical knowledge of their herb doctors who use plants constantly in their practice is truly outstanding."

There is a lot to learn — even from the primitive Negrito. — *By Alejandro R. Roces in The Manila Chronicle, July 1, 1968.*