

Kirk Endicott, ed., *Malaysia's "Original People": Past, Present, and Future of the Orang Asli*

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Living in West Malaysia is a diverse population who are called, in Malay, Orang Asli, or Original or First People. The Orang Asli, who number about 178,000, consist of numerous groups, some hunters and gatherers, and others who practice shifting cultivation and trade forest produce with outsiders. The scope *Malaysia's Original People* covers themes relating to the past, present, and the possible future of the Orang Asli peoples from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Excluding Endicott's introduction, there are twenty contributors whose papers are integrated into seven parts. The first part details the changes in Orang Asli studies since the 1950s. Duncan Holaday discusses the conditions of carrying out field research during the 1960s, when the Orang Asli groups were still relatively isolated. Since then, state development policies have exposed the Orang Asli peoples to experience land loss, demoralization, and religious conversation. During the 1980s, observers feared that the Orang Asli would be transformed into rural lumpenproletariat. Researchers felt compelled to become politically engaged and bring their activism into

the research. Holaday focuses on the research trajectories of one well known anthropologist, Robert Knox Dentan, who carried out his initial fieldwork with the Semai during the 1960s, and who subsequent researchers consider to be (with Geoffrey Benjamin and the editor of this book, Kirk Endicott,) the father of modern Orang Asli studies. Further, unlike the pre-1960s researchers, who presented their findings based on a one-time visit, many researchers since developed long-term engagements with the communities they initially studied. Signe Howell, in her contribution, calls this approach a multitemporal fieldwork experience, and she gives her own work on the egalitarian Chewong, a hunting and gathering people, as an example. She describes how the Chewong have become accommodated to the market economy since her visit during the late seventies, and how this experience has affected their egalitarian ethic. Howell points out that she could only understand these developments through a multitemporal process of fieldwork, allowing her to see the changes that had occurred over the decades and reflect on the relevance of seemingly unimportant events during earlier fieldtrips.

The new modern studies of Orang Asli also moved away from any racializing proclivities common to pre-1960s research. Khor Manickam concludes part one by focusing on earlier attempts at racializing Orang Asli groups. She discusses Dr. Ivan Polunin and P.H.A Sneath, who during the 1950s tried out a new “racial measurement” technique of blood sampling to prove the racial origins of each group. She critically concludes that such racializing reflected the racial ideologies of the time, but they tell us nothing about the people studied. Recent genetic studies on Orang Asli population have revealed a very different picture than the picture promoted before the twentieth century. Alan G. Fix’s paper opens part two of the book and presents genetic evidence that goes against the earlier assertions of Orang Asli peoples being “racial relics” of a distant past. Instead, the data suggests a population formation through genetic mix of DNA with surrounding peoples. Thus, he concludes that to consider Orang Asli peoples in terms of pre-historic racial groups is a myth. It would also seem, according to Bulbeck’s contribution, that during the Neolithic period, there was a site occupancy gap on the peninsula followed by a sudden population growth. This evidence signals the influx of Austroasiatic language speakers and later Austronesian speakers. A.S Baer’s paper furthers the discussion on prehistory by explaining the importance of the development of bamboo and rattan tool use in the cultures of the peninsula. The papers in this section complement a more recent anthropological position, which sees present-day Orang Asli economies and their different and distinctive kinship-relatedness as the consequence of interactive niche formations within an environment inhabited by diverse peoples influencing each other, including Malays.

The next three parts return to more ethnological and contemporary themes. The chapter on Aslian Languages provides novel possibilities for linguistic and ethnological studies. Niclas Burenhult and Nicole Kruspe analyze Orang Asli eating and drinking vocabulary. Through the “lexicalization of ingestion,” the authors reflect on the differing ideologies held by Orang Asli groups.

One of the major changes that has occurred among the Orang Asli since the 1960s has been in religion. Although there has always been some pressure for Orang Asli peoples to convert to Islam, these communities have traditionally resisted and continued to practice shamanism/animism. Through state development policies and greater exposure to the outside, many Orang Asli have been put under pressure to convert

to one of the world religions. This is theme of part four. Rosemary Gianno's chapter, followed by Peter Laird's contribution, present the shamanic and cosmic visions of two Orang Asli groups, the Semalai and Temoq. Part four concludes with Juli Edo and Kamal Solhaimi Fadzil's overview of the Orang Asli predicament of being caught between trying to maintain their traditional religious beliefs and pressure to convert to a world religion. The papers in part five try to show the relevance of these religions for the modern world. Andy Hickson and Sue Jennings relate their attempts at translating and adapting what they learnt from indigenous healers to their own psychotherapeutic practices in England.

One important theme in Orang Asli studies has always been concerned with their political and economic relationship with the state and its development policies and with Malays. This is the focus of part six, which reconnects the book with the discussions in part one. Rather than portraying them as passive victims of development, the authors try to bring Orang Asli agency to light in their different responses to the modern challenges. Different Orang Asli relationships with state policies are ambivalent and varied. For example, Wazir Jahan Karim and Mohd Razha Rashid provide illuminating data on the attitudes of two different Orang Asli groups to development and modernity. Whereas the hunting and gathering Kintak Bong group still actively reject these developments and try to maintain their nomadic lifestyle, the shifting cultivating Ma'Betise' take what the authors call "a window shopping experience" approach as they cautiously respond to outside pressures choosing what they want while wishing they had the financial ability to be better consumers. Barbara S. Nowak's historically-informed ethnographic paper captures the economic and social flexibility of the Hma' Btsisi in their livelihood, locality, and marriage relations, which have helped manage their relationship with Malays. Many Orang Asli communities reveal an existing tension between their fascination and engagement with what the outside brings to them and the risks that such engagements entail for them. Ivan Tacey tells us of what he calls Batek Tanum "transnational shamanism," who try to cosmically heal nations that are imagined to be potential allies in their fight for their rights against Muslim Malays. Tacey sees this development in shamanism as forming the cosmic side of the Batek Tenum's indigenous activism and quest for international allies. In her general paper on the Semang hunters and gatherers, Csilla Dallos seeks to transcend a conventional portrayal of forest-dwelling peoples maintaining boundaries with Malays by fleeing to the forest and argues that we should also be looking at how identities are made at the point of contact between the Semang groups and Malays when they economically engage each other. The final paper in the section is by Yogeswaran Subramaniam, a legal adviser and activist. Subramaniam delineates the predicaments that Orang Asli face in the courts of law as well as the possibilities and legal conditions for the recognition of their rights to ancestral land. His paper is also written as a guide for engaged researchers helping Orang Asli communities with land rights.

In the final part, Shanthy Thambiah, Zanisah Man and Rusaslina Idrus discuss challenges that Orang Asli face in education. Their paper is based on interviews, which show how Orang Asli have tried to maintain a balance between their state schooling and their identity. The interviewees also reveal the difficulties, prejudice, and discrimination that Orang Asli children experience when entering government schools. As more Orang Asli have been undergoing school education, new forms of indigenous expressions have emerged. Karen Heikkila and Anthony William-Hunt take us beyond

a hunting and gathering/shifting cultivating representation of Orang Asli and show how computer-literate youth are using the internet as a novel method of indigenous self-expression as they digitally share experiences and information with youth from other Orang Asli ethnic groups. The book ends with the message that a new generation of Orang Asli is becoming more aware of their possibilities by not only developing staunch identities within the Federated State of Malaysia but also finding ways to challenge the social and economic injustices their communities experience.

Although it has organizational shortcomings, Endicott's volume is a significant contribution to Malay Peninsula Orang Asli studies. It provides a wealth of updated information on the Orang Asli from diverse angles and disciplinary sources. *Malaysia's Original People* would also be of interest to more general study of Indigenous Peoples worldwide.

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