

The Orang Asli of Malaysia

Theme >
Malaysia

In the eyes of the government, developers and investors, the *Orang Asli* (Malaysia's indigenous peoples) are in the wrong time and place. Seen as lacking a sense of time, place or history, they are deemed backward peoples in need of assistance. In other words, they should be modernised. Their purported nomadism is unsettling to the government, which advocates their sedentarisation to resolve the 'problem' of their frequent mobility.



A Semai village located along the Tapah-Cameron Highlands Road

courtesy of author

By Alberto G. Gomes

Orang Asli land is coveted by powerful interests: for its timber and minerals, for conversion into oil palm or rubber plantations, golf courses, hydroelectric power installations, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport and development projects to benefit the Malay majority population. The reasons behind *Orang Asli* relocation or displacement are often concealed from the public eye. Instead, for the *Orang Asli*, displacement is called development. Government policies aim to draw them into 'the mainstream of society', into the 'right' place and time.

Labels

The ethnic label *Orang Asli*, meaning 'natural people' in Malay, replaced the term 'aborigines' used by the British colonial administration. *Orang Asli* refers to the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia who are not Malay Muslims, Malaysia's main ethnic group. The *Orang Asli*, together with the Malays and indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak, form the category of Malaysians known as *bumiputera* ('sons of the soil') who make up 65.1 per cent of the population; the rest is of Chinese or Indian descent (<http://www.statistics.gov.my/English/pressdemo.htm>). The *Orang Asli* comprise 0.5 per cent of the population (Nicholas 2000:3) and are conventionally divided into eighteen ethno-linguistic subgroups.

Both ethno-labels – *bumiputera* and *Orang Asli* – imply indigeneity; Malays are classified as *bumiputera* but not as *Orang Asli*. In the eyes of non-Malay citizens, recognition of an aboriginal people weakens the Malay claim to indigenous status. Such views are not expressed openly, however; Malaysian law prohibits public discussion of the issue of indigenous status, which is considered seditious. Occasionally, opposition politicians raise questions about indigeneity and rights of indigenous

minorities but these are quickly stifled by the ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). When questioned by the media, Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman replied, 'there is no doubt that the Malays were the indigenous peoples of this land because the original inhabitants did not have any form of civilisation compared with the Malays...and instead lived like primitives in mountains and thick jungle' (Nicholas 2000: 90).

There is no doubt that *Orang Asli* ancestors settled on the 'Malay' Peninsula long before the predecessors of contemporary Malays. However, prior settlement does not accord the descendants political privileges. The musings of the former Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, are revealing: 'Aborigines are found in Australia, Taiwan and Japan...but nowhere are they regarded as the definitive people of the country concerned. The definitive people are those who set up the first governments.... In Malaya, the Malays without doubt formed the first effective governments.... The *Orang Melayu* or Malays have always been the definitive people of the Malay Peninsula.' (Dentan et al 1997: 21-22) While the argument may explain Malay rule, it does not resolve the problem of the existence of a group of people who can be considered more indigenous than the Malays.

Assimilation

To solve this problem, the government has pursued a policy of assimilation to turn *Orang Asli* into Malay Muslims and, in the process, eradicate the category of aboriginal peoples in Malaysia. In a recent policy statement, the government announced its strategy 'to increase efforts at introducing a value system based on Islam for the integration of the *Orang Asli* with the wider society in general and Malays in particular' (Nicholas 2000: 98). Such a policy was tacitly adhered to in earlier days of government intervention; since 1993

it has been in the open. The policy not only facilitates Islamic conversion; it also prevents *Orang Asli* from converting to other religions, thus curtailing their religious freedoms. Islamic conversion would mean the *Orang Asli* would no longer have the wrong status as indigenous peoples. However, for resource managers, particularly forestry managers, many *Orang Asli* are still in the wrong place.

Forest dwellers

Evidence suggests that, in the first millennium AD, the *Orang Asli* were the primary suppliers of forest products such as rattan, bamboo, resins, ivory, and other animal parts in the maritime trade that linked Southeast Asia to markets in China, India and the Middle East (Gomes 2004: 2). Due to the settlement and encroachment of other peoples and interests onto their territories, *Orang Asli* peo-

ples are losing control of the forests. In the contest for resources, they are often on the losing side (Nicholas 2000).

During the 'opening up' of the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, forests were treated as if they were weeds to be cleared, and transformed into plantations and tin mines. After the Second World War, the *Orang Asli* and their forest abodes became strategically important in the fight against communist insurgents, who mostly operated from jungle camps. The push for economic development accelerated the conversion of forests into plantations, mines and land developments. The construction of roads and dams destroyed large tracts of forest and, with them, *Orang Asli* livelihoods. Timber became an important export bankrolling Malaysia's development.

Between logging and preservation

Paradoxically, the growing middle class produced by Malaysia's economic success began to clamour for the protection of forests and the creation of forest parks for recreation. The *Orang Asli* became an obstacle to two conflicting interests: commercial logging and forest preservation. Their 'shifting cultivation' was deemed

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wasteful and damaging to forests and resources. This perception was not new; in 1958, the Chief Forester blamed *Orang Asli* shifting cultivation for the destruction of valuable forest resources and recommended that 'it would be foolhardy to jeopardise the future of a nation by "preserving" a way of life for 50,000 people... when an opportunity, as a result of the Emergency, exists today to start settling them permanently'. Such sentiments have spurred the government's push to

resettle *Orang Asli* away from their forest bases and to open the land for exploitation.

The Aboriginal Peoples Act (1974) permits the *Orang Asli* to collect minor forest products but, under the Forestry Act of 1935, the Forestry Department has regulatory rights. The Act requires traders to obtain licences to purchase or trade forest products and to pay levies and taxes on commodities. By such means the Department can regulate trading and control *Orang Asli* access to the forests. While *Orang Asli* are not permitted to collect forest products from national parks, this restriction is not always enforced. As Colin Nicholas (2000: 134), Director of the NGO Centre of *Orang Asli* Concerns has observed, personnel of the Department of Wildlife and National Parks even act as middlemen in the trading of minor forest products gathered by *Orang Asli* from Taman Negara National Park.

It is more than the contest for resources that concerns government officials. In an attempt to ban tourists from visiting an *Orang Asli* community in Taman Negara, a government minister in 1997 remarked, 'Although it is natural for women of the tribe to live half naked in

the village, their photographs may give a wrong impression that Malays here are dressed in that manner' (Nicholas, 2000, p.134). One may conclude that the *Orang Asli* are not only in the wrong place and time, they are, in their marginal position, also a wrong people in Malaysia. ◀

References

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Orang Asli Groups and Locations

Source: Benjamin 1985