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## LITERATURE REVIEW AND

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Much of the rationale for the approaches to Orang Asli development has its roots in the development theories of the 1960s and 1970s. Even today, the basic philosophy underlying the current development strategies remains the same, although the specific programmes may differ. As such, in order to help situate the current context of Orang Asli politics and development, a brief discussion of the various development models that continue to influence Orang Asli is given below.[1] The critiques and deliberations of several researchers as to the appropriateness of these policies follow this. A conceptual framework is then developed to help direct the study on Orang Asli politics and development.

### Development, Politics and Indigenous Cultures

The years following World War II saw a succession of theories, each purporting to resolve the problem of underdevelopment in less-developed countries. These theories ranged from the neo-classical quantitative approaches to the structural and articulation models of the neo-Marxist schools. All, however, sought to explain how 'traditional' social formations were transformed into 'modern' ones.

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[1] I have also discussed this in Nicholas (1989).

Development as economic growth was defined as a rapid and sustained rise in real output per head and attendant shifts in technological, demographic and economic characteristics of a society (Easterlin 1968, IV: 395). This had its roots in the neo-classical economics of the late 19th century, which posed the problem of economics as one of scarcity, and was founded on the assumption that individuals, firms and nations are economically rational and will choose always to maximise profits/utility and minimise costs. The insatiable quest for wealth and profit was seen as one of the major motives for economic and social development.

Taylor (1975: 4-7), among others, argued that these axioms caused conventional economics to be turned into an exclusively quantitative analysis. Development was distinguished from underdevelopment by some purely quantitative indicator such as income per head. Subsequently, the developed sector was identified as capitalist while the underdeveloped sector was non-capitalist. The underlying assumption was that the traditional sector lacked initiative and innovation to develop on its own and hence, it had to be developed. The two sectors were considered separate from each other, so that the problem of development could be defined as discovering means to transfer labour and resources from the non-capitalist sector to the capitalist sector – as in the theory of economic dualism.

The most influential of the neo-classical growth economists was W.W. Rostow who argued that all societies had to pass through five stages in their effort to develop. These were: the traditional society, the preconditions for take-off, the take-off itself, the drive to maturity and, ultimately, the age of high mass

consumption (Rostow 1960). Nevertheless, the necessity for every society to pass through the same stages of development in a deterministic and progressive manner has been rightly rejected. The consensus is that even if certain societies were to converge in their development, the processes by which this occurs could differ in critical ways. Balogh (1982: 1) contends that the major weakness of the growth theories was their failure, or refusal, to recognise the actual nature of economic relationships. This was partly due to the restricted view of what was conventionally regarded as economic relationships to the exclusion of other vital influences as well as to the inadmissible method of analysis to which this narrow view gave rise.

By the early 1960s, consequently, it became necessary to re-define the excessively narrow economic interpretation of development to include changes of a social, psychological and political nature. Underdevelopment was now believed to exist because the cultures of the less developed countries were antagonistic to the competitive values of western capitalism (Clements 1980: 13). The new emphasis on development as modernisation then revolved around ways to ensure that 'modern' culture replaced 'traditional' culture so that traditional obstacles to development could be reduced, if not eliminated. This meant inculcating wealth-oriented behaviour and values in individuals, representing an apparent shift from a commodity to a human approach (Mabogunje 1980: 38-9). It saw a new concentration in the provision of educational and health facilities, better housing and recreation and renewed interest in youth and cultural activities. There was also a cultural dimension to it: to be modern meant to endeavour to consume goods and services of the kind usually manufactured in the advanced industrial countries.

The agreeable word 'modern' was frequently used as an euphemism and a substitute for a less agreeable word 'western'.

When the neo-classicalist models were unable to explain why the less developed countries (especially those in Latin America) failed to develop themselves, the structuralist – and later, the dependency – models of development were advanced. The structuralist school explained underdevelopment in terms of the manner in which colonies and neo-colonies of the 19th century had been integrated into the world economy by the advanced capitalist nations. The Dependency theorists contended the appropriation of raw materials and agricultural commodities on extremely favourable terms for the industrial countries was what characterized the underdevelopment process of most of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It was argued that there could be no underdevelopment if there was no development in the first place. Development and underdevelopment were thus seen as two sides of the same coin. As such, the areas which were usually the most backward were those which had been strongly linked to the centre (Frank 1969: 4-15).

Later, in an attempt to demonstrate how insertion into the capitalist world economy has transformed pre-capitalist societies and determined the emergence of new class structures, the mode of production approach and its articulation variant were developed. These models focused strongly on the development of commodity relations at the level of exchange and argued that it was unnecessary to assume that capital must absorb all other modes before being transformed by its internal contradictions. Thus, in certain instances, it would be in the interest of capital to

subordinate or conserve the non-capitalist mode rather than destroy or dissolve it. For instance, Rey (1973) and Meillassoux (1981) argue that by conserving the means of agricultural subsistence in the traditional sector, the labour power so extracted from it can be kept at a low wage. The need to secure raw materials is another reason that is advanced for articulation.

A variant of the articulation model focused on commodity production as a *form* of production rather than on the relations of production through which it was constituted. Bernstein (1979) showed that commodity relations can be intensified in a particular social formation without any sustained development of the productive forces or improvement in any living conditions of large segments of society. This was shown to be true for the case of the Semai in Pahang in the early 1980s (Nicholas 1985b, 1994c).

Nevertheless, despite its well-documented failings and contradictions, the modernization model still remains popular with economists and policy-makers. Clements (1980: 16) suggested that the most possible explanation for the popularity of the modernization theory is that its central assumptions leave the world economic system intact, does not demand any radical restructuring of the domestic economy and can be accommodated to the most conservative political philosophies.

**Orang Asli and Modernisation**

While the debate on the path to development continues, the paradigm adopted by the Malaysian government – at least in its treatment of the Orang Asli – remains largely of the modernization model.[2] Even in the resolution of the Orang Asli problem, the cultural-assimilationist approach (developed along the lines of western colonial expansionism) is adopted. Here, the overriding prescription for developing the Orang Asli lies in their 'cultural transformation' to a politically-defined 'mainstream'. Social change is thus perceived as a natural and uniform process (which in fact is a process of deculturation) with 'modernization' as its final goal. Inadvertently, political, economic and cultural confrontations are concealed in the process (Devalle 1992: 38-9).

These confrontations come about when the state regards the lifestyles of the Orang Asli, and the attachment they have to their territories, as archaic impediments to the progress of modernization. The antagonism is further intensified if the state perceives that it cannot modernize effectively if it were to tolerate indigenous minority cultures in its midst. The fear of not being able to exploit the resources that lie within the territories of the Orang Asli, if access to them is impeded by indigenous minority groups living there, is also of concern to the state (Maybury-Lewis 1996: 39). Invariably, dispossession of indigenous minority peoples from their traditional homelands becomes a project of the state,

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[2] Jimin (1983: 55-6, 113-4) revealed that the government was pursuing Rostow's 'stages of growth' theory in respect of its attempts to 'modernize' the Orang Asli. Mohd. Tap (1990: 501) maintains that this is still the policy of the government. This is sustained by recent official pronunciations in the press and in JHEOA programme summaries.

often under the guise of the altruistic goal of incorporation or assimilation into the national economy and dominant culture.

For the Orang Asli inhabitants of the natural resource areas, capitalism and colonial style exploitation (made presentable as development projects) seek to erode their resource base, forcing them to move out of their traditional homelands and threatening their cultural identity and economic stability and self-reliance. The political system increasingly treats them either in law and order terms or as ethnics and aliens with whom some kind of territorial arrangements must be worked out (Kothari 1989: 34).

Arguments of 'primitiveness' vs. 'development' and 'traditional society' vs. 'progress', further serve to justify the exploitation of natural resources on Orang Asli territories (Devalle 1992: 99). But, as Eder (1993: 3) points out, incorrect stereotypes of tribal societies are scarcely a recent phenomenon in anthropology; those associated with the victims-of-progress model reflect its characteristic preoccupation with the alleged contrast between tribal societies and modern industrial societies. Thus it is often said that tribal cultures are anti-materialistic[3]. This is simply not true about all tribal societies. The traditional societies of the Tolai (Epstein 1968; Salisbury 1970) and the Iban (Sutlive 1978), for example, are said to have fostered such personal traits as individualism and achievement orientation. Predictably, such traits powerfully influenced the respective

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[3] See Bodley 1982: 10-11 for a discussion on this perception.

responses of these peoples to the opportunities for participation in wider socio-economic systems.

However, quite apart from the economic opportunities gained when relating with the wider society, the increased exposure, and vulnerability, of the indigenous community to the overriding interests of the centre means that indigenous communities have more to contend with than they can bargain for. Michael Banton (cited in Armitage 1995: 185-186) distinguishes six orders of race relations, which exist after initial contact. They are:

1. Institutionalized contact, which occurs when two peoples first meet and establish some trading relationships between each other;
2. Acculturation, which occurs when two peoples intermarry and develop institutions with roots in both societies;
3. Domination, which occurs when one society takes control of the other;
4. Paternalism, which occurs when one society governs the other in what it views as being the other's best interest;
5. Integration, which occurs when single institutions are developed and racial or ethnic origin ceases to be recognised; and
6. Pluralism, which occurs when more than one ethnic group is recognised as having a right to continued recognition.

Of these, domination, paternalism, and integration all occur within the general framework of assimilation.

Domination and paternalism, as will be argued in the following chapters, has in fact been the consequence of policies – based on 'integration' – advocated for Orang Asli development. However, like most other minority groups, the Orang

Asli need and want to have their cultural identity protected against the encroachment of the predominant culture, and *not* to be assimilated or integrated into it. Hence, the ability of the Orang Asli to preserve its cultural identity will depend on its ability to define, defend and advocate its form and content. This may include the (re)possession of unusual collective rights and powers and the corresponding restriction of certain individual rights of non-members – communal resolve – within the Orang Asli's traditional territory (cf. Kymlicka 1989, cited in Okin 1991: 126-7).

Indigenous minority cultures – the distinctive way of life of a given people – often form the corner stone of any indigenous political or cultural action. These are what are regularly threatened, even when their lives are not at risk. And it is to their cultures that indigenous minorities often cling, in order to give meaning and dignity to their lives. The point to remember, then, is that indigenous cultures are not extinguished by natural laws but by political processes that are susceptible to human control. Indigenous peoples, then, are victims of the convenient use of power against the relatively powerless (Maybury-Lewis 1996: 8-9, 38).

Political processes do not merely subjugate vulnerable groups such as the Orang Asli. The process by which discrete small-scale societies are incorporated as marginal components of a larger universe is usually also the process by which class formation is started (Swift 1978: 13-14). The commercialization of previously subsistence economies leads to the emergence of new and more

permanent economic and social inequalities; the new institutions and roles that are created to mediate between the small society and the larger often become the institutions of a new class system. As a result, the problem of a marginal society begins to become a problem of class as much as ethnic or cultural identity, although it may continue to be perceived and formulated solely as the latter.

When appealing to their collective historico-cultural identity, the new classes express their concerns and views on issues of culture and deculturation, self-respect, self-determination, the right to linguistic specificity, and on the unequal nature of existing socio-economic politics. This participation is often sought outside existing structures through a process of redefinition of the contents of politics. They take a stand against the inequalities present in their society, against the abuses of the state, and against the hegemonic claims of the ruling sectors (Devalle 1992: 239). Nevertheless, it remains to be examined if such motivations are not merely machinations for more individualistic projects.

Here, it would seem pertinent to focus on the wellsprings of individual behaviour as well. The failure to focus clearly on individuals in situations of change – on their wants and needs, on the demands placed on them – in part explains, as Eder (1993: 6-7) contends, why a large anthropological literature on the impact of modernization on tribal societies, however valuable it is for documentary purposes, has contributed relatively little toward the construction of a more adequate theory of human adaptation and culture change.

Orang Asli development, therefore, has to be studied from a number of contexts: historical, political, and socio-cultural, at the very least. Since the Orang Asli have not developed in isolation, their political and economic relations historically, and their response to interventions into their lives today, are prerequisites for understanding the problem of development of their society. Because the Orang Asli are now incorporated into a modern nation state, their development must also be seen in the context of the goals of the state, especially as they pertain to the control and exploitation of natural resources. Invariably, Orang Asli-state relations form the basis of an Orang Asli identity, where the assertion and manipulation of such identity can be used by both the state and the Orang Asli to serve their own purposes.

## Orang Asli Politics and Development

There is now a considerable amount of literature, both academic and popular, on the Orang Asli, ranging from ethnographic studies, linguistics (although this is still very rudimentary), to an increasing body of work on Orang Asli economics, development, ethnicity and politics. The literature on the Orang Asli, in fact, has moved away from the traditional ethnographic recording to the more 'sensitive' issues of inter-community relations, impact of development and government policies, political representation and 'indigenous struggle', especially in the last five years. For our purposes, however, only a select review of the writings on Orang Asli development and politics, insofar as they pertain to the scope of our study, will be discussed here.

Perhaps the most comprehensive intimation of the official approach towards Orang Asli development is to be found in the CIRDAP report by Jimin (1983).[4] Essentially, for the JHEOA, development is seen as 'growth plus change' – that is not only seeking an increase in the Orang Asli's productive capacity, but also the transformation of their productive capacity (Jimin 1983: 114). Two methods of development approaches were to be used by the Department to achieve such development:

1. Economic upliftment through land development measures and commercial ventures; and
2. Provision of social services (health, education, housing, personal welfare) which should be equitable with that made available to the wider society (Jimin 1983: 114).

However, since these approaches actually reflected the 'economic growth' objectives of the modernization paradigm, one would think that there would be a fair achievement rate since the more subjective elements of development (e.g. autonomy and political representation) were not included in the permutations. However, as was seen in the preceding chapter, the development indicators for the Orang Asli leave much to be desired.

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[4] The report was presented at a conference of the Center for Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific. Although, Jimin, then the Deputy Director-General of the JHEOA, was the principal author, it was based largely on the masters thesis of Mohd. Tap Salleh (1977) entitled 'An integrated planning approach for the development of the Orang Asli'. Mohd. Tap, however, was himself a senior management staff of the JHEOA, and there is therefore no doubt that both these documents represented JHEOA's thinking on development as well as development approaches then.

Mohd. Tap (1990), in a very comprehensive and insightful "examination of the development planning among the rural Orang Asli," concluded that planning and implementation of development programmes have not been the most appropriate in terms of poverty eradication among the Orang Asli. He offered four major reasons for the poor results of the development programmes:

1. Highly centralized planning system of JHEOA;
2. Programmes too generalized and with poor follow-up support;
3. No significant adjustments made to adapt national development policy to the needs of the Orang Asli; and
4. Unmotivated bureaucratic machinery distanced from the community (Mohd. Tap 1990: 504-506).

However, he considered the integration of Orang Asli economies with the national *economy* inevitable and desirable (Mohd. Tap 1990: 124), and called for it be a two-way process, whereby the Orang Asli economies should also benefit from such a relationship. But, then, several researchers had already recognized that an obvious effect of the modernization programmes of the JHEOA was the increased monetization of the Orang Asli economy.

For one, Endicott (1979: 199-202; 1982), had argued that the exposure of the Orang Asli to the money economy (brought about by the construction of highways and the opening up of more forest areas for logging and land development schemes) would lead to ridicule and social pressure on the Orang Asli, a disappearance of some of their customs, and the loss of most of their forest resources and land. Hood (1982) also contended the Orang Asli were being transformed into Malay-type peasants in view of the increased monetization of

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their economy and the continued shortage of land. He also noted that roads, instead of facilitating the Orang Asli, served the capitalistic entrepreneurs even better such that, far from transforming their community into a viable economic entity, the flow of wealth was basically one way and moves even further away from the community to the towns (Hood and Hasan 1982: 26). This is looked upon differently by Baharon (1976: 52) who asserted that the Orang Asli could be said to be integrating into the national economy because, he noted, they were almost dependent on the market economy of the country like the neighbouring peasant communities.

But it became increasingly clear that integrating the Orang Asli into merely the national economy was not quite the ultimate goal of the government. Neither was this the issue facing the Orang Asli. On the contrary, the Orang Asli frequently assert that they are not averse to development or having their economy integrated with the national economy – which to them, is already the case anyway.

Writers on the Orang Asli have instead pointed that the bone of contention of the Orang Asli has been the expressed goal of integrating the Orang Asli with the mainstream *society*. This goal, however, is often interpreted (and substantiated by policy proclamations and actions of government agencies) to mean assimilation with the Malay section of society, with Islamization of the Orang Asli being imperative (Gomes 1994, Nicholas and Williams-Hunt 1996, Dentan *et al.* 1997).

Nevertheless, the issue of Orang Asli integration and assimilation has precipitated varying responses from varying researchers. Sabihah (1989: 92-3) for example, opines that the need for a policy of integration is there because the government feels that the Orang Asli are isolated and closed. She asserts, however, that it is the policy of the government (protection, especially via Act 134) that has caused the Orang Asli to be closed and isolated. On the contrary, she adds, the Orang Asli have had dealings with outsiders, especially the Malays, for generations.

Razha (1995: 2) maintains that the Orang Asli want to assimilate culturally and to develop a Malaysian sense of identity – but not with losing their own cultural diversity. This was the view of Baharon (1973), who opined that the future of the Orang Asli does not depend on being assimilated to any particular ethnic group but rather on an increased adaptation to the Malaysian nation and to the modern world at large. Nevertheless, Hasan (1992: 127) contends that economic development alone does not necessarily result in complete social integration. He adds that in designing social integration programmes, efforts to create attitudes that accept others as equals should be given attention.

Some researchers, however, argue that by integrating into the mainstream or in adopting Islam, the Orang Asli do not lose their identity. Ikram (1997) cites the case of the community in Bawong, Lasah where the Orang Asli there have converted to Islam, and yet, they still maintain their Orang Asli identity. Some see this as the direction the Orang Asli is to take. Hood (1992: 9), for example, contends that, in the final analysis, "the Orang Asli have to decide whether to

remain as Orang Asli (which most of them consider demeaning and something which is the result of a condescending outside social order) with an identity and traditions of their own, or to opt to join a larger community upon whom they put much of their trust."

To some extent, this appears to be the happening. Some Orang Asli, even whole communities, have opted to absorb the identity of the more dominant ethnic group, invariably via conversion to Islam and in adopting Malay cultural forms. Several writers have noted this and contend that this is not necessarily a recent phenomenon. Edo (1997) and Baharon (1976), amongst others, regard Orang Asli-Malay relations in a more positive light and assert that the Orang Asli have been co-relating with Malays on an equal footing. Other writers (e.g. Dentan 1963, Couillard 1984, Gianno 1993), however, suggest that Orang Asli-Malay relations in the past have not been too acrimonious and that separate Orang Asli identities actually came about as a result of such relations.

Nevertheless, despite past relations with other "large" communities, several writers point to the policy of integration and assimilation as the source of many of the current problems facing the Orang Asli. For others, they do not see this policy as a problematic in itself. Take the example of official perception, which Mohd. Tap (1977: 96) says is that "the 'problem' is not seen in the light of majority-minority relations, rather the problem is seen as the relationship between rich and the poor section of the society. It is believed that the notion of

minority versus majority will form a serious obstacle to the solution of the 'problem' which is mainly economic in origin."

Not many will disagree that the policy of integration towards the Orang Asli is actually economic in origin. However, according to Mohd. Tap, the 'economic origin of the problem' stems from the fact that the Orang Asli are socially and economically backward, and that their standard of living needs to be raised. Lim (1997: 145-157) also suggests that the solution to the Orang Asli 'problem' is in equalising their socio-economic variables with the other citizens, thus achieving their social integration with the mainstream.

Other researchers (e.g. Romeli 1996, Williams-Hunt 1996), however, have pointed out that under the guise of development and integration, the appropriation of Orang Asli resources, especially their traditional land, has been the target of the state. As the pace of development increases, they assert, so does the pain of Orang Asli when others compete for their scarce resources. Gomes (1988: 111) contends that such inter-group competition for scarce environmental resources has led to the persistence and genesis of discrete ethnic groups. I have also demonstrated (Nicholas 1997a) that the social stress experienced by the Orang Asli, especially with the loss of their traditional resources, has opened avenues for increased ethnic mapping along generic Orang Asli categories. Orang Asli ethnicity, it would appear, is very much a response of the Orang Asli to their contemporary situation, particularly in the context, as Loh (1993: 168) notes, of the prevalence and dominance of ethnicity in Malaysia's social relations and

be side-stepped by such development, others see it as an opportunity to improve their own socio-economic situation. Precisely for either of these reasons, the Orang Asli have organised themselves along a common identity marker. Dentan *et al* (1997) discuss the issues involved most succinctly, outlining the gradual change of policy from one that concerned their economy to one that sought to control their society. The writers also point to the aspiration of the Orang Asli to have their own leaders and organisations speak up for them. Towards this end, Zawawi Ibrahim (1996: 202) contends that

> The future will push POASM into the political arena, for it is on this terrain of political struggle that some of the crucial issues confronting the Orang Asli must find some real solution.... The problem must be approached in its totality, which therefore necessitates a consideration of the Orang Asli or 'tribal question' not just at the level of the 'economy' but also on the terrains of culture and politics, their historical specificity and their struggle.

Nevertheless, while the political factor is often mentioned in the context of the Orang Asli current struggle, it is rarely examined in sufficient depth to reveal the actual dynamics involved. Jumper (1997:106) for example, in a sympathetic but seriously flawed work (in that many of the facts have not been collaborated or even checked to be accurate), takes up Zawawi's call to include the historical and political context in any study of the future of the Orang Asli. However, it is difficult to agree with him when he argues that "If and when the Orang Asli wholeheartedly join UMNO en masse they will have effectively taken the plunge into a political arena in which dialogue is the medium of exchange, not bullets."

Orang Asli politics, as this study argues, has everything to do with economics and with the contest for resources. Merely entering into the domain of partisan

politics will not resolve the basic rationale for involvement in Orang Asli development. The future of the Orang Asli, as Endicott and Dentan (1994: 6) has stated, is still under dispute and revolves around two diametrically opposed goals: that of assimilation (for the government) and integration (for the Orang Asli). He observes that, despite the government having greater resources in money and coercive powers, the Orang Asli have shown that they have ways to resist. Further, as Orang Asli become educated and politically vocal, the greater will be their strength.

Thus far, however, insufficient work has been done on the history of Orang Asli resistance (or response) to external forces of change. Even less work has been done to examine the mechanics of Orang Asli politics and representation in their effort to claim their perceived birthright. This study hopes to contribute towards reducing the lacuna.

## Conceptual Framework

Based on the observed situation of the Orang Asli, and building on research done by several others, the study aims to situate Orang Asli politics and development in the context of the Malaysian nation state. Conceptually, the study will examine the historical evolution of the Orang Asli as they have emerged in today's polity, addressing issues of social and distributive justice as well as the contest for their traditional resources. The framework will also guide the study into examining the political reaction of the Orang Asli as they respond to the changing demands

imposed on them. The conceptual framework of the study can thus be outlined as follows.

### History and Political-Economy

The Orang Asli have not developed in isolation but rather in contact with the feudal, agriculturalist and modernizing stages of Malaysian history. Far from being stable or static societies, they have continually changed and adapted themselves – and their social organization – to those they came in contact with, either on their own accord or as a result of circumstances foisted on them. Increasingly, the lives of the Orang Asli are becoming inseparable from their relations with external systems of expansion and domination.

Fundamentally, the history of Orang Asli development and their involvement in the nation state, is invariably a history of justifications of the different state systems in each epoch. For example, they could be sought for their labour in one epoch; in another period, for their skills in sourcing various forest resources; and at other times, as compatriots in the political arena.

Only by locating the Orang Asli in their full historical and socio-economic context can their present response to political and economic changes to their lifestyles be understood. For today, as it was in the past, the Orang Asli are *locked in a dynamic struggle with the wider society – and with themselves – over the control of resources they declare as their own, over attempts at denying and*

economic distribution.

They, therefore, find themselves poised against the machinations of the nation state that they now are a part of. It also follows that it is the state – which, by its very nature, is politically organised to assert and maintain control over its citizens – that, in current times, is largely responsible for the ever-changing conditions of Orang Asli society. This has steadily created a need for the Orang Asli to adjust their conceptual schemes to continuously new situations.

And as their present situation vis-a-vis the national society changes, Orang Asli perspectives of history change too. This is so because Orang Asli perspectives comprise a history that is valid in terms of their mode of understanding the past, especially in their relations with outsiders. Invariably, aspects of prior residence, exploitation of their labour, appropriation of their territories and imposition of alien cultures, feature prominently in perspectives of their history.

On the other hand, the underlying interests and influences of present-day politics and economics have no deference to past wrongs that cry to be righted. These 'past wrongs', as it is with Orang Asli history, whether written or in oral tradition, is inescapably political, affecting as most political issues do, their economic position as well. As such, history, from the Orang Asli viewpoint, is not fixed in the past, but is something that is shifting and amenable to intervention and so can be used as a way of reaffirming or even changing the present (cf. Attwood 1989: 143).

It follows then that having a grasp of the past enables us to situate the Orang Asli in the present political context. This is likely to be more so for the Orang Asli themselves than for non-Orang Asli planners, politicians and private opportunists. However, mere knowledge of the past is not a sufficient requisite for social and political reform. But such knowledge can be motivators of processes that can initiate or effect reform.

## *Development and the Contest for Resources*

Developmental policies pursued by the state consciously or unconsciously ignore the economic and social interest of minorities such as the Orang Asli – in part because of the in-built national mechanism of development causing these minorities to be dumped into the informal sector (Nagaraj 1990). National governments, too, have come to regard indigenous peoples such as the Orang Asli as being no different from the other citizen groups, and thereby not warranting of government on different terms.

This situation stems primarily from the refusal of governments to recognise that relations between indigenous peoples and governments revolve largely around the fundamental asymmetry of the parties involved: a people and a state (Dyck 1989: 7). The former simply refers to a community of people, while the latter to a legal and political organization in which indigenous communities are not, simply aggregates of separate individuals belonging to a category, but rather distinct

groups that are usually associated with particular territorial bases. Indeed, the attachment of indigenous peoples to particular localities (or ecological niches) is one of their most notable and politically significant features whereas, as Cohen notes (1982: 7), identification of self with locality is anathema to the logic of modern political-economy.

Governments, generally, in addition to ideological and economic interests, are motivated by a range of specifically short-term political, social, and bureaucratic interests that often lead to policies and programmes whose impacts need to be analyzed rather than assumed (Feit 1989: 389).[5] Furthermore, given specific political and bureaucratic interests, the impact of government interventions – sometimes contradictory and inconsistent in themselves[6], often is to initiate significant changes in the lives of Orang Asli. The changes habitually conform to state interests and frequently produce a pattern of policy failure and local crises accompanied by a growing pattern of local dependency and reduced local autonomy.

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5 For example, Cramb (1989: 2) holds the view that resettlement schemes continue to be a popular form of development project because they serve the interests of politicians, bureaucrats, donor agencies and businessmen. For politicians, land settlement schemes can be used to legitimate those who hold power by demonstrating, in a highly visible fashion, that something is being done to alleviate rural problems. For bureaucrats, such schemes are attractive because they can be planned and developed in 'project units' that are amenable to the algebra of conventional cost-benefit calculations. For donor agencies, land schemes are an 'off-the-shelf' project type that can be speedily planned and funded on a large scale. Finally, commercial interests favour such projects because of their high dependence on external expertise and supplies, opening up profitable opportunities for business.

[6] For example, an early government policy towards the Orang Asli was that they should be protected by the federal government from external encroachments and influence. They were thus herded into forts or reserves in isolation from the rest of the national society. Later, because of changed political and social conditions, governmental policy sought to assimilate the Orang Asli into the wider Malaysian society and economy.

A reduction in local autonomy, nevertheless, is the key instrument for the state to effect control over Orang Asli society and resources. It can be said that Orang Asli have begun to be a target of internal colonialism. This is a state in which the Orang Asli are subjected to administrative control, dispossession of lands and resources, and forced or induced assimilation (Berman 1993: 314). The reasons for the propagation of internal colonialism are varied, but are usually related to areas of control. Ironically – and yet demonstrative of its effectiveness – such domination eventually becomes so successful that it is culturally accepted and becomes a fact of life for the Orang Asli.

Nevertheless, economic growth should not be an end in itself. Neither can economics or politics be separated from culture. For, as opined by Makita (1995: 372, cited in Hood 1997: 59), if the ultimate goal of development and economic growth is the wellbeing and happiness of every member of society, change cannot be imposed from outside or from above. The rate of change must also accommodate human capacities. Above all else, for the health of cultures and the quality of the natural environment, all people must retain their sense of dignity, their sense of self-confidence. They must feel that they have some control over their lives, and over their environment. To achieve greater material productivity at the cost of losing, or depriving someone else of, a satisfying spiritual and social life is not necessarily 'progress'.

But such noble aspirations for Orang Asli development do not coincide with the objectives of the state. It is therefore inconceivable that a modern nation state, especially one founded on capitalist motivations, would willingly concede to traditional ('socialistic') notions of development and progress, firmly rooted around the concept of local autonomy.

The reluctance of the state to accord such autonomy to the Orang Asli has to do, in large part, with the fact that the Orang Asli occupy the last remaining resource frontiers in a nation-state dominated by a profiteering system searching for natural resources.

It is now widely recognised that their traditional lands have provided the Orang Asli with both content and form of their culture. Its environmental destruction – an integral part of modern development – destroy the fabric of Orang Asli societies in an unprecedented manner such that the logical conclusion of such a path of development is deculturisation. Precisely for this reason, the unrestrained state sees this as an effective process to assert control over a people, and remove any remnant of autonomy-aspiring pockets of peoples.

It soon becomes clear to the Orang Asli therefore that the agenda of the state are quite distinct from that of their own.

### *The Creation of Identity and the Role of Ethnicity*

Ironically, as Gray (1995: 42) contends, it is a struggle for resources that is usually the basis on which indigenous peoples such as the Orang Asli become aware of the threat to their future. For as the nation state expands economically and politically, it must by necessity incorporate and dominate the Orang Asli in order to appropriate the resources they lay claim to. In the process, the Orang Asli become marginalised and suffer increasingly greater economic disparity in relation to the 'others'.

The appropriation of Orang Asli resources, particularly their traditional territories becomes an important project of the state for both economic and political reasons. Economically, because Orang Asli lands are no longer considered a 'frontier' resource, such territories are now a much sought-after factor-of-production, especially if they can be obtained at a premium. Politically, having Orang Asli groups exercise autonomy, however limited, over their traditional homelands is tantamount to the state being perceived as conceding some political control and hegemony to the Orang Asli.

Towards this end, the state carefully nurtures the notion of mainstream to serve as a frame of reference to the Orang Asli. Not only is this in keeping with the logic of the nation-state to grow on the social base of a single nationality[7] but advocating an ideology of integrating with the national mainstream allows the state to achieve its dual economic and political objectives of appropriation and

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[7] Which Nagaraj (1990:17) opines is nothing but a motley collection of symbols of the dominant linguistic and religious community.

control. This poses a constant threat to the integrity of the Orang Asli as unique cultural entities as well as to their continued control of their traditional resources. So the Orang Asli usually, and justifiably too, fail to respond to the ideals of the dominant nationality, whereupon they are generally treated with contempt and suspicion.

Invariably, the sustained and often aggressive efforts of the state to assimilate or integrate the Orang Asli with the mainstream generates within the community a deep sense of grievance and injustice. Such commonly felt grievance via-a-vis the attitudes and actions of non-Orang Asli citizens and the government can, and does, provide a powerful means of mobilizing the Orang Asli beyond the local level (cf. Dyck 1992: 18).

Prior to the intervention of the state, for example, their cultural distinctiveness was relative only to other Orang Asli groups. At the time, they perceived these differences as great. Thus, even as the term 'Orang Asli' was introduced by the state in the early 1960s, it did not automatically forge a common identity among the various groups then. However, having the non-Orang Asli and the state as 'adversaries and contraries' helped to forge an Orang Asli identity (Axtell 1981). It became clear, therefore, that in more recent times, the Orang Asli had more in common with each other than they did with others (cf. Barnaby 1992: 39). That is to say, the various Orang Asli groups, in discovering that they faced very much the same problems and from apparently the same sources, began to forge a common identity between themselves. An element of political consciousness soon

developed where Orang Asli indigenousness became a unifying factor.

Indigenousness, it needs to be said, is an attribute of personal and collective identity that emerges only when it is experienced. It is also a self-reflexive notion, which means that people have looked at themselves from the outside, identified the problems that face them, and understand why an assertion of their identity is a prerequisite for their survival (Gray 1995: 40-41). Invariably, therefore, indigenousness is an assertion by people directed against the power of outsiders, focusing primarily on the nation-state.

The state, nevertheless, is aware that indigenousness is a concept of political action as much as it is of semantic reflection. It is also aware that an Orang Asli indigenous movement is immediately a challenge to the state because it argues that the notion of a mainstream society is not sufficient reason to take control out of the hands of a people (Gray 1995: 42). Consequently, in order to protect its interests, the state actively seeks to deny or inhibit the development of Orang Asli indigenousness. The ensuing state actions inadvertently further enhance social stress among the Orang Asli, and in so doing, galvanizes them to use their newly-resurrected ethnic difference as a currency of power in asserting their position. A 'politics of difference' thus emerges in which the Orang Asli declare their entitlement and vie for power based on the qualities that make them different from the others (Steele 1989).

*Identity, Representation and Orang Asli Development*

The first response from Orang Asli individuals, communities or organisations, is likely to be to initiate various forms of indirect and symbolic opposition that speak loudly to the members, and appeal to them to remain committed to their community. Notable among these forms of indirect opposition are various manifestations of cultural conservatism, reinforced by passive resistance and strategies of indirect competition that assert their dignity and value of an indigenous community and culture (Dyck 1992: 10). Eventually, as the stakes against them increases, the response is to claim a communal identity that combines cultural particularity (which never before had to be affirmed) with modern political and developmental aspirations.

Nevertheless, it is inconceivable that the Orang Asli would have a unified understanding and interpretation of their political and economic aspirations. Even those aspirations that are vocalised may not truthfully represent the majority Orang Asli aspiration. In this regard, the question of Orang Asli identity, in particular, takes a new twist for, besides being discussed from the perspective of 'the other', it now needs to be approached from another angle – the viewpoint of the community itself regarding its own identity (Hakim 1996: 1494).

But what constitutes the essential elements of Orang Asli identity may vary from one individual to the next, from one community to the next. Nevertheless, what remains universal is the reality that, as Roosens (1989: 13, 151) notes, ethnic self-affirmation is always related in one or another way to the defence of social

or economic interests. That is, many people are willing to assert an ethnic identity only if they can gain by doing so.

This creates a paradox, for Orang Asli ethnic claims and slogans are not being formulated and promulgated by those who are confronted with the crucial issues of survival and dispossession, but rather by those who seem to have markedly moved away from their own culture of origin, which they now want to "keep". This, however, as Sowell (1994: 28) submits, is a common social phenomenon – for frequently those who have lost their culture, often become its most strident apostles. They now "identify" with their group, and may even do so in a highly vocal and exaggerated form.

Thus, in pursuit of the fruits of development, both political and economic, several representative Orang Asli organisations and institutions emerge, each claiming to have the mandate of its client base. This may pose a threat to the state. On the other hand, with various Orang Asli groupings claiming Orang Asli representation, the state is also able to treat representivity as a political resource that it can assign, or withdraw, to serve its own interests. Nevertheless, claiming Orang Asli identity and representation can be a powerful weapon for Orang Asli to seek political redress and attain distributive justice.

Clearly therefore the contemporary situation of the Orang Asli has its basis in their history and politics. It is to this that we now direct our attention.