The heart of the hunter

AMY SOHANPAUL MEETS THE TRIBAL TRAVELLER TURNED FILM-MAKER BRUCE PARRY

"To hell with what classical physics says, I totally believe now that there genuinely is a connection between everything. We are all really, literally divine, and we are running a very dire risk of upsetting the balance of our relationship with each other and with nature, in a very real way." Those were Bruce Parry's concluding words in my last interview with him, six or so years ago, in some sort of hotel boardroom, a formal setting slightly at odds with this most relaxed and unpretentious personality.

Six years on, in the lively café of the Picturehouse cinema in Piccadilly, we pick up exactly where we left off. This time the setting is more apt, as the presenter of BBC TV's hugely popular *Tribe* has just co-directed his first big-screen film, *Tawai*, a documentary featuring Borneo and the Amazon.

"The film tries to explore that idea of connection," Parry tells me now. "What is it to be connected, what is it to be separated, how do we perceive ourselves in relation to what is around us? What is our relationship with the natural world, and how has this changed over time?"

'Tawai' is a word used by nomadic hunter-gatherers in Borneo to describe their feeling of connection to nature. It's hard to translate. But some interviews in the film capture a little of this profound sentiment: "Trees are like humans," says one tribesman. "If the really big trees die, so do all humans. If the forest dies, humanity dies. The forest may die. The forest says, 'We are part of the same family.' "

For the Penan, forever nomadic, forever foragers, forever hunters, today's uncertainty over the fate of the forest threatens their way of life. Logging is the major threat. Indeed, for the first time in their existence, they are faced with the prospect of settling. Parry visits them in the film – or rather, revisits them, having previously stayed with them for *Tribe*. He worries about them now, wondering how they will adapt as they are forced into agriculture and settlements.

"The Penan felt completely different from any other group," he muses. "They were nomadic and still hunter-gatherers, but that wasn't the thing. There was something very much deeper. It's not immediately discernable, but very real when you're with them. It's the fact that they were very egalitarian. I look at all the other tribes I've been with and they are all hierarchical, they all have chiefs, shamans, leaders, but not the Penan."

Parry has long been an advocate for learning wisdom from traditional peoples and sources. There is, he says, "much to be gained from those living lives very different from our own." The Penan – and the Piraha from the Amazon, the other tribe shown in *Tawai* – have traditionally been at one with nature, and their hunter-gatherer way of living incorporates a mindfulness that Parry says we can access, leading to a greater sense of our connection with the wider environment.

"Hunting is a meditation. Every day when you hunt, you're meditating. You have to be in your senses, you have to be alert, you can't be drifting off in your mind to the future and the past. If you step on a twig, you'll never feed your family. When you're hunting, you'll be there, in the moment. If you're chanting, you'll be exercising the parts of your mind and body and senses that keep you in the present.

"I'm not saying we should all become Buddhists," he adds, "but the tools of meditation, song, poetry, dance, allow us to reconnect to something that is greater than ourselves. You're able to feel more intensely the empathic sense of connection. That's just what meditation has been shown to do. You have a much stronger feeling of being, of an expansion, if you will, of a conscious awareness of being part of something."

Belonging – to nature or to the community – is another tribal lesson that Parry feels we could learn from, especially in our treatment of the natural world. "If you're feeling an empathy with your neighbours, and an empathy with nature, you treat things in a different way. If I feel your pain and your joy, it's in my interest to make you happy. But if I'm feeling separate from you, I can behave how I want, to you or to nature. So their sense of empathy is how they are able to maintain this balance with their surroundings and with each other."

But Parry is keen to stress that he's not advocating a return to another era. He's an idealist, for sure, and he'd like to change the world. But he's a pragmatist, especially about how to do so. "This film is about understanding where we are now. For 95 per cent of our time on the planet, we were relatively harmonious with the environment. Now we're not. But we've also created this amazing world. So it's not about turning back the clock – but it is time to wake up to who we really are and where we really are. It's about how we're going to use all this wisdom.

"Are we going to see ourselves once again as part of nature? Or do we really think we're above it, and then we can travel to Mars?"

He smiles. "The people I met knew that they weren't above nature, so what you do to nature you do to yourselves. If we can get rid of this sense that we are bigger, that we are special and bigger, if we can put ourselves back in line with everything else around us on the planet – which is the other part of wisdom – then we have a potentially amazing, beautiful future ahead of us." He pauses. "You know, it's not too late."

***TAWAI: a Voice from the Forest* is released on 29 September in selected cinemas across the UK.**