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## **Btsisi', Blandas, and Malays**

### **Ethnicity and Identity in the Malay Peninsula**

### **Based on Btsisi' Folklore and Ethnohistory**

#### **Abstract**

This article examines Btsisi' myths, stories, and ethnohistory in order to gain an understanding of Btsisi' perceptions of their place in Malaysia. Three major themes run through the Btsisi' myths and stories presented in this paper. The first theme is that Austronesian-speaking peoples have historically harassed Btsisi', stealing their land, enslaving their children, and killing their people. The second theme is that Btsisi' are different from their Malay neighbors, who are Muslim; and, following from the above two themes is the third theme that Btsisi' reject the Malay's Islamic ideal of fulfillment in pilgrimage, and hence reject their assimilation into Malay culture and identity. In addition to these three themes there are two critical issues the myths and stories point out; that Btsisi' and other Orang Asli were original inhabitants of the Peninsula, and Btsisi' and Blandas share a common origin and history.

**Keywords:** Btsisi'—ethnic identity—origin myths—slaving—Orang Asli—Peninsular Malaysia

**H**MA' BTSISI', a South Aslian speaking people, reside along the mangrove coasts of the Kelang and Kuala Langat Districts of Selangor, West Malaysia.<sup>1\*</sup> Numbering approximately two thousand (RASHID 1995, 9), Btsisi' are unique among Aslian peoples for their coastal location and for their geographic separation from other Austroasiatic Mon-Khmer speakers. Btsisi', like other Aslian peoples have encountered historically aggressive and sometimes deadly hostility from Austronesian-speaking peoples. While in the past, these actions included slave raiding and slaughter, today the hostility is no longer genocidal, but rather ethnocidal (NOWAK 1985b). Through analysis of myths, stories, and ethnohistory, this paper looks at Btsisi' past and present interactions, and perceptions of their interactions with Austronesian-speaking peoples and the nation state of Malaysia.

Three major themes run through the Btsisi' myths and stories presented in this paper. The first theme is that Austronesian-speaking peoples have historically harassed Btsisi', stealing their land, enslaving their children, and killing their people. The second theme is that Btsisi' are different from their Malay neighbors, who are Muslim; and, following from these is the third theme that Btsisi' reject the Malay's Islamic ideal of fulfilment in pilgrimage, and hence reject their assimilation into Malay culture and identity. In addition to these three themes there are two critical issues the myths and stories point out; that Orang Asli were the original inhabitants of the Peninsula, and Btsisi' and Blandas share a common origin and history.

#### BTSISI' ORIGIN MYTH

Btsisi tell a series of origin myths they call *trimbow*.<sup>2</sup> Elders traditionally recite the *trimbow* cycle on seven consecutive nights. *Trimbow* are connected to Btsisi' mythical "ancestors" or *moyang*, who require the people to "feed" them with ritual foods, including *nasi pulut* ("glutinous rice"), before an elder recites the *trimbow*. Each night of the cycle an elder tells a different portion of the *trimbow*, which includes the creation of the world, the creation of

humanity, the origins of Orang Asli (and Btsisi'), and the flight of Orang Asli from their place of origin.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I will relay only the portion of the *trimbow* which discusses Btsisi' views on the Orang Asli place of origin. The narrative begins:

In Merekah the original Batin<sup>4</sup> was named Roun, whose blood was white.<sup>5</sup> One day, many ships of Muslim Arabs arrived by sea. Batin Roun told these visitors that the land, while once fit for cultivation, was scorched dry by the sun's heat. He told the visitors that people no longer could provide for themselves; that the land was too sandy and things did not live. "If you plant chillies they don't survive, if you plant rice it doesn't grow, potatoes don't live. Nothing grows. The days are too hot, the earth too sandy, the grass all dried up. Too hot. The earth is scorched." The Btsisi' Batin said to the Muslim Arab, "Tə' mr̄kah [the land is cracked], rumpuṭ layuw [the plants withered]." The Muslim Arabs misheard the phrase, Tə' mr̄kah, rumpuṭ layuw,<sup>6</sup> and wrote down the phrase *Tanah mr̄kah, tanah Melayu* [The land is cracked, the land is Malay] After this the Arab man said goodbye to the Btsisi' Batin and went away, saying he was going home.

Years later, a different group of Muslims arrived in great numbers. They were Malays. They came to visit with the Btsisi' Batin. "Oh Batin, how are you? What is your name," asked the Malays. The Btsisi' Batin responded that all was fine, there were no problems. He then asked "Why are you all here, such a crowd? What is the reason for your visit?" The Malay Batin then asked how did the Btsisi' survive in this land? What did they plant? The Btsisi' leader responded that people depended upon God's generosity, God supplied them with all their needs. All people had to do was desire something and God sent it down on a tray. "If you want rice, rice comes; if you desire money, money comes. Whatever you want, it arrives. This is because the earth is too sandy. The days are too hot and the grass goes brown. The earth is scorched," the Batin said.

The Malay Batin then opened the old book the Arab man had scribed and he read from it, "*Tanah mr̄kah, tanah melayu.*" The Malays told the Batin that by the prophecy written in the book, the land belonged to them. This he said was the place of the Prophet Mohammed. It was the place of the Prophet Adam.

The people, realizing they had no recourse, decided to leave Merekah to the Malays. Squeezing, squeezing stone like clay, the Btsisi' constructed a ship. They made a ship and its masts, and then they moved. Their time in Merekah was finished. They then set sail for a new home, landing seven months and seven days later at Tə' Mahdinah (Medina?).<sup>7</sup> At

Mahdinah there was fresh water and jungle, so the people settled there to plant their fields. After a generation the Malays appeared. The Malays followed them to Mahdinah. The Malay leader said this was the land of Malays. Fearing the Malays would try to force them to enter Islam as they tried to do in Merekah, the people fled. This time their boat was not made from stone but rather it was made from tree bark. Once they finished making the boat and loading it with supplies, the people again set sail. They sailed for days and nights, how long no one knows. They landed in the land of the Raja' ("King," "Prince," "Administrator") Jobok<sup>8</sup> Batak in Sumatra.

The Batak did not kill and eat them as they were known for, rather they became friends.<sup>9</sup> The people considered the Raja' Jobok Batak an honorable man who helped the people by providing food and anything else they needed. But the people found Batak law too harsh; especially the penalties for adultery. Not being able to live according to Batak law the people again set sail. Leaving Sumatra behind, they landed at Batu Pahat, Tə' Smanjok, ("Peninsula Country"), in Johor.

When they landed, the sea went inland as far as Batu Khep (Batu Caves). There were no large trees like mahogany trees, only grass. Everything was sea. Life wasn't hard because God took care of the people. If someone wanted a shirt or sarong, it would appear; if someone wanted rice, rice would descend on a tray. There was sufficient to fulfill everyone's needs.

Once on the Peninsula, the group split up into different groups, Semai, Temiar and Btsisi'. Some people went into the jungles and mountains others like Btsisi' remained on the coast. The "original people" are Btsisi', the "eldest" people (*hma' suluk*), the "real, original people" (*hma' sjaty*). (NOWAK 1980–1982)

#### ANALYSIS

This portion of the *trimbow* begins to explain Btsisi' feelings towards their Malay neighbors. Btsisi' have encountered constant and sometimes deadly aggression when interacting with Austronesian-speaking peoples. Historically, Btsisi' faced frequent dislocation when they came into contact with Malays. The *trimbow* tells of Btsisi' flight from their home in the face of conflict.

The *trimbow* also highlights Btsisi' awareness of Malay pressure to convert them to Islam. Malays historically viewed Btsisi' and all Orang Asli, as *Sakai*, or "slaves" (DENTAN 1997)<sup>10</sup> and as heathens, nonbelievers of the Islamic faith (NOWAK 1985b; DENTAN et al. 1997). Today, Btsisi' are cognizant

that Malays do not consider them to have a religion (NOWAK 1985b). Btsisi' are also aware that the government would like to convert them and all Orang Asli to Islam (BAHARON 1986, 25; JIMIN 1983, 90-91; NOWAK 1985b; DENTAN et. al. 1997), which would legally redefine them as Malay.

The *trimbow* places Btsisi' origins in Mecca, a city holy to Muslims, hence Malays. As Muslims, Malays desire to travel from Malaysia to Mecca on the Haj. In the *trimbow* Btsisi' did the opposite, they went from Mecca and Medina to Smanjong, the Malay Peninsula. Thus, the *trimbow* rejects the Malay's Islamic ideal of fulfilment in the pilgrimage to Mecca. The *trimbow* teaches Btsisi' they do not belong in Medina or Mecca, that they are not Muslims and should not *lep Islam* ("enter Islam"), in other words, convert and become Malay. Even under threat of dislocation or death, Btsisi' should remain Btsisi'.

The *trimbow* also implies Orang Asli are the original inhabitants of the Peninsula, the first people; Malays are the usurpers. It was Orang Asli who first inhabited the land of *tək mrkah*, *tək layu*. Malays came later and called it *tək Melayu*, "Malay land." While we can assume the *trimbow* is incorrect in placing Orang Asli origins in Mecca, the *trimbow* parallels the historic truth that Orang Asli were the original inhabitants of Smanjong.

There is an extensive archaeological and linguistic literature (for example, BENJAMIN 1976; DIFFLOTH 1979; BELLWOOD 1985; BENJAMIN 1986) as well as a more polemical literature on the issue of the first inhabitants of the Peninsula. Logan quotes a Btsisi' as saying to him, "You know that this is the Pulo Besar or Great Island which belongs to us, and not the Malays, who have intruded into our country" (LOGAN 1847a, 326).

While Btsisi' and the other indigenous communities on the Peninsula are known as Orang Asli or "original people" (Malay), there is a contradiction as the Malaysian Government recognizes Malays as Bumiputras (lit. "sons of the soil") with special rights. The problem becomes how can Bumiputras actually be "sons of the soil," which implies their indigenesness, if Orang Asli are the "original people." Something has to give. Thus, from the government, hence the Malay perspective, what must be relinquished is the category Orang Asli. DENTAN quotes a Semai as saying the following: "When the indigenous people [Orang Asli] become Malays, Malays become the indigenous people" (1997, 123).

This Malay insecurity regarding indigenesness could in part be a reflection of the fact that most people who call themselves Malay are relatively recent Indonesian migrants to the Peninsula. Bugis from southern Sulawesi, Minangkabau, Rawas, and Kerinci from Sumatra invaded the Peninsula on slave raiding expeditions, and also to gain control over forest product trade routes. ROFF notes that by 1886, two-thirds of Selangor's population of eighteen thousand were composed of migrant Indonesians (1967,

note 16). He remarks that the majority of the “foreign Malays” were predominantly Rawas and Kerinci Sumatrans (ROFF 1967, 37). Minangkabau from Sumatra also began migrating up into the Peninsula establishing their dynasties in Negri Sembilan. Most of the Indonesian movement into the Peninsula was aggressive and violent, particularly towards Orang Asli communities. As the above portion of the *trimbow* implies there is a distrust of Malay-speaking peoples who took Orang Asli lands and forced them to flee their place of origin. This distrust and fear is expanded upon in Btsisi’ stories (*cerita*) of slave raiding, conflict and flight.

#### CERITA AND ETHNOHISTORY

The *trimbow* cycle comes to an end with the people’s arrival on the shores of the Peninsula. The *trimbow* about the creation of humanity is complete. Btsisi’ stories about their ancestors’ lives continue in stories. *Cerita* content commences where the *trimbow* ends. While *trimbow* are mythical and probably not based on historic fact, *cerita* probably do have some historic basis.

The *cerita* tell of Orang Asli settling Smanjong (Malay: Semanjong, “Peninsula”) and clearing the land for cultivation. Later, Indonesians from Siak arrived from Sumatra, forcing Orang Asli to flee for their lives. A pattern of Btsisi’ settling and planting swiddens, only to have Austronesian-speaking peoples arrive, steal their land, and enslave their people is prevalent in many Btsisi’ *cerita*. The *cerita* describe Btsisi’ trying to defend themselves, although loosing at Ayer Tawar, Batu Pahat, Sungai<sup>11</sup> Buluh, and Tanjong Karang (KARIM 1977, 34), until they were finally successful at Sungai Rawang. Sungai Rawang is a great distance from where Btsisi’ live today and from where they lived in the British colonial period. BELLAMY (1895, 226), however, mentions that an alternate name for Btsisi’ is Orang Rawang, lending credence to the possibility that Btsisi’ at one time did live as far north and as far inland as Rawang, and of also having fought a battle there.

Upon victory at Sungai Rawang, Btsisi proposed terms for a peace treaty to the Jobok Siak (“Indonesians from Siak”).<sup>12</sup> They proposed if a coconut husk sunk while a stone floated, the Jobok Siak people would no longer bother them.<sup>13</sup> The Jobok Siak agreed to the bet knowing a stone would sink but a husk would float. Btsisi’ shamans’ magic was so strong and beyond the Jobok Siak’s expectations that to their surprise, the stone floated and the coconut husk sunk. Btsisi’ won the bet and achieved their wish for the cessation of hostilities, at least temporarily.

While no historic documentation exists about the above mentioned battles, there is documentation that Orang Asli all over the Peninsula were subject to murder and slave raiding (see, for example, ANDAYA and ANDAYA 1982, 161; ENDICOTT 1983; DENTAN 1997; GIANNO 1997; JUMPER 1997, 39). In

Negri Sembilan and southwestern Pahang, Rawa and Mandailing Malays from Sumatra intensively slave-raided Mantra (*Mintira*) settlements (LOGAN 1847a; EVANS 1915) and in Selangor, Rawa slavers raided Binua settlements in the interior of Selangor (LOGAN 1850, 756).<sup>14</sup> There is a possibility that when Logan is talking about the Binua communities he is referring to Btsisi'. In an article dated 1847, Logan mentions that Btsisi' were sometimes categorized, along with four other communities, as Orang Binua (LOGAN 1847b, 248).<sup>15</sup> Logan included a description of a Mantra camp attacked:

they [Rawa] always go well armed.... They are now settled in considerable numbers in Rembau, Sungai Ujong and the western part of Pahang, and their numbers and power yearly increase, and become more formidable. About seven months ago, bands of them, under Batá Bidohom, an invulnerable man, attacked the Mintirá in different places, killed many of the men and carried away more than a hundred of their women and girls into Pahang, where they were sold as slaves. The Rawa declared that they would hunt down the Mintirá every where, and deal with them all in the same way, in consequence of which the greater number have left their houses and are now scattered far and near (LOGAN 1847a, 329).

Minangkabau were also attacking Mantra<sup>16</sup> communities for their land. The attacking Indonesian Malay populations would probably have gained access to the inland regions inhabited by Mantra by crossing through coastal areas settled by Btsisi'. Thus, Btsisi' coastal location would have placed them in a very vulnerable position during inland slave-raiding expeditions. WILKINSON (1971a, 18) states:

the besisi are a shy, unwarlike people who have accepted without resentment the wrongs inflicted on them by past generations of Malays. Ask any of them for his family history and you will often be told a harrowing tale of the cold-blooded murder of some parent or relative.... From the days of Mudzafar Shah of Malacca he has been exploited and persecuted.

ANDAYA and ANDAYA (1982, 161) mention that as late as the end of nineteenth century, Sultan Abdul Samad of Selangor had Orang Asli slaves. While they do not mention what tribal community the Sultan's slaves came from, there is a likelihood some of his slaves would have been Btsisi', since they lived in the vicinity of the Sultan's residence on Bukit Jugra.

LETESSIER (1895, 100–101) provides a description of a typical Malay slave-raiding expedition on what was a Selangor Orang Asli community:

For wherever the Malay perceived any indication of their presence, he would build himself a small shelter, and never leave it until he had discovered the place of retreat where they generally spent the night. He would then repair to the spot at nightfall, accompanied by a few accomplices, and concealing themselves until dark they would not begin the hunt until the Orang Buket were asleep. They would then fire several rifle shots, spreading terror and confusion in every family. Their breaking up then made them easy prey to the Malays, who would make a rush for the spot where they heard the shrieks of women and children. The girls were as a rule at once knocked on the head, and the boys were carried off and sold as slaves. There is hardly a family but what has its own special calamity to relate, and cherishes a profound aversion for the Malay.

An Orang Asli who spoke with Letessier said to him: “In those days...we never walked in the beaten tracks lest the print of our footsteps in the mud should betray us” (1895, 100; see also ANNANDALE and ROBINSON 1903, 180, and COUILLARD 1984 for additional discussion regarding Orang Asli as slaves).

Slave raiding lingers in the memories of contemporary Btsisi’ as it does for other Orang Asli. Kirk Endicott, when discussing Batek<sup>17</sup> perceptions notes, “These stories shape and justify a world view in which outsiders, especially Malays, are pictured as dangerous and untrustworthy” (ENDICOTT 1983, 237). Btsisi’ elders who tell their grandchildren the stories of what happened to their *moyang* (“ancestors”), are teaching the youth to fear Malays. The elders are also covertly teaching Btsisi’ youth that they are different from Malays, and they should never become Malay, because it was the Malays’ ancestors who murdered and enslaved their ancestors.

Btsisi’ say at one time they did try to relieve tensions with Malays by establishing alliances through arranged marriages of Btsisi’ women into Bugis royal households, for example, Batin Gading married Sultan Tengku Mahmud of Pahang (1892–?), and Batin Pahang married Sultan Abdul Samad (1859–1898) of Selangor. Btsisi’ thought this arrangement would not only establish alliances, but would also secure a position of leadership for the women’s children. This did not succeed in bringing Btsisi’ the peace they hoped for.<sup>18</sup>

There is little doubt that Austronesian-speaking men married Orang Asli women, and this fits chronologically with immigrant Malay as well as Btsisi’ *cerita* (see NEWBOLD 1839, vol 1, 421–22; SKEAT and BLAGDEN 1906, vol. 1, 40–41; CALDECOTT 1971; NOWAK 1987). Malay tradition of Negri

Sembilan states that Minangkabau immigrants, who reckon kinship matrilineally, married aboriginal women in order to gain access to land. Later, they used their aboriginal connection to legitimize their rights to the land over those of later immigrants (SWIFT 1965, 9–10; CALDECOTT 1971, 330; WILKINSON 1971b, 284–87; JUMPER 1997, 18).

Btsisi' stories of their migrations and ethnohistoric accounts of the period Minangkabau migrated to the Peninsula, suggest that Btsisi' would have been living along the Melaka coast. When Minangkabau landed in Melaka, the inhabitants of the area were Orang Laut (Malay, "Sea People"), an ethnonym frequently, but not exclusively, used for Btsisi' (WILKINSON 1971a, 35; ANDAYA and ANDAYA 1982, 46).<sup>19</sup> WILKINSON (1971a, 18) mentions that Malays were killing Btsisi' during the reign of Sultan Mudazafar Shah (earlier known as Raja Kasim, the first Sultan of Melaka), who ruled Melaka circa 1445. This strengthens the probability that Btsisi' were living in the area when Minangkabau arrived. It also lends credence to the possibility that Btsisi', in addition to Blandas<sup>20</sup> women, married Minangkabau.

While Blandas are the people thought to have intermarried with Minangkabau, Btsisi' believe they once "walked together" with Blandas. Btsisi' *cerita* mention the separation of the two groups occurred along the Dugindək Kəsak (Kesang River), near the Melaka/Negri Sembilan border. If there is validity to Btsisi' *cerita*, the marriages of aboriginal women to Minangkabau may have been before the Btsisi'/ Blandas separation. This would mean that in a four-hundred-year span, between the early 1400s, when Minangkabau arrived in Malaya, to the mid 1800s, Blandas would have become Malay speakers, with little remaining memory of the Btsisi' language. Word lists collected from Temuan/Blandas by British colonial officials include only a small percentage of Aslian (primarily Btsisi') words.

Btsisi' recite a migration *cerita* which includes how Blandas and Btsisi' separated into two distinct communities. The story goes:

From Batu Pahat the people moved northward up the coast to the Muar River. They followed the river upstream entering some small tributaries until they reached Kəsak River, on the Melaka/Negri Sembilan border. There they reluctantly divided into two groups. One group went upstream and the second group went back downstream, towards the shore. The former became Hma' Darat<sup>21</sup> and the latter Hma' Laut.<sup>22</sup>

Blandas made swiddens along the mountain<sup>23</sup> and in the swamps of Johor near Tasek Bera.<sup>24</sup> Those that went to the sea dispersed, scattering to plant their swiddens. They ended up in Melaka, where they stayed to plant their swiddens in the swamps. After a few years, they moved to

Tanjong Tuan, Melaka, then to Bagan Pinang, and later they started to move north up the coast until they reached the Səpak River.<sup>25</sup> They then went up upstream to Kampuk Jəlutok.<sup>26</sup> The people then moved off the Səpak River and their descendants built a village at the crossroads of the Busut,<sup>27</sup> Dəngkil<sup>28</sup> and Buah River. The group then divided with some heading upstream while others went downstream to the coast where they entered Dugindək Səpak Kcil and went upstream to clear their swiddens. There they found evidence of a coconut estate, Tlok Mrbaw. The people then established the village of Bukit Bangkok under the leadership of Batin Toda’.

This story suggests Btsisi’ once lived as far south on the Peninsula as Batu Pahat, Johor. By the mid 1800s Btsisi’ began abandoning their settlements in Batu Pahat, Malacca, and Negri Sembilan for more northerly locations along the Selangor coast such as Bukit Bangkok, Koyn (Matak Buah), and Telok Gunyek, the first settlement on Carey Island. There is genealogical as well as ethnohistoric evidence confirming Btsisi’ residence in the southern end of the Peninsula. Genealogies I collected from 1980 to 1982 include a Batin Limpaa from Batu Pahat. A Pnghulu’ from a Carey Island village spoke to me of his grandfather, Pnghulu’ Limpaa, who came from Batu Pahat. SKEAT (1896, 361) mentions a Pnghulu’ Limpar from Batu Pahat who was visiting his kin at a Btsisi’ village on Carey Island. The same Carey Island Pnghulu’ also told me about his ancestor, Batin Toda’. Batin Toda’, who was mentioned in the above *cerita*, was the founding ancestor of Bukit Bangkok. He had two living sons in 1982. Both were very old, the eldest son, Batin Bolois, I estimated to be close to one hundred years old. If Batin Bolois’ father was the founder of Bukit Bangkok, the village could have been settled between 1850 to 1870 (NOWAK 1987, 34).

Ninik Singan relayed to me a couple of verses of a poem which, he said, recounts the division of the one community into separate Btsisi’ and Blandas groups. The inspiration behind the poem was to provide future generations from the two groups a way to identify each other and to recognise their common heritage. Verse 1 names the places people settled in the journeys.<sup>29</sup>

*Verse 1:*

1. *Gobaḳ gobil, buluh bohal,            Gobaḳ gobil, buluh bohal,*

[CALDECOTT (1971, 328) mentions a Bukit Gubang-Gubing near the Tinggi and Glami Rivers. WILKINSON (1971b, 287) includes “Buloh Bohal” among a list of places “that was very important in those primitive days.... Probably they were Biduanda<sup>30</sup> settlements and represent the

golden age of the Sakai, the time before Minangkabau colonists filled up the country and drove the aborigines to the mountains.” Ninik Singan told me (NOWAK 1980–1982) that *buluh bohal* refers to an earlier portion of the *trimbow* which tells about the creation of humanity. *Buluh* (Malay, “bamboo”<sup>31</sup>) *bohal* is a special bamboo knife midwives use to cut the umbilicus. This line may symbolically refer to an earlier portion of the *trimbow* cycle when the original siblings, older sister Pagar Buyoh, and younger brother Busut, cut the links with land they left behind following the great deluge (see NOWAK [1987 and 2000] for a version of this earlier portion of the *trimbow*). SKEAT (1897, 381) provides an alternative to the meaning of *buluh bohal* saying it was an heirloom insignia worn on the head of a titled elder.<sup>32</sup>]

2. *Siap barak dengan berkal.* Finished packing objects/  
wares in containers.  
[Typically the containers were made from the sheath or casing of the hearts of the palm tree *Oncosperma*.]
3. *Tersinggah yang haga menuju* Landed wishing to go straight to  
*Batu Pahat, Naning, Hnau, Pahang,* Batu Pahat, Naning, Endau,  
Pahang,  
*Jelebu, T’kek, Jeram, Jerabah,* Jelebu, T’kek, Jeram, Jerabah,  
[These are all place names. Naning, Jelebu and Pahang were part of the original “Nine States” of Johor. Hnau is the Endau River. LOGAN (1847b, 248) mentions that Btsisi’ occupied the Tiké River, a part of the upper Langat River.]
4. *Bukit Gentil, Bukit Galla* Gentil Hill, Gallah Hill  
[These are found in the northeast corner of Negri Sembilan. LOGAN (1847b, 248) mentions Besisu residing along the Galláh River, a feeder river to the Langat River.]
5. *Batin Baroh, Batin Gentil, Batin* Village elder Baroh, village elder  
*Jantai, Batin Cabai.* Gentil, village elder Jantai, village elder Cabai.  
[These are names of village elders or leaders who were the founders of the community on the migration. Frequently a place name would take on the name of the elder who founded the village.]
6. *Selayon pucok pinang, selayon* The top of the betel nut trees in the

*pucok dan nyiur.* distance, the top of coconut trees in the distance.

[When out at sea it is possible to see, in the distance, the tops of palm trees. This is an indication to people that the area is inhabited, so when people are migrating up the Peninsula, they would see the hazy tops of cultivated trees in the distance and know the area was inhabited.]

7. *Batin Pnghulu' Cap Kamok yang muka'.* Batin Pnghulu' Cap Kamok opened the land.

8. *Asal yang muka' tempat Smanjong.* He was the original person to open the Peninsula.

["To open" means to be the first inhabitant; the leader of the group who moves into a new region and clears a swidden.]

9. *Bersumpah yang batu blah,* Pledged at split rock,

[This is the place where the two groups, Btsisi' and Blandas, divided into their two separate communities and went in different directions. Before their parting, the two groups made an oath to each other to remember the verses written here and teach it to their future generations. The place where this oath was made is called "split rock."]

10. *Jebedek, Jebenda, Jowanda,* Jebedek, Jebenda, Jowanda,

[It is unclear whether these are place names.]

11. *Lep baju blah bangsa dan Blandas.* Entered (wore) split shirts and became the Blandas tribe.

12. *Kop darat 'empe' ribu, yang laut mah ratus.* 3000 live inland and 200 by the sea.

[The majority of the community became Blandas or Orang Darat, and settled inland, while a minority of the people, two hundred resided by the sea and are known as Btsisi'.]

13. *Sompah Jobo' dan laut.* Cursed by Malays never to return and live by the sea.

## Verse 2:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. <i>Runtuh tebi[ ti[gi,</i>                               | The waves came crashing down at the sand dunes/sandbanks on the beach,                   |
| 2. <i>Betik tujuluh, bertik tibarai ombak</i>               | Darting along the sand shoals (or mud flats) darting the waves,                          |
| 3. <i>Yang pecah, yang merlmpok,</i>                        | Which broke with a crashing sound,   |
| 4. <i>Merlmpok tebi[ ti[gi</i>                              | The surf on the sand dunes on the beach  |
| 5. <i>Betik tibarai, tuhbuluh ombak yang pecah menimpok</i> | Darting along the sand shoals, the colliding waves which break with a crash on the sand. |

BAHARON (1973) includes a Temuan (Blandas) mythical verse about the opening of lands in the Peninsula, which is similar to the Btsisi' verse. In the Temuan verse, five brothers who travelled together decided to go in different directions; three brothers remained inland while two went to the lowlands (or the coast?). It is not clear from this Temuan myth nor Baharon's commentary whether or not the inland community became Temuan and the coastal community Btsisi'. The Btsisi' and the Temuan verses do parallel each other. For example, the verse Baharon collected talks about three brothers remaining inland and two going to the lowlands, the Btsisi' verse talks about three thousand people remaining inland and two hundred going to the sea. WILKINSON's (1971b) history of Negri Sembilan, mentions that many of the place names in the Biduanda's Johol story are the same as the ones included in the Btsisi' verse.

While Btsisi' and Blandas verses do suggest a connection, it may not be the result of a single, shared origin but rather the consequence of intermarriage. Btsisi' genealogies collected in 1980–1982 show a number of Btsisi'/Blandas marriages (NOWAK 1980–1982). Btsisi' say there are other cultural parallels or shared customs among the two groups, most notably Btsisi's' *khenduri' plē diat* (durian fruit festival). Btsisi' recognise this seven-night festival to have its origins among Blandas. The elders organizing and singing the ritual songs for these seven nights all said they had a Blandas ancestor who married a Btsisi'. Btsisi' who do not have a known Blandas ancestor do not participate in the festival. I have, however, not come across any reference in the literature to a similar type of durian festival among Blandas. Btsisi' acknowledgement of this as belonging to Blandas could be incorrect.

There are other instances of similar, shared stories between the tribes. EVANS (1915), for example, relates a story he collected among the Blandas of the Kenaboi districts of Selangor and Jelebu. This story talks about how they were attacked by Rawa and Mandiling Malay warriors, who forced them to flee north and into the hills. The parallel of this story with the ones collected among Btsisi' may be just part of Orang Asli shared cultural history, and mean nothing, but, it may also suggest that the Btsisi' story of the division into Blandas and Btsisi' is true. BORIE (1865) tells a story he collected among Mantras about Batin Alam, the chief Batin who came from Roum (Constantinople). Blandas referencing Roum as their origin place or a Batin named Roum also suggests some connection between Blandas and Btsisi' remembering that in the Btsisi' *trimbaw* the Batin's name in Merekah was Roum.

BELLAMY was very explicit about the singular origins of Btsisi' and Blandas. He said:

Although these people have been named differently in different places, I believe them to have had one common origin, but their surroundings have altered them so that they now appear to form two distinct tribes.... The Orang Bukit (Blandas) have undoubtedly been brought a great deal into communication with the Malays, and have preferred to make use of the latter's language.... I have little doubt but that the Orang Bukit originally spoke the Bahasa Besisi, although at the present time they cannot hold converse with the Orang Laut [Besisi] except th[r]ough the medium of the Malay tongue (1895, 226).

There has been a great deal of speculation over who the Blandas are; or even how to classify them. Traditionally, they are grouped as part of the third main Orang Asli category, "Proto-Malays." Blandas, who are more commonly known as Temuan, speak Malay. There is disagreement regarding whether Temuan historically spoke archaic Malay (COLE 1945; WILKINSON 1971a), a Proto-Austronesian language (CAREY 1976, 241), or an Aslian language (SKEAT 1897, 328). The latter view suggests that Temuan are Malayised Orang Asli. If there is truth to the verse Btsisi' tell, it suggests the latter view—that Blandas and Btsisi' share a common origin, hence, Blandas are Malayised Btsisi'.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes Btsisi' myth, stories and ethnohistory for the purpose of gaining insight into Btsisi' perceptions of their Malay neighbors who control the nation-state Btsisi' inhabit. The myths and stories provide a number of

critical points regarding how Btsisi' view their identity and position in Malaysia. A central issue the *trimbow* emphasizes is that Btsisi' consider Orang Asli to be the original inhabitants of the Peninsula. Subsequent to Btsisi' belief that Orang Asli are the original inhabitants is the fear and distrust they have of Malays, who stole their land, and killed or enslaved their people.

The *trimbow* also attempts to teach Btsisi' youth that they are different from their Malay neighbors. It relates Btsisi' desire to remain distinct from the Malay population. This includes not converting to Islam, thus reinforcing Btsisi' distinct and separate spiritual and legal identity. What is good for Malays, for example, the Haj, is not necessarily good for Btsisi'. The final point originating from Btsisi' myths and stories, a most speculative point, is the possibility that Blandas and Btsisi' were historically a single group; that Blandas are Malayised Btsisi' and not Proto-Malays. If this is true, it goes a long way in helping to clarify whether Blandas and possibly Jakun are Proto-Malays or Malayised Orang Asli. Finally, the relationship between Btsisi' and Blandas is a function of the more general relationship between Orang Asli and Malays.

#### NOTES

\* Singan knon Muntil passed away in the late 1980s. Ninik ("grandfather") Singan spent many hours working with me, narrating the *trimbow* and discussing its contents. He also told me many of the stories referred to in this article. His involvement was instrumental to this article. I would like to acknowledge his involvement and honor him and his family with co-authorship.

1. Hma' translates as "people" or "person" (cognate with *Semaq* as in *Semaq Beri*, another Orang Asli community). It is unclear what Btsisi' actually means. Some stories suggest the term refers to "scales" as in fish scales. As Btsisi' are fisherfolk it has been suggested that Hma' Btsisi' therefore means "people with scales" (for example, KARIM 1981, footnote 1, 13). Another possible explanation for the origins of Btsisi' is from the Malay word *sisi*, meaning "edge," which describes the people's location vis-à-vis the Temuan /Blandas, who Btsisi' say named their language (BENJAMIN 1985). Btsisi' call themselves Hma' Heh or "We People." They are known in the literature and officially by the Malaysian Government Office of Indigenous People or JHEOA (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli) as Mah Meri or Mah Mrih ("People of the Jungle").

2. SKEAT and BLAGDEN (1906, vol. 2, 855) describe a *trumba* or *terumba* as "a tribal genealogy in the form of a song or chant."

3. Btsisi' are reciting *trimbow* less frequently with the availability of alternative forms of entertainment, such as television. Children are now more interested in watching television than in hearing myths and stories.

4. Batin is a titled position that is inherited. While in the contemporary period, all Batin are men, in the past Btsisi' say Batin were women. A male Batin inherits the position through his patriline whereas a woman would have inherited her position matrilineally. The last female Batin died three generations ago. She had no female kin who could replace her so the line ended. Batin are responsible for internal village affairs. As the traditional post-marital residence pattern

is matrilineal, village women would stay together and men are the outsiders. Women, as the natal inhabitants of the village, would most likely be involved in village maintenance and harmony.

In contrast, the titled elder responsible for inter-community relationships is the Pngulu'. This position is and has always been held by a man, and it is inherited patrilineally. Since a man moves into his wife's natal village, he remains an outsider and thus has a desire to maintain ties with his own natal village. It is therefore logical for men to take responsibility for inter-village affairs (see NOWAK 1987 and NOWAK forthcoming).

5. Malays say royal blood is white (ATKINSON 1983). ANDAYA and ANDAYA (1982, 77) say: "He was therefore remembered as Sultan Berdarah Putih, the King of the White Blood, to distinguish him from his successors who lacked this same evidence of true royalty." Arab merchants traded with Ming Dynasty China in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries masquerading as ambassadors from distant countries, for example, "the Kingdom of Rum in Asia Minor (that is, the long defunct Roman East), which were recorded as 'presenting tribute' as late as 1618" (REISCHAUER and FAIRBANK 1960, 329). SKEAT and BLAGDEN (1906, vol 2, 317), when narrating a "Btsisi' tradition of their early migrations" say the Malays came from "Rūm, Stambul, Sham (that is, Syria) and Mecca."

6. *Layuw* is the Btsisi' transliteration of the Malay word *layur* literally meaning to "fade and die" (WILKINSON 1959, 665).

7. The number seven is symbolically significant representing the seven layers of the cosmos. Not only are the *trimbow* told over seven nights, but the Btsisi' *main jo'oh*, a ritually important song and dance cycle re-enacting the mythological formation of the cosmos, is made up of seven songs (NOWAK 1987, see also COLLINGS 1949, 87–88; COUILLARD 1980, 29; ENDICOTT 1979, 33–42; HOWELL 1984, 59–65; LAIRD 1979, 64).

8. *Jobok* is the Btsisi' term for Malay (compare DENTAN 1997).

9. Batak are an Austronesian-speaking people residing in northern Sumatra. Btsisi' say in the past Batak practiced cannibalism. Victims found guilty of breaking Batak custom or law were cannibalised. Among Btsisi', Batak is not only synonymous with cannibals but youth use the term to refer to someone who has done something rather stupid or clumsy.

10. The traditional Malay term for Orang Asli is *Sakai*, which, in the contemporary period has a derogatory connotation meaning "slave." An earlier, precolonial meaning is "dependant" or "subject peoples." This word probably relates to the trade relationship between the Malay patrons and the aboriginal trading clients (LYE 2001, 219). JUMPER (1997) however suggests the word *Sakai* comes from the Sanskrit word meaning "companion" or "ally." What is clear is that the meaning of the word changed with the changing relationship between Orang Asli and their Malay neighbors.

11. *Sungai* is the Malay word for river. Btsisi' say *dugindak*.

12. Siak is located on the east coast of Sumatra.

13 Intriguingly, GIANNO (1997, 64) includes a story of Semelai fleeing from Malays in which a Malay sultan searching for the Semelai Batin was told if a rock floated and a coconut husk sank, then the Batin could be found up a particular stream.

14. In relaying a boat journey up the west coast of Malaysia, Logan relates the fact that the Rawa were at that particular time attacking Binua (see footnote 28). He says: "From some Jiram men who were lying in a fishing boat I learned that ...the Rawa were now attacking the Binua in the interior of Salangor, and that the chief of Ulu Salangor had gone to Lukut to receive the orders of the Raja on the subject. They said their forays had now extended to the interior of the Birnam" (LOGAN 1850, 756).

15. Most typically J. R. Logan identified Binua (or Benua) as people living along the upper reaches of a few large rivers such as the Endau, in Johor. More contemporary scholars such as Narifumi Maeda TACHIMOTO (2001) identified these same communities as Orang Hulu.

16. Mantra (Mentra, Mentera) is another name for Temuan or Blandas.

17. Batek are a North Aslian community residing in the Taman Negara region of Malaysia.

18. Many of the invading Sumatran groups, such as Minangkabau, married (in actuality or mythically) Orang Asli women in an attempt to legitimate their occupation of traditional Orang Asli territory (ANDAYA and ANDAYA 1982, 50).

19. While Malays sometimes call Btsisi' Orang Laut, the name is most often used to designate Proto-Malay communities in Johor, such as Orang Seletar and Orang Hulu (see TACHIMOTO 2001).

20. Blandas is the most frequently used Btsisi' term to name Temuan, a Proto-Malay community. The link between these communities is discussed in greater detail further along in the text.

21. Hma' Darat literally means "inland people." It refers to Blandas (Temuan).

22. Hma' Laut means "sea people." *Laut* is a Malay word and has entered Btsisi' language replacing the Btsisi' word *bauwau*.

23. When I questioned Ninik Singan as to what mountain the story referred to he told me it referred to Gunong Ledang, which is also known as Mount Ophir. The mountain is located on the border of Johor and Melaka States.

24. Tasek Bera is now inhabited by Jah Hut and Semelai.

25. Sepang River. There is the Little Sepang (Dugindak Səpak Kcil) and the Big Sepang Rivers (Dugindak Səpak Besar).

26. Kampung Jelutong is in the north-northwest corner of Negri Sembilan. SKEAT and BLAGDEN (1906) mention this village.

27. *Busut* means mound.

28. Dəngkil is a Temuan village near Bukit Bangkok. Btsisi' have many relatives living at Dəngkil through intermarriage (see WILSON 1967 for an ethnographic description of Dəngkil).

29 See SKEAT 1896, 325; SKEAT and BLAGDEN 1906, vol. 1, 686, and AYAMPILLAY 1976, 176–78 for slightly different versions of these verses.

30. Biduanda is an old term used to refer to Temuan. The term comes from the Malay word meaning "royal messenger" or "palace servant" (LYE 2001, 211).

31. If this does refer to bamboo, it is interesting that the verse uses the Malay word (*buluh*) rather than the Btsisi' word, *dik*.

32. The first line in the origin story as recorded by Skeat goes: "Gobang Goben, Buluh Bohal." SKEAT (1897, 325) explains this line the following way: "Gobang Goben, taken as a corruption of Lobang Loben, was once explained to me as the name of a hole in a large bamboo called the Buluh Bohal in Sumatra, from which the founder of the Sakei race miraculously issued." This seems to fit Ninik Singan's interpretation in which he described *buluh bohal* as the knife used to cut the umbilical cord. In another passage, Skeat places a different interpretation on what *buluh bohal* might mean. He later says the following: "when I was at Sepang, the Sakeis [Btsisi'] told me of a strange sort of head-gear which formed the insignia of their lineal chiefs, and now Raja Manau of Sepang tells me that this head-gear was a short time ago in the possession of Batu Pah Kasat (late of Sepang Kecil)...who used to wear it on his head whenever the tribe met in council. Raja Manau states that this head-gear was made of some material with which he was not acquainted, but which might have been manufactured from tree-bark, and that it consisted of strands of this material most cunningly interwoven into knots or loops resembling the *bulu bembaban* (a kind of knot) of the Malays. It is called *buluh bohal*, and descended direct as 'pesaka' (heirloom) from father to son in the male line. It is not used, however, by any other than this one tribe" (SKEAT 1897, 381).

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