

A HISTORY OF ORANG ASLI STUDIES: LANDMARKS AND GENERATIONS¹

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This essay reviews the history of Orang Asli studies, from colonial-era reports right up to the present. It chronicles generational changes in personnel and quality of work, and highlights significant studies and researchers in the field. It is intended to stimulate renewed interest in the literature and provide a quick guide to the primary sources.

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INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, a network of researchers compiled a comprehensive and annotated bibliography of Orang Asli studies (Lye, 2001). This exhaustive effort yielded over 1700 items, most of which were references to textual sources but also included multimedia productions and artefactual collections in museums, herbaria and archives. The bibliography showed how much work had already been accomplished in studying this heterogeneous ensemble of peoples. This literature ranges from studies of prehistory and human evolution to health, biomedicine and linguistics to the classic anthropological concerns for kinship, mythology, social organisation and environmental relations to, more recently, political analyses of development, assimilation, poverty and land rights. Equally extensive are the popular writings of reporters and official reports by government agencies.

Copies of the bibliography were quickly requested by researchers throughout the world and distributed to the major archives and libraries in Malaysia and elsewhere. Although the initial reception was gratifying, the bibliography's long-term impact on the development of Orang Asli studies at home, in local institutions, has been difficult to detect. Many recent studies show a distressing lack of familiarity with the literature. All too often, tired old clichés and erroneous information are reproduced without comment, existing scholarship is ignored and insufficient effort is made to revisit and build upon old studies and findings. The professionalisation of Orang Asli studies still leaves a lot to be desired. As other specialists have commented (for example, Dentan and Charles, 1997; Razha, 1995b), recruitment among Malaysian scholars is very poor—in the past 15 years, there have only been 6 new Malaysian with doctorate specialising

in Orang Asli.² In the hope of stimulating renewed interest in the literature and to provide a quick guide to the primary sources, I offer this extended revision of the introduction that fronts the bibliography.

My goal is to chart a brief history of scholarship on Orang Asli. Other publications (for example, Baer, 1999; Burenhult, 1999) have reviewed the state of knowledge on Orang Asli biomedicine and linguistics, and I will not deal with those topics, except in passing. Most recently, Benjamin (2011b) has completed a detailed and nuanced assessment of Orang Asli language endangerment, which makes a powerful argument for the significance of Aslian languages to understanding the cultural history of the region. Other topical and analytical reviews can be found in Benjamin (1989) and Rambo (1979a). Reading these reviews gives us a striking picture of change: both in the lives of Orang Asli and in the scholarly responses to that change. I will return to this point below. My goal is mainly to provide a chronological (generational) map of the conditions under which information on Orang Asli was gathered and therefore of the growth of Orang Asli studies. I am less interested here in substance (approaches, topics and conclusions) than in placing these studies in their broader historical frame. Throughout, my focus is selective and tends to be on 'landmarks'—key persons and studies.³ Wherever appropriate, I also highlight work that still needs to be done. I am, of course, biased by my training and interests in environmental anthropology.

A final prefatory note is that Orang Asli (literally, 'original people') is the official name for the twenty-plus indigenous ethnic minorities of Peninsular Malaysia.⁴ Although the name was not devised and adopted until the 1950s, for present purposes I will use it consistently throughout this essay.

THE EARLY PERIOD

It is difficult to determine when the history of Orang Asli literature should start. Court chronicles such as the *Sejarah Melayu*, for example, have been usefully investigated by historians for information on the place of Orang Asli in early Malay states (for example, see Andaya and Andaya, 1982; Andaya, 2008). As a defined field of study, we can perhaps start 200–300 years ago, with the earliest encounters of explorers, travellers, government administrators, missionaries and merchants. Other than the French Catholic missionaries, most of these early visitors were British, and their documentation was intimately involved in the colonial project of making local subjects 'legible' (Scott, 1999) to administration. For example, there was an ongoing preoccupation with identifying who and where the aboriginals were, how Malays stood in relation to them, and how the various languages spoken in the Peninsula compared with one another. However,

many of the earliest encounters read like artefacts of chance rather than of deliberate ethnological mapping. Wherever colonials travelled in the Peninsula, they either heard of or encountered people who were different from the Malays. For one thing, most of these indigenes were not Muslims; they had rich and vibrant religious lives of their own (Marsden, 1966: 1811). These early writings (generally little more than nuggets of information) often reproduce rumours, subjective impressions and no small degree of exaggeration (see, for example, Anderson, 1965 [1824], appendix: xxvii–xlvii). Despite their unreliability, a careful reading can reveal much of Orang Asli lives and conditions then.

One of the most important developments was James Logan's founding of the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia* (which ran from 1847–1859). Logan himself contributed numerous articles (Logan, 1847a, b, c, d, e, f, g, 1848a, b) and, as editor, published or reprinted many other accounts of Malay and Orang Asli lives. As such, the journal provides an excellent record of life in the first half of the century as perceived by the colonials. There were also Malay accounts conveying interesting information on the indigenes' modes of life and how they were treated and perceived [see, for example, the accounts of Abdullah Kadir (Abdullah, 1960) or "Munshi Abdullah" and his son Mohamed Ibrahim Munshi (Mohamed, 1975)]. Least read today are works by German, French, Dutch and other European scholars and travellers, most of whose writings remain untranslated (see Borie, 1865, 1886, 1887; Miklucho-Maclay, 1878a, 1878b; Saint-Pol Lias, 1883).

ENTERING THE 20TH CENTURY

Not until Walter William Skeat and Charles O. Blagden systematised these early observations in the two-volume *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula* (Skeat and Blagden, 1906) did something of a consensus emerge on who and what the ways of life of the indigenes were, what to call them, and how to group and classify them. Though the classificatory scheme they used is now out of date, Skeat and Blagden's monumental volumes remain indispensable: they are a rich source of historical, ethnographic and linguistic information and include excerpts from the older and less accessible literature.⁵ Skeat also paid tribute to those who had gone before and in particular, suggested that his volumes be read in complement to Rudolf Martin's *Die Inlandstämme der Malayischen Halbinsel* (*The inland tribes of the Malay Peninsula*) [Martin, 1905], which had appeared a year earlier and was mainly, though not entirely, concerned with physical anthropology.

In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, new styles of writing were blossoming. On the one hand, travellers, planters and administrators were churning out popular accounts and memoirs (for example, Ainsworth, 1933; Bird, 1967,

[1883]; Cerruti, 1904; Wells, 1925). An important person writing in this genre was Hugh Clifford, a colonial administrator. He published a number of fictional collections based on his experiences, including his encounters with the Orang Asli, which revealed an impressive talent for insightful observation (for example, Clifford, 1897, 1904, 1929). Part of the impetus for this genre of work—other than the imperialist fervour for explorations, scientific or otherwise—was probably an early sense of ecological panic (fear of species extinction and landscape degradation) and its corresponding response, the protectionist ideal, spreading through the United States and Europe in the late 19th century (Farber, 2000).

Malaya has a place in this larger narrative. Stamford Raffles, best known in Southeast Asia as the 'founder' of Singapore, was to become an influential founder of the London Zoological Society. While still in Southeast Asia, he strongly encouraged specimen collections (see Gullick, 1993: 205–206) and upon his return to London was a proponent of the position that zoological collections should reflect the diversity found in the British Empire. Such imperialistic sentiments undoubtedly lay behind the systematic appropriation of exotic specimens, although the transfer through trade of species and cultigens from one part of the world to another is, of course, of great antiquity (Dunn, 1975). Half a century after Raffles came William Temple Hornaday, who encountered *Jacoons* (Temuan) while hunting in the Batu Caves area (Hornaday, 1885). Hornaday was to become director of the newly founded Bronx Zoo in New York, where he pioneered wildlife conservation. The industry of 'nature writing' was developing fast and furiously at the close of the 19th century, alongside the popularisation of natural history through zoos, museums and botanical gardens. It was inevitable that specimen collectors, hunters and sightseers would also tramp through Orang Asli territories (for example, see Kelsall, 1894). They prefigure the tourists of today.

INCREASING PROFESSIONALISATION

At the turn of the 20th century, however, research on the indigenes was dominated by just a handful of 'recurring names.' Systematic and fieldwork-based scholarship by the likes of Skeat, Martin and the flamboyant Vaughan-Stevens (see, for example, Vaughan-Stevens, 1892–1894) was increasingly focused on careful, concrete accounts of defined groups of people. Vaughan-Stevens had his moments of insight but was, however, often unreliable; fortunately, his most useful findings were incorporated by Skeat and Blagden (1906) into *Pagan Races*, thus saving future generations from the near-impossible task of sifting fact from fiction. Most studies in this generation did not rise beyond description and reportage, though they were occasionally flavoured by debates over the truth or

reliability of published observations. Among Skeat's writings, for example, we find just one (Skeat, 1908) that addresses a theoretical problem. As he details in his introduction to *Pagan Races*, professionally trained researchers did not appear on the scene until the latter part of the 19th century. The early appearance of these researchers could be taken, as Skeat did, as an indication that the Peninsula's indigenes had 'entered' the global ethnological map. In 1901, we find the appearance of the first-ever doctoral thesis on a familiar Orang Asli topic, the regional distribution of the Ipoh tree (*Antiaris toxicaria*) and blowpipe-hunting (Geiger, 1901).

With the local establishment of museums, journals and learned societies, the institutionalisation of knowledge was on its way. A key figure was the colonial administrator I. H. N. Evans. In 1912, Evans (who was beginning to publish his notes on British North Borneo, now Sabah) was appointed assistant curator and ethnographer of the Perak State Museum in Taiping; he was promoted to Ethnographer in the Federated Malay States Museums in 1926. His work included editing the *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums*, and he turned the Taiping Museum into a centre of research on Orang Asli.⁶ His many publications are notable in the development of Orang Asli studies. These were compiled into three collected volumes (Evans, 1923, 1927, 1937) that are now must-reads for serious Orang Asli researchers.

The Austrian ethnologist Paul Schebesta conducted a year's fieldwork among Semang in the 1920s for a comparative study of *die Negrito Asiens* (eventually systematised in Schebesta, 1952, 1954, 1957). The most accessible of his Malayan work is the travel account *Among the forest dwarfs of Malaya* (Schebesta, 1973 [1928]), which contains lively depictions of the Semang he encountered and a useful map. He was the first published fieldworker to specialise in the Semang (although usage of 'Semang' as a racial category dates from the early 19th century). Though known primarily as an ethnographer and ethnologist, his achievements included "one of the first grammatical accounts of any Aslian language [Jahai]" (Burenhult, 2002: 11) and another grammatical account of a Central Aslian language he called 'Ple-Temer', which "appears to be the sole record of a language intermediate between Temiar and Lanoh which has since disappeared" (Benjamin, 2011b: 17).

Evans, Schebesta and, to a lesser extent, R. J. Wilkinson and R. O. Winstedt (both better known for Malay studies), made many fresh 'discoveries', including the names and locations of hitherto unknown ethnic groups and refined earlier schemes of classification. Winstedt was involved in the 1921 *Census* of aborigines (Winstedt, 1922) and Wilkinson also conducted fieldwork, including many weeks spent studying the 'Central Sakai' (Semai) language for the much-consulted aborigines part of his *Papers on Malay subjects* (Wilkinson, 1971).

Many of the ethnonyms emerging from this generation of studies were not to be confirmed until the contemporary period and some remain a source of scholarly debate.

Evans retired in 1932 and was replaced as museum director by the energetic H. D. 'Pat' Noone, who had been Field Ethnographer and was eventually appointed Perak State's first Protector for Aborigines. Pat Noone was said, in an hagiographical account (Holman, 1984 [1958]), to have become a legend in Malaya before he was out of his mid-20s; it is certainly true that he remains one of the most legendary of Orang Asli researchers—ever. He maintained a dual career in anthropology and administration (initiating a bureaucratic tradition that lasted until the 1970s), and his influence continues to be felt. His proposed Aboriginal Policy (appended to H. D. Noone, 1936), through its incarnation in the State of Perak's 1939 Enactment no. 3, became the foundation of the Federal-level Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance of 1954 (Act 134), which has remained largely unchanged today.

Noone also published, among a number of papers, an ethnographic account of the Temiar (H. D. Noone, 1936)⁷, the scope and quality of which was not to be rivalled until the fieldwork of Geoffrey Benjamin in the early 1960s. In terms of larger patterns of scholarship, though we can discern changing (generally improving) standards of documentation, the era of the single-community monograph was yet to come. The foregoing names aside, there were few full-time researchers. At that time, as now, few 'locals' were interested enough to initiate lasting research projects on the Orang Asli. To quote from the gloomy (and mildly exaggerated) backcover blurb in Razha (1995b), "[Aslian anthropology] is almost a dying field in Malaysian academe. . . Malaysian anthropologists are reluctant to participate in Orang Asli studies."

During this period, Orang Asli were also appearing in publications other than ethnological and historical journals. The decades before the Second World War were characterised by tremendous ecological change (Cant, 1973). The primary concern was commercial. The 1920s, for example, saw a growth in the expansion of plantation estates, which was largely unplanned; the effects reverberate to this day. It is no accident that the Singapore Natural History Society (the first non-governmental environmental organisation in the country) was founded at this time, 1921; its successor the Malay(si)an Nature Society, followed 20 years later, and there is also a successor Singapore Nature Society. Foresters and conservationists did not have much legitimacy in this administration, but tentative efforts were made—as far back as the 1880s—to set land aside as timber and protective reserves.

As I have recounted elsewhere (Lye, 2011), Taman Negara National Park, first proposed in the 1920s and enacted in 1938/1939,⁸ was intended to be a sanctuary for wildlife against the destructive effects of plantation agriculture. These early reserves were often located in Orang Asli territories: Taman Negara, for example, sits astride the Batek territory, and the first forest reserve, Chior in Sungai Siput, is in Semai country. As foresters conducted surveys and inventoried resources, they too came into contact with the indigenes and sometimes wrote up their observations. Perhaps the central work in this respect was the monumental *A dictionary of the economic products of the Malay Peninsula* (Burkill, 1935), which is still an essential source on the ethnoecology and environmental relations of the Orang Asli. Although not comprehensive by any means, it is a systematic inventory of pre-War biodiversity, and includes observational, classificatory and linguistic data from Malay and Orang Asli communities. Other relevant sources are detailed in Rambo's review (1979a).

In general, foresters were not concerned with, and only dimly understood, the resource management practices of the Orang Asli; most begrudged the provision of land for Orang Asli. However, in line with the protective sentiments of the time, there was some debate among a sympathetic minority whether Orang Asli land needs could be addressed by integrating them into conservation projects (for example, there was some discussion whether the national park could also function as an aboriginal reserve to protect the interests of the indigenous inhabitants). These minority sentiments appear to have been overruled (see Lye, 2011 for more discussion). Foresters and conservationists too were constantly at odds with the government over the loss of forest, and their main concern was not people but the proper management and exploitation of timber or wildlife (for a primary source detailing such concerns, see Wildlife Commission of Malaya, 1932). Thus, their success often depended on alienating Orang Asli territories. Some among them, for example, would initiate the genre of attacking Orang Asli swidden farmers (shifting cultivators) for being wasteful of timber (Barnard, 1933; Strong, 1932; Wyatt-Smith, 1958), a criticism that escalated after the Second World War and has been adopted as an ideology by government officials today, regardless of evidence to the contrary.⁹ As Rambo pointed out, "Orang Asli swiddening, unlike practices of Malays and Chinese, does not result in take over of plots by *lalang* grass" (Rambo, 1979a: 55) and he elsewhere indicates the important role played by Orang Asli in altering and modifying the habitats and genetic diversity of the forest environment (Rambo, 1979b: 60–63). This issue is often misunderstood and still awaits thorough analysis, a point I have raised before (Lye, 2004: 123–144).

THE EMERGENCY

After the Second World War, with the onset of the 1948–1960 Emergency, Independence and the formation of Malaysia, "Orang Asli" became established as the official name for the indigenous ethnic peoples of the Peninsula. The military events of the period, which led to the formation of the Department of Aborigines (now the Department of Orang Asli Development) and the bureaucratisation of Orang Asli lives, have been well discussed in works such as Carey (1976), Harper (1999), Jones (1968), Leary (1995), Nicholas (2000) and Short (2000), and need not concern us here. The Emergency as an event stimulated three main types of documentation: personal (autobiographical) accounts; political-historical studies; and news and magazine stories (this last collected in Nicholas, Williams-Hunt and Sabak, 1989). Significantly, most of the Emergency literature was and is written by 'outsiders' drawing on archived materials, personal involvement and/or, to a lesser degree, interviews with Orang Asli. For example, Gouldsbury (1960) "provides a great deal of information on the proto-history of the Jabatan Orang Asli and of the Ulu Gombak hospital during the 1950s, in which events she was intimately involved" (Benjamin, 1989: 27). Orang Asli responses to these events, and their memories of what happened to them during those years, from the Japanese Occupation onwards to the Emergency, are still not fully recorded.

We find in this period the first-ever thesis produced specifically on an Orang Asli people: Kilton Stewart's controversial 1947 study of the so-called Dream Therapy (based on his 1930s visits to Temiar with Pat Noone). Stewart, described by the anthropologist Edmund Leach as "a blowhard and storyteller who was not taken seriously by anyone who knew him" (quoted in Domhoff, 2003), was famously unreliable. To be fair, however, the 'New Age' interpretations of Senoi dreamwork that have been so enduring (critiqued in Dentan, 1983; Domhoff, 1985) are mainly due to the efforts of his widow (Geoffrey Benjamin, personal communication, 3 June 2011).

A key figure during the Emergency years was P. D. R. 'Peter' Williams-Hunt, the first Federal Adviser on Aborigines and another "legend in his own time." To meet the security forces' need for 'quick-and-dirty' information on Orang Asli, he produced the first general survey since Skeat and Blagden's 1906 volumes—the lively and, at moments, irreverent *An introduction to the Malayan aborigines* (Williams-Hunt, 1952). His general review of Orang Asli cultures and societies (though slanted towards Semai) was a source for an influential geography textbook of the 1960s (Ooi, 1963) and thus has worked its way into the consciousness of a generation of Malayan students.¹⁰ His work was predominantly focused on Orang Asli administration and advocacy. However, he also published a number of articles and pioneered the use of aerial photography in

anthropology and archaeology (Williams-Hunt, 1948, 1949a, 1949b, 1949c; see Moore, 2009). In this respect, his work was probably unique and predated by several decades of contemporary anthropologists' involvement in sky-(satellite-) based mapping of indigenous territories.

There were a few other landmark studies produced in these heady days, chiefly Ivan Polunin's medical-natural history (Polunin, 1953) and R. O. D. "Richard" Noone's documentation of Orang Asli trade exchanges (Noone, 1954). As Benjamin (1989: 30) remarks, "The rather dismal health picture" in Polunin's study "is a detailed indictment of the conditions suffered by Orang Asli living in guarded camps during the earlier years of the Emergency, for that is where most of Polunin's research had to be carried out."¹¹ Noone, the brother of Pat, is best remembered as the third Adviser on Aborigines and driving force behind the formation of the Senoi Praaq, the Orang Asli paramilitary unit; he also published memoirs of his search to discover the truth behind his brother's disappearance during the Japanese Occupation (Noone and Holman, 1972).

An interesting 'bridge' to the future was built with the brief 1955 visit of anthropologist Rodney Needham, who went on to publish several 'minor reports' from his surveys (Needham, 1956, 1960, 1964a, 1964b, 1974, 1976, 1984). His major contribution to Orang Asli studies, no doubt, was his supervision almost 20 years later of the Oxford theses of Kirk Endicott (1979a), Hood Salleh (1974, 1978) and Signe Howell (1989). These scholars have gone on to create legacies of their own. For example, when I first began research on the Batek, I walked closely in the footsteps of Endicott and his wife and collaborator Karen Lampell Endicott (Endicott, 1979; Endicott and Endicott, 2008). Hood's students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi are too numerous to mention; he has without doubt been the 'dean' of Orang Asli studies in Malaysia. Rodney Needham, in short, was the intellectual 'grandfather' of a certain tradition in Orang Asli studies.

THE FIRST PROFESSIONALS

In general, research momentum was not to pick up until the cessation of the Emergency. The 1960s and 1970s saw the first concrete bifurcation of directions. On the one hand, administrative figures were still collecting field data. One important person from this period was Malcolm Bolton (Bolton, 1968, 1972), who headed the Orang Asli medical service and founded the Ulu Gombak Orang Asli Hospital. A kindly and efficient man, he is fondly remembered by Orang Asli even today. As Bedford (2009) recounts, Bolton initiated a high level of Orang Asli participation in the Medical Service—which the present administration does not maintain. Another administrator-researcher was Iskandar

Carey, a professional anthropologist who headed the Department of Aborigines. His bureaucratic duties combined with his professional training gave him privileged insight, and he actively published his findings right through the 1960s and 1970s (collected in Carey, 1976, an overall survey). For example, he supervised the first ever attempt, a 'resounding failure,' to sedentarise the mobile Batek in ulu Kelantan and honestly admits to governmental mis-reading of the people's intentions in going along with the scheme (Carey, 1976: 118). Government research centres like the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) and the Institute of Medical Research (IMR) were headquarters for a number of skilful (but never specialised) researchers: names such as Frederick Dunn, who published a landmark and still-cited survey of Orang Asli forest products collection (Dunn, 1975), and the eminent zoologist Lim Boo Liat, who published a translation of Temuan animal tales (Lim, 1981).¹²

Outside the administrative bureaucracy, anthropologists and linguists were arriving to take up fieldwork. Though small in numbers, these individuals formed the first professionally trained generation of researchers who took up extended (one to two years') residence with Orang Asli communities. The earliest of these were Robert Dentan, Geoffrey Benjamin and Narifumi Maeda (Dentan, 1965; Benjamin, 1967; Maeda, 1967).¹³ Maeda (now known as Tachimoto) was the first Asian anthropologist to conduct Orang Asli fieldwork (excluding Malaysian undergraduates) and the first in a line of Japanese scholars to do so. His successors include Yukio Kuchikura and Toshihiro Nobuta.¹⁴

Two major factors distinguished this group of researchers from their predecessors. One was long-term fieldwork. Finally, researchers were in the consistent habit of producing full-length studies of single ethnic groups, rather than broad surveys of ill-defined ensembles of people or short summary descriptions with little analysis. With the in-depth sociological information obtained from this kind of study, it was now possible to offer more theoretically informed and conceptually sophisticated analyses. Especially highlighted was Orang Asli religion, a topic first broached in the colonial materials and convincingly redefined in this cohort of studies (Benjamin, 1967; Endicott 1979a; Hood, 1978; Howell, 1989; Karim, 1981; Laird, 1978). However, as pioneers, these researchers felt the need to collect as much basic data as possible (Benjamin, 1989: 8) because very little of that data had ever been recorded, and their resulting theses are (in my view) more valuable for ground-breaking ethnography than for theoretical positions.

In this generation of studies, we also find for the first time multi-year studies of the same people by individual researchers, which then allowed for diachronic analyses and revision of early assumptions. Many still-active Orang Asli researchers either continue to go back to their host communities years after their

original studies or keep in touch in other ways. This approach allows for a fuller appreciation of the complexities of Orang Asli lives and conditions and instils caution against jumping to hasty conclusions. Diachronic approaches are also encouraged by the development of 'second-generation studies', some of which were mentioned above. Undoubtedly, Semai, Semelai, Temiar, Temuan, Mah Meri (Besisi), Jakun and Batek studies have benefitted most from this trend. A final point to note about this generation is the emergence of PhD-level studies by Malaysian scholars, notably Baharon (1973), the first Malaysian to helm the Department of Aborigines, Hood and Karim (published as Karim, 1981)—all submitted to university departments abroad.

HOME-GROWN STUDIES

In the 1960s and 1970s, with the expansion of higher-education opportunities, a new generation of studies surfaced: graduation exercises and theses produced by Malaysian and Singaporean undergraduates (see, for example, Razha, 1973; Syed Jamal, 1973; Tan, 1973; for a review, see Walker, 1979). This was the first time local students were sent to conduct independent and original field research under the supervision of (often expatriate) anthropologists and sociologists who themselves conducted research on the Orang Asli. Notable among the latter were Shuichi Nagata and Anthony Walker at Universiti Sains Malaysia and Kirk Endicott and Terry Rambo at Universiti Malaya. As befitting the genre, the quality of these undergraduate reports was uneven, although they did include some careful, pioneering studies (Foo, 1972; Gomes, 1977; Hoe, 1964; Koh, 1977).

Few of these students continued their work with Orang Asli; most appear to have terminated their studies at the bachelor-degree level. Gomes, Razha and Tan are exceptions: while Tan went on to carve a distinguished niche in Chinese (and, later, Sarawak indigenous) studies, Gomes and Razha continued with Orang Asli and have published significant research as mature scholars (Gomes, 1988, 2007; Razha, 1995b; Razha and Karim, 2001). Malaysian universities continue to churn out undergraduate (and postgraduate) work on Orang Asli, and it has become nearly impossible to monitor them. As a quick generalisation, I might remark that basic social science and, especially, linguistic research by undergraduates has declined in both quantity and quality, but work on newer themes such as law, tourism, education, Islamisation and development-sponsored changes has gained momentum. Even if the more recent student work has not lived up to the promise of earlier generations, taken as a whole these reports are an interesting mirror into the recent history of Orang Asli. One might usefully draw on this corpus to chart the changes that have occurred, both to Orang Asli and in broader perceptions of and approaches to them.

THE PAST THIRTY YEARS

The 1980s will likely be seen as a watershed moment in the history of Orang Asli and, by extension, Orang Asli studies. Over the course of this decade, the pace of economic and environmental change in the country as a whole was overwhelming (Lye, 2004: 6–10). The environmental impacts were felt most strongly in the rural and indigenous sectors. Orang Asli became more visible as political agents from the 1980s onwards but more significantly after the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) had helped to turn global attention to the promotion of indigenous knowledge and rights. As land and environment-related problems worsened, Orang Asli became more insistent on government attention and sophisticated at asserting their claims and concerns. Civil society also played a role in highlighting issues and bringing broader attention to bear on Orang Asli problems and governmental neglect; the role played by the Center for Orang Asli Concerns, a watchdog, facilitation and advocacy group founded in 1989, has been notable.

With greater consciousness of human-environment interrelationships spreading throughout society and Orang Asli issues receiving more play in the media, so there was more acknowledgement of the costs of mainstream development to minority sectors, Orang Asli among them (see, for example, Kua, 2001). Nicholas (2000) has aptly termed this process a "contest for resources": natural resources and land are appropriated from indigenous owners, with little going back to communities in the way of compensatory mechanisms; or, as my Batek mentor Tebu described the effects of development on the lives of forest peoples, "they [mainstream society] bring about the end of our lives, the way they live" (Lye, 2004: 27–39).

The research landscape has also changed over these past 30 years, becoming more complex, with more people doing work with Orang Asli—including literate and/or urbanised Orang Asli. The earliest formal examples of this last group were in symposia organised by Hood Salleh and others at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, which offered some of the first conference papers written by Orang Asli. Most of these conference papers, however, have not been published—a lamentable gap. Later, conferences organised in conjunction with indigenous activist groups, such as those by the National Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia (Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia, JOAS), also fostered public airing of indigenous concerns. More Orang Asli representatives are engaged in such networks and/or speaking out in more diverse fora, from quiet communications entrusted to ethnographers like myself (Fung, 2003; Lye, 2004), to closed-door meetings (Zawawi, 1996), to the public spaces of protest, demonstration and litigation (Idrus, 2008; Nicholas, 2000). It is clear from these various accounts that Orang Asli are by no means naïve receptors of ideas and

goods from the outside. Rather, many indigenous representatives have a strong critical consciousness of what is happening to them, and appropriate ideas, knowledge, and strategies from the broader world as they develop new forms of political critique. Nor is any of this new: back in the 1930s, H. D. Noone (Noone, 1939) had recorded the emergence of a new Temiar song-and-dance complex that seemed to be a response to the intensification of cultural contact (later elaborated in Roseman, 1998).

More recently, diverse Orang Asli individuals have taken to videography and the internet and begun to publish their own (non-academic) texts. One such publication is *Chita' Hae*, an 'auto-ethnography' written by the Tompoq Topoh Mah Meri Women's 'First Weave' Project in response to their feeling that existing literature "are of varying degrees of accuracy, and few include facts we feel are important" (Rahim, 2007: iv). Another example is the work of the Semai short-story writer Mahat Anak China, who publishes in Malay under the pen-name Akiya and blogs as Akiya Mahat (Akiya, 2001, 2008). His novel *Perang Sangkil* (2008) is a fine example of what might be termed ethnohistorical fiction, based on Semai responses to 19th century slave-raiding events. Regrettably, not enough Orang Asli have reached tertiary-level education, but graduation exercises and theses by Orang Asli students have begun to appear. Juli Edo's (Juli, 1998) was the first PhD dissertation by an Orang Asli on an Orang Asli topic, an ethnohistorical study of Semai land rights and claims (although this was not the first dissertation by an Orang Asli). Juli has gone on to supervise new student research from his base at Universiti Malaya. For example, his student Lim Chan Ing (2010) has recently taken an innovative phenomenological approach to the analysis of Semaq Beri food classification.

On more traditional ground, Orang Asli research, conducted by both local and foreign researchers, have moved in many different directions. One directional split may be the result of the language in which works are written. A glance at the Orang Asli *Bibliography* (Lye, 2001) will show many listings of Malay-language materials. However, most of these appear to be the work of students. Among professional ethnographers, only a few have consistently published in Malay, and these materials often appear in obscure locations. For example, Ramle Abdullah's (1993) ethnography of a Semaq Beri community in Terengganu is not often read or cited. Similarly, Hasan Mat Nor's (1989, 1996) valuable data on Orang Asli resettlement schemes are hard to find in all of the usual places. Internationally, their works are almost never cited. I am unsure whether this is the fault of the researchers, who have not translated their work into English to reach a broader audience, or whether one should also challenge the provinciality of the international audience, which invests non-English-language materials with lower status. At any rate, as someone who publishes exclusively in English, I admit there is a loss: the loss of a local audience for one's work. In the interests of

promoting research progress, there is also a loss in this sharp divergence of directions, with researchers not doing enough to consult findings published in languages that are not their own.¹⁵ Some of the need is being met by the Center for Orang Asli Concerns, which has issued affordable paperback versions (either in English or in Malay translation) of theses and books on Orang Asli.

Thus far, I have not mentioned an entire genre of studies detailing Orang Asli arts, dance, music, folklore and material culture, which can be traced back to the specimen-collecting mania of Victorian times and has been entering a 'mature phase' since the 1980s. Some of these studies continue the longstanding tradition of describing or presenting the art forms without analysis (Davison, 1989a, 1989b; Howell, 1982; Werner, 1974, 1975, 1986). Holaday, Chin and Teoh (1985) remains the outstanding example of this genre, which presents Jah Het stories "carefully transcribed in the original language, with an English translation on the facing page and a glossary at the back" (Benjamin, 2011b: 21). Other studies contextualise Orang Asli art by linking cultural practices with politics (Roseman, 1998), social change (Couillard, 1980), and various other conceptual concerns (Jennings, 1995; Lye, 1994; Roseman, 1991). The visuality (and aurality) of these art forms suggests to me that—in a world of dwindling publication budgets—it may be time to transfer the materials to the multimedia channels of the internet (via interactive and photographic websites and blogs), but this potential is not yet realised. For example, the document and material culture collections of Evans and Skeat are still stored, largely unseen, where they were bequeathed—at Oxford and Cambridge in England (details of these and other collections can be found in Lye, 2001: 292–298).

As I mentioned earlier, there are still large gaps in histories and ethnohistories of the Orang Asli. In Benjamin's (1989: 26) view, "Professional document-based historical study of the Orang Asli has barely begun—and hardly anyone seems interested in pursuing it". However, the situation has improved since then. Bedford's (2007, 2009) study of health care and the Gombak Orang Asli Hospital, for example, makes good use of the unpublished diaries and notes of the hospital's founder, Malcolm Bolton. Professional historians are beginning to train their lenses on the roles played by Orang Asli in state formation (Andaya and Andaya 1982; Andaya, 2008; Harper, 1998), while the topic of Orang Asli slavery (and, relatedly, the genesis of *sakai* as a derogatory label for Orang Asli) has developed into an entire sub-genre of studies (Couillard, 1984; Dentan, 1997; Dodge, 1981; Endicott, 1983; Jones, 1968; Roseman, 1980).

Mentions of Orang Asli pacifism and/or violence recur throughout Orang Asli studies, but the major specialists in this area continue to be Clayton Robarchek (for example, Robarchek, 1977, 1978, 1979) and Robert Dentan. Dentan's most recent book (2008) revises and corrects stereotypes that he had inadvertently

unleashed with earlier works (for example, Dentan, 1978, 1979). However, more than simply an updated ethnography, this new work offers challenging ideas about the very nature of violence in human societies and shows how Semai violence is linked to the dramatic changes that have altered the society in recent decades. It thus offers a different way to approach history. Document-based research on Orang Asli history is 'there' for the taking, but its counterpart, *oral* history recounted by Orang Asli elders, is elusive and disappearing fast, and almost no studies focus exclusively on it (but see Juli, 1990, 1998; Razha, 1995a). The linguistic expertise necessary to record, correctly transcribe, and translate the history is in most cases beyond the skills of the average one-field anthropologist¹⁶, whereas linguists, understandably, cannot spare the fieldwork time to work on non-technical issues.

Environmental research, which had been part of the colonial project (see above), has also advanced. Approaches in recent decades can be divided roughly between human ecology, ethnobiology, and the political economy approach that links Orang Asli environmental problems to the wider context of resource appropriation and social inequalities.¹⁷ The most theoretically sophisticated studies in the human ecology tradition were those by Rambo (1982, 1985) and Kuchikura (1987, 1988a, 1988b, 1993, 1996). Rambo's breadth of interests was admirable and included surveys of various aspects of Semang (especially Jahai) resource use. Unfortunately, he left Orang Asli studies when he left Malaysia. Kuchikura worked within optimal foraging theory, but the great value of his work has been his detailed studies of Semaq Beri food procurement strategies. His "if it moves, count it" approach showed exemplary field discipline and uncovered information that has broader interest. One example was the fact that JAKOA (governmental) rations to the newly sedentarised Semaq Beri provided only 20% of the protein that could be obtained from blowpipe hunting: a clear signal that sedentarisation and dependence on government food assistance impoverished the people and may (if all things remained equal) lead to malnutrition.

There have been some detailed inventories of environmental use and classifications (Avé, 1988; Gianno, 1990; Howell, 2006; Ong, 1986). Most recently, linguist Niclas Burenhult has taken this genre even further by bringing his technical expertise to bear on Jahai classifications of space and landscape (for example, Burenhult, 2004, 2005, 2008). My own, as yet incomplete, contributions to this sub-genre began by analysing Batek folklore (Lye, 1994), which revealed implicit understandings of culture-nature relations, developed into an interest in hunter-gatherer landscape concepts (Lye, 1997), and were finally shaped, via the Batek's intervention, into a study of concepts of degradation (Lye, 2004). This research trajectory suggests that there is always 'something more' to learn from Orang Asli knowledge of the environment; for example, Lye (2011) discusses the environmental history of Orang Asli and conservation in Malaysia.

Orang Asli environmental concepts, as with their constructions of identity (see below) are ever-changing and responsive to changes in the larger environment; the monitoring of these changes in knowledge bases, philosophies, and politics over a long period of time is itself a fascinating study.

The overall social-political-environmental impacts of development are well documented and critiqued, but many studies were written from 'victims of progress' and 'impact studies' approaches (Dentan et al., 1997; Endicott 1979b; Hood and Hasan, 1984; Lai, 2008; Lim and Gomes, 1990; Nicholas, 2000; Nowak, 1985; Yong, 2006). Studies of this sort are valuable for monitoring and policy-critique purposes, but the older studies in particular lack understanding of Orang Asli agency. Orang Asli, no doubt, have borne the brunt of environmental destruction, but they have also welcomed many sorts of changes that outsiders considered in wholly negative terms—such as the new roads developed from the 1980s onwards (Lye, 2005).

It goes without saying that identity politics is a contentious issue with a long pedigree, whether in Malaysia or anywhere else. In line with the broader changes discussed in this section, it is not surprising that issues related to identity-construction have become a 'hot topic' in Orang Asli studies, almost to the point of fatigue. Researchers are now looking at the topic sideways and backwards: going back in time (for example, Sandra Khor Manickam at the Australian National University is preparing a doctoral dissertation detailing colonial racial classifications¹⁸); addressing questions of citizenship and human rights (Nah, 2003, 2006); analysing the larger implications of using the legal arena to configure the relationship between the state and the Orang Asli (Idrus, 2008); critiquing assimilation, *bumiputera* and Islamisation policies on grounds of equity and social justice (Nicholas, 2003); and so on.

Beyond these questions of identity—how Orang Asli construct their identities, how those identities are constructed by the broader world, and the directions of change under the current political regime—researchers have also sought to treat this issue with greater nuance. This last question requires a more substantive look at the *content* of Orang Asli identity and ethnicity. As this paper was going to press, I learnt of four new papers that promise to do just this, by examining the conditions of Orang Asli pacifism, autonomy and egalitarianism (Benjamin, 2011a; Dentan, 2011; Endicott, 2011; Howell, 2011).

One of the most sociological monographs is Nobuta's (2009) of the Parit Gong Temuan, which examines how governmental policies of assimilation and Islamisation are causing new social divisions in the community, i.e., creating new marginalities within an already marginal community. Another community study, Dallos' (2011) on the changing household organisations of Lanoh in Hulu Perak,

possesses the same kind of flavour. I do not imply that the community approach is preferable, but it does yield fine-grained data on the effects of government policies that is not available from macro-level studies. In a related vein, Gomes (2007) has published his long-awaited survey of modernity and the Jahai. Like Dentan's, this study is the result of many years of monitoring changes in a community that the researcher first visited as a young student. None of these community studies, based on careful scrutiny of distinct social groups, gives a ringing endorsement for the benefits of development.

CONCLUSION

Benjamin (1989: 8) recalled that, until Robert Dentan began his studies of the Semai in the early 1960s, literature on the Orang Asli "had come to form a closed historical corpus, just large enough for any one scholar to master". That is, of course, no longer true; even specialists find it hard to keep up with the latest work.¹⁹ Orang Asli research is now coming from all directions, not just from a small group of core specialists.

However, much basic ethnography remains unfinished. For example, as one can see from the group index of the Orang Asli *Bibliography* (Lye, 2001: 269–273), very little is known about smaller groups like Batek Tanum, Batek Nong, Orang Kanaq and Orang Kuala (in contrast, the groups that have attracted the most interest have been Semai, Temiar and Temuan). Some of these gaps are being met at research centres like Centre for Malaysian Indigenous Studies, Universiti Malaya (UM), founded in 2004, and tangentially, the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (mentioned earlier), where social forester Lim Hin Fui (H. F. Lim, 1997) has long worked. Findings from the UM Centre have not thus far been distributed widely; one hopes that it will become a vibrant centre for training future researchers as well. There is simply too much work to be done and not enough people to do it.

In view of the rapid changes happening among the Orang Asli today, any ethnography is dangerously close to becoming history in just years rather than decades, which makes documentation of the lesser-known communities even more urgent. Aside from scholarly imperatives, there are political reasons for promoting greater ethnographic awareness. Much of social policy is based on incomplete information (or wilful ignorance of established "truths"). The standard development model is premised on one-size-fits-all ideologies, a point also raised (in a different way) by Nicholas (2003). Policies are made and implemented without sensitivity to the diverse ways of life of disparate Orang Asli communities. What works for some Orang Asli may not work for others. Just to take one example, between town-based Temuan in Selangor and forest-

dwelling Batek in Taman Negara there is very little socio-cultural similarity. However, as they are all Orang Asli, they come under the same administration and are expected to adapt themselves to the same standard model of development. Policy (e.g., in land, health, education and poverty alleviation) might improve if it were based on basic acknowledgement of this diversity. On the other hand, much of the necessary documentation has not been done.

However, being agentive rather than passive, Orang Asli adapt to the constraints of the state in different ways, and this is the basis for further socio-cultural differentiation: both externally in relation to other Malaysian peoples and internally within any single ethnic group. Nevertheless, while they change, they also retain their cultural norms and ideologies and resist efforts to absorb them into the broader society (Lye, 1997). The foregoing studies aside, there has not been enough work on the process of differentiation, whether political, cultural or sociological. For example, Semang in the northern states (especially in Hulu Perak and Kedah) used to be among the best known of the Orang Asli due to the efforts of Evans and Schebesta. In the early 1970s, research by Universiti Sains Malaysia lecturers and students (narrated above) updated the ethnography somewhat. Since then, there has only been one long-term doctoral-level study in this ethnographic area (Dallos, 2011) to add to the linguistic work of Niclas Burenhult and his associates (Burenhult, Kruspe and Dunn, in press; Burenhult and Wegener, 2009).²⁰ Over these decades, there have been some major social-spatial changes, especially via the construction of the Temenggor Dam, the East-West Highway, and rural urbanisation processes (Endicott, 1979b; Yong, 2006). However, we still do not have a general idea of the welfare, spatial distribution, or assimilational strategies of most of the Orang Asli in this region, including any involvement they might have in tourism and conservation projects.

With more Orang Asli writing ethnography now, some of the gaps have a better chance of being filled. My own hope would be to see more Orang Asli students going back to communities to work with their elders (as Juli did for his dissertation). As mentioned above in connection with the Emergency, the memories of Orang Asli are not fully recorded, and much will never be. For example, I deeply regret not visiting the Ceq Wong elders Beng and Patong in Krau, for they had worked in Taman Negara and encountered the Batek there in the 1950s. Now it is too late: these two gentlemen are dead.

Social memories can be expressed in creative ways, whether through the recall of fragile elders, transmitted via casual chat and genealogies, memorialised in arts and crafts, encoded in myth, folklore, song and other performance genres, or inscribed in stories of the landscape. This review essay, and the 2001 bibliographical project that made it possible, has also been an expression of social memory: memories of research experiences and leads held by the elders

among Orang Asli specialists, transmitted via conversation and text to younger researchers and materialised in book and article forms. In brief, I have learnt much from this ongoing conversation and I hope the research overview provided in this article, together with notes on work that still needs to be done, will encourage more researchers to enter the field.

NOTES

1. The original research on which this article is based was partially funded by a postdoctoral fellowship from the Japan Society for Promotion of Science (1998–2000), which enabled my participation in the Center of Excellence project of Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies. I would like to thank Koji Tanaka, my host professor, and Tachimoto Narifumi, Director of the Center at the time, for supporting the publication of the Orang Asli *Bibliography* (2001) that has, in turn, resulted in this review. I also thank Adela Baer, Geoffrey Benjamin, Colin Nicholas, Rahman Embong, Chin Yee Whah and Francis Loh for valuable feedback on earlier versions of this article and Geoffrey Benjamin, Colin Nicholas, Alberto Gomes and Rusalina Idrus for sending additional research materials.
2. As far as I am aware.
3. Space constraints do not permit a wider coverage of relevant studies.
4. Technically, 'Aslian' refers to a distinctive group of approximately twenty Mon-Khmer languages spoken in north and central Peninsular Malaysia and the Isthmian parts of Thailand, which is further subdivided into Northern, Central and Southern Aslian. Farther south, the Melayu Asli languages are Austronesian, the language family to which Malay also belongs. Outside linguistics, 'Aslian' may refer to general aspects of Orang Asli life and scholarship. The Department of Orang Asli Development (*Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli*, JAKOA; formerly the *Jabatan Hal-Ehwal Orang Asli*, JHEOA) lists 18 Orang Asli populations divided into 3 ethnolinguistic groups, but this leaves out other groups such as Temoq, Semnam, Batek Nóng and Batek Tanum. Moreover, as specialists point out, the tripartite division discounts complex cases such as the Ceq Wong, linguistically Northern Aslian (Semang) but culturally Senoi, and Lanoh, culturally Semang but linguistically Central Aslian (see Burenhult, Kruspe and Dunn, in press).
5. Not to be forgotten is Skeat's memoirs of the 1899 Cambridge Expedition, written from the perspective of old age but vivid with fascinating detail about the Malayan social-ecological landscape of that time (Skeat, 1953).
6. Portions of this now sadly defunct journal have been scanned and are available online in scattered places.
7. Originally intended to be the first of four parts, but no trace remains of the other three parts (Geoffrey Benjamin, personal communication, 3 June 2011).
8. Established on the site of the former Tahan Game Reserve and enacted as King George V National Park.
9. See Nicholas (1992) for a critique.
10. However, as Geoffrey Benjamin (personal communication, 3 June 2011) reminds me, as far as geography is concerned, it was Darryl Forde's chapter on 'Semang and

Sakai' in his *Economy and Society* (1934: 11–23) that had the widest influence until relatively recently.

11. This point should be remembered by present-day researchers on Orang Asli health, who often describe the symptoms (the low health status of Orang Asli) without addressing the causes (governmental neglect, environmental degradation, land appropriation and community displacement).
12. Translated into Malay and then reissued in a new format by the Center for Orang Asli Concerns.
13. The linguist Gérard Diffloth also began his work with Aslian languages around this time, as did Asmah Haji Omar, whose Honours thesis on Kintaq linguistics was submitted in 1964.
14. I do not include Shuichi Nagata in this list, as his association with Orang Asli studies began not as a newly arrived student from Japan but as a lecturer at Universiti Sains Malaysia in the 1970s (see, for example, Nagata, 1973).
15. This is not, of course, a problem unique to Orang Asli studies.
16. To my knowledge, no postgraduate training of anthropology in Malaysia includes substantive instruction in linguistics.
17. This division is rough-and-ready only. I would not claim that all the writers I identify as using one or other of these approaches identify with those approaches, either generally or exclusively.
18. Unpublished draft of doctoral dissertation materials shared by the author (Sandra Khor Manickam, personal communication, 16 September 2010).
19. A yahoo discussion group for Orang Asli specialists was formed in the early 1990s with the express aim of enabling scholars to keep in touch with the latest work and issues. It took the place of the *Orang Asli Studies Newsletter*, edited by Kirk Endicott from 1982–1995.
20. Yong (2006) compared the effects of the Temenggor and Kuala Selangor dams on the Jahai and Temuan, respectively, based on several months of field observations in each location. It was not a long-term community study.

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