

ORANG ASLI IN HISTORY AND EARLY POLITICS

The Orang Asli were not always an impoverished and dependent people. As the first peoples on this peninsula, they were very much participants and actors in the political and economic structure of the early civilisations. Nevertheless, each flux of immigrant peoples – who invariably coveted the Orang Asli's resources – perceived the usefulness of the Orang Asli differently, and dealt with them accordingly. Thus, as we shall see below, from being in control of their society and their resources in early times, they were eventually reduced to being regarded as mere 'savages' and 'wards of the sultans' by the time of British colonialism.

Early Perceptions of the Orang Asli

The term *Sakai* – used variously to mean slave, dependent or savage, but never used by the Orang Asli to refer to themselves – appeared in European literature in the eighteenth century to designate the non-Muslim indigenous groups of the Malay Peninsula that were the object of slave raids. Couillard (1984: 84-5), however, argues that the connotation of 'savage' is valid for only one historical period, namely that of colonial intervention. Before this period, she shows that the word *Sakai* had very different connotations reflecting relations of personal dependence similar to those suggested by the terms 'subject' or 'dependent', and

indeed even 'ally'. The last meaning is probably derived from the Sanskrit 'saksi' meaning 'friend' and probably, asserts Couillard, referred to the indigenous 'companions' with whom the Hinduised traders were dealing with as far back as the seventh century, or earlier.

In any case, it is clear from the literature, that the ancestors of today's Orang Asli never neither lived in isolation nor were they divorced from the political situation of the day.¹ Relations with the other communities ranged from the Orang Asli being regarded as non-humans, to them being given due deference in view of their ruling status. Malay and European perception of the Orang Asli, however, were generally not too kind. Osborn (1857: 239-40), for example, described the Orang Seletar of Singapore as:

... human beings in their most degraded form without religion, without any acknowledged form of government and only gifted with animal instincts and passions.... Of a Creator they have not the slightest comprehension, a fact so difficult to believe, when we find that the most degraded of the human race, in other quarters of the globe, have an intuitive idea of this unerring and primary truth imprinted on their minds.... The personal appearance of these people is unprepossessing, and their deportment lazy and slovenly, united to much filthiness of person.

Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (1985: 251), in his 1849 biography, *The Hikayat Abdullah*, similarly perceived the Orang Asli in Malacca in no kind way:

The first thing I noticed was that in their general bearing they were human beings like ourselves, but that in their habits they were hardly even as animals. For animals at least know how to

¹ The ancestors of today's Orang Asli are generally referred to as 'aborigines' in the literature, apart from 'Sakai' and the respective terms used to identify them such as 'Jacoons', 'Biduanda' and 'Orang Laut'. However, for our purpose here, the term Orang Asli will be used to refer to both the present day Orang Asli as well as their ancestors, unless specifically identified.

keep themselves clean, which the Jakun certainly did not.... Their eyes had a wild look in them as though they were ready to bolt. As they chattered to one another they sounded to me like birds twittering.

The literature is dotted with various references to the manner the Orang Asli were being perceived. For instance, the colonial administrators, Skeat and Blagden (1906: 103) assumed that "the hillmen of Negri Sembilan never indulge in the luxury of a bath." Harrison (1986: 44) considered the "semi-wild Sakais" to be "as shy as most beasts of the forest ... (and) would be most reluctant to leave their own part of the forest and might have little or nothing to do with the Sakais in the next valley."

Frank Swettenham, in relating the story of Mat Aris (1984: 53-63), also alluded to the "the primeval forest, the home of wild beasts and Sakai people, aboriginal tribes almost as shy and untamed as the elephant, the bison and the rhinoceros, with which they share the forests of the interior."

It has also been supposed that they ('Samangs') worshipped the sun (Bird 1980: 15). And Harrison (1986: 44) insinuated the low intelligence of the Orang Asli when he commented that many of them "knew only their primitive language and who, when their three numerals *Na-nu*, *Nar* and *Ne*, 'one, two, and three', have been used, fall back for further expression of mathematical ideas on the word *Kerpn*, which means "many".²

Bird (1980: 13-15), writing in the 1880s, informs that the Orang Asli were called indiscriminately *kafirs* or infidels by the Malays and “were interesting to them only in so far as they can use them for bearing burdens, clearing jungle, procuring gutta, and in child-stealing....” Slavery in the Malay Peninsula, as Gullick (1989: 99) remarks, was invariably restricted to non-Muslim slaves, such as captured Orang Asli on raids by Malays. Endicott (1981: 222) suggests that the Malay slave hunters were “probably ordinary villagers who did this when an opportunity happened to present itself, or when their headman or chief demanded it.” But, he adds, there may have been full-time professional slave-hunters as well. At the same time, some of the actual slave raiding was done by other Orang Asli, though the ultimate ‘consumers’ of the slaves captured were the Malays (Endicott 1981: 223).

Numerous authors (e.g. Mikluho-Maclay 1878, Swettenham 1880, Clifford 1897, and Wray 1903) also relate how the Orang Asli were hunted down like wild beasts, the men killed off, and the women and children carried off into slavery. Hugh Clifford (cited in Gullick 1993:13-15) for example, describes a desperate attempt by ‘Sakais’ to throw pursuing slave-raiders off their tracks, while the naval officer Osborn (1857: 239-40) related how, when Orang Asli were caught by the Malays, “they were tied up or caged just as we should treat chimpanzees.”

In fact, it was as recent as 1936 when H.D. Noone, the then field ethnographer at

² By this reasoning, one might ask, are we to conclude that modern computer binary language, based on a series of zero's and one's, is even more unsophisticated since it only uses two numerals?

the Perak Museum at Taiping, urged that the "practice of transporting aborigines and putting them on show in amusement parks and elsewhere should be forbidden by law universally," noting that in the previous year, Semai and Temiar have been 'shown' in Singapore, Penang and Taiping (Noone 1936: 65).

Even so, it is clear from some of the early writings that Malay relations with the Orang Asli were a significant element in village life. Apart from organising the slave raids against the Orang Asli, Malay villagers also traded with them and sometimes intermarried with them (Gopinath 1991: 13). The Russian ethnologist Mikluho-Maclay (1878: 212) also noted that:

These Orang Sakai Jina (tame Orang Asli) generally speak Malay and their children for the most part forget their original language. They visit the huts and the kampongs of the Malays (in small parties with their wives and children) and this is one important reason of the mixture of two races, the Orang Sakai giving their daughters as wives to the Malays.

Nevertheless, the forested hinterland were the habitat not of Malays but of the forest dweller, the ancestors of today's Orang Asli, and it was they who were the major collectors of local products (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 10-11). Malay settlement, as a rule, had developed along the rivers and coasts rather than the hinterland, and Malays themselves rarely ventured beyond the fringes of the jungle. Roberts (1899: 3), for example, noted that "from the junction of the Telom and Seram rivers, few Malay houses were found at long intervals, but above that there are none whatever, the whole of it being Sakai country."

Dunn (1975: 109) also noted that the Orang Asli have played a significant role in the Malay Peninsula's economic history as collectors and primary traders as early as the fifth century A.D. This is concurred by Andaya and Andaya (1982: 11) who suggested that an internal trading network had linked the periphery of the forest with the hinterland. By this means, goods were bartered and passed from one group of Orang Asli forest dwellers to another, sometimes over forest tracks but most often along rivers. Various items were traded. The Malay chronicler, Abdullah bin Kadir, for example, writing in the early 19th century mentions that the Jakun of Pahang traded in ivory, resin, camphor and rattans (Abdullah 1985: 257). And as the Chinese market developed, and the list of sea products came to include such items as the rare black branching coral known to the Malays as *akar bahar* and the famed *tripang* or sea slug, used as an ingredient in Chinese soups and medicinal preparations, it was the Orang Laut who could locate with unerring accuracy the desired products (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 13). Without their swimming and diving skills it would have been impossible to source these products.

Similarly, the collection of jungle produce demanded much more than pure identification. The collector had to be attuned to minute clues acquired as part of his cultural upbringing. For example, only certain signs such as peeling bark and falling leaves betray the presence of the valuable heart of the *gaharu* tree from which aromatic wood is obtained. Similarly, camphor, which takes the form of small grains inside the tree trunk, must be detected by specific signs like the smell of the wood when chipped. Equally important for the extraction of forest

products was the mastery of the magical skills needed to facilitate the search and placate the spirits of the plants concerned (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 11). And only the Orang Asli forest dwellers had these knowledge and skills, which the Malays tapped.

The Malays also prudently tapped the knowledge of the Orang Asli in selecting potential spots for mining (Gullick (1989: 151, citing Perak Government Gazettes 1889: 633 and 1894: 337). This is also alluded by Mohamed Ibrahim Munshi (1975: 17-18) who noted that "some Jakuns earn money by pointing out rivers or streams where there is tin, etc." In fact, during a trip to Pahang, Munshi Abdullah in 1838 saw Jakun not only bringing resins, rattans and aromatic wood to trade with Malays but also working in Malay gold mines (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 133-4).

Autonomy and Political Dominance

However, the Orang Asli were not always merely collectors and labourers for the ruling Malays. On the contrary, there is much evidence in the literature to show that some of the Orang Asli groups played very dominant roles in the administration and defence of established political systems in the Malay Peninsula.

Andaya and Andaya (1982: 49-50) argue that when the Malay newcomers arrived with an established system and political ranks, there were already Orang Asli

groups in the Malacca region to whom such concepts would have been familiar. Thus when Parameswara appeared in Malacca with his following, there was already a small fishing village at the site, whose population included the Orang Laut. Parameswara tightened his links with the Orang Laut by bringing their leaders into the political hierarchy and, via judicious marriages, into the royal family itself. For hundreds of years the Orang Laut devotion to the Malay rulers of Malacca was a crucial factor in the kingdom's preservation and prosperity. In fact, Hang Tuah, the most famous Laksamana in Malay folklore, was himself of Orang Laut background (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 70).

The State of Rembau (in Negri Sembilan) also presents us with the curious anomaly of an Orang Asli chief reigning over a population of Malays. Wilkinson (1908 cited in Hooker 1970: 22, fn. 4) informs how the Dato' (of the State of Rembau) would have to be an Orang Asli ('Sakai') in the direct female line. Although by blood he must be largely a Malay - owing to the law of exogamy - his claims to heirship is by virtue of the Orang Asli element in his ancestry. The Dato' of Johol is also a 'Sakai' in this sense.

Wilkinson (1908, cited in Hooker 1970: 27) further adds that in Rembau, the system of land ownership according to the *adat perpateh* worked very well and has made the Biduanda tribe (the representatives of the Orang Asli) a very wealthy and powerful clan, that has picked up Malay culture and is more than able to hold its own with the descendants of the Sumatran settlers. Under the *adat perpateh*, ownership went with actual tenure, subject, in some places, to the

payment of a small allowance to the descendants of the ancient races who had once possessed the land. The *adat* also laid down that some compensation was due to the dispossessed, were it only for the hunting rights of which they were deprived. In a sense, the law even admitted the claim of the beasts and birds to some consideration: the birds possess the earth, the fish possess the sea, but the Orang Asli or their representatives owned the wastelands and the forests. And while the Malay settlers owned the cultivated tracks, the tribal headmen owned the stretches of ricefield and the rows of areca-palms (Hooker 1970: 25-6).

Preceding Rembau, the Orang Asli in Malacca also had political control over their territories. Newbold (1839, II: 117-126) gives accounts of how Jakuns and Bidoandas [sic] came to be penghulus and chiefs in Malacca with titles such as Lelah Maharajah and Setia Rajah. The Bidoandas also enjoyed certain special privileges and were even exempted from capital punishment for serious crimes.

The *Hikayat Abdullah* (1985: 260-1) also relates how four Orang Asli tribes had been holding dominion over Naning (in Malacca) since early Portuguese times. In 1642, when the Dutch Governor of Malacca sought to appoint a Ruler of Naning; all the Naning folk ("the very old and the young included") had debated the matter and concluded that they "should like Datok Seraja Merah of the Biduanda Tribe to be our ruler." Datok Seraja Merah was subsequently appointed Ruler of Naning and upon his death sometime later, he was succeeded by his sister's son, also of the Biduanda tribe.

In the south, we are told that in the mid-17th century, the Sultan of Johor went to the Orang Asli kampung at Ulu Beranang (in Negeri Sembilan) where he met Puteri Mayang Selida. He married her, and brought her to Johor whereupon they had four sons born to them (Buyong Adil 1981: 4). The Legend of the White Semang in Perak also relates how Nakhoda Kasim of Johor had gone to Perak and married an Orang Asli woman who was thought to have supernatural endowments, and eventually founded the Perak sultanate (Maxwell 1882).

Gullick (1965: 39) also described how aspiring heirs in Negeri Sembilan had to resort to claiming Orang Asli (matrilineal) ancestry in order to be eligible for hereditary positions. This was achieved by claiming that the founders of their families were the sons of Orang Asli (Sakai) ancestresses married to Malacca noblemen. Certain of the *waris* groups even called themselves Biduanda. In this way they were able to argue that by Orang Asli ancestry on the maternal side they were entitled to primacy over mere matrilineal immigrants.³

In Pahang, too, being able to trace your lineage along an Orang Asli blood line appears to have been important enough for great care and accuracy to be taken in recording genealogies. For example, Endang – the pen name of an Orang Asli leader in Pahang – cites the *Sejarah Batin Simpok and Batin Simpai* (The Annals of Batin Simpok and Batin Simpai), still being passed down in oral tradition, where the genealogies and lines of inheritance are still very clear – this being concrete evidence of the autonomous nature of Orang Asli society in the not too

³ See also Winstedt (1932: 135-42), 'Bendahara Sekudai and Negeri Sembilan', and Gullick (1949: 7-13).

distant past (*Berita Harian* 24.6.1997). Endang also recalls that the Orang Asli in Pahang had similar status as in Malacca and Negri Sembilan where, for example, the Tok Batin (Orang Asli village head or chief) had the same standing as that of a Ruler or Raja of the Orang Asli. Consequently, he was the judge and the reference point for all matters of customs and tradition, which was highly developed.

Among northern Orang Asli groups, Mikhulo-Maclay (1878: 215) recorded that "The Orang Sakai and the Orang Semang consider themselves the *original inhabitants* and independent of the Malay Rajahs, and so they are in fact in their woods." Noone (1936: 61-2) also noted that the Temiar, prior to the intervention of British rule, "pursued the independent existence of a hill people on the Main Range." In his opinion, it was the decision of the British Government that the boundaries of the states of Perak and Kelantan should be defined by the watershed that has made the (Ple-)Temiar the subjects of anybody.

Orang Asli as Subjects

That the Orang Asli became subjects of anybody can be seen in the manner in which titles now came to be bestowed on Orang Asli leaders in exchange for favours or responsibilities, rather than the Orang Asli being the bestower of such titles or privileges. Edo (1997: 8) gives a list of titles given to Orang Asli leaders on behalf of the Sultan of Perak and suggests that this reflects that "the Orang Asli had received political endorsement of their Malay allies even in the 19th

century, and probably in the period before.”⁴ In Woh (Tapah), Semai elders still remember the titles given, as well as the time when the Sultan of Perak had given seven elephants to the headmen in the area to help the Orang Asli transport rattan and tin (the latter which they worked with the Chinese) for the Sultan.

Without doubt there had been a change in the relationship between the Orang Asli and the Malays, especially among the elites of both groups. It is possible that – with the sultanates and the Malay system of political ascendancy becoming more firmly entrenched in the Peninsula – the need to resort to using the legitimacy of Orang Asli lineage, for example, no longer arose. On the contrary, it seemed likely that the Malay aristocrats chose instead to step up their exploitation of the Orang Asli and their resources in the pursuit of greater wealth. Thomson (1875: 77), for example, remarked that:

... the Tumongong (of Johore) ... is steadily adding to his resources by the export of wood, which grows in unlimited quantities in his vast primeval jungles. But while doing all this, he is driving from their wild haunts a simple, untutored, and most interesting type of the human family, the Jacoons.... They have long been used by the Tumongong, in cutting wood and clearing a route for the railway. They, however, detest the Malays, and hold no direct intercourse with them.

Penghulu Yok Rinchit of Kampung Woh Intek, in the interior hills of the Tapah Forest Reserve, related to me how his people were originally from the lowlands of Teluk Intan, but then moved to the forested hills at Woh, and then to Blantan,

⁴ The giving of titles to Orang Asli and other leaders appears to have been a common practice during the rule of the Malay Sultans. Linehan (1973: 50), for example, states that in 1738 when Sultan Sulaiman visited Kuala Endau, “the headmen of the nine proto-Malay tribes (*Suku Biduanda*) came before him and he gave them titles.” Swettenham (1880: 59) also mentions that “the headman of the Slim *Orang Jakun*, or *Sakeis* as they are called, is blessed with the title of ‘Mentri’.”

before settling further upriver at Intek. According to him, the migration started in the late 1800s and was basically to escape from the Malays.⁵

The general aversion of the Orang Asli to submission to, or to control by, other communities is evident in the response of the Orang Asli to intrusions into their lives. At one extreme, as Newbold (1839: 397) notes, for instance, attempts to domesticate the Jakuns – who are “extremely proud and will not submit for any length of time, to servile officers or to much control” – generally ended in the Jakun’s disappearance on the slightest coercion. At the other extreme, Clifford (1992: 103-4) refers to a seemingly recalcitrant response from another group of Orang Asli in Kelantan, as can be seen from his report:

The Nenggiri River is fairly thickly populated by Malays near its mouth, but the upper reaches and the surrounding districts are inhabited almost entirely by aboriginal tribes. These consist chiefly of Tem-be Sakai, who speak a dialect almost identical with that spoken by the Plus Sakai in Perak, with whom, indeed they are said to hold constant intercourse. These tribes are said to number several thousand souls, and as they bear a bad reputation among the local Malays, the interior of the Nenggiri district is almost entirely given over to them, very few Kelantan natives ever penetrating far into this Sakai country, in many parts of which the Malay language is still unknown. I am informed that, unlike most of the wild aboriginal tribes, these Sakai have frequently committed depredations on Malays entering the district, and that more than once a string raiding party has been despatched up the Nenggiri, by orders of the Sultan, to keep the jungle people in check, and to punish them for their misdeeds.

⁵ Personal conversation, 2nd February 1992. Edo (1997) infers that the relationship between the Malay aristocrats and the Orang Asli during this period was one of “traditional alliance”. This may be so, since the Orang Asli who chose to remain in their original homelands, in all likelihood, had no choice but to ‘work with’ the Malays. His references to tribute-giving to the Sultan of Perak is perhaps an indication of the Orang Asli’s realisation then that submission was better than warfare.

The British Road to Paternalism

Nevertheless, it is argued that the onset of British rule was also the beginning of paternalism towards the Orang Asli. This was due in part, as Harper (1997: 5) notes, to European ethnography that seemed bent on looking to the Orang Asli for evidence of the prevailing theories of social evolution. Out of this, Harper observed, emerged a pervasive assumption that for the most part the Orang Asli represented an early stage of Malay development, and only in their eventual absorption in the Malay community would they find culmination of a slow march towards a settled, civilised existence.

Also, a recurring motif of colonial writings was that until the British intervention, Malay relations with the Orang Asli were those of master and slave (Harper 1997: 5). The autonomous Orang Asli chiefdoms of early Malayan history, with its highly evolved political and economic systems, apparently did not weigh much for the British administrators.⁶

British paternalism is perhaps best illustrated by the comments made by the British Resident towards the end of the nineteenth century, who, when asked to

⁶ Bah Akeh, a Semai elder in Tapah, reduces the whole Orang Asli problem today to British short-sightedness when they first arrived on our shores. "For," he opined, "if they had looked harder and further inland, they would have seen us and this country would have been called 'Tanah Orang Asli' instead of 'Tanah Melayu'" – an allusion to belief that the root of the Orang Asli problem today is that they are not recognised as the duly legitimate indigenous or 'original' people of this land.

decide on the applications of two Orang Asli for title to their fruit orchards in Selangor, said that, "They must be provisionally treated as children and protected accordingly, until they are capable of taking care of themselves" (Sel. Sec/2852/1895). The applications, needless to say, were rejected. Nevertheless, this paternalism, as we shall see, was so ingrained in the official treatment of the Orang Asli that it was continued by the JHEOA after Independence (McLellan 1986: 91).

Nonetheless, Colonial rule brought about some administrative changes, with laws being enacted to outlaw certain 'uncivilised' activities such as slavery and debt-bondage while other laws were also enacted to control the extraction of natural resources and the alienation of land, for example. And while the imposition of colonial rule removed some of the violence from trade (Harper 1997: 7), the control of the British rulers began to permeate every facet of living in the Peninsula. By the mid-nineteenth century, for example, Malay and Orang Laut participation in sea-borne trade had been all but eliminated by the British (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 122-3).

It was nevertheless clear that for the British, its economic interest in the region were its main priority.⁷ As far as the Orang Asli were concerned, it has been suggested that ethnographic portrayals of the indigenous communities as

⁷ The records of the early travellers continually reiterate that before British enterprise opened up the interior, the Malays had barely penetrated beyond the big rivers, coasts and estuaries. Noone (1936: 62, fn. 1) noted that the present towns, such as Sungkai, Slim and Tapah, all followed British intervention and were founded moreover by non-Peninsular Malays (Mendilings, Achinese, etc.) who intermarried with the Orang Asli.

defenceless creatures with limited intelligence and capacity for self-reliance, helped to justify British intervention into their lives, essentially by turning the colonial power into a 'protector' of the Orang Asli (Dodge 1981: 8-9, Loh 1993: 33-4). Ironically, also, while it sought to free Orang Asli from slavery and debt-bondage, the colonial government at the same time agreed that the Orang Asli should be regarded as 'wards' of the Sultans (Howell 1995: 276).⁸

Direct intervention into the affairs of the Orang Asli began in concert with H.D. Noone's *Aboriginal Tribes Enactment* (State of Perak, Enactment No. 3 of 1939). This closely followed his rather detailed *Report on the Settlement and Welfare of Ple-Temiar Senoi of the Perak-Kelantan Watershed* (1936), which sought to perpetuate the view of the British colonialists that the Orang Asli should remain in isolation from the rest of the Malayan population, and be given protection.

Noone called for the establishment of large aboriginal land reservations where the Orang Asli would be free to live according to their own tradition and laws. He also proposed the creation of 'patterned settlements' in less accessible areas, where the Orang Asli could be taught agricultural skills. He further sought the encouragement and development of aboriginal arts and crafts, and the creation of other forms of employment among the Orang Asli. Several protective measures were also proposed, such as the banning of alcohol in Orang Asli reserves and

⁸ Earlier Noone (1936: 62), seem to view the matter of 'wards' of the Sultan differently. From the point of view of the British Government, he noted, the Ple-Temiar have been assumed to be the subjects of the Sultans of Perak and Kelantan. But he acknowledged that "the whole question is very open.... (since) The Ple-Temiar are not Mohammedans [and therefore not Malay], and there is no reason to suppose that they shew [sic] any tendency to become such in bulk."

the controlled peddling of wares. Although not implemented by the government of the day, his 'Proposed Aboriginal Policy' did, however, lay the groundwork for future government policy towards the Orang Asli.

Orang Asli reserves were also mooted but their establishment was interrupted by the war with the Japanese (Harper 1997: 11). While the period during, and following, the Japanese Occupation opened the eyes of the colonial administration to the existence, special situation and usefulness of the Orang Asli, it was to be the Emergency of 1948-1960 that caused the Orang Asli to be placed directly in the plans of the government.⁹

The Emergency

As several researchers (e.g. Jones 1968, Short 1975, Carey 1976, Leary 1995) have extensively documented, the Orang Asli were not unaffected bystanders during the Emergency. On the contrary, several Orang Asli – both civilians as well as Orang Asli who decided to take up arms on either side of the warring parties – lost their lives or were injured during the insurgency.¹⁰ This was so

⁹ Nagata (1997: 95) contends that "although the British colonial government virtually ignored the welfare of the Orang Asli until the Emergency forced it to recognise them, a few of these states were already dealing with them (e.g. the office of To' Mikong and To' Pangku in the case of Kelantan and Perak). Many of these practices fell into disuse as a result of the establishment of the federal Orang Asli department.... It is therefore misleading to assume that the administration of the Orang Asli affairs began solely as a result of the Emergency."

¹⁰ Khoo and Adnan (1984: 233) provide statistics on the number of Orang Asli injured or killed during the Emergency, as follows: *Orang Asli terrorists*: 60 killed, 6 injured, 57

especially after the war strategies included the Orang Asli. This was when the insurgents were no longer able to get help from their sympathisers in the rural areas, and the Brigg's Plan – which involved relocating much of the rural population into closely-guarded 'new villages' – successfully cut the link between the two parties. Consequently, the insurgents were forced to operate from areas in deep forests, where they sought the help of the Orang Asli, some of who were old acquaintances from the Japanese Occupation. The Orang Asli were known to provide food, labour and intelligence to the insurgents, while a few even joined their ranks.

The Colonial Government quickly saw the importance of the Orang Asli in winning the war and created the post of Adviser on Aborigines. However, initial efforts at controlling the Orang Asli proved disastrous – especially the move to herd them into hastily-built resettlement camps in order to prevent the insurgents from getting support from the Orang Asli. A few hundred Orang Asli died in these crowded and sun-baked camps, mainly due to mental depression rather than diseases.¹¹

Later, realising their folly, and recognising that the key to ending the war lay in "winning over the hearts and minds the Orang Asli," a Department of Aborigines was established and 'jungle forts' set up in Orang Asli areas, introducing the

surrendered, 5 captured. *Orang Asli civilians*: 69 killed, 15 injured, 53 missing. *Auxiliary Police or Home Guard*: 4 killed, 5 injured. *Special Constable*: 1 injured.

¹¹ Jimin (1983: 60, fn. 1), citing JHEOA records, puts this figure at 7,000 Orang Asli who died during the early resettlement effort. This figure is however disputed by many reserachers.

Orang Asli to elementary health facilities, education and basic consumer items. This period also saw the first important attempt at legislation to protect the Orang Asli. The Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance of 1954 – later called the Aboriginal Peoples Act, and amended in 1967 and 1974 – was a turning point in the administration of the Orang Asli, as it indicated that the government had officially recognised its responsibility to the Orang Asli.

During the same period, the Department of Aborigines was enlarged in order to make it an effective force. But, as the former Commissioner for Orang Asli Affairs noted, the only reason for such re-organisation was to ensure a better control over the Orang Asli and to make sure that they would have less inclination and few, if any, opportunities to support the insurgents (Carey 1976: 312).

Later, in an apparent reversal of the government's policy towards the Orang Asli, the jungle forts were abandoned and replaced by 'patterned settlements' (later to be called 'regroupment schemes'). Here, a number of Orang Asli communities were resettled in areas that were more accessible to the department officials and the security forces and yet close to, though not always within, their traditional homelands. The schemes promised the Orang Asli wooden stilt-houses as well as modern amenities such as schools, clinics and shops. They were also required to grow cash crops (such as rubber and oil palm) and practise animal husbandry so as to be able to participate in the cash economy.

Ignoring the varying impacts the colonial plan had on the Orang Asli, the strategy nevertheless proved successful in that Orang Asli support for the insurgents waned, and the Malayan government was able to eventually declare the end of the Emergency in 1960. However, for the Orang Asli, this spelled the beginning of a more active and direct involvement of the state into their affairs and lives.¹²

The Aboriginal Peoples Act

As mentioned above, the Emergency also saw the enactment of the Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance 1954. Later revised as the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1974, the Act is unique in that it is the only piece of legislation that is directed at a particular ethnic community. For that matter, the Department of Aborigines, or the JHEOA as it is called today, is also the only government department catering for a particular ethnic group.

Being enacted during the height of the Emergency, the Aboriginal Peoples Act basically served to prevent the communist insurgents from getting assistance from the Orang Asli. It was also aimed at preventing the insurgents from imparting their ideology to the Orang Asli. For this reason, there are provisions in the Act

¹² According to an editorial in the *Straits Times* of 1.5.1955 (cited in Leary 1991: 44), the Emergency had, at least for the non-Orang Asli citizens, one salutary effect: "It has focused attention on a group of people toward whom the popular attitude has been one of indifference mixed with contempt. In the definition of Malay peoples, the Aborigines were not included. They were part of the animal life around the fringes of the jungle.... All the people of Malaya have staked their claims and asserted their inalienable rights except our dispossessed hosts driven into the jungle fringes ... The old policy of treating them as interesting museum pieces to be protected and preserved could only mean the extinction of the real sons of the soil."

that allow the Minister concerned to prohibit any non-Orang Asli from entering an Orang Asli area, or to prohibit the entry of any written or printed material, or anything capable of conveying a message, among others. Even in the appointment of headmen, the Minister has the final say. Generally, the Act treats the Orang Asli as if they were a people needing the 'protection' of the authorities to safeguard their wellbeing.

Nevertheless, the Act does recognise some rights of the Orang Asli. For example, it stipulates that no Orang Asli child shall be precluded from attending any school only by reason of being an Orang Asli. It also states that no Orang Asli child attending any school shall be obliged to attend any religious instruction without the prior consent of his parents or guardian. Generally also, the Act allows the right of the Orang Asli to follow their own way of life.

With regard to their traditional territories, while the Act provides for the establishment of Orang Asli Areas and Orang Asli Reserves, it also grants the state authority the right to order any Orang Asli community to leave – and stay out of – an area. In effect, the best security that an Orang Asli can get is one of 'tenant-at-will'. That is to say, an Orang Asli is allowed to remain in a particular area only at the pleasure of the state authority. If at any such time the state wishes to re-acquire the land, it can revoke its status and the Orang Asli are expected to move elsewhere. Furthermore, in the event of such displacement occurring, the state is not obliged to pay any compensation or allocate an alternative site.

For example, in 1958, the Chief Forester lamented that the destruction of valuable forest and the loss of considerable revenue could eventually become prohibitive if shifting cultivation rights were allowed in forest reserves, and if the movement of Orang Asli to a settled existence and permanent cultivation outside forest reserves was not accelerated Wyatt-Smith (1958: 149). He further advised that, "It would be foolhardy to jeopardise the future of a nation by 'preserving' a way of life for 50,000 people – for what may be many years – when an opportunity, as a result of the Emergency, exists today to start settling them permanently."

The early government gazettes even spelled out specific rights and privileges that the Orang Asli enjoyed in relation to forest resources. For example, the rules only allowed:

The privilege of taking annually as an average for their own domestic use and not for sale or barter: (i) the bark of one kepong tree over 8ft in girth at 6ft from the ground for every three households; (ii) 200 Class II poles, 2 tons of Class I fuel and 2,000 running feet of whole cane for every household (Wyatt-Smith 1958: 149).

Such regulations effectively inform the Orang Asli, in no uncertain terms, that their traditional territories – over which they previously had dominion and autonomy – are no longer under their full control.

To aggravate the situation, Orang Asli also experienced discrimination in the manner the rights to their traditional territories were being considered. Means (1985: 639-70) had noted that

... by 1913, certain areas of the Peninsula were designated as 'Malay reservations' where only Malays could own or lease land. These reservations provided substantial protection for the customary holdings of Malays, whose titles were legally recognised in perpetuity. By contrast, no such protection was extended to any of the aborigines. Instead, aboriginal lands were deemed to be crown lands of the Malay rulers, and were treated as if they were unoccupied....(the aborigines) were permitted to live on 'unoccupied lands' by sufferance, as dependants of the Malay rulers. Naturally, these assumptions were not shared by the aborigines, who remained blissfully unaware of their presumed status in law and its bearing on land use and property rights.

Noone (1936: 62) also noted that on the prevailing state map of Perak, large areas of exclusive Ple-Temiar land were designated 'Malay Reservation' – and most of it was unsurveyed. "If we are to have a reservation," he suggested, "let us at least reserve the land for the people who occupy it."¹³

Noone also recorded cases where Orang Asli land was given to Chinese squatters and the Orang Asli themselves were ejected. And while in one district, compensation was given to Senoi groups whose land was alienated to European estates, no compensation was given to land alienated at Cameron Highlands (Noone 1936: 62). A quick look at the archival records of Colonial Government during the earlier half of this century reveals a host of applications by non-Orang Asli for lots on Orang Asli territories as well as appeals by Orang Asli to secure

¹³ For Noone, the first point to be decided is the right of the Orang Asli to be regarded as full subjects of the Malay Rulers, to whom benefits enjoyed by the Sultan's other subjects, if they are to be the full subjects of that rule, should be extended (Noone 1936: 62). This situation exposed the anomaly in the treatment of Orang Asli as Malays. They were apparently acceptable as Malays culturally and politically, but when it came to being eligible for lots in Malay Reservations, they were not accepted. This was to be an issue that was persistently raised in later years.

their rights to their traditional territories. Without doubt, therefore, Orang Asli lands were increasingly being lost to others even during the colonial period.

The UMNO Factor

In a rather strange twist of fortunes, the Orang Asli found themselves having to resort to a Malay political party, UMNO, to try to seek some reinstatement of their rights. Malay politicians submitted to the Colonial Government that the Orang Asli "have no one to plead their cause", and argued for their rights as "the original inhabitants of the country" (Harper 1997: 17).¹⁴

In 1948, the secretary-general of UMNO, Zainal Abidin Hj. Abas, in a letter to the Deputy Chief Secretary of the government, requested that all Sakai reserves

¹⁴ However, this submission did not imply that UMNO recognised that Malaya belonged to the Orang Asli. The release of the 1947 census saw statements on the preliminary position of the Orang Asli in the new society being debated, which prompted the Malay newspaper *Utusan Melayu*, to warn that: "The people who pretend that Malaya belongs to the Sakais are trying to deny that Malaya belongs to the Malays (Harper 1997: 15).

This view was maintained years later by Mahathir Mohamad (1981: 73) when he contended that "the Malays are the original or indigenous people of Malaya and the only people who can claim Malaya as their one and only country."

To further reiterate the perception, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister, in response to an ongoing 'row' over the pribumi issue in the press, said that: "There was no doubt that the Malays were the indigenous peoples of this land because the original inhabitants did not have any form of civilisation compared with the Malays... and instead lived like primitives in mountains and thick jungle." (*The Star* 6.11.1986).

In perhaps a final attempt to conclusively drum home the message, the then Education Minister and UMNO Youth Chief, Anwar Ibrahim, said that the younger generations "must understand the political dominance of the Malays in the country, the modern history of which began with the arrival of Islam during the days of the Malacca Sultanate." As such, he proclaimed, "Our history should begin with modern Malay history from the days of the Malacca Sultanate" (*The Star* 21.9.1986, cited in *The Rocket*, December 1986).

be surveyed and gazetted. He noted that "the present system of earmarking certain areas as Sakai reserves without survey and publication in the gazette as intended by law, did not give the Sakai population sufficient security ...(and) cases had been known where land was alienated to non-Sakais" (Fed. Sec.Larut 789/48 & 49).

The UMNO secretary-general was actually responding to a "strong representation" from the Persatuan Kaum Darat, Selangor,¹⁵ who had asked UMNO to request the Colonial Government to consider that:

- 1) All Sakai Reserves in the Federation be surveyed and gazetted under the appropriate land laws, and;
- 2) All Sakai head-men,
 - a) In Selangor be appointed after consultation with the Persatuan Kaum Darat Selangor;
 - b) In other states be appointed after consultation with the 'Batin' and the 'anak-buah' of the area concerned (D.O. Larut No. 789/48).

Two years later, the Adviser on Aborigines, P.D.R. Williams-Hunt, himself sought the assistance of UMNO to look into the wellbeing of the Orang Asli. He engaged in "unofficial correspondence" with Captain Hussein Onn on the subject of UMNO policy towards the Orang Asli (Fed. Sec. 12354/50 (15)) and subsequently intimated in his letter to the Deputy Chief Secretary that "... from the political viewpoint, the aborigines are generally considered as Malays, if they

¹⁵ This appears to be the first organised grouping of Orang Asli. However, nothing more as yet is known about it, including how many, and who, its members were.

are considered at all and that a large percentage of the existing Malay population in the country is of aboriginal origin.”¹⁶

He felt that UMNO, with its “extensive funds and membership, was in a better position to undertake welfare and advancement work that could not be attempted by the existing government organisations, and could do much to prevent friction between Malays and adjacent aborigines” (Fed. Sec. 12354/50(15)).

UMNO, apparently, was also involved with the Orang Asli of the day in other matters. In December 1948, for example, it was reported that in Segamat, Johore, two groups of Jakun ‘refugees’ totalling 81 persons had embraced Islam. This was the direct result of the efforts of the Segamat branch of UMNO, supported by other district branches, which contributed to a fund to assist the Islamization and to give aid to the converts (*Warta Negara*, 22.12.48 cited in Leary 1991: 161).

Thus, the political position of the Orang Asli had experienced a 180-degree turn-around, as least as far as wielding political influence is concerned. When in the past Malays aspiring for political status had to consort, adopt or claim Orang Asli association, by the time of Malaya’s Independence, it was the Orang Asli who had to resort to relying on the new holders of political power.

¹⁶ However, just two months earlier, Williams-Hunt did not support the suggestion of the Malay penghulu at Kerdu that the Jah Hut children there be sent to school. The reason given was that he felt that “any attempt to turn them into Malays would be unfortunate for I would rather see them as first rate aborigines than fifth rate Malays” (Ref. No. (2) in AA Phg. General, T 274/49 (16)).

Summary

Despite the very broad brush-strokes used here, a picture of the circumstances leading to the Orang Asli situation today can be appreciated.

As discussed above, the Orang Asli were treated according to, and depending on, how others coveted their resources and/or their political status. Thus, when they were the people best suited to extract natural resources (because of their intimate knowledge of the environment and skills in procuring the needed products), their labour was exploited as independent procurers and traders. At other times, when only their physical labour was required, they were enslaved. And when prevailing customs for political ascendancy required genealogical ties with Orang Asli ancestry, such bonding was sought, or even crafted, if only to claim control over territory and resources.

In the transition to British rule, as well, full control over forest resources was sought by the colonisers, and the ideological manoeuvre involved in achieving this was to regard the Orang Asli as savage dependents of the state, requiring protection and paternalistic intervention.

In essence, then, a people who were once autonomous, who were once in control of their traditional territories and its natural resources, and who were involved in independent trading and political relations with others, had now come to be dependent on others, losing much of their political and economic control over the

territories they deem their own. Eventually, as the contest for resources intensified, the new Malaysian state further intensified its control over the Orang Asli by introducing various policies and programmes for their development.