

Contacts and Contrasts: the British vs. the Orang Asli in Colonial Malaya

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A few historical reports exist on the Orang Asli, the indigenous people of the Malay Peninsula.¹ Several focus on the Orang Asli before British rule began in the mid-19th century or after Malaya's independence in 1957. Reports focusing on the colonial period tend to concentrate on official policies, the Communist insurgency after 1945, or the expropriation of forest resources. In contrast, here I discuss the social and cultural contacts—and conflicts—of the British and Orang Asli.² Some colonialists were well-informed about Malaya and pursued scholarly studies there, although most of them had difficulty in looking at Malaya's indigenous people without prejudice. Yet others were notably unprejudiced, even empathetic.

The British economic, political, and military goals in Malaya influenced their writings on Orang Asli, and these writings in turn influence social issues today.³ However, the British clearly distinguished the Orang Asli from the Malays, the majority group. Indeed, much of the discussion of Orientalism, about European perceptions of large groups in Asian colonies, does not readily apply to Orang Asli or other small indigenous groups. While the British Empire had “natives” in every colony, aborigines were a rare lot. If the British stereotyped Malays as “lazy natives,” they certainly did not consider Orang Asli as lazy, or natives, or lazy natives.⁴ Since the Orang Asli were not Malays—not Moslem and lacking rajas or sultans with whom the British could palaver—they were deemed insignificant or, at times, quaint museum specimens.

That is, Orang Asli were the ultimate strangers (and vice versa), in a long line of strangers. Since the minority Orang Asli were not an impediment to self-serving colonial goals—they fled instead of fought—the British could view them with some detachment. Although British rule relentlessly robbed Orang Asli of land and autonomy, British writers tended to applaud Orang Asli ecological knowledge, as well as their traits of independence, honesty, and tolerance. The trade-offs between “civilization” and the humane relations in these small subsistence communities were clear to some writers. Observing Orang Asli was sometimes liberating.

¹ The many groups of Orang Asli (“original people”) include the Jahai, Temiar, Semai, Batek, Chewong, Temuan, Jakun, and Seletar. These group names arose gradually during the colonial period. Names used in government census reports today generally follow colonial practice, except that some small groups are now ignored. The mosaic Orang Asli population today is less than 1% of that of West Malaysia. Its major groups are Malays (many of Sumatran extraction), Indians, and Chinese.

² The historical papers include Leary 1994, Dodge 1981, Harper 1997, and Jones 1968. Some histories of the British era do not even mention Orang Asli, e.g., Butcher, 1979.

³ See also Salemink 2003 and, for a different approach, Walker 2002.

⁴ See Said 1993, p. 245, and Alatas 1977. In discussing the colonial-era population in Malaya, Alatas did not acknowledge the presence of Orang Asli (pp. 228-229). He stated flatly that the country belonged to the Malays (p. 95) and that they gave up “their” land to the British (p. 127). While, as Alatas noted (p. 102), Europeans forced themselves on the Malays, it was not only Europeans who forced themselves on the Orang Asli. Alatas censured the colonial harm to majority groups in Southeast Asia, not the harm to minorities, such as the Orang Asli in his own nation-state.

Background⁵

When young British men arrived in Malaya to be colonial officials, they were usually not married, not rich, and innocent about the region.⁶ They spent their first years doing paperwork in a small office, having tea at correct intervals, going to “the club,” and writing lonesome letters home. They also studied Malay with an aged Malay tutor for their colonial-service test. Some took to bicycling out of town on the new roads. Others netted butterflies in their gardens or joined the town sports team. Virtually all viewed the rainforest hills and mangrove shores as forbidding places—not part of their enlightened world.⁷ It was only later that they heard of the Sakai, Semang, Negrito, Jakun, or even generic aborigines. By the time they encountered them, flanked by their Malay entourage, they “knew” what to expect.⁸

Many British who wrote about their life in Malaya never mentioned Orang Asli. Possibly they ignored them or knew little about them. Those who did mention Orang Asli often chose to emphasize particular topics, such as if they had ringworm or if they could count to ten in Malay. This selectivity meant that many topics of interest to historians, anthropologists, and others today are noticeably absent from most British accounts.⁹ For example, they contain little about Orang Asli women, often remarking only that their mode of dress was topless. And while the British were collectors of “trophies” of wildlife—whether butterflies or tigers—they were little interested in preserving “monotonous” nature—or “obsolescent animal forms.”¹⁰

The British who wrote about Orang Asli usually encountered them when they, the British, “took to the woods.” A few were entrepreneurial planters who managed rubber, coffee, or other plantations. A few worked in tin mining. But most were colonial employees. This group included men governing sub-districts, districts, or states, as well as forestry officials, public works officials (involved in road or railway construction), and police officials—among others. These “old hands” usually became aware of Orang Asli because of their duties in rural areas. Some were involved in circumscribing and controlling “Sakai Reserves.”¹¹ Other work involved expeditions for land surveys, in which Orang Asli were indispensable as coolies and as guides through uncharted terrain. Game hunts had a “recreational” following, usually in Orang Asli back yards, in which

⁵ See, for example, the diaries in Kempe, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 94. For a general introduction to foreigners’ views, see Gullick 1963.

⁶ While the British-era lands on the Malay Peninsula were referred to as Malaya, the country name became Malaysia after independence in 1957. A common story “imposed upon the credulity of new arrivals” was that the aborigines had short tails (Cameron 1865, p. 120).

⁷ For example, see Knocker 1924, p. 8: “So profound...is their knowledge of jungle lore that even in the despised ...mangrove swamps the coastal tribes roam about fearlessly and collect a species of wild edible fruit peculiar to these localities. It is the last place in the world where a civilized being would look for any form of sustenance.”

⁸ However, one early writer warned that the Malays “do not appear to possess any traditionary [sic] accounts of the different [aboriginal] tribes, and although they readily affirm such and such things of them, they confess, when closely questioned, that their information is mere hearsay...” (Begbie 1834, p. 19). The word tribe was used for Orang Asli but not Malays. As in Africa, “tribe” was largely a colonial construct (see Stoler and Cooper 1997, p. 11).

⁹ This was emphasized by, among others, Stoler and Cooper 1997, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰ Wheeler 1928, p. 33.

¹¹ A Sakai Reserve, or Aboriginal Reserve, was a British term for an Orang Asli territory that was at least semi-officially recognized, often grudgingly by men who wanted to dispossess the Orang Asli so that tin mines, logging concessions, or other predatory interests could be facilitated.

the European hunter came to rely not only on Orang Asli guides and coolies, but also Orang Asli knowledge of salt-lick locations and animal behavior. The quest for the exotic also lured Europeans to visit Orang Asli areas, if only to estimate how far a blowpipe dart could be shot.¹² In addition, European scholars began to accumulate ethnographic information on Orang Asli groups, often in a sympathetic way. This work accelerated after the British reasserted themselves in Malaya following WWII, but the impetus then was more political than academic.

The writings I focus on here are about British history—their view of the world and their place in it. They are also about Orang Asli history, largely unknown to them since they have no written history. Their oral history goes back only a few generations, although legends help to recreate earlier times, as does much indirect evidence.¹³ The colonial writings often distort Orang Asli, such as by excluding the longstanding interaction of Orang Asli with others. Orang Asli in these accounts often appear as unchanging—ahistorical.¹⁴ The British, after all, were writing for their home audience, not for any Malaysians—least of all for Orang Asli.¹⁵ For this reason, the writers' imagery is strongly European, comparing a rainforest river to a Scottish fishing stream or quoting Shakespeare at times. In effect, the Orang Asli and the British were often at odds because of their separate experiences and assumptions.

Few of these British commentators had personal relationships with Orang Asli, or at least few identified any individually.¹⁶ First of all, they rarely saw Orang Asli alone, without Malay observers (who would have their own views).¹⁷ Second, since Orang Asli men were better versed in Malay than their compatriots, and since the British gravitated toward men they mistakenly regarded as “tribal chiefs,” these were the usual contacts. A well-wisher might single out the “Ketua” or “Batin”—the headman of a group—and perfunctorily cite his name and village locale, ignoring the women and children. The impression given is that an Orang Asli group consisted of a few men who spent their time blowpiping birds and monkeys. (If this had been the case Orang Asli would have starved to death ages ago.) That is, here we have vignettes of men with men.

Few of these colonial writers seem modern to us today. Rather, they wrote in a colonial mentality, even when the British returned to rule Malaya in 1945. Their social consciousness extended somewhat to Malays, but still less to Orang Asli, usually

¹² According to Dodwell (MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 224), Bagus, the headman at Chinain near Behrang, easily hit a young coconut 25 yards distant. According to King (MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 291(1), letter dated 19th March, 1954), Senoi could hit a cigarette packet 30 paces distant and “bumped off two Communists outside Fort Shean with their blowpipe darts—they died in 3 minutes.” According to Follows and Popham 1990, p. 112, a Temiar can hit “the ace of spades on a playing card at 20 paces just as well as a gun-slinger of the wild west with their six-shooters.”

¹³ On Semai history, see Juli Edo 1998. On indirect evidence see Dunn 1975; Endicott 1983, pp. 216-245; and Leary 1994.

¹⁴ Also, a British film of the 1950s was entitled “Timeless Temiar.”

¹⁵ While the audiences of the British writers were invisible in Malaya, they were composed of like-minded compatriots. Orang Asli also have invisible audiences, particularly at séances, but they are spirit beings and not necessarily like-minded with humans. More broadly, to Orang Asli all of nature is full of spirit beings that watch and prescribe human behavior; they are moral watchers.

¹⁶ Even Evans, a dedicated ethnographer of Orang Asli, rarely added personal names for his published photographs of Orang Asli (Guha 2002).

¹⁷ For example, Malays assured Blagden that Orang Asli scavenge dead animals, even eating those quite decomposed (Blagden 1903).

considered as nomads.¹⁸ One outcome of that era is that today Orang Asli remain virtually landless in their own land—not that they haven't tried to overturn this British bias.

Overall, the concordances of these foreign observers on Orang Asli are too numerous to be accidental. Some of this is due to direct borrowing from earlier published reports or to gossip at “the club” or with Malay subordinates. But much reflects a larger pattern of thought about Asians and other non-Europeans. Self-reflection was little in vogue.¹⁹ Colonialists had empires to rule and “develop.”

Moreover, to gain an integrated perspective on Orang Asli during British rule would require many observations from Orang Asli themselves. But they are largely silent in British or other writings.²⁰ The few Orang Asli voices that have reached print about this era come from elders in recent years looking back on the past. Even then they are speaking indirectly, through friendly visitors, and with their words given in an alien language. While most Orang Asli were illiterate during British rule, they were often multilingual.²¹ Many spoke several Orang Asli languages. Some had long spoken Malay and lost their mother tongue over the generations. In the north, some spoke Thai. A few spoke a Chinese language learned from the “towkay” they knew well. But virtually none knew English.²² And yet, Orang Asli voices were voluble in their own circles during the colonial era, a period of vast social and economic change.²³ Comment was called for and often expressed.²⁴ But little was translated into English to counterbalance British writings. I have provided some remarks by Orang Asli that were recorded by British writers, although I cannot vouch for their accuracy.²⁵

How the British Regarded the Orang Asli

¹⁸ Nevertheless, home territories of Orang Asli hunter-gatherer groups were described as being clearly demarcated as early as the 1930s (Forde 1934). The groups traversed their areas systematically for seasonal resources. More generally, every inch of the forest was owned by some Orang Asli group (Short 1975).

¹⁹ But see Stacey 1958.

²⁰ However, we have it on the authority of the secretary to the sultan of Johore in 1894, then in London, that Orang Asli possessed the peninsula before the Malays arrived: “The aborigines were the proprietors of the soil, and we, the Malays, came there from a place in the Island of Sumatra...They are simply nomads, and move from place to place, living on tapioca, yam, rice, and forest produce. We have tried to bring them all into closer connection, but have so far failed except with a certain family called Seletar...” (Lake 1894, pp. 297-298).

²¹ This language facility may not have impressed the British. In 1917 one of them described Orang Asli near Gopeng, Perak, as “real wild men of the wood, though these particular ones talked Malay, wore a few clothes and were not noticeably smelly” (Hart, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 53, p. 8).

²² None of the British writers knew any Orang Asli languages well into the 20th century. They had to talk with Orang Asli in Malay. Evans, for example, never was with any group for more than a month, “hence I cannot ‘speak Sakai’ or a single Sakai dialect” (Evans 1923, pp. vi-vii).

²³ The upheavals included relentless encroachments on all sides, slave raiding, smallpox epidemics, the widespread flu epidemic of 1917-1919, vast floods in 1925-1926, the rubber “boom and bust,” the Japanese occupation, the Chinese insurgency thereafter, and the enveloping cash economy. For example, Collings wrote that “from one end of the country to the other” the “jungle folk harped on the hardships” of the Japanese occupation (Collings 1949, p. 3).

²⁴ Juli Edo 1998.

²⁵ Benjamin (1968) noted that Temiar try to foretell an outsider's views and converse with him on that basis.

In general the British found Orang Asli to be “impatient of all control” and “of a restless turn of mind.”²⁶ One District Officer criticized the headman of a settlement near Jalong in the Korbu Valley. It seems that this man, Long Intan, had taken on airs that were “too exalted” for a Sakai. After a strongly worded letter was sent to him by the officer, he became “chastened and very respectful.”²⁷

After the Communist insurgency, or “Emergency,” started in Malaya after 1945, the British government took “steps” about the Orang Asli. The British had discovered that groups in remote rainforest areas were being used by the insurgents in many ways. One insensitive response was to round up Orang Asli groups and “resettle” them far from their home areas—behind barbed wire, guarded by sentries. Many Orang Asli died due to malnutrition, diseases of crowded conditions, or severe depression. Those who could do so, probably hundreds, dodged the wire and sentries and escaped into the forest. Belatedly, the British switched from these inhumane camps to a string of remote military centers, located near traditional Orang Asli home grounds, in order to induce them to side with the government against the Communists. As expected, Orang Asli did become accustomed to these centers, which usually included a medical clinic and a small store—maybe even a primary school.

In 1954 a visitor to one of these centers (Fort Shean) found the Senoi there to be “nice chaps,” but talking with them (in Malay, of course) was awkward as their minds were “not yet developed” and they couldn’t count far. He wrote, “We weren’t doing sums, but an inability to count beyond [ten] keeps the conversation to items like: ‘Which do you prefer to eat, rats or snakes?’”²⁸

The British often described the Orang Asli in ways suggesting their inferiority: pygmies, little jungle folk, timid little beings, the gentlest creatures, inoffensive, picturesque, primitive, childish in terms of (British) legal matters, subjects of the Malay sultans, squalid, dirty, intractable, like wild beasts. Orang Asli languages were described as twitterings, peculiar noises, or “incomprehensible gabble.”²⁹

To take one example, a British rubber planter thought Orang Asli looked repulsive:

...the majority of them being terribly emaciated and pot-bellied, with skins like dried figs. Many of them were suffering from...‘Panow,’ which discolours the skin in patches...others had the most revolting ulcers on the feet and nostrils...Their hair was matted and completely neglected...the women...looked almost bestial...³⁰

Even so, this planter was astonished that he had not surprised an Orang Asli during his forest travels, although he had surprised most types of wildlife. This convinced him that people do exist “whose capacity for scenting, hearing and moving noiselessly actually surpasses that of the animals.”³¹ Conversely, many British men did observe Orang Asli fleeing from them upon a chance encounter. The “wild” nature of the

²⁶ Newbold 1839, p. 414.

²⁷ Kempe, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 94, vol. 11, p. 142.

²⁸ King, op. cit., letter dated 19th March, 1954.

²⁹ Follows and Popham 1990, p. 105.

³⁰ Ainsworth 1933, pp. 160-161.

³¹ Ibid, p. 155.

Orang Asli was proven to one writer when, glimpsing a group of them near Mount Ophir (Gunong Ledang), they dashed off “into the jungle, as if in terror at the sight of white men and their enemies the more civilized Malays.”³² Yet other Orang Asli were so curious to look at their first white men that they walked a long way for a glimpse. In the case of a road-building crew, they missed seeing the white bosses and saw only Tamil Indian laborers, causing them some puzzlement.³³

Some British did see Orang Asli as hardy people who were interesting, delightful, full of humor, alert, honest, highly respectable, clean, intelligent, hospitable, and having marvelous memories.³⁴ Some were even described as fat and healthy, although fatness was certainly not an Orang Asli hallmark. And they had a reputation for boundless energy: “They...never seem to tire. In fact, a tired Sakai may safely be classed in the same category as a dead donkey...”³⁵

Orang Asli were indeed renowned for stamina. Once an “outside” party was traveling with four Chewong guides, between 16 and 50 years of age, who carried 60-pound loads and hacked out a path through the forest: “The writer unencumbered with anything more heavy than a walking stick had difficulty in keeping pace along the cleared track. On arrival at a camp site the guides set to work, cleared the site and erected the tents. The writer was incapable of further effort.”³⁶

Another compliment was:

The Sakai, with all his primitive ways, has one magnificent characteristic. It is his spirit of independence; love of freedom and refusal to be bound by conventions...His hearing and seeing are remarkable. Time and time again I have felt a perfect fool when in their company at my total inability to hear or see some sound or object which to them was obvious.³⁷

Likewise, one day a British game warden and Bawang, an old Temiar, were in the forest and heard a barking deer. The British man started creeping towards it, but Bawang stopped and rolled a cigarette. When queried, Bawang (who had heard the animal retreat) said, “Too late. Kijang has gone.”³⁸

Others were clearly flummoxed by Orang Asli behavior or views. A British officer in Serendah, Selangor, wrote:

The Sakei institution which...corresponds to marriage is...wanting in so many of the important ingredients of marriage as to render it doubtful whether the institution of marriage within the meaning of section 398 of the Penal Code (enticing away a married woman) exists among the Sakeis. The formal ceremony seems to consist merely of the delivery of some jungle products...Quarrels between Sakeis and Malays over Sakei women are not infrequent. The Sakeis usually threaten to leave the district and seek the mountains, unless interference

³² McNair 1878, p. 433.

³³ Juli Edo 1998.

³⁴ The town of Behrang Station was described as filthy while the Orang Asli village near it was “clean, civilized, and well kept” (Dodwell, op. cit., p. 11).

³⁵ Knocker 1924, p. 71.

³⁶ Mummery 1948.

³⁷ Ainsworth 1933, p. 170.

³⁸ McKie 1965, p. 111.

with their women is prohibited whilst the law requires strict proof of a marriage before authorizing the punishment of the offender...³⁹

In another case, a Development Officer in Johore in 1956 was disconcerted when he went to inspect Kampung Redan, a Seletar village. He found the school empty and a note left by the absconding teacher that he closed the school because no pupils attended it. Moreover, the headman said that none of the villagers were interested in the school: "From time immemorial they had engaged in fishing mainly for crabs and...there is no object in teaching a child the ABC whose future is to be devoted to the pursuit of crabs, since the latter do not know the ABC either." Then too, the buildings erected for the villagers by the Social Welfare Department, although in good condition, were inhabited by dogs which were hostile to the officer's inspection. On top of that, when he asked about a midwife, a woman told him that it was a husband's job. She was greatly amused that husbands in other places were incompetent at delivering babies. Perhaps worst of all, the Seletar said that they only wished to be left alone. They did not want to be "developed."⁴⁰

In the same year, 1956, another writer argued that the intrusions by refugees into remote areas during Japanese rule and later by "Chinese bandits" and military forces, had enabled Orang Asli to get to know the wider world. He went on, "If acquaintance with fountain pens they did not know how to write with and electric torches with batteries which soon ran dead was of no practical use to them, such sophisticated toys were stimulating a hope to adapt their ways of living to changing conditions by which alone their cultural survival might be ensured."⁴¹ Exactly how the accumulation of sophisticated toys might ensure cultural survival was not explained.

Collings gave a gloomier picture of the Japanese and Emergency times. He wrote that the "machinations of the 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere'" frightened almost all Orang Asli groups. Some accessible ones were tormented:

...while the far-away forest...dwellers fled helter-skelter from their gardens...and many needlessly died of hunger although neither the Japanese nor their henchmen ever dared to go far into the great forest...And now the present Emergency...has again made the aborigines flee...for in many places thuggery had made it impossible for them to grow their crops or bring up their children in safety and already some lowland groups are losing their identity and belief in their own dignity and ways of life.⁴²

In some river valleys, however, Orang Asli coped with the contending powers of the British and the Communists during the Emergency by making elegant arrangements to protect themselves. By agreement among neighboring groups, one of the groups would cooperate with the British and another with the Communists. All other local groups would stay neutral. The two cooperating groups would keep all the others

³⁹ Report of C. N. Maxwell in Anonymous 1896, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Blackledge, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 190, p. 48. Orang Asli often said they wanted to be left alone; see, for example, Follows and Popham 1990, pp. 102-104. This Orang Asli view clearly opposed any imperial mentality of power and control.

⁴¹ Hayward, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 285, p. 22.

⁴² Collings 1949, p. 3.

informed of developments, but no one would inform either of the alien forces about this strategy. If the Communists won the conflict, its cooperating group would defend those who had been friendly with the British, and vice versa if the British won.⁴³

In another incident during the Emergency, a police officer attended a court case in Tapah where an Orang Asli man and wife were on trial for their lives for possessing a shotgun (which they may have received from local Chinese insurgents). The policeman felt sorry for them because the Orang Asli were exploited both by the British and the Communist sides in this messy little war; he thought the lives of the couple with the shotgun were spared but noted that the wife had been wounded in the neck.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, this sympathetic report leaves a lot unsaid. Who, for instance, had wounded the woman and why—the British forces?

When describing Orang Asli housing, the British often used words such as lean-tos, sheds, hovels, or huts, even if the “hut” was 80 feet long!⁴⁵ Because the dwellings were not as permanent as an English cottage, few writers noticed that Orang Asli forest dwellings were made with free materials, readily available; were welcome social retreats from the tropical sun and rain and from tigers; and were—in today’s idiom—biodegradable.⁴⁶ Here is one negative view from a British surveyor in Johore: “They...wander...living in scanty leaf shelters built on rickety poles at a considerable height from the ground. It is not...uncommon to find a dozen men, women, and children in company with a tame monkey or two, a few dogs and cats, innumerable fowls, and perhaps a tame hornbill, living in perfect harmony under the same miserable shelter.”⁴⁷ The surveyor also had difficulty in appreciating a two-day Orang Asli wedding feast, which, as far as he could see, amounted to people “gorging themselves with green corn and sugar obtained from the Cabong palm, thumping tom-toms, and dozing in the intervals.”⁴⁸

Orang Asli houses were even described as constructions “somewhat resembling on a large scale those made by the wild pig.” But if the settlement was near a swamp, the dwellings were often “in the trees or on poles, looking for all the world like small rabbit hutches on stilts.”⁴⁹

The “Jacoons,” we are told:

build their huts in the trees, often at an elevation of...thirty feet. They are reached by means of ladders, up which their old men and women, their children, and even their dogs, learn to climb with ease. It is difficult for the traveller to detect the locality of these huts [except that] on a windy day he will be apprised of their vicinity by hearing strange wailing musical notes...produced by long thick pieces of bamboo, split between the knots so as to resemble the chords of a harp, which they hang on the tops of the highest trees...in such a manner that the wind vibrates the chords...⁵⁰

⁴³ Short 1975.

⁴⁴ Rugg, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 290, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Shuttleworth 1965, p. 31.

⁴⁶ For positive views, see Chapman 1949.

⁴⁷ Lake 1894, p. 286.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁴⁹ Ainsworth 1933, p. 167.

⁵⁰ Cameron 1865, pp. 119-120.

Similarly, one writer was impressed with an ingenious Negrito “tiger scare” (a stream-propelled noise-making device) as well as how careful the Negritos were in spending money in town.⁵¹

Finally, the British deprecated the Orang Asli for not having a religion, or not having a real one. In fact, many British were quite confused about what indigenous religion without books or temples might be. Some said the Orang Asli worshipped the sun, or the moon, or ancestors. One early scholar wrote:

I have not been able to discover that the Sakeis...possess any distinct ideas of the worship of a Deity...[If] those tribes had any [such] idea...they would...have sought to embody their ideas of his personality in rude graven images of some sort, but no such images have...been yet discovered in any of their villages in the Peninsula. It is still more strange that they should...have no...words or ceremonies such as would result from their possessing even the most rudimentary form of religious belief...Such ideas of worship...as the Sakeis possess are confined to the attempt to propitiate by charms the noxious agencies...believed to cause disease, and which readily present themselves to the untutored imagination of the jungleman in the form of malignant spirits.⁵²

However, by the 1960s, a few British writers were more appreciative. McKie wrote, “The Temiar are animists who...are perfectly attuned to their environment and to the spirits which, in their belief, inhabit the trees and the waterfalls and the winds. Animism suits them, and they would regard, and rightly, any attempt to change their beliefs as impertinent.”⁵³ Notably, Orang Asli religion has been well studied by scholars since the 1960s.⁵⁴ Yet many Malaysians today are unaware of Orang Asli spirituality.

How the Orang Asli Regarded the British

Two British employees of the Taiping Museum, Evans and Henderson, once met some Negritos where the muddy Kenering (dirtied by upstream mining) entered the Perak River. Since Evans knew one of the men, he asked to take their photographs and offered them money in return. “The instant response was—How much?” A price was agreed on and they took their photos.⁵⁵ Several museum people also mingled with Orang Asli on a collecting trip to the Cameron Highlands. These “camp followers” willingly captured specimens for which they were paid:

One Sakai, whom we nicknamed Fatty, brought in a couple of frogs in a cardboard box...Robinson took the box and began to open it while Fatty, with a look of consternation, warned him that they would get away. His frown when one did escape was delightful. It said as plainly as anything—‘Now, you fool, I’ve lost 10 cents through your carelessness...’⁵⁶

⁵¹ Henderson, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 139, pp. 91-92. The technological ingenuity of Orang Asli has been underreported.

⁵² Report by W. W. Skeat in Anonymous 1896, p. 8.

⁵³ McKie 1965, p. 110.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Endicott 1979 and Benjamin 1967.

⁵⁵ Henderson ms., op. cit., p. 90.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 135.

One British writer, Weld, asserted that by the 1880s Malay slavery of Orang Asli had already stopped, although in fact it existed for some years after that. He wrote that a man who came down from the hills with his women and children to see him said, “Why, if anybody hurt us nowadays, I should travel till I found a magistrate and your police, and wouldn’t they just make an example of the evildoers!”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Jahai Orang Asli house slaves were legally released from bondage only in 1899, when Siam ceded northern Perak to British rule. Several of these former slaves, who had become Muslims, then ran back to the forest and “cast away Islam.”⁵⁸

Orang Asli did come to look on the British as providers of useful medicines. In the mid-1950s the British Advisor in Pahang was impressed when a group of twenty Orang Asli came out of the forest to the railway line “in a pitiable state” in search of medical help. He had two medical men called. They gave the Orang Asli injections for what was thought to be influenza: “Here indeed was an unexpected fruit from a period of communist emergency troubles in the jungle which had led them to brave coming in for medical assistance rather than perish in isolation, as had previously seemed to be their instinct.”⁵⁹ However, Orang Asli readily accepted European medicines much earlier. On a British journey in the 1930s, “the Temiars showed an extraordinary desire to sample European medicines, and the immediate efficacy of iodine on cuts or...doses of aspirin, calomel or quinine which we distributed caused an almost embarrassing desire for medicines all along our route...”⁶⁰ And in 1935, the Semai of Kuala Denak, Perak, accepted plasmoquine to treat their high levels of malaria—perilous to the children. The local shaman, originally opposed, became “quite friendly and eager to assist” the British effort when he saw its good results.⁶¹

This acceptance of medicines did not mean that Orang Asli abandoned the services of their shamans. Shuttleworth reported observing a shaman in Pahang cure a woman in a coma, “her stomach vastly distended and her skin...the appearance of fish scales...wholly revolting.” The next morning, Shuttleworth admitted, “I was astounded to find the sick woman quite conscious and obviously on the road to recovery.”⁶²

Nor did Orang Asli always take to British views and wishes in other circumstances. When British scientists encountered the “wilder folk at Telom” they were surprised to find them “almost truculent in their demeanor.”⁶³ And when Evans asked a Negrito headman who had just had his hair trimmed if he could collect some of it lying on the ground, he was refused. After considerable thought, the headman explained that if the hair was taken far away “it might take with it some of the soul of the owner and do him injury.” Evans accepted this refusal, “nor did he attempt to get any of the hair clandestinely.”⁶⁴

However, all too often Orang Asli may have thought they could not refuse some British “Tuan” (lord, boss). Stacey recounts how he coveted a man’s blowpipe and, without further thought, offered a sarong in exchange for it:

⁵⁷ Weld 1983, p. 74.

⁵⁸ Annandale and Robinson 1903, p. 28.

⁵⁹ Hayward, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 285, pp. 23-24

⁶⁰ Baker 1933, p. 291.

⁶¹ Nevin 1937, pp. 145-147.

⁶² Shuttleworth 1965, pp. 75-77.

⁶³ Annandale and Robinson 1903, p. 47.

⁶⁴ Henderson, op. cit., p. 91.

“The...Senoi almost involuntarily took the sarong...Then he turned and walked slowly away...Suddenly I felt a biting shame at my action, and I realized both that the Senoi was not pleased with the exchange and that from his point of view he had no choice...I cursed myself...but it was too late to amend...”⁶⁵

British Portraits of Individual Orang Asli Men and Women

Early British stereotypes of Orang Asli were echoed in descriptions of individuals. For example, an Orang Asli headman near the headwaters of the Selama River was described by Maxwell in 1878: “The chief, who gloried in the name of Tuboo, or sugar-cane, was about 5 ft. 3 in. high...His eyes, small and piercing, moved about in a restless, suspicious manner, which nothing could prevent, and in this feature the Malays are wont to recognise a wild man.”⁶⁶ And while Maxwell described an Orang Asli “chief” on the Baling River as “a man of no common intelligence; besides his own language, which is different from any I have ever read of, he spoke Malay and Siamese,” nevertheless Maxwell found he had “that restlessness of the eye which...is so sure a sign of the denizen of the forest.”⁶⁷

According to Kempe, a District Officer in Perak, one old Orang Asli leader and shaman, Tok Lela of the upper Kinta area, was something extraordinary. When Kempe visited Orang Asli near Jalong, Tok Lela danced during a so-called gebak: “naked to the waist, shriveled like an autumn leaf, yet erect, his long white and very dirty beard hanging below his breast.”⁶⁸ Similarly, the “Sakai” headman, Pa Gedong, was a “scraggy creature” who wore “a very dirty loincloth, a...disreputable cap and a blowpipe.” He was “always alert and with an eye to the main chance...and his manner, when he saluted you with a ceremonious ‘Tabek, Tuan,’ was positively regal.”⁶⁹ And a Negrito headman met on an expedition to Lenggong was reported to be typical, “not ashamed to do a bit of cadging, asking us to make a present to the women and children.” Fortunately, the British visitor came with a supply of 10-cent coins.⁷⁰

When a young British visited a Temiar group removed from an embattled area during the Emergency, he wanted to, and did, visit a shaman’s dwelling. He found “a weak-looking thin-limbed man (with TB) crouching...his little shoulders curled round his sharp collar-bone.” This man, called Semayek, had “strange blazing eyes” and his hands were nimble and expressive. He was a leader of dance ceremonies and was “held in awe by the other Temiar.”⁷¹

The commander of Fort Brooke in 1954 described a Temiar headman as having “a small, squat body on bow legs, rather stout for an aborigine, with a belly that sagged over his tatty...loincloth.” His feet were “huge and flat, with stubby splayed toes, and hardened like tyre treads” from walking barefoot all his life. “His ankles were scarred by leech-bites which must have gone septic, leaving large blotches of polished skin. When he coughed and spat...he revealed very few and very black teeth...a jungle

⁶⁵ Stacey 1958, p. 169.

⁶⁶ Maxwell 1878, p. 111.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 113.

⁶⁸ Kempe, op. cit., vol. 11, p. 143.

⁶⁹ Henderson, op. cit., p. 135.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 91.

⁷¹ Stacey 1958, p. 155.

goblin...scratching his belly, his bloodshot eyes roaming round...A grin would split that ugly mug of his, showing those dreadful teeth.”⁷²

Given these generally unflattering descriptions of Orang Asli, would an Orang Asli have described an Englishman in a similar tone? Would an Orang Asli have commented unfavorably on an Englishman’s red beard or bad breath, his clumsiness, his ignorance of what was considered good manners? The answer is probably not. It was not part of the culture.

Sometimes British men were constrained by an individual Orang Asli in some critical way. Here are two incidents, the first involving Evans and the second involving Chapman. Once when Evans was camping near a Negrito group in Ulu Selama, Perak, both Malays and Negritos visited his tent to talk one evening, including Mempelam, the Negrito headman. Some of the Malays were disparaging the Negritos, and Evans tried unsuccessfully to stop them. When the talk turned to a tiger which was prowling around, and the Malays said they feared it, Mempelam, according to Evans, “said in a rather boastful manner—‘Tiger! Who’s afraid of a tiger? Anybody can call one! I’ll call one now, if you like!’” Evans remarked that the Malays kept quiet and so did he, “as I had no gun with me and thought it not impossible that the Negritos might have means of calling tigers of which I did not know.”⁷³

As for Chapman, he remained in Malaya to commit military sabotage during the Japanese occupation, which often required him to ask for help from Orang Asli, such as the headman Pa Kasut:

a little old man with no teeth, a bad cough, and a childlike simple expression—far too old, one would have thought, to be allowed out hunting alone. Later acquaintance modified this view, and though he always seemed frail, he was kindly and had a whimsical sense of humour; but like many of the older Sakai he had an inordinate fear of the Japs and this prevented him helping us as much as he would have liked.⁷⁴

Untypical Orang Asli were also described. A man at Tanah Sa’ratus near Damansara in Selangor was described as a lunatic. He was banished by his co-villagers to a nearby hut where he lived alone, never leaving it or going into the forest: “He could not go near a fire without burning himself, placing his hands into the flames, hence his banishment. He was well cared for, the other members of the tribe feeding him.”⁷⁵ Quite likely this man had epilepsy, known to occur in Orang Asli. For example, a “Seman” Orang Asli near Grik, reported to be imbecile and epileptic, had a “frightfully scared” body and limbs caused by burns from falling into the hearth fire.⁷⁶

Another official, Knocker, had an amusing view of an Orang Asli leader near Seremban. This Jinang was a cheerful man who managed to get himself a musket and a complete set of Chinese clothes by pretending to rid a Chinese tin mine of evil spirits—

⁷² Follows and Popham 1990, p. 89.

⁷³ Evans 1937, p. 34.

⁷⁴ Chapman 1949, p. 253.

⁷⁵ Report of W. D. Scott in Anonymous 1896, pp. 20-21.

⁷⁶ Annandale and Robinson 1903, p. 11.

by lighting fire crackers, chanting mumbo jumbo, and singing nonsensical songs. His “show” convinced the Chinese that he was an effective magician.⁷⁷

Baker also provided a positive portrait. He described the Temiar leader To’ Jagor as “a fine upstanding man who carries his years easily” and who had traveled widely when young and spoke Malay, but who for many years had not left his home area on the Sungei Ber where he kept “a strict standard of fatherly discipline.” Baker was also taken with To’ Jagor’s two wives, “one young and comely who travels with him and one older woman, tall and stately, with a great natural sense of dignity who looks after the long house in his absence.”⁷⁸

Hervey, too, wrote approvingly of Orang Asli. On a trip to the Endau area, he met the leader of the largest Jakun village on the Sembrong: “He is a fine looking man, powerfully built, very dark, and speaks Malay, like the rest of his race, with a very broad accent, but there is something pleasing in their intonation, which seems...to suggest their natural simplicity of character. He promised me men with a smaller jalor [boat] to take me further up the stream...Later, I visited him in his own house, a good-sized one...”⁷⁹

Hervey likewise approved of a Jakun who was accompanying him:

the dexterous Agoi, a *Jakun* to whose skill we owed most of the game and fish procured on our way up the river. During the evening a very unpleasant low sound was heard...which some of the Malays thought came from an approaching elephant...but the *Jakuns* knew better; it was a frog giving vent to his feelings...Agoi went and secured him...The noise this species makes is almost unearthly...The *Jakuns* say it is a weather guide.⁸⁰

Shuttleworth met an old Orang Asli on the Sungai Lipis with one side of his face normal and the other “one great, gaping hole, exposing all his teeth, tongue and palate.” The man said that when he was young he had dozed off in the forest one day, “and awoke to find his face in the jaws of a tiger. He screamed for help, and his father arrived and killed the tiger with a *beliong*...” The man’s deformity had not made him a social outcast. He was a happy, contented man with a grown son and a wife—“a situation hardly thinkable in the civilized world.”⁸¹

Then there was Maroi, a highly respected leader and shaman, or *putau*, of the Che Wong group. Ogilvie met him in 1938 in the hills near Gunong Benom, when Maroi was already elderly: “Though his legs would not support him on account of arthritis in his last few years, his mind and sight were still functioning well. On his death in 1944 he was not buried...but placed in a *sanrong*...a house especially built for the dead.”⁸² Much to Ogilvie’s surprise, in 1948 he happened to meet “a really grand old man with most of his faculties, and many of his teeth” at a high-elevation settlement of Che Wong: “This man, Poen, definitely stated that he is the sire of Maroi. I believe it. Poen cannot be less than ninety-three years of age...The poor old man lost an eye in an accident two months

⁷⁷ Knocker 1924, p. 78.

⁷⁸ Baker 1933, p. 292.

⁷⁹ Hervey 1881, p. 99.

⁸⁰ Ibid, pp. 110-111.

⁸¹ Shuttleworth 1965, p. 134.

⁸² Ogilvie 1949, p. 12.

before I met him. Nevertheless, he walked the best part of two miles up the steep side of Gunong Pallas...to welcome me on my arrival...a wonderful feat of endurance...”⁸³

Not surprisingly, Orang Asli became known as useful to “big game” hunters. One hunter wrote about an Orang Asli named Penglima Garang: “[We] left our camp to hunt for seladang...Penglima Garang ...knew the haunts of the Kenawan herd well, and had been useful to me on many previous occasions. He was a remarkable-looking little man, very thick set, with the widest, thickest, ugliest nose that I have seen on any face.”⁸⁴

Early during British rule in Malaya, slave raiding by Malays on Orang Asli was a fairly common topic of concern. In one writer’s opinion, “The Sakai women seem to have been frequently hunted down like wild beasts, becoming with their children slaves through generation after generation.”⁸⁵ But slavery did become outlawed and by the 20th century other topics came to the fore. Not that they were discussed with Orang Asli women; few of them spoke Malay and fewer still of the British men spoke any Orang Asli language. Communication was therefore limited. The British men mostly just looked.

Among the British commentators on topless dress for Orang Asli women, one seemed to think it scandalous that such attire was worn near towns. Meeting some Semang near Grik, he found them in “quite the correct costume, i.e., the women none to the waist and then a circlet...for a skirt. It was most surprising to find aborigines so near civilization still wearing their ‘uniform.’”⁸⁶ Later he wrote that the “babo,” or women, in the Korbu area go out early in the morning to collect tapioca (cassava) but “they wear little in the way of clothing!”⁸⁷ It is not clear if he was deploring their semi-nudity as wantonness or deploring their lack of warm sweaters.

Also in the Korbu area, the medical aide on an official trip took a group photograph of topless Orang Asli women. His British supervisor wrote, “There was much amusement and a certain amount of chaffing. They were not beauties. Several had daubed their faces with streaks of bright red.”⁸⁸ Later he did allow that the women, during a singing ritual, had “more than a little idea of melody in a primitive sort of way.”⁸⁹ The photographer, Uteh, angered this supervisor later when Uteh was discovered “stowing fowls” with his baggage that he claimed the Orang Asli had given to him. Because Uteh was an educated Malay, he should have known not to take advantage of Orang Asli.⁹⁰

One British official commented on a “young lady” he saw, whose arms were covered with numerous brass armlets. She wore a dozen bead necklaces, also hung with brass rings, fastened with a buckle containing boar’s teeth. Through her nasal septum she had a long porcupine quill. Her face was painted in black and red stripes. “She is a belle,

⁸³ Ogilvie 1948, p. 16.

⁸⁴ Hubback 1905, p. 254.

⁸⁵ McNair 1878, p. 194.

⁸⁶ Kempe, *op. cit.*, vol. 9, p. 17.

⁸⁷ Kempe, *ibid.*, vol. 10, entry dated 5 May, 1931.

⁸⁸ Kempe, *ibid.*, vol. 10, entry dated 1 May, 1931.

⁸⁹ Kempe, *ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 145.

⁹⁰ Kempe, *ibid.*, vol. 10, entry dated 6 May, 1931.

no doubt, and amongst the *orang Sakei*, I dare say irresistible.”⁹¹ In like vein, “Sakai” women were said to use “a skewer thrust through the nose” as a tawdry aid to beauty, but in British eyes the truly beautifying touch was wearing a red hibiscus flower behind the ear. “The effect, however barbaric and bizarre, can be quite charming...”⁹² Chapman recording seeing Orang Asli women who were naked to the waist and unwashed, some having paint-smearred faces, but “a few were comely...with luxuriant black hair tied in a bun held up with a bamboo comb.”⁹³

The British did come to know that Orang Asli women can be useful. As a favor to one British Tuan, who had just received a baby gibbon as a gift in a remote forest, a lactating Orang Asli woman offered to nurse the gibbon while the official was off on a short expedition.⁹⁴

The women were also resourceful and energetic. Shuttleworth observed a Jakun wife who, upon hearing faint dog barks:

suddenly jumped into a little dug-out canoe and poled into the center of the river. With amazing dexterity and balance she held the frail-looking craft steady in midstream, by manipulating a long bamboo pole with one hand, whilst grasping a long trident-like spear in the other...[She knew] her husband, with the aid of dogs, was driving a mouse deer towards the river...[Soon] a *pelandok* broke from the thick undergrowth and plunged into the river...[It] surfaced about one hundred yards upstream and commenced to make good headway against the current. Some quick work with the pole and the woman was after it, followed by the dogs...she made no mistake and speared it in the back...hailed it into the boat and cut its throat. The dogs, wet and tired, crawled aboard, sniffed curiously at the dead animal, then took no further interest in it...⁹⁵

The British used Orang Asli women as coolies on their expeditions if few men were available. In 1924 near the Cameron Highlands, the coolies “looked a very scratch lot—all Sakai—including one old lady who was a friend from the previous trip, two small girls and a small boy...” Likewise, the next year, “Our coolies filled us with dismay—half of them were women and some of these were carrying small babies.” One headman’s wife, although pregnant, trekked along carrying her infant in a sarong sling plus a heavy suitcase on her back when her husband passed it to her, complaining of a sore spine. But the British found out that their worry about these coolies was unfounded: “they never faltered...nor were they in any way exhausted...”⁹⁶

In 1954 Orang Asli women helped load and unload the supply aircraft that serviced Fort Shean, one of the remote posts set up to insulate the Orang Asli from local Communist insurgents. A fort visitor wrote that one woman hoisting a load on her back, “seriously incommoding the one-year-old slung there in a cloth. He ducked his head out of the way, peered round his mother and seemed to take the liveliest interest in the

⁹¹ Swettenham 1880, p. 59. T. Hubback got some camera-shy Semang women in the national park to pose for his camera by calling out, “Let all the ugly women stay away and only the pretty ones come forward” (Gulick and Hawkins 1958, p. 89).

⁹² Banner 1929, pp. 27-28.

⁹³ Chapman 1949, p. 251.

⁹⁴ Knocker 1924, p. 32.

⁹⁵ Shuttleworth 1965, pp. 69-70.

⁹⁶ Henderson, op. cit., pp. 158 and 203-204.

proceedings.”⁹⁷ But some women at these forts were wary of outsiders. One visiting doctor found that most Jahai women kept their distance and rarely agreed to a physical examination or a laboratory test.⁹⁸

Overloaded Orang Asli women on treks may have been an exception. On a journey through Pahang using Temiar porters, the British were pleased to see “how carefully the Temiars spared their women: a pregnant woman carried nothing beyond her own burden and the other women had only the lightest loads...”⁹⁹

One British woman wrote about the Orang Asli, based on her experience with them in the 1950s, but said little about the women except that those around forest outposts should wear brassieres for modesty’s sake.¹⁰⁰ She did describe a fourteen-year old Semai girl, with a mouthful of both retained baby teeth and new adult teeth, who stoically let a British doctor named Jim pull the baby teeth out—without an anesthetic: “The girl rinsed out her mouth with the proffered disinfectant, beamed through watery eyes at Jim, removed her hand from mine, thus releasing me from a vice-like grip, took the collection of bloody...teeth and with a cigarette from my tin removed herself to open her mouth to all who would look—everyone in fact.”¹⁰¹

According to Evans, the Ulu Kinta “Sakai” had some strange food prohibitions for women and children, including deer, fowl, and one kind of tortoise. Women were said to eschew them in order to preclude their children suffering from convulsions. But laxity seemed common. Evans wrote, “I have seen a woman devouring venison—and I was told that nowadays a woman pleases herself as to whether she observes...the prohibitions. It seems to me that such customs may have...arisen owing to the desire...of the men-folk to reserve the greatest delicacies for themselves.”¹⁰²

Finally, the British did not seem to envision that Orang Asli women could be leaders.¹⁰³ While their writers ignored this subject, the scholar Schebesta wrote of a woman leader of a group of hunter-gatherers: “The peculiarity of this tribe is that their *kepala* or head is a woman, named Isan; I have nowhere heard of a similar state of things.”¹⁰⁴ And Miklucho Maclay, writing about Orang Asli “Rajahs,” noted that, “If such a Rajah dies his widow can claim to be considered as Queen. So I was often told, and it is characteristic of the position of the Orang Sakai women as compared with that of the Malay women.” He also wrote that other Orang Asli groups have leaders called “Battens,” and that this office can also be transferred to the leader’s widow.¹⁰⁵

The one situation in which Orang Asli women were accorded important roles was in health services. During the Emergency era, Bolton built up a large group of medically

⁹⁷ King, op. cit., letter dated 19 March, 1954.

⁹⁸ Kinzie and Kinzie 1966.

⁹⁹ Baker 1933, p. 290.

¹⁰⁰ Leary 1995, pp. 90-91. The donated bras produced an epidemic of skin rashes. Even in the 1980s Temiar women were being urged by government employees to cover their breasts when officials visited. It became a habit for village women, on hearing a motorboat on the river, to hoist their sarongs from their waist to chest level and lower them again when the officials left (Jennings 1995, p. 59).

¹⁰¹ Gouldsbury 1960, p. 42.

¹⁰² Evans 1923, p. 236.

¹⁰³ This failing was widespread under colonial rule (Salemink, 2003, p. 20).

¹⁰⁴ Schebesta 1925, p. 24. He was likely the first scholar to learn an Orang Asli language; he learned Jahai (Schebesta 1939).

¹⁰⁵ Miklucho Maclay 1878, pp. 215 and 216.

trained Orang Asli to staff the Orang Asli hospital at Gombak in Selangor, to staff distant clinics at “forts,” and for related duties. A third of the trainees were women.¹⁰⁶

British Justification for Taking Orang Asli Land

As early as 1834 the idea was current that since the Orang Asli had not “settled down into any form of municipal government” but were fragmented into “wandering villages acknowledging no common head,” too few of them existed on the peninsula to “entitle” them to be considered its legal proprietors.¹⁰⁷

By the 1860s, someone was considering putting a sanitarium, or rest-house, for Europeans on a hill called “Gunong Poolai,” which towered over the Johore rainforest. It was only thirty miles away from all the “civilized conveniences” of Singapore and “nobody was making any use of it...its paths...only traversed by the *jakun* and the tiger.”¹⁰⁸ While this argument obviously ignored Orang Asli territorial rights, one writer in the same decade was concerned enough about the fate of the Orang Asli to assert that “the benignity of the British Government” in Malaya would secure their “protection from oppression and imposition.”¹⁰⁹

Also in the 19th century, many British subscribed to the theory of an “infinite jungle.” They regarded the Orang Asli as the “lords paramount” of the interior who had forsaken the coast due to Malay encroachment. However, since the rainforest grew so vigorously, it was almost an insuperable barrier to “the progress of cultivation,” thus ensuring that it would always provide a haven and subsistence base for Orang Asli.¹¹⁰

In return for the slightest exertion, the soil will yield an abundant supply of fruit. Indeed the exertions of the fathers frequently provide for the wants of the children; for many fruit-trees, such as the durian, the jack, and the mango, do not mature for ten or twenty years, and then continue bearing for...double or treble that period. A right of property to these trees...[lies] in the children of [the planters], and such right is respected with punctilious honesty...Great jubilees are held at the...fruit seasons, and the divisions of the tribe, scattered far apart throughout the year, gather together...Their stay lasts as long as any fruit remains on the trees, and in some cases this is fully six weeks...When the fruit-trees are all exhausted the [people] betake themselves once more to the...forest, where they can always obtain a plenteous supply of wild hogs, deer, and birds, besides wholesome roots and berries; the streams, too, afford them abundance of fish.¹¹¹

By the beginning of the 20th century, British writers applauded the British government for not forcing Orang Asli to take out licenses for collecting forest produce or mining tin in their ancestral territories.¹¹² But in 1915, Evans discounted the idea of

¹⁰⁶ Bolton 1973.

¹⁰⁷ Begbie 1834, p. 19. However, according to Semai legend, when the Siamese lived by the Perak River, many became sick and some died because of the poisonous leaves of the jelutong tree. On reporting this to the Siamese king, he ordered them home, decreeing that Perak was to be the country of the aborigines (Dentan 1963).

¹⁰⁸ Thompson 1864, p. 237.

¹⁰⁹ Cameron 1865, p. 125.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-117.

¹¹² Annandale and Robinson, 1903, p. 47.

Orang Asli having home territories, holding that those living in a certain area may not “truly” belong there because groups had been shuffled around in complex ways. This shuffling was due, he said, to the inroads of alien Malays, Chinese, and Siamese, as well as slave raiding by Malays “and the wandering habits of certain tribes, notably in Pahang...”¹¹³ He seems to have overlooked the British as a cause of this shuffling.

Conveniently, the British were prone to a kind of double-think in dealing with Orang Asli whom they were about to eject from their land. As one official wrote in 1901 about the Balau Hills group:

I told them that being sent out...by the Government of the State, it was imperative that I should enquire into their welfare as much as that of the more civilized races. I anticipated that they could be of great assistance to me in carrying out the work with which I had been entrusted. The Government’s programme was to open up the land hereabouts so that the civilized world should enjoy its richness and the “fruits” of the fertile soil. They knew the jungle thoroughly...To do my duties efficiently it was...necessary that I should learn more about this *terra incognita*; and who, better than themselves, was there to teach and guide me? In return, I should certainly study their interests; for, as virtual *raiats*, they had a prior claim to my consideration. Unfortunately it was inevitable that they should clash with the advance of civilization, of which, indeed, I was merely the vanguard. Their domains must be invaded: that could not possibly be avoided. Vast areas of the jungle they loved...must be converted into roads, railways, towns, villages, mines, and plantations. At the same time they would get due compensation for all material losses; and...they must look to me as being stationed here by the Government for that specific purpose. One overwhelming consolation there remained for them: it was a practical impossibility to lay low the whole jungle, especially on the mighty mountain range wherein they had for generations past sought, and found, the sanctuary so much cherished. The State Government whom I represented was very solicitous that no one should suffer injustices, or that no one race of people should be exploited for the benefit of another.¹¹⁴

Soon thereafter, this “Settlement Officer” was detailed to count the Orang Asli fruit trees growing on land earmarked for new tin-mining concessions, so that compensation could be paid through the government to the Orang Asli owners by the miner. (Notably, the payment was for trees, not for land.) Several Orang Asli would accompany him on such counting trips to identify the trees and guide him through the forest. Just before one of these trips he came down with fever, but to his surprise the Orang Asli soon provided him with an accurate count of their trees. They had blazed each fruit tree in their forest area and counted it by making a notch in a long stick, using one side for durian trees—60 in all—and the other for mangosteen trees—nine of them. “The durian trees were too many for them...to total up...Yet when told there were 60 they apparently grasped what that number meant...”¹¹⁵

Twenty years later, this same official returned to the area only to discover that the local Orang Asli had all disappeared, reportedly moving to Selangor, as there was little

¹¹³ Evans 1915, pp. 85-86.

¹¹⁴ Knocker 1924, pp. 52-53.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

rainforest left in the state of Negri Sembilan. They had been driven out by “an invincible civilization” in the form of “usurping rubber plantations.”¹¹⁶

The Orang Asli even had to buy the right to collect fruit from their own fruit trees, with ten percent of the price they paid going to the British as “forest revenue.”¹¹⁷ In addition, British forestry officers repeatedly opposed attempts by other officials to move Orang Asli groups from an area coveted for commercial use and into a forest reserve. In one case, Bukit Tinggi Forest Reserve was threatened, but the forester argued for moving the Orang Asli to “State Land”—usually land far less desirable, such as swamps or denuded areas of old tin-tailing.¹¹⁸

Some Orang Asli, however, were uneasily tolerated in their traditional territory.¹¹⁹ After Trolak was declared a Forest Reserve, it was observed in 1911 that Orang Asli were still living in its eastern part: “Their small clearings are so far practically insignificant [but] this should be noted and annually reported on. From such small beginnings rights may develop which become a serious matter in a few generations.”¹²⁰

Trolak was already a problem for the British in the 1930s. The Orang Asli living there had evidently accepted “a small amount of discipline” and had agreed not to fell any more forest to make farm fields unless the District Forest Officer approved. According to one official, “Once felling has taken place, the damage is done and punishment would not help...as, having no money, [the Orang Asli] cannot be fined and imprisonment would only tend to frighten and drive them further afield, where they could do untold damage before they were discovered. All over the country, the Sakais [are] retiring further and further back from the fertile plains as a result of the opening up of land by immigrants, and...little plains land remains for them on which to find a livelihood.” He optimistically noted that, “Within the reserve they have protection, no one can come and settle there, no one can trespass or disturb them.”¹²¹ Presumably forestry department “discipline” was not a disturbing factor.

Likewise, the farm fields in the Sakai Reserve at Batang Kali were inspected in 1930 to see whether the Temuan should be permitted to stay there. Since they seemed to understand that their occupation was conditional on British approval and since they were not cultivating all the land available, they were allowed to remain there another year.¹²²

On a broader scale, the area explored by a British group between Kuala Betis and Gua Musang in the 1930s, which depended on the ready help of Temiar porters and leaders, was coveted by the explorers for British usage—200 square miles in this area being deemed suitable for “immediate agricultural development.”¹²³ At the same time, a

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 57-58.

¹¹⁷ Fyfe, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 168/1, diary entry dated 14th August, 1931. A fuller discussion of this durian auction scheme is given by the acting Assistant District Officer for Kuala Lumpur in Anonymous 1896. This officer noted, on p. 2, that many of the Orang Asli “appeared to resent this interference in their affairs.” See also Harper 1997, p. 8.

¹¹⁸ Fyfe, MSS Ind. Ocn. s.168/6, diary entry dated 9th April, 1957.

¹¹⁹ For restricted rights in Perak forest reserves, see Leary 1995, p. 26.

¹²⁰ Chipp, MSS Brit. Emp. s. 311(4), entry dated 8 Feb., 1911. Timber was a “cash cow” for the British, see Harper 1997.

¹²¹ Barnard 1933, p. 18.

¹²² Fyfe, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 168/1, diary entry dated 23rd December, 1930.

¹²³ Baker 1933, p. 295.

virtuous hope was professed that “adequate reserves between Kuala Cherus and the upper ridges of the Ber” would be set aside by the British government for Temiar use.¹²⁴

In another instance, the son of a Semai headman in Ulu Behrang stated in a magistrate’s court that he employed some Chinese to clear Semai land, “implying that he had a right both to clear jungle and to employ outside labour to do it.”¹²⁵ The Chinese were prosecuted by the Assistant District Officer and the headman was warned that he himself might have been prosecuted. The same officer told the Semai at Sungai Bil that they could have a month to “think over” moving to the north side of the river, since Cluny Estate wanted the land they were occupying on the south side. The Semai, long established on the south side, said they had no wish to move.¹²⁶

Orang Asli land rights were likewise ignored for hunter-gatherer groups, such as the so-called Semang.¹²⁷ In 1946 they were reported “to do little work except extract jungle produce, for which they find a limited market in Kroh Township...They spend much of their time loafing about in shop houses, and in spite of their picturesqueness make no great contribution to the life of the community. Efforts will be made in 1949 to get them permanently settled somewhere...”¹²⁸ Nevertheless, some Orang Asli were not in “outside” areas willingly. They were kept in semi-slavery in or near Malay villages to perform menial tasks and odd jobs, for a pittance of daily rations.¹²⁹

Occasionally, British officials realized that if Orang Asli were given land titles, this would benefit both them and the District Land Officers. One official in Selangor suggested that every Orang Asli owning any kind of land, whether an orchard, a wet-rice field, or a hill-rice field:

Be provided with a title, similar to that given to ordinary natives...and that instead of being called on to pay an annual quit-rent, they be allowed it free of rent, on the payment of the fee of \$1 for registration...[The] District Land Officer...often has claims made for small durian dusuns [orchards] situated within the limits of large areas of land applied...and taken for agricultural purposes...and which often cause endless trouble...because no system of registration of such claims exists. Such a system of registration would not...be considered a vexatious...one by the Sakeis, generally, as they mostly own durian dusuns which pay them handsomely...¹³⁰

This view was, however, contradicted by another Selangor official. He felt that while Orang Asli could be induced to settle down:

as soon as he settles he ceases to be a Sakei and loses his...most laudable characteristics. His durian orchards might conceivably (at an almost inconceivable expense) be surveyed and reserved to him throughout the State, but he could not be confined to their limits...To reserve a tract of jungle for their

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 295.

¹²⁵ Dodwell, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 193, p. 3; Temiar also employed outside labor (Benjamin 1968, p. 11).

¹²⁶ Dodwell, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 224, diary entry dated 14th September, 1948.

¹²⁷ Even in 1948 several Malayan states still regarded most Orang Asli as nomadic, thus not needing a “Sakai reserve” (Leary 1995, pp. 31-32).

¹²⁸ Blake, MSS Ind. Ocn. s. 276, p. 134.

¹²⁹ Williams-Hunt 1952, pp. 46-47.

¹³⁰ Report by W. W. Douglas in Anonymous 1896, pp. 3-4.

especial use would certainly be ineffectual unless the tract were more extensive than the Government would be ready to grant...¹³¹

The final word on land goes to Ogilvie, the friend of the Chewong, who live to this day amid mountains in Pahang, especially in the Krau Game Reserve: “Could not this home of theirs be made inviolable for all time, whether or not rich mineral deposits may be found there in some distant age? Surely they could be given sole rights [to] what is undoubtedly their own.”¹³²

The Lingering Colonial Effects on Orang Asli¹³³

In 1954 one official considered that the strife of the Emergency had put Orang Asli into “a hard world,” and he hoped that “wise and kindly people” would be put in charge of them to prepare their way ahead.¹³⁴ However, the Orang Asli had been put into a hard world much earlier, when the British land-grab started in Malaya and even before that, when Asian immigrants and foreign epidemics arrived—not to mention the Japanese occupation. Also, this official’s “wise and kindly people” excluded any Orang Asli, although wise and kindly Orang Asli were and are quite common. That is, Orang Asli were to be treated like children indefinitely, it would seem, not being proper adults. But who were British officials, or their successors in independent Malaysia, to assume that they knew the answers for Orang Asli survival and happiness?

Among the wise and kindly Orang Asli are women. Another lingering colonial effect has been that Orang Asli women are not recognized by the Malaysian government as leaders: headmen are appointed, not headwomen.

But the largest lingering colonial effect on Orang Asli today is their condition of virtual landlessness—a condition not imposed on others in West Malaysia. They are still considered “tenants-at-will” in law. One group or another is dispossessed of their ancestral lands almost weekly, to make way for dams, golf courses, roads, timber concessions, gambling casinos, airports, or whatever else rich and powerful outsiders wish to use their land for. The Orang Asli encounter the past in the painful present.

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¹³¹ Skeat in Anonymous 1896, p. 17.

¹³² Ogilvie 1948, p. 21.

¹³³ Leary 1995: Chapter 6 covers many events injurious to Orang Asli after independence in 1957.

¹³⁴ King, op. cit.

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