



Routledge Malaysian Studies Series

THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

FROM THE FOREST TO THE URBAN JUNGLE

Govindran Jegatesen



The Aboriginal People of Peninsular Malaysia

To date, most studies of Malaysia's aboriginal people, the Orang Asli, have studied the community in either rural or forest settings. This book, however, outlines the dynamics of Orang Asli migration to Kuala Lumpur – Malaysia's most urbanised region – and explores the lived experiences of these individuals in the urban space. The book begins by charting the history of the Orang Asli under British colonial rule followed by the community's experiences under the Malaysian government, in an attempt to provide a deeper understanding of the economic and social complexities facing the Orang Asli today. Based on extensive original research, the book goes on to discuss the interesting changes taking place among urban Orang Asli migrants with regards to gender dynamics, while exploring the unique ways in which these urban indigenous migrants maintain close links with their home communities in the rural spaces of Peninsular Malaysia. The book concludes by assessing how research on the urban Orang Asli fits into broader studies of urban and contemporary indigeneity in both Malaysia and abroad.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Glossary of terms</i>	ix
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xi
1 Introduction to the Orang Asli	1
<i>The Klang Valley</i>	1
<i>The Orang Asli</i>	2
Education	7
Employment opportunities and income	13
Health and medical services	15
2 Early and recent Orang Asli history	21
<i>The slave trade of 18th- and 19th-century Malaya</i>	21
<i>British Malaya and governance</i>	22
<i>The Orang Asli in post-independence Malaysia</i>	27
Sloth and heathen folly: the Orang Asli within Malaysia's modernisation narrative	28
Malaynisation through Islamisation	33
Orang Asli NGOs and indigenous activism	40
3 From the settlements and into the city: investigating Orang Asli experiences	50
<i>Administrative classification of Orang Asli settlements</i>	50
<i>Migration and urban-village relations</i>	52
<i>Maintaining urban-rural connections</i>	56
Marriage and divorce	59
The sociality of sharing	62

4	Contextualising indigeneity	67
	<i>Indigeneity in Malaysia</i>	68
	<i>Orang Asli and early Malay politics</i>	71
5	Orang Asli and the question of gender	75
	<i>Gender narratives and perceptions of gender roles in recent Orang Asli history</i>	76
	<i>The office of midwife</i>	81
	<i>Gender in Orang Asli leadership structures</i>	83
	The gedo semaq of the Semelai	86
	The puyang of the Semelai	92
6	Inequality: the fragmentation of egalitarianism among the Orang Asli	97
	<i>JAKOA and Orang Asli leadership</i>	97
	<i>Who holds the purse strings? Gender anxiety: development and implications of a cash economy</i>	101
	<i>Contemporary notions of gender roles among urban Orang Asli migrants</i>	106
	Who wears the apron? Gender roles in the domestic sphere	108
7	Narratives on the Orang Asli and key considerations	114
	<i>The big man speaks: governmental narratives</i>	114
	<i>The scholar speaks: academic narratives</i>	116
	<i>Reimagining the lines in Orang Asli studies</i>	121
	<i>Key considerations of this book</i>	122
	<i>Index</i>	125

Preface

The Orang Asli have a long history of movement across the Peninsula, and for many millennia, much of their movements were tied to the search for subsistence and trade. Following the industrialisation and ongoing modernisation of Malaysia, they – as with many indigenous communities across the developing world – recognised and partook in the socio-economic benefits that are to be found in urban spaces. However, despite the decades-long movement of Malaysia's indigenous peoples to the nation's urban spaces, their experiences within Malaysia's cities and townships have received little ethnographic attention. Thus, the lives of the Orang Asli who migrate to Malaysia's urban areas remain a mystery to us. Why do certain individuals make the decision to travel from their communities – even if such movement is temporary – and venture into urban spaces? What are some of the conditions that may have compelled them to do so? And when one considers the literature celebrating the egalitarian value systems of the Orang Asli, one cannot help but wonder – how do they negotiate such value systems in a space that may not readily uphold such ideals?

In understanding their experiences in the urban space, it is only appropriate that it is their narratives that form the core of this undertaking. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, conversational narratives with Orang Asli individuals allowed for the emergence of new insights, and the interview process often transcended that of researcher and respondent, bringing about an environment that facilitated cross-questioning between individuals interviewed and myself. The fieldwork for this book was carried out in 2015 through in-depth interviews with Orang Asli individuals who live – and work – in the Klang Valley, with a minor fieldwork component also carried out at the Semelai community of Bukit Rok in the Tasik Bera vicinity of interior Pahang. Despite the focus on urban experiences, much of the images found within this book are of Orang Asli lived experiences in the rural space. Almost all the individuals I spoke to were hesitant about being photographed – and given the political climate at the time they were interviewed, this concern is certainly understandable.

Readers familiar with the Orang Asli may find some information in this book to be familiar to them – particularly concerning historical narratives of the

Orang Asli. However, such information was included not only to provide readers who are yet unfamiliar with the subject matter with some context regarding Orang Asli lived experiences in recent history, but also to allow for the juxtaposition of such recent historical observations in the rural space on themes such as gender and Orang Asli movement with contemporary urban experiences. In attempting to broaden the understanding on the subject of rural-urban Orang Asli movement, this book further explores the ways in which gender roles among the Orang Asli have undergone changes resulting from rural-urban movement – specifically to the Klang Valley area – in search of work. In furthering the understanding on urban Orang Asli migrants, and the ways in which they negotiate – and even contest – framings of their indigeneity, a critical consideration of this book is to understand how the Orang Asli themselves perceive the changes occurring from rural-urban migration – both on contemporary notions of Orang Asli indigeneity and on gender roles within Orang Asli communities. These are some of the considerations that this book aims to explore, and, in so doing, I hope that it contributes in some small way to the broader academic and civil discourses on the enigmatic Orang Asli in contemporary Malaysia.

Glossary of terms

adat	custom
balai	hall
bidan	midwife
bomoh	witch doctor
cengroh	a gift from the spirit world – either through a dream or an object – that grants a Semelai individual the power to become a <i>puyang</i> or a <i>bomoh</i>
gedo semaq	the indigenous leadership structure of the Semelai responsible for the socio-cultural leadership of the community
halaa'	a shaman/leader from the Semai community
jahat	evil or wicked
kafir	from the Arabic <i>kāfir</i> meaning infidel or non-believer (specifically in Islam to refer to non-Muslims)
kampung	village
ketua	village head or village chief
kampung kristang	Catholic descendants of 16th-century Portuguese-Malay intermarriages
lembaga adat	the indigenous leadership structure of the Hma' Meri responsible for the socio-cultural leadership of the community
Mambang Kerdor	a female spirit familiar in the world of Semelai shamanism
mati anak	Malay lexical phrase used by the Semelai to refer to the vampire spirit of a woman who died during pregnancy
mudin	a circumciser in the Semelai community
pawang	a shaman/leader from the Semai community
penghulu	Malay for a village headman
pontianak	Malay for the vampire spirit of a woman who died in pregnancy
Pribumi	the non-Orang Asli and non-Malay indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak

sakai	a derogatory term used to refer to the Orang Asli with historical connotations to slavery
batin	the (usually male) head of an Orang Asli community or village
waliq	a practice in the Semelai community where a representative is elected from both the bride and the groom's sides of the family to help resolve future marital disputes
waris	a practice in the Semai community where the kin of a person accused of a wrongdoing is called upon to speak in her/his defense

List of abbreviations

COAC	Center for Orang Asli Concerns
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CT	Communist Terrorist
CTM	Complementary and Traditional Medicines
DOSM	Department of Statistics Malaysia
DWNP	Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Malaysia)
FOCUSED	Foundation for Community Studies and Development
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HOAG	Hospital Orang Asli Gombak (Gombak Orang Asli Hospital)
IWGIA	International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)
JAKOA	Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Development)
JHEOA	Jabatan Hal-Ehwal Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Affairs)
JOAS	Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia)
KAT	Indonesia's Komunitas Adat Terpencil (Geographically Isolated Customary Law Communities)
KKLW	Kementerian Kemajuan Luar Bandar dan Wilayah (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development)
KOMAS	Pusat Komuniti Masyarakat (Society Community Center)
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCCHR	Malaysian Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MOH	Ministry of Health
MOE	Ministry of Education
NCD	Non Communicable Diseases
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PKKOAP	Persatuan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Orang Asli Negeri Perak (Perak Orang Asli Arts and Cultural Association)

xii *List of abbreviations*

POASM	Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli Association)
RM	Ringgit Malaysia (Malaysian Ringgit)
RPS	Rancangan Penempatan Semula (Resettlement Scheme) OR Rancangan Pengumpulan Semula (Regroupment Scheme)
SABOT	Semelai Association for Boating and Tourism
SPNS	Sinui Pai Nanuk Sngik
SUHAKAM	Suruhanjaya Hak Asasi Manusia Malaysia (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia)
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation

1 Introduction to the Orang Asli

When women work in the city, most of them want to stay on in the city. Even after they are married, they still continue living in the city. Orang Asli parents tell their children . . . They say, “O.K. She’s now in the city . . . all you younger ones, go to the city . . . follow that big sister. She is in the city.”

Anggrik (a Hma’ Meri woman)

This comment was from a conversation I had with an Orang Asli woman from the Hma’ Meri community, and she communicates a sentiment that an increasing number of Orang Asli parents in the rural settlements of Peninsular Malaysia hold to be true – that the urban space is a place of opportunities. A cursory search into the scholarship on the Orang Asli reveals a wealth of information on the experiences of the Orang Asli in the rural space;¹ some of these narratives date back to the nation’s colonial era² – ranging from studies that explore Orang Asli connections to their lands, their socio-cultural heritage, socio-economic concerns, health, and other critical considerations that seek to understand their lived experiences as indigenous minorities. Much of this scholarship has contributed to our increased understanding of the community, and it follows that much of the work conducted by ethnographers, anthropologists, and sociologists working with the Orang Asli today are built on these writings. However, the experiences of rural-urban migration – and living – as well as implications of this movement on Orang Asli gender roles and contemporary indigenous identity formation have yet to be significantly explored and continue to be phenomena that are little understood. This chapter provides a brief overview of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia and will introduce the Orang Asli – the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia – who are the subjects of the study. This will entail a cursory exploration of the lives of Orang Asli communities in contemporary Malaysia vis-à-vis their geography, education, employment, socio-economic opportunities, and health.

The Klang Valley

The Klang Valley is an area that comprises Kuala Lumpur (the federal capital) and its suburbs, as well as a number of cities and townships in the state of

Selangor in Peninsular Malaysia – which, collectively, form the core of Malaysia's commercial, administrative, and industrial sectors. For the purpose of this book, the Klang Valley refers to the major cities and townships within the Klang-Langat conurbation³ and it is geographically delineated by the Titiwangsa Mountains (*Banjaran Titiwangsa*) to the north and east of the Peninsula, and the Straits of Malacca to the west. The region takes its name after the Klang River – the principal river flowing through the valley – which was closely linked to the development of a number of colonial tin-mining townships during British rule. Originally a small tin-mining town at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers, Kuala Lumpur's growth and expansion began in the late 19th century through the joint efforts of the Chinese tin-mining *kapitan* Yap Ah Loy and the British officer Frank Swettenham.

As the heartland of Malaysia's commercial and industrial sectors, the Klang Valley has a history of rural-urban migration that continues to this day. The region is Malaysia's most urbanised and most heavily populated, encompassing all of Kuala Lumpur and some parts of the state of Selangor – the state within which the city of Kuala Lumpur is located. The Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur – known in Malay as *Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur* – and the Selangor districts of Gombak, Petaling Jaya, Hulu Langat, and Klang, as well as a few local authorities including Kuala Lumpur City Hall, Shah Alam City Council, and Petaling Jaya City Council, collectively form the conventional definition of the Klang Valley region at 2,843 square kilometres. Increasingly however, the Klang Valley region is interpreted to include the southern Selangor district of Sepang (Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Serdang, Bangi, Cyberjaya, and Putrajaya) and Kuala Langat, due to the economic and infrastructural relationships between Sepang district and the rest of the Klang Valley. This extended region of 4,000 square kilometers is known as the Klang-Langat conurbation or *Wilayah Lanjutan Klang-Langat*. Kuala Lumpur, which lies at the heart of the conurbation, is the most densely populated area at almost 6,900 people per square kilometre. As indicated in Image 1.1, this book defines the Klang Valley to include the wider Klang-Langat conurbation of 4,000 square kilometres (dark shaded), of which the capital is Kuala Lumpur. The northern Selangor states of Kuala Selangor, Sabak Bernam, and Hulu Selangor (light shaded) are generally excluded when defining the Klang-Langat conurbation.

The Orang Asli

Part of the region that makes up the Klang Valley today is home to the Temuan people, who have a historical presence in many parts of the Klang Valley. They are perhaps most associated within Malaysia's public consciousness as the victorious plaintiffs in the landmark Sagong Tasi case against the state of Selangor for their forced removal from ancestral lands in 1995 to enable the building of the Nilai-KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport) highway – for which they were unfairly compensated.⁴ Another group with a historical – albeit less