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Marginalisation of the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia

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Since the 1970s, the Malaysian government has created several economic and social initiatives and institutions as part of its New Economic Policy (NEP) to fulfil its goal of developing a more affluent, inclusive and equal society. More than half a century later, we find that while the national poverty level has been considerably reduced and the association between ‘race’ and occupation is less obvious, there are several marginalised communities, such as the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia and indigenous minorities in Sabah and Sarawak, who remain in the ‘backwaters’ of modern Malaysia (Endicott and Dentan 2004). This chapter will focus on the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia, who fare poorly in almost every social, political and economic indicator relative to the national average (Nicholas and Baer 2007).

Contrary to common assumptions, Orang Asli communities have become marginalised not because they live on the fringes of Malaysian society and lack access to economic and social services, but because they have been entrapped by the tentacles of state hegemony and market economy via state projects of economic development and social engineering (Gomes 2007). Their increasing entanglement with ‘modern’ Malaysia has spurred their displacement and dispossession, as well as the degradation of their environments and sources of livelihood – in short, their impoverishment. They mostly live in abject poverty; 35.2 percent of Orang Asli are classified as ‘hardcore poor’ (rakyat termiskin), compared with 1.4 percent nationally (Nicholas and Baer 2007: 119). Concomitantly, they lack food security, suffer disproportionately from preventable diseases, experience high maternal and child mortality, have remarkably lower life expectancy than the average Malaysian, are more vulnerable to natural hazards, and post educational attainment levels far below the national average.

**Who are the Orang Asli?**

The ethnic label ‘Orang Asli’ literally means ‘original people’ in Malay. Before the 1950s, the British used the term ‘Sakai’, a former label for the subgroup of people now called ‘Senoi’, to refer to the Orang Asli in general. Apparently taking note that this ethnonym, meaning ‘serf’, is a derogatory term and is held to be invidious by the Orang Asli, the British dropped the term from official usage. The label ‘Sakai’ most likely relates to the time during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the Orang Asli were the targets of brutal and cruel
slave-raiding perpetrated by immigrant Malays, mostly from Sumatra (Endicott 1983). ‘Sakai’ was replaced with the epithet ‘Aborigines’ in later years of the British colonial administration; however, this term was also deemed inappropriate and was changed to ‘Orang Asli’ in the early 1960s.

The Orang Asli population of 158,000 in 2008, comprising 0.5 percent of Malaysia’s total population, is officially divided into three main groups – Negrito (Semang), Senoi, and Melayu Asli (Aboriginal Malays or Proto-Malays) – which are further subdivided into eighteen ‘tribes’ (sukubangsa) (Rusaslina 2012: 267). Two-thirds of Orang Asli speak distinctive languages belonging to the Mon–Khmer language family (named after the two main languages in the group). Linguists have labelled these languages as ‘Aslian’ languages, ‘because they are spoken only by Orang Asli’ (Benjamin 2001: 101). The Mon–Khmer language family, according to linguists, is a branch of the Austroasiatic stock (Benjamin 1976; Diffloth 1979). Aslian languages are further subdivided into Northern, Central and Southern on the basis of the geographical location of the speech communities. The other Orang Asli peoples speak Austronesian languages related to the Malay language.

Most Orang Asli engage in a combination of economic activities, including hunting and gathering, fishing, swidden farming, arboriculture, and small-scale trading of forest products such as rattan, bamboo and gaharu. Since the 1970s, a growing number of them have become increasingly involved in the cash economy as small-scale rubber, oil-palm and fruit cultivators and wage labourers (Dallos 2011; Dentan et al. 1997; Gomes 2004; Howell and Lillegraven 2013; Nagata 1997; Nicholas 2000). Their increasing involvement in cash-cropping has progressed in tandem with their growing dependence on the market and commercial stores for most of their food and other needs. While entanglement with the market was gradual and voluntary for many Orang Asli communities as their interactions with commercial centres intensified, this was not the case for a large number of Orang Asli who became entrenched in the market economy as a consequence of government-sponsored development and modernisation programmes.

Development, dependency, and disempowerment

Orang Asli encounters with development have been in the form of either government initiatives purportedly designed to uplift the social and economic position of the beneficiaries, or a range of national projects such as resource extraction, road or highway and dam construction, commercial plantations, and land development schemes for mostly rural Malays. All in all, insurmountable evidence from numerous studies confirms that development in either form has contributed to the marginalisation of the Orang Asli (Aiken and Leigh 2011; Dentan et al. 1997; Endicott and Dentan 2004; Gomes 2007; Nicholas 2000).

Government policies in respect to Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia were formulated and passed as a statute, the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954, by the colonial administration during the height of the anti-communist Emergency (1948–60). In 1955, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (known by its Malay acronym, JHEOA, currently JAKOA) was set up primarily as a tool of the security forces, concerned with preventing Orang Asli from falling under the influence of communist insurgents hiding in the dense forests. One of its projects was the controversial resettlement of Orang Asli living in ‘communist areas’ to ‘safer’ sites. It is worth noting that, as Nicholas (2000: 107) contends:

The department was modelled along the lines of the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Australian Department of Aborigines, not just in terms of administrative
structure, but also in rationale: to ‘protect’ a class of people deemed to be ‘wards of the state’. The policy of establishing Orang Asli reserves is an example of policy similarities.

While national security remained as an important policy consideration in the 1960s, the Department embarked on a range of efforts aimed at integrating the Orang Asli into ‘the mainstream of society’ (JHEOA 1961: 2). The government’s paternalistic attitude, a legacy of the colonial administration, of ‘protecting’ the Orang Asli, was evident in its early policy statements. The Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 (1974) gave the JHEOA the power to exclude any person or ‘class of persons’ from entering an Orang Asli area. The discourse of Orang Asli protection is often invoked when state officials are keen to control the affairs of the Orang Asli or to maintain control of access to Orang Asli peoples by, for instance, prohibiting missionaries other than Islamic ones from visiting Orang Asli villages or disallowing activists from contacting Orang Asli (Rusaslina 2011).

In a 1976 publication, Carey (1976: 300), who was the Head of the JHEOA in the 1960s, identifies the JHEOA’s three main tasks as: ‘the provision of medical treatment, education, and rural development’. JHEOA rural development projects include: (1) the resettlement of Orang Asli into ‘pattern settlements’ where they are housed in new Malay-style dwellings, provided with a piped water supply, encouraged to cultivate cash crops such as rubber, oil palm, and trees in specially designated plots of land, and provided with facilities such as a school, community hall, health clinic, and sanitary conveniences; (2) the promotion of cash crops; and (3) the provision of agricultural skills and knowledge to previously non-settled Orang Asli. Clearly, these rural development programmes intend and operate to incorporate the Orang Asli more fully into the market economy and the Malaysian state.

In the 1990s, state policies towards the Orang Asli began to take a neoliberal turn in their promotion of privatisation as a means of reducing government intervention in, and expenditure on, development programmes and in the process facilitating greater ‘free market’ involvement (Nicholas 2000: 96). The government also stepped up its assimilation policy towards the Orang Asli, a policy aimed at turning Orang Asli into Malay-Muslims. Such a policy was tacitly adhered to in the early days of the state’s intervention in the lives of the Orang Asli, but since 1993 there appears to have been open admission of the objective to convert the Orang Asli to Islam, especially with the establishment of a special dakwah (Islamic missionary) unit some time in the 1980s to fulfil the goal declared in a 1983 JHEOA document of ‘the Islamisation of the whole Orang Asli community’ (Nicholas 2000: 98; Dentan et al. 1997: 144). This is, however, not just a policy to facilitate religious conversion; it is also implicitly a policy to prevent Orang Asli from converting to another religion.

What has been dubbed as the ‘Srigala Incident’ exemplifies this insidious aspect of the conversion policy. Dentan et al. (1997: 68) provide a succinct description of the Srigala Incident:

At the urging of a Christian missionary and using funds he supplied, the thirty Christians in the forty-person Semai settlement of Teiw Srigala’ (Malay Sungai Srigala) in Selangor began in August, 1990, to build a M$16,000 church, which was also to serve as a kindergarten. On orders from the Malay District Officer, they applied for a building permit on September 2. On September 14 the D.O. denied their application on grounds that ‘certain’ relevant laws forbade it. The D.O. circulated several copies of this letter, including one to the Selangor Department of Religious Affairs. The Semai unsuccessfully appealed the decision. The D.O. ordered them to destroy the building and accused...
the Christians, particularly their leader Bah Supeh, of illegally occupying government land. But Bah Supeh remained defiant. . . . On November 27, officials from the District Office, armed policemen, and Federal Reservists armed with batons, machetes, and M–16s invaded Teiw Srigala'. With the help of two bulldozers from the Public Works Department (JKR), they levelled the church.

Since the Srigala Incident, there have been at least two other reported destructions of Christian churches in Orang Asli villages: one in Kampung Orang Laut Masai in Johor in 2005 (New Straits Times, 18 December 2005) and the other in Kampung Jias in Kelantan in 2007 (New Straits Times, 15 January 2008).

Displacement and dispossession

Government-sponsored development for the Orang Asli has mostly been implemented through resettlement projects in which Orang Asli have been enticed to leave their forest or forest-fringe homelands and settle in patterned villages resembling Malay kampung (villages). While the primary reason given for resettling Orang Asli in the inception of this programme in the 1950s was to ‘protect’ Orang Asli from the communist insurgents operating in the forests, the reasons provided for Orang Asli relocation in the 1970s onwards have included moving people closer to economic growth areas, facilitating economic development, and the provision of educational and health facilities. In almost all the resettlement projects, however, it is apparent that the Orang Asli have been moved to make way for industrial resource extraction such as mining and logging; infrastructural development like dams, roads, and airports; land development schemes for more dominant others; commercial development; universities (National University of Malaysia); and even golf courses (Dentan et al. 1997). In light of the negative connotations associated with the word ‘resettlement’, these projects were later officially referred to euphemistically as ‘regroupment schemes’. Irrespective of nomenclature, these schemes have been generally unsuccessful for a range of reasons, including inadequate government support, unfulfilled promises of facilities, loss of access to traditional sources of livelihood, and insufficient land and degraded environmental conditions at the regroupment site.

Resettlement has led to increasing marginalisation of the Orang Asli by displacing them from their traditional lands, resulting in their loss of control and ownership of the land that was once theirs. Moreover, land allocated to Orang Asli settlers is invariably less than, and different from, the land they occupied traditionally. As Nicholas (1990: 71) observes, the size of the resettlement areas ranges from 1.1–15 percent of the size of their former territories. For one project, the Betau Regroupment Scheme, he notes that the 95.1 hectares of land allocated to the village amounts to a mere 1.4 percent of the approximately 7,000 hectares of their communal land.

Land or traditional territory (sakaq) is an important source of history and identity for the Orang Asli, who typically relate stories of past events in connection to the place where these events occurred. In other words, Orang Asli history, as in most indigenous communities, is inscribed in their land; their historical consciousness is spatialised rather than temporalised, as in conventional conception. Spaces are transformed into places as they are incorporated into people’s social and cultural maps. Place is also an important symbolic source and substance for Orang Asli social identity. Defining who they are depends largely on where they are from. Hence, displacing them from their sakaq does not only have significant economic repercussions in terms of the diminution of their source of livelihood, but also dire implications for their sense of identity and history.
To ensure a secure future for their economy, it is of critical importance for the Orang Asli to have unambiguous ownership and control of their land. As Endicott (1979: 190) indicated some time ago, for Orang Asli, ‘the amount of land acquired and the kind of rights to it that are obtained will have a crucial effect on the future of those groups’. Secure tenure to their land is certainly an issue of considerable concern as, while most Orang Asli think of themselves as owners of the land they utilise, they have yet to obtain clear legal recognition of their claims. As Nicholas (2000: 38) contends:

The dismal record of securing Orang Asli land tenure – coupled with increased intrusion into, and appropriation of, Orang Asli traditional lands by a variety of interests representing individuals, corporations and the state itself – remains the single element that is of grave concern to the Orang Asli today.

As Hooker (1976: 180) has indicated:

The area of state land occupied by the Orang Asli is public domain and the greatest title which the Orang Asli can get, either as an individual or as a group, is tenant at will. There is no power in any Orang Asli to lease, charge, assign or mortgage such land although some dealings are possible with the consent of the Protector. . . . Land as such cannot be owned and no one group can claim rights over it as against another group. All that may be owned is the produce of the land both cultivated and (in some cases) wild.

Orang Asli do not have secure rights to the land they occupy. Even if resettlement lands were declared as Orang Asli reserves, they would be ‘tenants at will’, totally dependent on the state, which has the right to revoke wholly or partly its declaration of reserve status.

The displacement of the Orang Asli is predicated on a myth that they do not have clear notions of land rights or their links to territory are weak. Nicholas (2000: 103–4) provides quotations made by several ministers and high-ranking officials illustrating this misconception. For example, a chief minister of the state of Perak stated: ‘Perak will issue land titles to the Orang Asli on condition that they give up their nomadic ways and live in a certain area for a continuous period of time’ (Nicholas 2000: 104).

In 2010, a proposal to amend the policy pertaining to Orang Asli land was announced. It was proposed that Orang Asli be ‘given’ between two and six acres of land per household (Rusaslina 2012). But this proposal repeats many of the flaws of the policy it sought to replace, such as the provision of inadequate amount of land allotted to Orang Asli, often a fraction of what they claim as theirs, and it was formulated with hardly any Orang Asli consultation. Furthermore, as Rusaslina (2012: 285) points out, the proposal ‘disregards the Orang Asli’s unique position as indigenous peoples with special ties to the land’, a status that is being increasingly recognised by the Malaysian courts, as evidenced in the case of *Sagong Tasi v. State of Selangor*, where the Court ruled that the Orang Asli of Sagong Tasi had ‘native title’ to the land that the state had deemed as ‘unoccupied’. While this is indeed a welcome change in the way Orang Asli land rights are perceived in the Malaysian courts, the Orang Asli struggle to defend their rights to their land continues, as many communities still face the threat of losing their customary land to outsiders or having their lands degraded by logging or mining. They will remain marginalised as long as the Malaysian state regards them as ‘wards of the state’, waiting to be given land rather than having their rights to their land recognised. Their marginality is also reinforced through government-sponsored education.
Schooling the marginalised

The introduction of schooling in Orang Asli communities has been one of the key modernisation projects implemented by the Malaysian government. Before 1995, the JHEOA carried out the Malaysian government’s educational programmes for the Orang Asli, designed to prepare Orang Asli children to enter the national education system after three years of schooling. The JHEOA set up about eighty schools specifically for Orang Asli communities in remote areas (Endicott and Dentan 2004: 36). These schools were generally poorly equipped and children were taught by JHEOA Malay and Orang Asli field officers rather than by professional teachers. After completing the initial three years, the children were sent to one of several primary schools set up in larger Orang Asli communities. These schools offered education through standard six. Students passing the standard six exams were then eligible to attend government secondary schools, mainly located in towns or close to large Malay kampung. Orang Asli secondary students mostly stayed at JHEOA hostel accommodation in several urban areas.

The JHEOA educational programme has been declared a ‘dismal failure’ by government officials and Orang Asli advocates alike. A 1994 survey revealed that about two-thirds of Orang Asli children (47,141 out of 70,845) between 5 and 18 years old were not going to school at all (Endicott and Dentan 2004: 37). The proportion appears to have improved over the years, with a reported 60.8 percent of Orang Asli children having received some schooling. The number of Orang Asli children attaining secondary schooling had increased from 10.2 percent in 1991 to 15.5 percent in 2000, but only 0.8 percent had made it into a tertiary institution by 2000 (Rusaslina 2012). A key problem, however, is the high dropout rate, as Endicott and Dentan (2004: 37) indicate:

According to JHEOA statistics, the dropout rate in the 1980s was extremely high, especially in the lower grades. . . . On average 25 percent of the children who started primary schools, mostly in JHEOA schools, dropped out after only one year, and about 70 percent of all students dropped out by the end of grade five.

The high dropout rate does not appear to have improved, as recent statistics reveal. Between 2000 and 2008, the dropout figure for Orang Asli students between primary and secondary schooling averaged 36 percent, and the average share of Orang Asli students leaving school between form one and form five was a staggering 48 percent (Rusaslina 2012). Why is the dropout rate among Orang Asli schoolchildren high? Government administrators regularly blame Orang Asli attitudes. A media statement by Jimin, a former director-general of JHEOA, quoted in Endicott and Dentan (2004: 37) exemplifies this view:

Firstly, it must be realised that there is no formal education in Orang Asli society. None of the Orang Asli tribes have their own alphabet or writing. Moreover, the introduction of a formal education process was met with general apathy. Orang Asli children go to school because there is a hot-meal programme. They will stay away from school if they are scolded by their teachers. Then there is the problem of parents taking their children away for weeks – to look for wild fruits during the season.

Several anthropologists (see Dentan et al. 1997; Endicott and Dentan 2004; Nagata 1995; Nicholas 2000; Rusaslina 2012) attribute the high dropout rate to problems with the education programme. One problem raised is the relevance of the curriculum to Orang Asli needs.
It has been argued that Orang Asli parents generally felt that their children stood to gain little from subjects such as Malaysian (Malay-centric) history and mathematics. Another, perhaps more significant, issue is the quality of education provided at Orang Asli schools. In particular, a thorny issue is the appointment of ‘inferior teachers’ in Orang Asli schools, as Endicott and Dentan (2004: 38) explain:

Teachers in the three-year primary schools were JHEOA field staff with no training as educators (Jimin 1983: 72; Mohd Tap 1990: 269, 295 n. 24). Teachers in six-year central schools came from the Ministry of Education, but were generally those who had failed their Lower Certificate of Education exams. Many resented being assigned to JHEOA schools (Mohd Tap 1990: 269), and they often took out their resentment and frustration on their students.

Recognising the lack of success in the JHEOA education programme, the government shifted the responsibility of Orang Asli education to the Malaysian Ministry of Education in 1995. Since then, there has been some improvement in terms of the quality of infrastructure and teachers in Orang Asli schools, which in effect means that the strategy of imprinting social and cultural values and beliefs through schooling has been enhanced.

Health, nutrition, and disease

The JHEOA was given the intrinsic role of implementing a health and medical programme in the late 1950s and it has run this programme ever since, with some assistance from the Malaysian Ministry of Health. Endicott and Dentan (2004: 36) hold the view that the programme has been a ‘qualified success, although the quality of care has not improved appreciably since the 1960s’. The central aspect of this programme is the 450-bed Orang Asli Hospital at Hulu Gombak on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. The JHEOA also provides health and medical care through clinics established at resettlement and regroupment schemes and through flying doctor services. How effective has this medical programme been in catering to Orang Asli health care needs? Chee (1995: 63) indicates:

There are still many problems and inadequacies [in the Orang Asli Medical Service]: it is, for instance, not based on the primary health care philosophy of community participation; largely oriented toward a curative approach with a vertical programme of disease eradication; and lacks trained staff, resources, and proper supervision, organisation, and management.

One major problem that has undermined the government medical programme is the high level of non-compliance by the Orang Asli. Generally, Orang Asli are unwilling to seek medical treatment from the government medical personnel because they are often discriminated against by the mostly non-Orang Asli medical staff. Orang Asli have told me that they are often treated in a condescending manner at the government clinics. They claim to have been ridiculed, laughed at, and scolded by medical staff. Orang Asli reticence in their communication with medical practitioners has on occasions led to misdiagnosis.

Assessing the effects of the JHEOA medical programme in disease control among the Orang Asli, Endicott and Dentan (2004: 36) note:

Certainly many diseases, like ringworm and yaws, have declined dramatically since the 1950s. The infant mortality rate appears to be down, and the total population is increasing.
Yet malaria and tuberculosis are still serious problems, respiratory diseases are common, pollution-caused diseases have increased, and malnutrition is widespread.

Baer (1999a) reports that Orang Asli account for about 50 percent of all reported malaria infections in Peninsular Malaysia. This amounts to roughly 450–600 reported cases of malaria per year, but the rates of infection are likely to be even higher since many cases of infection among Orang Asli are undetected by authorities (Baer 1999a). The incidence of tuberculosis among the Orang Asli is alarming; for the state of Perak, Devaraj (2000) reports a rate of 240 cases per 100,000 of tuberculosis among the Orang Asli, which is 5.5 times higher than the overall rate for the state.

As for the health consequences of resettlement, Chee (1995: 50), among others, contends that ‘Resettled communities which are at higher population densities . . . can sustain parasitical infections which could not previously be sustained; and crowding provides ideal conditions for the spread of infectious diseases.’ Another factor is the settlement layout, which turns out to be conducive to the proliferation of diseases like malaria. As Baer (1999b: 303) indicates, the low-built and closely spaced houses, unlike traditional living arrangements, prevent people from ‘penning domesticated or wild-caught animals (alternative blood-meal sources for mosquitoes)’ or making ‘smudge fires’ under their houses to drive mosquitoes from the area. Having more people living close to one another, as Baer (1999b) also notes, facilitates the transmission of malaria from an infected person to others.

In my multi-temporal research (1976–2006) on an Orang Asli resettlement, Sungei Rual in Kelantan, I analysed demographic changes in the resettlement, drawing from censuses I conducted in 1978, 1988, and 1998 as well as extrapolating from genealogical records, reproductive histories, and comparative analysis. During the period from 1978–98, there were 178 deaths in the Sungei Rual population. This means that an average of nine people died each year; in a population ranging from 193 to 331, this is a rather high number of deaths in a year. From a comparison of death records compiled in different survey periods, it was evident that there were more deaths occurring in Sungei Rual annually than before. I found that approximately 96 percent of the deaths were brought about by disease. From death records kept at the Sungei Rual administrative centre that I obtained in 1988, it was reported that twelve (or 40 percent) of the thirty deceased whose deaths were registered with known causes suffered from chronic diarrhoea and blood in the stool, which are symptoms associated with such diseases as acute amoebic dysentery and cholera. Another nine (30 percent) died of respiratory-related diseases, such as acute bronchitis and tuberculosis. In 1993, there was a cholera outbreak with eighteen detected cases, which killed eight people (Gomes 2007).

My analysis indicated a very high and rising child mortality rate. A comparison of the differences in the figures for surviving children and live-born over the three census periods suggests a considerable increase in the level of mortality in the Sungei Rual population. The number of children dying before their mothers had increased from 0.67 in 1978 to a staggering 1.69 in 1988 – which meant each post-reproductive woman living in 1988 had lost one child more than her counterpart living in 1978 – to 2.13 in 1998.

As Baer (1999b), among others, has indicated, there is a correlation between medical problems and nutrition. Good nutritional status undoubtedly ensures a balanced immunological system and therefore good health and better protection against disease. Several studies report a decline in nutritional status in Orang Asli communities that have been resettled. On the basis of nutritional surveys carried out in several such populations, Khor (1994: 123) concludes:
Some 15 years after relocation, the nutritional status of Orang Asli children in regroupment schemes can be described as poor with a moderate to high prevalence of underweight, acute, and chronic malnutrition. Their dietary intakes are deficient in calories and several major nutrients...

Similarly, from anthropometric measurements taken at a Semai resettlement, Betau in southeast Pahang, Mohd Sham Kassim (1986, in Chee 1995: 61) found that out of 499 children below the age of ten examined, ‘54% [were] underweight, 21% severely underweight, 70% stunted, and 47% had poor mid-arm circumference (indicating poor protein and calorie reserves)’. In another study in Kuala Betis, Kelantan, Zulkifli et al. (1999) discovered considerable evidence of malnutrition, such as underweight, stunting, and wasting among the 451 Temiar children they examined. The researchers attributed the malnutrition to ‘the diminishing food source from hunting and gathering due to logging activities in the resettled area’ and ‘the impoverished state of the resettled Orang Asli communities’ (Zulkifli et al. 1999: 125–26). In a relatively recent review of seven studies of nutritional status among several different Orang Asli communities, Khor and Zalilah (2008) reveal that one-third to three-quarters of the children examined in these studies were underweight and stunted.

**Conclusion**

Orang Asli remain as the most marginalised community in Malaysia in terms of their access to political and economic power. Their increasing immersion into the ‘mainstream’ of Malaysian society has resulted in their increased marginalisation, specifically because it has intensified the asymmetry between the Orang Asli and dominant others. Orang Asli dependence on others, especially on the government, for the fulfilment of most of their needs has induced a loss of control of their means of production and survival. They still generally lack security of tenure as far as ownership of their traditional lands is concerned. They continue to be displaced from their homelands to make way for development projects for other people, such as the building of dams, the construction of the new international airport in Sepang, plantations, and even golf courses. Through projects of social engineering, such as conversion to Islam as part of ‘spiritual development’ and resettlement into Malay-modelled kampung, they have been forced into living facsimiles of Malay lives.

Malaysia’s impressive economic advancement over the past several decades appears to have missed Orang Asli communities, as many of them live in abject poverty. Orang Asli levels of educational attainment and their health and nutritional status remain relatively low. They are more vulnerable to disease and concomitantly suffer high levels of child and maternal mortality rates and have low life expectancies. They continue to be viewed and represented as ‘primitive’, ‘backward’, and naïve people needing a helping hand to advance into the ‘modern’ world, and their cultural practices, as inimical to modernity.

Inspired by international indigenous movements, Orang Asli have recently clamoured for social justice for their communities. In March 2010, some 3,000 Orang Asli travelled to Putrajaya to deliver a memorandum with 12,000 signatures to the prime minister, asserting their rights to their traditional lands (Rusaslina 2012). While such political activism and several court decisions favouring Orang Asli land claimants are important steps towards resolving Orang Asli marginality, there is much more that needs to be done. Most significantly, Orang Asli must be treated as equal citizens, with the respect and dignity that they so deserve.
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