

A CONCLUSION AND A BEGINNING

In tracing their history, it is evident that the Orang Asli have never lived in isolation, nor have they always been a marginal group divorced from an imagined mainstream. On the contrary, Orang Asli communities, especially in Southern Peninsular Malaysia, were well established before the reign of the Malay sultans, with Orang Laut groups even providing critical military and economic support during the formation of the Johore and Malacca Sultanates. That the Orang Asli were part of the emerging Malay states can also be gleaned from the customary practices in some states, e.g. in Negri Sembilan and Pahang, where it was necessary to assert genealogical links with Orang Asli ancestry to legitimise rule. Today, however, the once politically autonomous and independent people – “an extremely proud people who would not submit to control” (Newbold 1839: 397) – are but a pale likeness of their ancestors. The Orang Asli, in fact, rank among the most marginalized of Malaysians today.

The study traced the Orang Asli's marginalization through an analysis of how, and why, others came to control the Orang Asli. Clearly, Orang Asli history has been a history of justifications: depending on how others perceived the Orang Asli, or coveted Orang Asli traditional territories and resources, they dealt with the Orang Asli accordingly. Thus, when their skills and knowledge of the forest

and seas made the Orang Asli the best people to extract natural resources (such as resins, camphor, *tripang*), their labour was exploited as independent producers and traders. But when their physical labour *per se* was required, and not their skills or knowledge, they were subjected to slavery.

Similarly, when it was expedient to enter into political alliances with Orang Asli for control over their territories, Malay chieftains did so, often claiming Orang Asli ancestry or by entering into power-sharing alliances (e.g. by bestowing of nobility titles on the Orang Asli). The British colonialists also sought control over Orang Asli traditional territories, and initially did so by simply ignoring their existence as a people. Instead, they regarded the Orang Asli as non-humans or primitives, requiring paternalistic guardianship as dependents or wards of the state. Hence, colonial policy towards the Orang Asli, especially during the Emergency, was one of paternalistic protection of the Orang Asli from external influence – quite the opposite of the current policy of integration/assimilation into the mainstream. It is contended that the policies and programmes of the Malaysian nation state that produce the greatest impact on the Orang Asli situation today.

The Nation State and the Orang Asli

The Malaysian nation state does not recognise the Orang Asli as a people. For to do so, would be to allow the Orang Asli exercise autonomy in their traditional territories. And allowing Orang Asli such autonomy, however limited, has both political and economic implications for the state.

Politically, this would be tantamount to the state conceding to the Orang Asli the right to self-determination. That is to say, the state acknowledges the right of the Orang Asli to own and manage their own territories and to lead separate lives from the dominant society, if they should choose to do so. Hence, to remove any suggestion that the state is conceding to Orang Asli calls for autonomy, it advanced the notion of 'mainstream'. More specifically for the Orang Asli, this translates into a policy of integration/assimilation into the mainstream. Maintaining the concept of a mainstream has been politically important insofar as the state has been able to assert its logic of a single nationality, and hence its legitimacy to exercise control over its citizens.

Economically, since Orang Asli land is no longer considered a 'frontier' resource, such territories are now a much sought-after factor-of-production, especially if they can be obtained cheap. Consequently, the appropriation of Orang Asli traditional territories and resources became an important project of the state for economic reasons as well. Not surprisingly, Orang Asli claims to their traditional territories have been rejected by the state on the grounds that, among others, the Orang Asli were opportunistically motivated, and the quantity of land requested was excessive.

Thus, as the claims to Orang Asli autonomy challenged the state's own political and economic authority over a people and a territory, its object is to reduce, if not eliminate altogether, any semblance of Orang Asli local autonomy.

Undermining Autonomy

A reduction in local autonomy was, in fact, the key instrument for the state to effect control over the Orang Asli and their traditional territories. Accordingly, policies and programmes for Orang Asli development were markedly devoid of autonomy-augmenting objectives. On the contrary, in pursuit of the goal of reducing Orang Asli autonomy, the state instituted actions that hinted of internal colonialism – including administrative control, dispossession (of land and other resources), and forced or induced assimilation.

However, because the Orang Asli insist on remaining in their traditional territories, the state could not appropriate these territories. Further, because this insistence was, in the first case, based on aspirations of sustaining cultural identity and political autonomy, rather than meeting the need for economic and physical sustenance, it had to remove Orang Asli attachment to the land so that the state can appropriate these territories. This could only be achieved by forcibly removing or relocating them, or by instituting strategies and programmes aimed at their de-culturalisation. Invariably, both objectives were achieved under the guise of integration/assimilation with the mainstream *society*.

Ironically, in reinforcing the concept of the state and its imagined mainstream among the Orang Asli, a ‘politics of difference’ evolved. The Orang Asli then became locked in a dynamic struggle with the wider society – over their lives and control of their traditional territories and resources.

with the mainstream society was further reinforced, with emphasis on rejecting Orang Asli identity and politics.

Ensuing state actions – including appropriation of traditional territories by administrative fiat, exploitation of natural resources through privatisation deals, or programmes aimed at converting Orang Asli to the official religion – all aimed at crushing Orang Asli autonomy. Inadvertently, the Orang Asli experienced further social stress as various policies and programmes were implemented. This, however, galvanised them to use their new sense of ethnic difference to assert their position. Hence, the very attempt at bringing the Orang Asli into the mainstream caused them to distance themselves from that mainstream and create their own politics.

Yet, in order for the Orang Asli to escape being categorised as ‘just another ethnic minority’ by the state, and in order to promote and protect their claims for special status and rights within the national society, the Orang Asli had to simultaneously make themselves both like, and unlike, the mainstream they dealt with. On one level, they had to constantly demonstrate the fundamental cultural differences between themselves and the majority population. On another, they wanted to be treated as equals with the state on one side and themselves, as a people, on the other.

The need to negotiate with the state, however, raised problems of Orang Asli representation – both in the content of that representation and in deciding who should be accorded the right to such representation.

Orang Asli Organisations and Representivity

The Orang Asli were initially a collection of diffuse local communities, each with their own locus of cultural identity, ethnic sanctuary, and economic opportunity. As mentioned earlier, shared experiences and common causes vis-à-vis the nation state have helped promote a collective awareness among the Orang Asli.

However, to achieve some degree of mobilisation, Orang Asli leaders, mainly in POASM, had to transform apathy – or reluctance to be activist – by creating a vision around which Orang Asli could identify or organise politically. This vision, however, has not been informed by ideological argument, but rather by ethnic self-affirmation in the defence of economic interests. This gave rise to problems of representation because Orang Asli aspirations and wants were frequently as varied as the number of Orang Asli individuals and organisations vying for the same resources for economic gain. Some Orang Asli, for example, were willing to forsake communally-held ancestral territories in exchange for promises of individual land titles in new, often smaller, locations merely because these titled lots afforded greater opportunities for material advancement (such as the possibility of using the land to obtain bank loans).

In pursuit of Orang Asli political and economic development, therefore, several Orang Asli representative organisations and institutions have emerged. Apart from POASM, there has been the institution of the Orang Asli Senator and various welfare organisations, as well as business enterprises and cooperatives, each claiming to represent Orang Asli interests and constituents.

However, to be truly representative as an Orang Asli organisation, it had to be seen as representing the views, needs and aspirations of the Orang Asli to the government and the public. To be able to do this, it has to be *authorised* as a reliable vehicle of communication and has to be held *accountable* to its constituents. It also has to be *representative* of the Orang Asli in its social composition, as well as *responsive*, by providing services needed or expected by the constituency.

No single organisation or institution has met all these criteria. On the contrary, the variety of claims to Orang Asli representation has provided the state with a new resource for their control: the state was now able to assign, or deny, recognition to the claim of Orang Asli representation. That is, the state was now able to assign, or deny, political representivity to an Orang Asli entity of its own choosing, and as opportune. For example, although POASM was more representative than, say, the JHEOA or the various Orang Asli business-cooperatives, it was accorded less political representivity by the state.

In fact, frequently, as has been shown, Orang Asli organisations and institutions that enjoyed political representivity were those mainly motivated by economic

gain, and not fully accountable to the community they claimed to represent. Invariably, in pursuit of their objectives, the impact on the Orang Asli has been further appropriation and exploitation of their traditional territories and resources.

Moreover, the need for Orang Asli representation and the use of representivity as a political resource by the state, attest to the gaps between the two entities – to the politics of difference that has surfaced in Orang Asli-state relations.

Further, while it is commonly held that without representivity, native organisations would not be able to persuade governments to adopt the policies they prefer, it is a fallacy to assume, in the first place, that only the state should wield the power to assign, or deny, representivity.

Thus, if the Orang Asli are to reassert their autonomy, to aspire towards genuine development, they must reclaim for themselves the right to assign representivity, and not to relegate that power to an external entity. But first, Orang Asli must define, and agree, on what they aspire to. That is to say, there is a need to go beyond demands for mere economic distributive justice.

The 'New' Development

Rist (1999: 243-4) contends all the 'development' measures of the last few decades have resulted in material and cultural expropriation. The failure has been so complete that it would be futile to want to go on as before as this would only

lead to an increase in poverty and inequality. Hence, the main task is to restore the political, economic and social autonomy of marginalized societies. No more can be expected of the state, except that it should refrain from stifling the initiatives of grassroot groups.

This is true in the case of the Orang Asli. The single strength that their traditional societies had was the integration of social, political and economic aspects of their societies. Rapid change in any one area was avoided as it could adversely affect the whole and weaken the links that bound their society together. On the contrary, under the current model of development, economic growth was seen as an end in itself, divorced from, and often impacting upon, Orang Asli politics and culture.

Nevertheless, development has indeed become a problem of inequitable distribution for the Orang Asli. It has also sowed the seeds of ethnic discontent and difference. Thus, for Orang Asli societies to become culturally and materially healthy again, a corrective to development is needed. However, the modern state has been so successful in limiting access to plausible alternatives to the way we live, that we seem to have lost all imaginative capacity to entertain serious alternatives to the less-than-satisfactory models we have now.¹

¹ Nevertheless, several writers (e.g. Beauclerk, Narby and Townsend (1988), Kothari (1989), Pandit Nehru (cited in Pachauri, 1984), Barnaby (1992) and Coleman (1995)) have suggested that for an alternative model of development, a few basic elements must feature. For one, the development should take into account both the interests and the expertise of those in the areas to be developed, ensuring at the same time that people develop along lines of their own genius without any imposition from outside. Also, the results of development programmes should be judged by the quality of human life that is evolved, not by economic statistics. Steps must also be taken to arouse awareness, form

In any case, an important first step for genuine Orang Asli development is for them to regain control over their lives – that is, to regain autonomy and self-determination. For the purpose of immediacy and strategy, this should logically translate into first regaining ownership and control over their traditional territories. This is not to deny that other issues – such as the threat of assimilation or the erosion of political autonomy – are less significant. On the contrary, the issue of Orang Asli land rights is but the most visible and deeply-felt manifestation of the principal problem facing the Orang Asli: the inability or, worse, refusal of the state to recognise the Orang Asli as a distinct people. For only when such recognition is denied, can policies of assimilation, or appropriation of their traditional territories, for example, be justified.

Using the ‘land rights’ problem as a strategy for Orang Asli political mobilisation is also sensible because the issue is deeply felt among the communities, is easily identifiable, and is the source of much social stress for the Orang Asli. However, if Orang Asli are to effectively plan, implement and control their own future, political representation is the key. As many Orang Asli now realise, without political representation, they will find themselves in a weak position, vulnerable to social, economic and legal abuse. Nevertheless, political representation can only be effective if such representation is sustained by broad-based support from the community, and a willingness to endure initial setbacks.

local organisations, and meet social and economic needs – without the creation of dependence. The participation of women should also be ensured.

Achieving the New Development

Orang Asli have applied all manner of non-confrontational methods – including dialogue, lobbying, workshops, and use of the media – to persuade the state to recognise them as a people and, accordingly, recognise their right to manage their traditional territories and their lives. However, at least in the current context, it is inconceivable that the state will concede any level of autonomy or self-determination to the Orang Asli as it would mean having the state relinquish control over some of its territory and bequeathing to the Orang Asli an aspect of its sovereignty.

The challenge, therefore, is for Orang Asli to find ways to separate their relations with external systems of expansion and domination. To do so, they must first alter the *status quo* and the way the state perceives them. Some of the measures that need to be taken are discussed below.

Negotiate from a Position of Strength

Without doubt, Orang Asli have to negotiate from a position of strength in order to assert their aspirations for autonomy and self-determination. Their relatively small and diverse population, however, dictates that this should come from political, rather than numeric, strength.

Towards this end, a united and visible Orang Asli polity is a prerequisite. This, however, does not mean that the Orang Asli should have a single representative organisation. Rather, while allowing for disparate representative Orang Asli

organisations and institutions, there should be a commitment to a unified goal or vision.

At the same time, Orang Asli should strive towards getting support and empathy from a wide spectrum of individuals and organisations, as well as seek solidarity with other groups, both local and international, through coalitions and networking. The aim is to assign greater political strength through affiliation and association with others.

Arrest Erosion of Orang Asli Autonomy

Thus far, Orang Asli activism has largely been in response to threats to their traditional territories and resources. The Orang Asli should recognise that other policies and programmes of the state also act to erode, or reject, Orang Asli autonomy. These include policies of integration through regroupment and village-twinning programmes, assimilation through religious conversion, privatisation of Orang Asli development, and submission to a mainstream education system.

The scope of Orang Asli activism should therefore be widened to embrace all activities, programmes, and policies that seek to erode Orang Asli autonomy and self-determination, no matter how remote and inconsequential they appear to be.

Procure Favourable State Policies

While taking measures to check the erosion of Orang Asli autonomy, political representation should also be made to procure favourable state policies or actions

that will promote self-management of Orang Asli communities and traditional territories.

First, the state should be persistently reminded that it is multi-ethnic and that priorities vary accordingly – the Orang Asli, for example, may want to seek quite different futures from the national society.

Second, statutory and constitutional guarantees should be provided for the rights of Orang Asli to legal recognition of their lands and resources, to their communal forms of land-holding, to their socio-political and economic organisation, and to their religions and languages. The Orang Asli, as such, should never be over-administered or overwhelmed with a multiplicity of schemes and policies, all determined from outside the community.

Persistent political representation in pursuing the above goals not only serves to (very slowly, but surely) persuade the state to consider such contentions and demands, but more importantly, debates and mobilisation on these matters help to galvanise broad-based Orang Asli support and solidarity.

Develop an Orang Asli Ideology of Struggle

Orang Asli activism thus far, political or otherwise, has been largely motivated by ethnic self-affirmation in the defence of economic interests. An ideological conception of the Orang Asli 'struggle' is yet to be developed.

In order to avoid potential disagreement over fundamental issues, and to further develop solidarity among various Orang Asli groupings and individuals, an integrated assertion of what constitutes their socio-political programme and vision is needed. The process of developing such an ideology is, in itself, expected to further evolve an informed and united Orang Asli polity.

Reclaim Representivity

It is commonly held that without representivity, Orang Asli organisations would not be able to persuade the state to adopt the policies they prefer. However, Orang Asli representivity is currently a political resource for the state. It can assign, or deny, representivity to Orang Asli or non-Orang Asli organisations, irrespective of whether such organisations actually represented the Orang Asli. For example, because representivity was a state assigned resource, the JHEOA was accorded the representivity that it currently enjoys, and exploits, to great disadvantage and distress for the Orang Asli.

Nevertheless, it is a fallacy to assume that representivity is the sole prerogative of the state. In reality, political representivity of Orang Asli organisations is as much a problem for Orang Asli organisations as it is for the state. It remains, therefore, for the Orang Asli to regain the right to use representivity as a resource for itself. That is, the challenge remains for Orang Asli to turn representivity from a state-assigned status into an Orang Asli-achieved status.

In conclusion, therefore, it should be evident that in the pursuit of a new development, it does not mean that the Orang Asli are rejecting development *per se*. On the contrary, Orang Asli have persistently complained that they have long been deprived of enjoying the fruits of development, although they have not been spared the effects of it. The 'new' development that is advocated is to be different in that the Orang Asli figure prominently in it, and they have a say in it.

The idea, then, as Rist (1999: 244) suggests, is that in spite of 'development', we need to organise and invent new ways of life – between modernisation, with its sufferings but also some advantages, and a tradition from which people may draw inspiration while knowing that it can never be fully revived. More importantly, he adds, all that matters is that each society should regain the right to organise its existence as it sees fit, outside the system now in place, by limiting the role of economics, giving up the accumulation of material goods, encouraging creativity and ensuring that decisions are taken by those directly concerned.

Thus for Orang Asli to become culturally and materially healthy again, they have to work towards the important first step of regaining control over their own lives and over their traditional territories. This requires recognition from the state that they are a separate people. The task at hand for the Orang Asli, therefore, is to recover that recognition.



Plate 1

Jahai youth with malaria fever in Jeli, Kelantan. Living conditions are still very basic, and access to health facilities is a major problem. High mortality rates among the Jahai have been reported. Many Jahai are now in the process of being settled. However, subsistence and cultural needs often find them in the forests for stretches of time.



Plate 2

Semai house in Tapah, Batang Padang District. Made from materials from the forest, these houses do not last very long – about 4 to 5 years at most before the attap begins to give way. They then move to a new site, usually close to the previous site, but always within their traditional area. Nevertheless, these 'movements' have given others grounds to accuse them of still being nomadic.



Plate 3

Semai mother and child. In 1994, 60 per cent of women who died in childbirth were Orang Asli. Also, infant mortality rates are three times the national average. Most causes of deaths, however, are easily preventable and totally unnecessary.



Plate 4

Semai nose-flute player playing for tourists. In the past few years there has been a revivalism of traditional Orang Asli culture of sorts, especially among the youth. In some communities, they maximise their 'revivalism' by catering for tourists interested in their cultures.



Plate 7

Logs removed from the Jahai's traditional territory. The settlement is just behind the logs. The water supply has been disrupted because of the logging road upstream. However, 'permission' had been given, for a small fee, to the loggers by a 'leader' of the community, the headman's son-in-law.



Plate 8

Temuan blockade at radar site for the new KL international airport. The community had already commenced legal action against state encroachment into their land for the construction of the highway to the new airport when the developers quietly started to build a radar site on their land. The Temuans protested. The Selangor State Government then offered RM120,000 as compensation. The Temuans rejected it as it did not come with an acknowledgement that the land was theirs.



Plate 9

Temuan in Bukit Lanjan holding out before the bulldozers. In this JHEOA-brokered deal with a private developer, the compensation for the Orang Asli, although better than in other Orang Asli areas, was far below the market price. In exchange for the 256 of hectares Orang Asli reserve land, the Temuans were given a RM60.9m compensation package. This is only a mere 1.5 per cent of the RM4,000m development cost for the township project, suggesting a 'great' deal for the developers.



Plate 10

Lawyers with Jahai accused in the Jeli case, Kelantan. Here, nine Jahais were charged with culpable homicide for the deaths of three who encroached into their land. Only after three years was the case thrown out of court for lack of evidence and due to police foul-ups. The case, however, attracted wide national attention, and is often cited by other Orang Asli as what can happen if existing conflicts are not resolved amicably and speedily.



Plate 11

POASM 1997 Annual General Meeting. Elections to the Supreme Council are held once every three years. This is a non-election year AGM in session. As of 1997, the POASM Constitution was amended to allow direct membership and to allow all members to attend and vote at AGMs. The previous POASM Constitution, based on a delegate system of representation, was not sufficiently participatory.



Plate 12

POASM village level meeting at Kampung Cluny, Slim River. In 1989-90, there were almost weekly meetings throughout the peninsula, held to introduce POASM and to discuss local problems. Participation at these meetings was always encouraging. The group in the foreground had come from Pahang – after a 2-day trek across the main range, through Pos Bersih.



Plate 13

Long Jidin delivering his last speech as POASM President at the 1994 Annual General Meeting. Here, he announced his decision not to stand for re-election, and that he had established the Orang Asli Chamber of Commerce (DPOASM). The western suit he is wearing was paid for with POASM funds ("Surely, you don't expect POASM leaders to wear T-shirts when meeting Ministers?").



Plate 14

Orang Asli leaders. From left: Arif Embing (Deputy-President, POASM), Ibrahim (Council Member), Itam Wali (Past President and Senator), Majid Suhut (POASM President). These Orang Asli leaders are together on the occasion of the wedding of Itam's daughter in 1997. Top leaders of POASM generally get along well with each other.



Plate 15

Picking up the pieces after demolition of houses by the authorities. Eleven families in Bukit Lanjan were not satisfied with the compensation offered for their land and had engaged lawyers to seek redress. However, without prior warning, a demolition team from the local municipal council swooped down and demolished two Temuan houses in Bukit Lanjan on 9 May 1998, citing powers given in Act 134. During the demolition, a senior JHEOA officer merely stood by and watched.



Plate 16

POASM protest at the Prime Minister's Department. Angered by the high-handed way in which the houses in Bukit Lanjan were demolished, POASM organised a bus load of Orang Asli from Selangor to stage a demonstration at the Prime Minister's Department. Although Orang Asli have staged local-level protests, this was the first time a protest was conducted away from their traditional territory, and one that involved several other communities in solidarity. The event was subsequently perpetuated in a POASM poster.