Indigenous Politics, Development and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia: the Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources

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Introduction

The Orang Asli are the indigenous minority peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. They numbered 116,119 in 1999 – representing a mere 0.5 per cent of the national population. The Orang Asli, however, are not a homogenous people. The term Orang Asli translates as 'original peoples' or 'first peoples'. It is a collective term for the 18 ethnic sub-groups officially classified for administrative purposes under Negrito, Senoi and Aboriginal Malay. Nevertheless, shared socio-economic indicators and social histories can justify their treatment as one category of people.[1]

The Orang Asli as a People

Before 1960, the Orang Asli, as an ethnic category, did not exist. The various indigenous minority peoples in the Peninsula did not see themselves as a homogenous group, nor did they consciously adopt common ethnic markers to differentiate themselves from the dominant population. Instead, they derived their micro-identity spatially, identifying with the specific geographical place they lived in. Their cultural distinctiveness was relative only to other Orang Asli communities, and these perceived differences were great enough for each group to regard itself as distinct and different from the other.

However, particular ethnic labels and identities had historically been ascribed to the Orang Asli by others who wanted to discriminate against them on grounds of their real or assumed ethnic characteristics. In the colonial period, the generic terms '*sakai'* and 'aborigines' were commonly used to refer to this group of people – terms that carried varying derogatory connotations. Prior to this, anthropologists and administrators referred to the Orang Asli by a variety of terms including *Besisi* – people with scales, *Orang Liar* – wild people, *Pangan* – eaters of raw food, or *Orang Mawas* – ape-like people.

Ironically, it was the communist insurgents and the Emergency of 1948–60 that made the colonial government realise that a more correct and positive term was necessary if they were to win the hearts and minds of the Orang Asli (and so win the war against the communist insurgents). Realising that the insurgents were able to get the sympathy and support of the indigenous inhabitants in the forest, partly by referring to them as 'Orang Asal' (original people), the colonial government in turn adopted the next closest term 'Orang Asli' (literally 'natural people', but now taken to mean 'original people' as well). It also became official policy that the Malay term be used even in the English language (Carey 1976: 3). However, this in itself was not enough to forge a common identity among the Orang Asli sub-groups, nor did they immediately accept the term.

As such, Orang Asli homogeneity was initially a creation of non–Orang Asli perceptions and ideological impositions rather than being something that was self-defined. Nevertheless, with increased contact with the dominant population, it became clear to various Orang Asli groups that they had more in common with one another than they did with the dominant population. This was especially so since much of this latter contact was not amiable or beneficial to them. As I argue

[1] See Appendix 1 for a summary of the socio-economic status of the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia and government policy pertaining to them.

later, the social stress that they experienced as a result of this contact caused these indigenous minority groups to develop a common identity under the label 'Orang Asli'.

Social History

In the main, the Orang Asli groups kept to themselves until about the first millenium AD when traders from India, China and the Mon civilizations in Southern Thailand sought forest products such as resins, incense woods, rhinoceros horns, feathers, and even gold. Orang Asli living in the interior became suppliers of these items, bartering them for salt, cloth and iron tools.

The rise of the Malay sultanates, however, coincided with a trade in Orang Asli slaves that prompted many Orang Asli groups to retreat further inland to avoid contact with outsiders. For the most part, therefore, the Orang Asli lived in remote communities, each within a specific geographical space (such as a river valley) and isolated from others. They identified themselves by their specific ecological niche, which they called their customary or traditional land, and developed a close affinity with it. Much of the basis of their culture and religion is derived from this close association with the particular environment. Economic dealings with the neighbouring Malay communities were not uncommon during the past few hundred years, especially for the Aboriginal Malay groups. There seemed, also, to be a certain amount of interaction between the Orang Asli and the other ethnic groups, particularly the Malays who resided along the fringes of the forest.

The arrival of the British colonialists brought further inroads into the lives of the Orang Asli. After the early interest in the Orang Asli as targets of missionary Christian zeal and as rich subjects of anthropological research, the events of the Emergency – the colonial government's civil war with the communist insurgents from 1948 to 1960 – pushed the Orang Asli into the political arena. The primary motive for such newfound interest in the Orang Asli was undeniably that of national security – as Orang Asli help was necessary if the Malayan government was to win the war against the insurgents. The Emergency period also saw the introduction of two administrative initiatives that were to have a lasting impact on the future of Orang Asli wellbeing: the establishment of the Department of Aborigines in 1950, and the enactment of the Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance in 1954.

The post-Independence period also saw significant impacts on the Orang Asli. The 'development' of the Orang Asli became a prime objective of the government. Towards this end, the government adopted a policy in 1961 that sought the Orang Asli's 'ultimate integration with the wider Malaysian society'. The original process was to be by improving the socio-economic position of the Orang Asli. However, with time, the policy began to emphasise their assimilation with the Malay community and their conversion to Islam (JHEOA 1983).

The last two decades, additionally, were a period of sustained growth for Malaysia. With a development model that emphasised modernisation and industrialisation, especially with a vision to make Malaysia a fully industrialised nation by the year 2020 (Mahathir 1991), the Orang Asli began to experience a contest for their traditional resources. Encroachments into, and appropriation of Orang Asli traditional lands, in particular, became increasingly frequent, provoking varying responses from the Orang Asli themselves. These ranged from subdued

acquiescence and political lobbying, to outright protestation and legal recourse. The Orang Asli also began mobilising themselves through various organisations, particularly the Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli Association, (POASM). Consequently the Orang Asli, as a cultural and political entity, became more visible and vocal.

A History of Justifications

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.

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 redefining their cultural identity, and over concerns of political access and economic distribution.

The Orang Asli, 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.

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. National governments, too, have come to regard the Orang Asli as being no different from the other citizen groups and thereby not warranting government on different terms.

This situation stems primarily from the refusal of the state to recognise that relations between the Orang Asli and the government revolve largely around the fundamental asymmetry of the parties involved: a people and a state (cf. Dyck 1989: 7). The government has chosen to see the former simply as a community of individuals and the latter as a legal and political organization in which indigenous communities are simply aggregates of separate individuals belonging to a category. The Orang Asli, however, regard themselves as separate and distinct groups deserving of self-government and sovereignty in the particular territorial bases that they are usually associated with. Indeed, the attachment of the Orang Asli to particular localities (or ecological niches) is one of their most notable and politically significant features whereas, as Cohen (1982: 7) notes, identification of self with locality is anathema to the logic of modern political economy.

A reduction in the local autonomy of the Orang Asli would therefore be the key instrument for the state to effect control over Orang Asli society and resources. As such, it can be said that Orang Asli have begun to be the 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.

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. Because their traditional lands have provided the Orang Asli with both the content and form of their culture, the environmental destruction – an integral part of modern development – destroys the fabric of Orang Asli societies in an unprecedented manner, such that the logical conclusion of such a path of development is de-culturization. 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. This sets in place a struggle for resources.

The Creation of Orang Asli Identity

Ironically, as Gray (1995: 42) contends, a struggle for resources is usually the reason indigenous peoples, such as the Orang Asli, become aware of a threat to their future. For as the nation state expands economically and politically, it must by necessity incorporate and dominate indigenous peoples, like the Orang Asli, in order to appropriate the resources they lay claim to. In the process, groups such as the Orang Asli become marginalized 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 cheaply. 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, but advocating an ideology of integrating with the mainstream allows the state to achieve its dual economic and political objectives of appropriation and 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 their community a deep sense of grievance and injustice. Such a 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. 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. 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 among 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 sought to deny or inhibit the development of Orang Asli indigenousness. The ensuing state actions inadvertently further enhanced social stress among the Orang Asli, and in so doing, galvanized them to use their newly-created ethnic difference as a currency of power in asserting their position. A 'politics of difference' thus emerged in which the Orang Asli declared their entitlement and vied for power based on the qualities that make them different from the others (cf. Steele 1989).

Identity, Representation and Orang Asli Development

The first response from Orang Asli individuals, communities or organisations, was to initiate various forms of indirect and symbolic opposition that spoke loudly to the members and appealed to them to remain committed to their community. Notable among these forms of indirect opposition were 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. Eventually, as the stakes against them increased, the response was to claim a communal identity that combined cultural particularity (which never before had to be affirmed) with modern political and developmental aspirations.

Nevertheless, the Orang Asli do not 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, since 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 (cf. Hakim 1996: 1494).

But what constitutes the essential elements of Orang Asli identity varies 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 way or another to the defence of social or economic interests. In other words, 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 emerged, each claiming to have the mandate of its client base. This posed a threat to the state as the very act of staking claims on Orang Asli identity and representation can be a powerful weapon for the Orang Asli to seek political redress and attain distributive justice. On the other hand, with various Orang Asli groupings claiming Orang Asli representation, the state was also able to decide to whom to accord such representational status. That is to say, the state can use 'representivity' as a political resource by assigning, or withdrawing, such representivity to serve its own interests. In turn, the control of Orang Asli representivity by the state can also cause the contest for resources to be shifted away from a state-Orang Asli tussle to one between Orang Asli themselves. And this is what it did.

Orang Asli Representivity: a Resource for the State

To the state, bestowing recognition to claims of Orang Asli representation – that is, assigning political representivity – can be a resource that it can ascribe or withdraw.[2] Clearly, in this sense, political representivity is an *assigned* political status rather than an empirically demonstrable condition (Weaver 1989: 144). For example, when the state is pressured by Orang Asli demands that it dislikes or disagrees with, it can use representivity, or the lack of it, as a weapon to discredit the demands, or even the organisation making those demands. Alternatively, when the state decides to pursue a particular policy regardless of Orang Asli opinion, it may choose to overlook representivity altogether or, alternatively, assign representivity to an organisation, or even to an individual, irrespective of their representational status.

[2] Kornberg *et al.* (1980, cited in Weaver 1989: 114) attributes three meanings to political representivity. In the first meaning, an indigenous organisation is considered to be representative if it is seen to represent the views, needs and aspirations of its constituency to the government and the public. That is, it is both *authorised* to be a reliable vehicle of communication and is held *accountable* to its constituents for its conveyance. In the second meaning, an indigenous organisation is seen to be politically representative if it is *representative of* its constituency. In other words, the members of the organisation are expected to be a social microcosm of its constituency. The third meaning stresses representativeness by *responsiveness*: whether the organisation actually responds to the needs and demands of its constituency by providing services needed or expected by the constituency.

Assigning, or denying Orang Asli political representivity can also impact on Orang Asli traditional territories and resources. For example, if the aim is to satiate narrow, self-serving needs – such as exploiting the timber resources in an Orang Asli area – it becomes more pertinent to seek political representivity rather than mere Orang Asli representation. In such situations, the state can, and often does, accord political representivity to purported 'representative' Orang Asli institutions or individuals, irrespective of their actual representation. Invariably, the ability of the state to use political representivity as a resource is always linked to its control over the Orang Asli and their traditional territories.

The State and Orang Asli Representatives

The norm for Orang Asli representation *vis-à-vis* the state has generally been by appointment. Thus, when it was decided that an Orang Asli should hold the position of Nominated Representative for the Aborigines in the Federal Legislative Council – to replace the Dato Panglima Kinta Eusof, a Malay – the Colonial Government appointed Tok Pangku Pandak Hamid, a hereditary headman from the Sungei Korbu area, to the post (*Singapore Standard* 7.8.1957). Today, the equivalent position is that of Senator for the Orang Asli in the Upper House of Parliament. This is a nominated position, and thus far, all the seat-holders have been appointees chosen by the Department for Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA). This is also the highest political position an Orang Asli can realistically hope for, and as such, it has become a coveted prize. The selection and appointment of the Orang Asli Senator has become cause for much politicking and lobbying among some individuals. The opportunities for financial gain that come from such a position are no doubt an attractive carrot to them.

The state, through the agency of the JHEOA, is also directly involved in choosing the village headmen. Armed by provisions provided for in the Aboriginal Peoples Act [sections 16(1) and 19(1)(c)], the Minister has the authority to appoint and dismiss Orang Asli headmen, whether they are customarily elected or not. This provision, enacted during the Emergency for obvious 'control' purposes, is still applied today and has become a bone of contention in some situations.

Hence, it is not uncommon to have two headmen in a particular settlement: one hereditary or elected by the community, the other appointed by the JHEOA. The tendency is for the JHEOA to appoint someone who is at least a little literate in Malay, and preferably someone who is amenable to its dictates. This usually implies a younger person, and therefore usually someone less experienced in the traditions and customs of the community.

The President and the Senator

The institution of the (appointed) Orang Asli Senator and the (elected) POASM President best illustrates the fact that representation is not necessarily a condition for attaining representivity. With POASM gradually increasing its membership from 277 in 1987 to more than 10,000 within 5 years, it became a body to be reckoned with. Even the JHEOA had to acknowledge its representational status with the Orang Asli. POASM was also a high profile organisation and was able to garner wide media coverage and the attention of top politicians.

The President's position therefore became a coveted trophy, since it was thought that the position was the logical and legitimate claimant to Orang Asli political

representivity in the eyes of the government. The rationale was that there was no one more eligible for the Senator's post than one who had a sizeable following of Orang Asli. Even other (non-Orang Asli) Senators, they argued, could not claim representation. Representivity – that is, the political recognition of being *the* Orang Asli representative – rather than mere Orang Asli representation, was coveted since only the former can provide opportunities for material advancement.

In the end, however, the government was able to forcibly demonstrate to the Orang Asli that numerical representation was not a precondition for political representivity. An unpopular Orang Asli leader was chosen as the Senator despite the POASM President having the support of a majority of the Orang Asli membership. To further drum home the point that political representivity was vested in the arms of the government, the government then sought to grant the appointed Senator several lucrative projects set aside for Orang Asli entities, while intentionally ignoring those aligned to the association or the Orang Asli communities themselves.

However, POASM is not the only body organised on the basis of Orang Asli representation. A myriad of organisations now competes for political representivity, each asserting Orang Asli identity and claiming Orang Asli representation. These include the Muslim Orang Asli Welfare Association, the Perak Orang Asli Foundation, the Orang Asli 4B Youth Movement, the peninsular-wide Kijang Mas Cooperative, a host of smaller state-level Orang Asli cooperatives, local (Orang Asli) branches of UMNO, and especially the Orang Asli entrepreneurs' grouping, PASLIM.

With numerous Orang Asli organisations claiming to represent the Orang Asli and seeking political representivity, the state is thus able to treat such representivity as a political resource that it can ascribe, or deny, to serve its own interests. Thus, at one moment POASM may be recognised by the state as the authorised representative of the Orang Asli. At other times, it could be the state-appointed Orang Asli Senator, or any of the other 'Orang Asli' organisations. Again, depending on which representative body the state accords political representivity, and its reason for doing so, Orang Asli traditional territories or resources can be affected.

The Contest for Resources, Again

It also became evident that there were growing differences among Orang Asli as to what constituted Orang Asli identity. Yet, despite the actual content of this identity being vague or un-articulated, some Orang Asli individuals and organisations quickly appreciated the obvious (economic) advantage of promoting such an ethnic label.

The 1990s saw an increasing number of Orang Asli companies and businesses being established to exploit natural resources in Orang Asli areas. Some of these entities are 'Orang Asli' only by virtue of having a 'representative name' in their management or membership. Invariably, none represent whole communities, even though they purport to, as in the case of various Orang Asli 'cooperatives'. The most sought after business is logging.

Thus, it seems that the plight of the Orang Asli over the contest for their resources has come full circle. It was initially encroachments into their traditional territories, and control over their lives, that caused Orang Asli to experience social stress.

Seeing that they had common situations and common adversaries, the various Orang Asli communities came under a single banner – primarily that of their representative organisation, POASM – to forge a common Orang Asli identity to actively participate in the political arena. Acknowledging the demand for Orang Asli self-representation, and not wishing to relinquish control over Orang Asli traditional territories and resources, the state ascribed to itself the right to assign, or deny, political representivity. It then conferred such representivity on various organisations claiming Orang Asli representation. Motivated purely by economic gain, and not subject to accountability by the community they claim to represent, such representative organisations invariably caused further social stress for the Orang Asli, as their traditional territories and resources were frequently appropriated, or exploite, at the expense of the communities. Indeed, the contest for Orang Asli resources has indeed come full circle. Only this time, the Orang Asli themselves are included among the encroachers and as the source of social stress.

Thus, although a strong sense of belonging has emerged among the Orang Asli, this does not mean that all Orang Asli are alike in perception and ambition. While some used the new Orang Asli identity to assert their political autonomy, others used it to travel the development path mapped out for them. Hence, in the pursuit of a variety of goals, different Orang Asli representative organisations were established, each claiming Orang Asli representation, and each motivated differently.

Further, in response to Orang Asli demands for greater self-representation, the state was, to an extent, able to concede it without losing control over the Orang Asli and their resources. This it was able to do by assigning, or denying representivity to Orang Asli organisations and institutions of its choice, irrespective of whether they could claim actual Orang Asli representation.

Frequently, however, those Orang Asli organisations and institutions that enjoyed political representivity were motivated by economic gain, and were not accountable to the community they claimed to represent. Consequently, in pursuit of their own objectives, the immutable impact on Orang Asli has been the further appropriation and exploitation of their traditional territories and resources.

Appendix 1.

THE ORANG ASLI OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA:
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND GOVERNMENT POLICY

Ever since the five-year Malaysia Plans were published, the Orang Asli never failed to be listed as being among the most impoverished of Malaysians. Regrettably, recent statistics still indicate that the Orang Asli continue to be so. This Appendix looks at various social indicators in order to demonstrate their marginal position in Malaysian society.

Socio-economic Status

Educational Attainment
In general, while there has been significant improvement in the overall school attendance of the Orang Asli, the years of actual schooling leaves much to be desired. On average, of the Orang Asli school children who registered in Primary One eleven years ago, 94.4 per cent of them never reached the end of secondary schooling.

The 1991 census revealed that 37.8 per cent had at least primary schooling, whereas only 7.8 per cent had reached lower secondary school. Even fewer – 2.4 per cent – had reached upper secondary school. While the proportions have been small, a significant number of Orang Asli have also reached tertiary education. As of June 1997, 138 Orang Asli had completed tertiary education with government assistance, while another 99 were still continuing their education.

Although the proportion of Orang Asli with no schooling declined 15 percentage points for both males and females, males indicated lower levels of those without any education, i.e., 46.3 per cent compared to 56.7 per cent for females. The same applies for primary education. However, the differences were not very significant for both sexes for secondary and tertiary educational attainment (Department of Statistics 1997: 27).

Health
It is generally accepted that there has been a marked improvement in the provision and availability of health facilities for the Orang Asli. However, there is still much more that needs to be done. For example, it was reported that of the 42 mothers who died during delivery in 1994, 25 (60 per cent) were Orang Asli women (*The Sun* 28.9.1996). Given that the Orang Asli community constitutes only 0.5 per cent of the national population, this means that an Orang Asli mother in 1994 was 119 times more likely to die in childbirth than a Malaysian mother nationally.

The crude death rates and infant mortality rates for the Orang Asli also do not compare well with the national statistics. For 1984-1987, the Orang Asli recorded a much higher infant mortality rate (median=51.7 deaths per 1,000 infants) than the general population (median=16.3). Similarly, the crude death rate for the Orang Asli (median=10.4) was doubled that of the national population (median=5.2). Accordingly, their life expectancy at birth (estimated at 52 years for females and 54 years for males) was also significantly lower than that for the national population (68 years for females and 72 years for males). The lower life expectancy at birth for Orang Asli females could be due to their higher maternal

death rates caused by child-birth or poor maternal health or that Orang Asli mothers are over-burdened with reproductive, as well as productive tasks.

With regard to diseases inflicting Orang Asli, the diseases that persist are infectious and parasitic diseases, specifically tuberculosis, malaria, leprosy, cholera, typhoid, measles and whooping cough. For example, of the 785 admissions for 1996 at the Orang Asli Hospital in Gombak (including childbirth complications and motor vehicle accidents), almost half (368 or 46.8 per cent) were from preventable diseases as malaria, tuberculosis and scabies. In fact, malaria and tuberculosis continue to plague the Orang Asli. The figures are more disturbing when compared to the national statistics. For example, of the 7,752 malaria cases reported in Peninsular Malaysia in 1995, more than three-quarters (79.2 per cent) were from the Orang Asli (6,142 cases). Similarly, for tuberculosis, the incidence of the disease is 5 to 7 times greater for the Orang Asli than for the rest of the country.

Data on Orang Asli health also indicate that malnutrition is prevalent among Orang Asli. For example, it was found that even in regroupment schemes, some 15 years after relocation, the nutritional status of Orang Asli children can be described as poor with a moderate to high prevalence of underweight, and acute and chronic malnutrition. The prevalence of underweight Orang Asli children in these schemes ranged from 18 to 65 per cent, while stunting (an indication of under-nourishment) ranged from 15 to 81 per cent. A few cases of wasting (an indication of severe malnutrition) were also found. Together with the nutritional problems – poor diet, low growth achievement, anaemia, diarrhoea – it appears that the poor health of the Orang Asli is tightly bound to the destruction of their traditional subsistence base and their resultant material deprivation.

Nevertheless, despite relatively good medical service provision, the health problems that the Orang Asli face are still those that reflect underdevelopment. They continue to suffer from a disproportionate incidence of tuberculosis, malaria, skin diseases and malnutrition. However, there is sufficient information on Orang Asli health available to enable the Orang Asli to enjoy and benefit from better healthcare facilities, especially since most Orang Asli health problems are easily preventable and curable.

Poverty and Wealth

Statistics revealed by the Director-General of the JHEOA show that 80.8 per cent of the Orang Asli live below the poverty line (compared to 8.5 per cent nationally), of which 49.9 per cent are among the very poor (compared to 2.5 per cent nationally) (*The Star*, 19.2.1997).

Other indicators also point to the poor quality of life that the Orang Asli experience. For example, only 46.4 per cent of Orang Asli households had some form of piped water, either indoors or outdoors. As expected, almost all the houses served with piped water were urban-based (Department of Statistics 1997: 46). However, the 1991 census also showed that almost a third of Orang Asli households still depended on rivers and streams for their water needs.

The availability of toilet facilities as a basic amenity was lacking in 47 per cent of the Orang Asli housing units, compared to only 3 per cent at the Peninsular Malaysia level.

For lighting their homes, 36.2 per cent of Orang Asli households enjoyed electricity, while the majority depended on kerosene lamps (*pelita*). Much of the availability of electricity supply in the interior rural settlements was derived from generators, either provided by the JHEOA under the RPS development schemes, or purchased by individual households.

Ownership of Land

The attachment that Orang Asli have to their traditional lands cannot be over-emphasised. Most Orang Asli still maintain a close physical, cultural and spiritual relationship with the environment. Increasingly, however, Orang Asli are beginning to see the ownership of their traditional lands as an essential prerequisite for their material and economic empowerment. Under present Malaysian laws, the greatest title that the Orang Asli can have to their land is one of tenant-at-will – an undisguised allusion to the government's perception that all Orang Asli lands unconditionally belong to the state. However, provisions are made for the gazetting of Orang Asli reserves, although such administrative action does not accord the Orang Asli with any ownership rights over such lands.

The status of gazetting Orang Asli land is given in the table below. In 1996, a total of 131,736 hectares of Orang Asli land were given some form of recognition by the government. Of this, 18,587 hectares (14.1 per cent) were gazetted Orang Asli reserves, while another 29,879 hectares (22.7 per cent) had been approved for gazetting, but have yet to be officially gazetted. Still, another 83,270 hectares (63.2 per cent) have been applied for gazetting, although no approval had been obtained as yet. However, it should be stressed again that these areas are merely those that the government deem to be Orang Asli lands. From calculations made based on the JHEOA's *Data Tanah* (1990), it was found that the area gazetted represented only 15 per cent of the 779 Orang Asli villages. The remaining villages faced even greater insecurity of tenure over their territories.

Of more concern is the realisation that the size of gazetted Orang Asli reserves had actually declined from 20,667 hectares in 1990 to 18,587 hectares in 1996 – a decline of 2,080 hectares. Similarly, approval for gazetting has been withdrawn from 6,198 hectares of the 36,076 hectares originally approved in 1990. However, there had been an increase (of 16,250 hectares) in new applications for gazetted Orang Asli reserves. While this may seem a consolation for the gazetted and approved lands lost, these new applications are invariably for new regroupment schemes.

As of 9 May 1999, the status of Orang Asli land was as follows:

Status of Orang Asli Land, 1999

Land status	Hectares
Gazetted Orang Asli Reserves	19,507.4
Approved for gazetting but not yet gazetted	28,932.2
Applied for gazetting, but not yet approved	78,795.0
Total	127,234.6

In terms of actual titled ownership to Orang Asli traditional lands, the statistics are even more dismal. In 1997, only 51.185 hectares (0.28 per cent) of the 18,587 hectares of gazetted Orang Asli reserves were securely titled. Furthermore, in terms of individuals, only 0.02 per cent of Orang Asli (19 individuals) have title to their land.

Government Policies

Policies pertaining to the Orang Asli are sometimes structured and published. At other times, the policies appear to be reactions to current crises or attempts to keep in line with prevailing national trends or needs. Invariably, however, the majority of policies pertaining to the Orang Asli are decided *for* them, rather than *by* them, although in recent years, there have been sporadic attempts by the state to solicit Orang Asli input in their development strategies. A brief chronological survey of the policies as they were introduced is given below.

Protection

Given that the Orang Asli were regarded as being no better than children by the British Colonialists, the attitude towards the Orang Asli at the turn of the 19th century was one of 'protection'. The colonisers, certain of their racial and cultural superiority, introduced paternalistic policies that were often deemed as being in the 'best interests' of the Orang Asli. Such paternalism remained in effect until after the Second World War when there was a major policy shift towards integration.

Integration

A policy of 'integration' was officially adopted by the Malaysian government in 1961 – just a year after the end of the Emergency (Malaya's civil war with the communist insurgents from 1948-1960). The main thrust of the policy was that the Government should "… adopt suitable measures designed for their protection and advancement with a view to their ultimate integration with the Malay section of the community" (JHEOA, 1961: 2).

In later official communications, the objective of the policy statement was variously changed to "ultimate integration with the wider Malaysian society" or "integration with more advanced sections of the population," or "integration with the national mainstream." Nevertheless, despite the pressures placed on them, the first two heads of the JHEOA treated the integration objective as secondary to the development objective of the Policy Statement. Integration, it was held, was only possible if the Orang Asli were helped – socially and economically – to achieve their advancement and development. A recent *Programme Summary* of the JHEOA, however, restates the organisational objective as: "To integrate the Orang Asli community with the other communities in the country through the socio-economic development processes" (JHEOA 1993: 4).

Hence, the primacy of 'development' in the earlier policy statements was replaced by integration, with socio-economic development being the *means* – rather than the end – of Orang Asli progress and advancement.

Sedentism/Regroupment

The early 1970s saw the Communist Party of Malaya revive its armed struggle in what has occasionally been referred to as the Second Emergency. Again, this was mainly directed from interior forest bases. But the military was quick to look upon the forest-dwelling Orang Asli as probable allies of the insurgents, and saw

the physical removal of the Orang Asli from their traditional environment as a militarily expedient solution. In 1977 they proposed the implementation of a resettlement policy not unlike that executed during the Emergency. However, instead of resettlement areas, they were now to be called 'regroupment schemes'. While resettlement meant moving the Orang Asli out of their traditional homelands, 'regroupment' referred to the formation of development schemes within, or close to, the traditional homelands of the Orang Asli concerned. A total of 25 regroupment schemes were to be established over an implementation period of 10 to 15 years, beginning in 1979, and at an estimated cost of RM260 million.

Besides the provision of medical and educational facilities, the Orang Asli participants were to be allocated permanent use of land for housing and subsistence gardens, as well as to undertake some form of income-generating activity, such as rubber or oil palm cultivation – not unlike the Felda schemes being developed then.

Nevertheless, while it was acknowledged that the development plan for the Orang Asli was to be based on the twin prongs of security and economic development, it was not denied that the security objective received more attention. Hence, it was no coincidence that most, if not all, such schemes were initially in locations on the Titiwangsa (Main) Range which were considered 'security areas. Even after the communist insurgency ended in 1989, the policy of regroupment remained in place, under the rationale that the perceived nomadism of the Orang Asli made it difficult and uneconomical for the government to bring development to them.

Modernisation/Multi-Agency Approach

For most of its existence, the JHEOA has been a one-agency department responsible for all aspects of Orang Asli needs. There has been much criticism of this approach, especially since the department had neither the resources nor the trained personnel to carry out its functions effectively. Since the mid-1990s, however, the JHEOA has been soliciting the services of other agencies – ncluding the Ministries of Education and Health, as well as federal agencies such as the Federal Land Rehabilitation and Consolidation Authority (Felcra) and the Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Authority (Risda) – to help deliver the goods.

The JHEOA also introduced a 10-point development strategy, the rationale of which was to "place the Orang Asli firmly on the path of development in a way that is non-compulsive in nature and allows them to set their own pace" (JHEOA, 1993a: 5). The 10 strategies, as outlined in the English version of the *Programme Summary,* are:

1. Modernising their way of life and living conditions, by introducing modern agricultural methods and other economic activities like commerce and industry.

2. Upgrading medical and health services, including having better-equipped clinics in interior areas, to bring about a healthy and energetic Orang Asli community.

3. Improving educational and skill development facilities, including programmes to provide better hostel facilities for both primary and secondary students.

4. Inculcating the desire among Orang Asli youth to become successful entrepreneurs by showing and sometimes opening doors of opportunity for them.

5. Getting Orang Asli in interior areas to accept Regrouping Schemes as an effective means of improving their living standards and turning their settlements into economically viable units.

6. Encouraging the development of growth centres through the restructuring of forest-fringe Orang Asli *kampungs*, including the establishment of institutions such as Area Farmers Organisations and co-operatives.

7. Gearing up Orang Asli culture and arts, not only to preserve their traditions, but also as tourist attractions.

8. Eradicating poverty, or at least reducing the number of hardcore poor among the Orang Asli.

9. Introducing privatisation as a tool in the development of Orang Asli areas.

10. Ascertaining a more effective form of development management in line with the direction in which the Orang Asli community is progressing.

The expressed goals of the JHEOA remain largely unchanged viz. "to improve the wellbeing and (to) integrate the Orang Asli with the national society" (JHEOA, 1993: 3). The more obvious changes to the policy strategy include the introduction of privatisation as a tool for the development of Orang Asli areas, participation in tourism and inculcating an entrepreneurial class of Orang Asli youth. The Malay version of the strategy statement further elaborates the strategies including one "to increase efforts at introducing a value system based on Islam for the integration of the Orang Asli with the wider society in general and the Malays in particular."

However, some of the positive assurances in the 1961 *Statement of Policy* – that the land rights of the Orang Asli shall be respected, and that the Orang Asli will not be moved from their traditional areas without their full consent – are glaringly absent in the new development strategy of the JHEOA.

Islamisation and Assimilation

The Orang Asli have become the target of institutionalised Islamic missionary (*dakwah*) activity, particularly after 1980. The two-prong objectives of such programmes were "the Islamisation of the whole Orang Asli community and the integration/assimilation of the Orang Asli with the Malays" (JHEOA 1983: 2).

The *dakwah* programme involved the implementation of a 'positive discrimination' policy towards Orang Asli who converted, with material benefits given both individually and via development projects. Towards the end of 1991, the appointment of 250 'welfare officers' (later called *Penggerak Masyarakat* or community development officers) – to be trained by the Religious Affairs

Department and the JHEOA – and a programme of building *surau*-cum-community halls in Orang Asli settlements, was announced. The establishment of a special unit called 'Dakwah Orang Asli' in the Islam Centre further suggests that this policy has the sanction of the state (*Berita Harian* 23.6.1995).

Also, while the JHEOA goes to great pains to stress that the policy towards the Orang Asli is one of integration, not assimilation, it fails to explain why, apart from being the target of a programme of Islamisation, that the Orang Asli are often categorized under 'Malay' in official reports and censuses.

Land Policies – For National and Orang Asli Safety

In the recent past, there have been new efforts at resolving the land rights issue of the Orang Asli. State governments have agreed in principle to give land titles to Orang Asli, and that the JHEOA would apply for the lands "on which others had no claim on, those earmarked for cluster agriculture schemes, and those under the planned villages concept approved by the state governments." The presumption here is that it is not necessary to give out titles for land that the Orang Asli are currently residing on, nor will the land be anywhere near the extent of their traditional territories.

This is the issue at stake. The Orang Asli want the traditional territories on which they are residing to be either gazetted as permanent reserves, or for some form of permanent title to it to be issued. The state government, however, sees relocation to another (smaller) site as a precondition for granting land titles – individually, not communally.

Land Titles for Individuals

The policy now seems to be to give Orang Asli land titles under the National Land Code "just like other individuals in Malaysia". However, although there are some Orang Asli who want individual titles, there are also those who do not, since this will undermine their traditional rights to their communal territories. Also, with individual land titles, individual lots would be fixed in size and number, and their total area would invariably be smaller than what they are asserting traditional rights over. Among other problems, the community will also face problems with fixed-sized lots as it will not be able to cope with expanding households, in contrast to the traditional land tenure system that had the advantage of a relatively large traditional territory to fall back on.

Privatization: State vs. Orang Asli Interests

One element of the 10-point development strategy of the JHEOA is "introducing privatisation as a tool in the development of Orang Asli areas". More specifically, the *Ringkasan Program* (JHEOA 1992: 5) lists the methods to achieve this, as follows:

1. To co-operate with the private sector to develop potential Orang Asli areas, especially in forest-fringe areas with developed surroundings; and
2. To establish suitable organisations to represent the local Orang Asli community in joint-ventures with the private sector.

Basically, such joint-ventures work by having the Orang Asli sign away their rights to their traditional territories – usually through the JHEOA, an ostensibly Orang

Asli cooperative, or a representative committee of the community (such as a *Majlis Adat* or Customary Council) – to a private corporation, which may or may not be an Orang Asli entity. In exchange for the right to mine, log, and own the land in perpetuity or on lease, the corporation enters into an agreement to provide basic infrastructure facilities and housing for the Orang Asli. In some instances, the promise of titled individual plots is thrown in.