

British explorer's documentary gives voice to forest tribes, some of most vulnerable in the world

Kylie Knott

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British explorer and documentary maker Bruce Parry has found himself in a lot of unusual situations while embedded with indigenous communities around the globe.

While filming his popular BBC series *Tribe*, that first aired in 2005, Parry drank cow's blood in Ethiopia, ate wild rats with the Adi tribe of the Himalayas and got very high during an ayahuasca initiation ceremony in the Amazon.

But explaining the meaning of tawai, the word nomadic hunter-gatherers of Borneo use to describe their connection to nature, and a word used in the title of his latest work, *Tawai: A Voice from the Forest*, has him slightly stumped.

"It's really difficult to explain because there's no direct English translation for tawai," says Parry on the phone from Wales, the place he now calls home.

"It has multiple meanings. It means secure, in the way a forest holds you like a child. It also means nostalgic and connection," he says.

In *Tawai*, his first full-length feature film, Parry spent months weaving his way through the thick forests of the Amazon and Borneo to the River Ganges and Scotland's Isle of Skye to capture the impact of deforestation.

With more than 1.6 billion people dependent on forests for their livelihood it's an important issue.

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The result is a thought-provoking probe into what's changed within the human psyche since humans stopped being nomadic hunter-gatherers and turned to agriculture.

The film has been well received since its release in Britain in 2017, but Parry says he's not interested in the success. He wanted to make viewers look inside themselves.

It's not the first time he's held a mirror up to modern society. It's been 10 years since his Bafta-award winning BBC series *Amazon* turned the spotlight on globalisation and the impact of trades such as gold, coal and soil.

"The planet is really struggling because of the amount rich nations consume. They don't know where the stuff is coming from," he says.

Hongkongers can watch *Tawai: A Voice from the Forest* and ask Parry questions when it screens at The Hive in Wong Chuk Hang on October 24.

It's a chance for people to see and hear Parry off screen, far removed from the "white man in the jungle" persona that might not gel with the cynically minded. People will get to see him in a humble light, talking articulately and respectfully about the people and cultures he has drawn global attention to.

"Yes, I've dined with cannibals and turned my penis inside out," he says, referring to an episode of *Tribe* when he underwent a painful penis inversion ritual while spending time with the Kombai people of West Papua, who are also known to have practised cannibalism.

"But I don't want to just give sound bites about the unusual situations I've been in, because it's so much more than that. It feels demeaning to just describe it in a

few words, a bit dehumanising even, if I just sum up these amazing people and their cultures in a few sentences. I mean the cannibal I dined with was a really lovely guy.”

Maybe this humble attitude can be traced to his childhood. Parry was raised in a strict Christian and military family (he’s a former Royal Marine) in Devon, southwest England. It’s not surprising to hear he had an adventurous childhood “shooting rabbits and eating hedgehogs”.

In Wales he hopes to apply some of the nature-connecting principles he picked up from his time living with remote tribes.

“I’m not asking people to turn back the clock. I’m just highlighting the wisdom of the past so I can bring it into today.”

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