

## Orang Asli

### Profile

Estimated population: 150,000 (Centre for Orang Asli Concerns, 2003)

Ethnicity: Temiar, Semai, Lanoh, Semnan, Sabum, Kensiu, Batek, Kentaq Bong, Jehai, Medrique, Tonga, Temuan, Jakun, Orang Kanaq, Orang Selitar, etc.

First language/s: Aslian languages, Semelai, Temoq, etc.

Religion/s: Animism, Islam, Christianity

Orang Asli is a collective term (which means original or first peoples in Malay) for some 18 ethnic groups of less than 150,000 in total who are widely regarded as comprising peninsular Malaysia's original inhabitants (in the sense that they pre-date the arrival of Malays). They are generally divided into three distinct groupings: the Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay. The Temoq, Senoi and Negrito speak related languages known as Aslian, which belong to the Mon-Khmer family, while the ancestors of the Proto-Malay spoke languages that, like Malay, belonged to the Austronesian family of languages. The Proto-Malay group are similar in appearance to Malays, but of diverse origin. They live along the Strait of Malacca and in southern Johor. Some have adopted Islam and are being absorbed into the Malay community.

While perhaps half of the Orang Asli live in or close to forests, may be involved in hill rice cultivation or traditional hunting and gathering activities, others such as the Orang Seletar and Mah Meri live near the coast and are fisherman. Still others, such as the Jakun, are involved in agriculture. A few Negritos continue a semi-nomadic lifestyle.

About 70 per cent practise traditional animist religions, about 10 per cent are Christian and 15–20 per cent Muslim, though the percentage of Orang Asli who are Muslim has been steadily increasing in more recent years, especially among the Proto-Malay.

### Historical context

Prior to European colonization, the Malacca sultanate was based on the naval prowess of Orang Laut sailors in alliance with Malay rulers. However, other Orang Asli were captured and enslaved by Malays, and Orang Asli used to be referred to as sakai, meaning slave, or by the derogatory expression, semang.

The Orang Asli remained largely isolated until the middle of the nineteenth century and were able to maintain control over parts of the interior of the Malaysian peninsula, as they had little economic or strategic interest to colonial authorities. During the 1950s insurgency known as the Emergency however, communist (and ethnic Chinese) guerrillas often fled to the mountainous areas inhabited by the Orang

Asli, some of whom cooperated with the guerrillas because of their traditional hostility towards Malays. The British established fortified settlements, often with health clinics or schools, to resettle the Orang Asli and isolate them from communist contact. A Department of Aborigines was created, which, after independence, eventually became the Department of Orang Asli Affairs. Official government policy is to convert the community to Islam.

From the 1960s, the Malaysian government began a policy of 'integration' which meant steps to modernize the Orang Asli by introducing cash-crop agriculture (and discouraging traditional hunter-gathering and nomadic activities), education (mainly in the Malay language), and replacing traditional leaders by government-appointed headmen.

From the 1980s the policy of integrating the Orang Asli has taken an even more pronounced religious connotation, as the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (the JHEOA) has activities aimed at spiritual development of the Orang Asli, widely seen to refer to the conversion of Orang Asli to Islam through a number of enticements.

Malaysia's relative economic success after the 1980s and 1990s has brought with it increased pressure on the Orang Asli, especially in terms of land rights: large tracts of their traditional lands have been lost to plantations, factories, and other developments in the name of progress, often without any compensation.

## **Current issues**

The main existing legislation dealing with the Orang Asli, the 1954 Aboriginal Peoples Act, continues to be decried as too weak to protect the Orang Asli, especially in relation to the issues of land usage and ownership. Very few Orang Asli have ownership of land, and the Aboriginal Peoples Act only provides for 'usufructuary rights' or rights to use land and its resources. This results in the vast majority of Orang Asli essentially being tenants on their traditional lands. Perhaps less than 20 per cent of Orang Asli villages in Malaysia are gazetted (announced in an official government journal that publishes the texts of new laws and decisions) and set aside as Orang Asli Areas or Reserves.

The Orang Asli have less legal protection of their ancestral lands than do indigenous populations in Sabah and Sarawak, as authorities can 'degazette' any reserve land at any time. On some occasions, where compensation has been offered, this has tended to be limited to the loss of usage such as fruit trees and other resources, but not of Orang Asli homes.

The Semai people, numbering just 15,000 and settled in the central highlands of Malaysia, claim to have been suffering stress-related diseases because of a proposed National Botany Park that threatens to uproot them from their ancestral lands. The tribe was offered a temporary reprieve in February 2007 when public exposure of the project and lobbying by the Semai themselves led to a stand-down by the government.

In a case in September 2005, following a previous decision of 1998, the Court of Appeal of Malaysia confirmed that the Temuan tribes are customary owners of land and not mere tenants, and must therefore be compensated according to landownership laws rather than for mere usufructuary rights. This case, still being appealed before the Federal Court, would signal at least the possibility of extensive landownership based on customary indigenous ownership for the Orang Asli, though state authorities would still retain the ability to expropriate land, with appropriate compensation, according to existing legislative requirements. A ruling is expected in late 2007.

While this development is positive, most Orang Asli are far removed for any extensive recognition of their ancestral landownership rights, while development projects continue to threaten their homes and livelihood. According to a February 2007 study carried out by the Malaysia National Human Rights Commission, everywhere in Malaysia Orang Asli indigenous communities are facing a bleak future marked by official neglect and the greed of private enterprise. The study said loss of land, sudden eviction and paltry cash compensation has seriously injured the Orang Asli community.

The Orang Asli have also in recent years been targeted for conversion to Islam by a number of local government programmes and state-funded missionaries in parts of Malaysia, such as the state of Kelantan, where rather infamously Muslim men who married an Orang Asli woman would be given 10,000 ringgit. There are no available figures on the impact of these more recent measures on the Orang Asli.

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