

Bases of Traditional Authority among the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine some basic factors connected with authority and leadership in traditional Orang Asli society. For this purpose, two societies were chosen, i.e. the Temiar as studied by Benjamin in the 1960s and the Temuan as studied by Baharon in the 1970s. The two societies were compared from the point of view of the perception of its members towards their headmen or leaders. The ethnographic evidence shows that while the Temuan clearly use concepts of authority and leadership based on their adat (customs) to regulate interaction between members, such concepts are not relevant to the same degree among the Temiar.

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini bertujuan untuk meneliti beberapa faktor asas dalam sistem wibawa dan kepimpinan masyarakat Orang Asli tradisional. Dua buah masyarakat telah dipilih, iaitu masyarakat Temiar yang telah dikaji oleh Benjamin pada tahun 1960-an dan masyarakat Temuan yang telah dikaji oleh Baharon pada awal tahun 1970-an. Kedua-dua masyarakat dibanding dari sudut persepsi anggotanya terhadap pihak yang berperanan mengetuai masyarakat mereka. Didapati dari bukti-bukti etnografis bahawa masyarakat Temuan menggunakan konsep-konsep wibawa dan kepimpinan yang terkandung dalam sistem adat kelompoknya adalah lebih jelas menguasai sistem interaksi antara anggota masyarakat itu kalau dibandingkan dengan masyarakat Temiar.

INTRODUCTION

The study of authority and leadership in non-stratified societies has a relatively long history, culminating in some classic formulations on Africa (e.g. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1940) and later Oceania (e.g. Sahlins, 1968). This paper attempts a small contribution in the same types of

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societies in the Malay Peninsula. It also aims to compare, albeit in a limited scope, studies on highland and "peripheral" societies of the peninsula and the wider studies on Malay civilizations in Southeast Asia. What ever minor benefits we might acquire from such a comparison would be in the interest of the reexamination of concepts which were unchallenged over a long period. Perhaps, principally because both fields of study have been developed along different lines, and therefore have asked different questions, *Orang Asli*¹ and Malay studies have been conducted without an awareness of several overlapping areas between them. One such area is that of traditional authority, power and charismatic leadership. Who are the "big men" in traditional Malay society? Where were their powers mainly derived from, and what were the perceptions of the *rakyat* (common people) towards them? These and other questions connected with the evolution of the idea of the *negara bangsa* (Malay nation state), the organization of the warrior class and their attitudes towards the royal court are topics which can be made the subject of joint research.

This paper looks into two types of traditional political authority among the Orang Asli of Malaysia, using material from two main sources, namely, Benjamin (1968) and Baharon (1973). The aim is to delineate the different "models" of traditional authority found in both societies in order to trace how these have evolved as a response to various factors, to their present form. A broader objective of the paper lies in its relevance to socio-political studies in Malaysia. Studies by local scholars such as S. Hussein Al-Atas (1968) and S. Husin Ali (1975) have earlier attempted in their own styles to discuss specifically Malay ideas and perceptions of authority and leadership using sociological analysis as their main tool. How their ideas contrast with more anthropological interpretations should be of primary importance in any holistic review of the situation.

Many aspects of Orang Asli conceptions of authority and leadership are closely interconnected with Malay ideas on the subject. Indeed, on many points I speculate the connection to be one of continuity, that models of societal hierarchy among societies on the Peninsular Malaysia should be best understood as modes of adaptation, or adaptive responses to sociocultural stimuli emanating from the wider social and ecological environment. Local Malaysian sociologists have basically failed to look into the relevance of Orang Asli conceptions of authority and leadership mainly because of the persistent notion that the latter are not directly significant, i.e. that simple societies have straightforward "unsophisticated" notions of social organization. In this connection, nothing is farther from the real empirical situation. I will therefore hazard the view that an adequate analysis of authority and leadership in Malay society should benefit a great deal from concepts which are relevant to Orang Asli societies.

TWO MODELS

This section presents some ethnographical details pertaining to the Temiar and the Temuan, two communities which have been relatively well studied (Figure 1). Traditional authority among the two communities refers of social power given to a person or persons through a process of a consensus of values by members of the community in dealing with its own members and the outside world. There is, therefore, an internal societal agreement as well as an external perception of such agreement which the community wishes to project to the outside world. The latter point will be made clearer as we go on.

The idea of a model of traditional authority is applied here insofar as it points to a pattern which has evolved within a certain local social framework. This is a useful method of perceiving the evolution of the degree of social dominance and "patronage" in small-scale societies such as the Orang Asli. This also helps to draw attention to differences in the opinions of members of a society regarding their own values, which are a product of the dynamic interplay of the many biological and environmental factors.

THE TEMIAR MODEL

Benjamin (1968) stated that in the earlier stages of its history Temiar society never really needed any leaders. Nor was there any conclusive evidence dating to the British colonial times to support the notion that there were designated headmen of any specific group of villagers. Temiar had only a loosely formed village community based to a large extent on kinship and marriage. There was a preference for Temiar natives to marry their own kind, although marriage with other Orang Asli (Semai, Semelai, for instance) was not frowned upon. There also existed an "openness" in Temiar values with regard to marriages with non-Orang Asli outsiders. Marriages of Temiar women to Chinese men (which sometimes did not fare very well) was not unknown in the community and appeared to indicate that outsiders could be easily absorbed into the community and, presumably, assume social authority if they fulfilled certain requirements deemed important by the villagers.

Previously, Temiar did not have much to do with outsiders beyond wanting from them commodities such as salt and iron. But the situation had changed since Benjamin began his study in the mid '60s. When the Temiar wanted to travel, or get supplies, they visited relatives in river valleys nearby. Or, when they organized small expeditions to the neighboring Semai land, it was mainly to find out how the other world lived. Like other Orang Asli, the Temiar had a very developed anthropological (ethnological) instinct, a characteristic Benjamin noted. It appeared that the most distinctive field of knowledge,

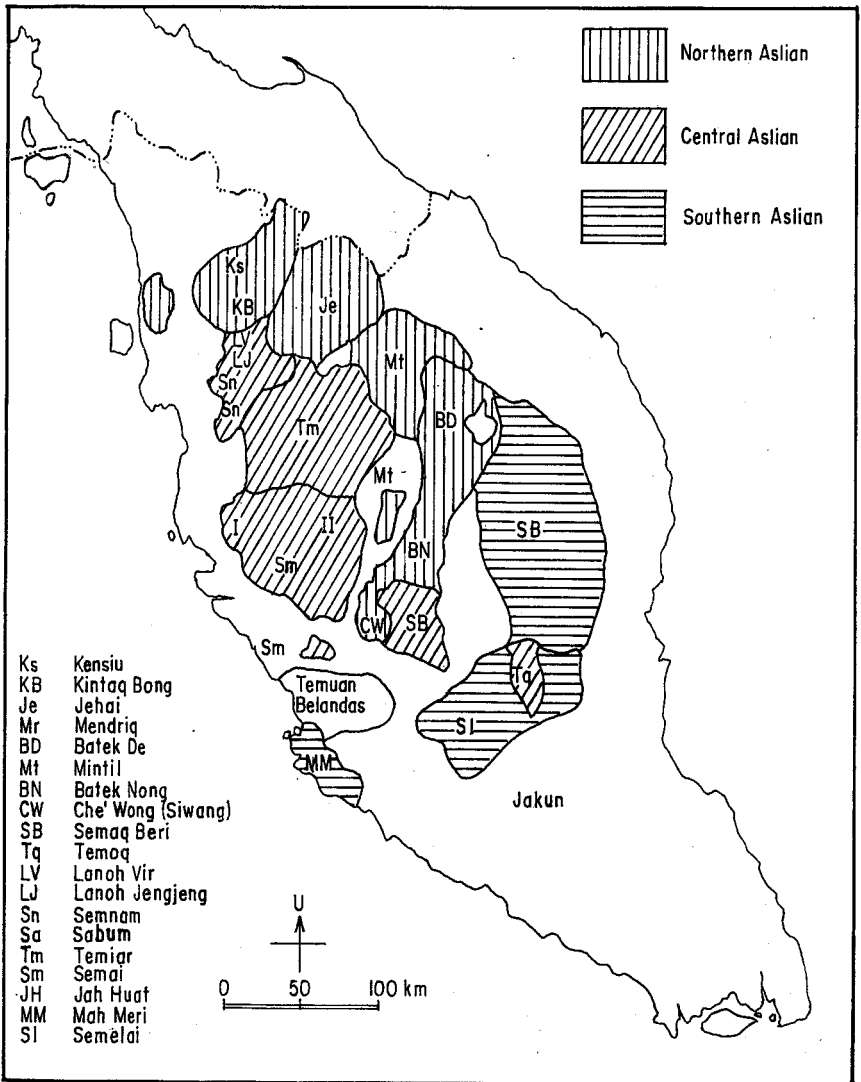


FIGURE 1. Peninsular Malaysia: Orang Asli areas
 Source: Benjamin (1983)

indeed the specialized knowledge that Temiar (or other Orang Asli people) possessed in their educational repertoire, was that concerning Malays and their social customs. Thus it was hardly surprising that even though they had little urban experience, the Temiar tended to look at their society "through the screen of Malay culture" (1966: 5). Accordingly, when asked who their headman was, the Temiar response would be to introduce the eldest among a group of kinsfolk, not someone who held a position of authority or power by virtue of having been elected. It would seem there was no incumbent headman with a designated authority who passed it down through a fixed order of succession. Benjamin sociologized that:

... just like a headman imposed by outsiders, with no native basis, exists only in the pages of official documents ... the ideal charismatic native leader exists only in the realm of Temiar mythology. Temiar origin myths sometimes make reference to elementary social groupings at whose head is a man known as the *keril*. This word implies dominance in the behavioral sense; it is the word Temiar used to describe the dominant male among those species of social animals with which they are familiar. When applied to men, it refers, according to my informants, to those with prepotent strength and impressive appearance – but it is never, as far as I know, applied to any mere mortal men.

Headmen, specially charismatic ones, are a unique and rare species. For the Temiar, who are mostly down-to-earth in their approach to life, men first have to be elevated to the higher pedestal of historical fame before they become immortalized as "superior" or outstanding mortals. In other words, perception of a person's greatness comes usually after his death, when a certain perspective raises him to a level higher than that of ordinary men. In this sense, it is possible to speak of great leaders, simply because they had exhibited some commendable social ability when they were alive.

But who are day-to-day leaders with authority among the Temiar? The answer is simple: they are the ones who are senior in age and are able to organize the community's housing and farming activities (Benjamin, p.4). Anyone with a great deal of experience would be able to develop and teach everything to young members of the community, from the art of farming to learning magic spells necessary in quelling thunderstorms. Thus, many are capable of becoming influential and politically strong within the community, given a homogeneous population and a straightforward attitude of respect for traditional knowledge. However, Benjamin says that a headman must also be able to deal effectively with outsiders. This is the crux of the matter. Community leaders who are withdrawn, are unable to speak fluent Malay, or who do not have the benefit of having travelled beyond their own village or river-valley are almost always non-leaders in the Temiar political context. This is because the Temiar realize the advantage of learning new things and the ability to solve "diplomatic" problems involving outsiders, who are mainly Malays. The normal mechanism for ensuring practical and effective communication with

outsiders is to “appoint” someone who has both the inclination and the natural ability to play the role. However, he is not appointed a leader because the values of the Temiar do not demand that he be appointed, so he remains an “ordinary villager.” Among the Temiar there is little display of political sense, i.e. they do not outwit each other politically. Nor is it felt there is much to be gained from being dominant for the sake of being so.

Political authority clearly does not have roots in Temiar traditions. The problem for the Temiar then is when the outside world encroaches on their lives: who should be the mediators between them and the outsiders?

Benjamin cautions outsiders against making a mistaken interpretation. The only words present in the Temiar language referring to Temiar mediators with the outside world are *tuwo* and *tugɔ*, both of which hardly point to any definitive connotation of authority or leadership. Although another ethnographer, Carey, earlier suggested that the two terms are titles given respectively to the highest ranking and the subsidiary authorities of a series of hierarchically segmented villages, Benjamin denies that there is any empirical evidence to support this, and except for one instance, all of them have equal status. In the '60s, Benjamin states that apart from a government chief who was in charge of the Betis river area, there was another “relevant Malay chief” of the same area, called the *To' Mikong*. Temiar leaders, when they eventually get appointed by outside agencies such as the *Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli*, are in practice known as *tuwo* in their villages and it is they who appear to be the ones with charismatic qualities. Thus, for our purpose, it is not the *To' Mikong* but the Temiar *tuwo* who can be regarded as a community leader in every social sense.

On the whole, the idea of headmanship as we normally understand it is alien to Temiar, more so if a headman insists he be recognized as one in an area where nobody knows him at all. There is no straightforward, consistent recognized system operating in Temiar land. A leader in one part of the country has no assurance that his position will be easily acknowledged by people in another area. Benjamin reminds us, for instance, that there is no indigenous basis for a downstream headman to extend his authority over Temiar living upstream. Mistrust of outsiders is often the deciding factor. Benjamin remarks:

I was told by people in the uppermost village of the Perolak valley that in the old days if a Temiar *penghulu* (headman) arrived from downstream wielding his “*surat kuasa*” (letter of authority) the children would run from him in fear exactly as if he were a Malay; and adults would also be very apprehensive. The intruding *penghulu* would simply proclaim the *Gob*, the Malay strangers, had given him suzerainty over the whole area.

Modern-day Temiar are appointed by the government and may not have charismatic qualities to support their position. Education, ability to earn a cash income, and a general facility in dealing with outside agencies

(government or otherwise) count for much more for the aspiring Temiar. One consequence of social change introduced into their community (such as regroupment schemes) is seen in the erosion of traditional values, including those pertaining to leadership. The progressive "encapsulation" - to borrow the term adopted by Benjamin - of the Temiar social order aims at producing villagers who are able to adapt quickly to the cash economy. In this context, it is not improbable to assume that Temiar would continue to reorient themselves towards choosing a more entrepreneur like the headman than they had in the past.

THE TEMUAN MODEL

The matrilineal Temuan of Negeri Sembilan provides an example of a political system which can be regarded as the most advanced, even exceptional for an Orang Asli group. Here, the structure of hierarchical power is well developed and established by closely observed oral traditions. Baharon (1973: 18), quoting an earlier source, confirmed that the Temuan village or *kampung* "conceived of as a corporation of people in relation to their estate," is "ruled" by a hierarchy of leaders who rank, in order of precedence: Batin, Jenang, Jekerah, plus a number of *Pelimas/Panglimas*. He further adds that in certain communities, the *Batin*, in the absence of, or in addition to, the Jenang and Jekerah, is assisted by *Mangku/Pemangku* and *Menteri*. Temuan have to be understood as a society which is directly involved with the social and political history of the wider political state, i.e. Negeri Sembilan, in which it is encapsulated. This point accentuates even more the political status of the position of *batin* and renders it as a powerful office in his local community.

Temuan social life in traditional times was regulated by basic values such as commensalism, and food-sharing, clearly expressed in the concept of *makan sejangbak* (to eat together or to share a meal together from the same "spread") and that or *punan* (the belief disaster would strike one whose desire, usually for food, is not immediately fulfilled). It is interesting to note that these beliefs are shared widely by other Orang Asli peoples on the peninsula. Though we are not provided by Baharon with more details regarding the beliefs of the Temuan, other aspects of their social life indicate close adherence to traditions shared by Orang Asli in the central regions (e.g. the Senoi Jah Het and Semelai of Pahang). But if this can be taken as an ethnographic probability, where traditional authority is concerned the Temuan have to be singled out as a unique group. Baharon refers to "a basic cluster of leadership offices" all the holders of which are ranked in the form of a hierarchy "above the untitled members of the local community." In this context, some ranks are designated as inherited (*pesaka*) or uninherited ones. Accordingly, "legends and myths say that four of the leadership office, *Batin*, *Menteri*, *Jenang* and *Jekerah* were in

existence since the days of their moyangs (“ancestors”) - having come from Pulau Percha (Sumatra). It is therefore noteworthy that Temuan do sometimes make categorical distinctions particularly in respect of the batinships that are found in their communities today. It is now said that there are two types of Batin, namely (a) *Batin Pesaka* and (b) *Batin Baru*.”

We are concerned here primarily with the *Batin Pesaka* whose ancestry appears to be traceable to the original headmen held by the four successors to the Temuan culture hero Batin Pah Galang or Batin Mepatih, although as it happens today here is little real difference between them. The real bases of traditional authority lie in their genealogical legitimacy enshrined in the Temuan *adat* (traditions) and the non-traditional locus of power which lies outside the *adat*. In any case, effective authority is confined only to the local community.

The distinguishing element in the ideological structure of Temuan political thinking lies in their categorical adherence to matrilineality. Leadership offices are declared never to be designated from father to son. Baharon (p. 112-113) quotes the Temuan declaration: “*kita bukan Raja ...*(we are not Raja or kings;” only they can transmit their offices from father to son) and to do so or to transmit the offices to those who are not ‘rightful’ heirs would be *tulah* (being in a state of “supernatural” or “divine” curse) and “*kalau nyap cacat, cedera ...nyap rosak, binasa*” (a situation likely to bring about physical harm or even some dire catastrophe to the successors).”

In theory the Temuan claim that all leadership office must be passed on from a man to his sister’s son (*anak buah*) and this must satisfy the following conditions, namely rightful clan (*perut*) affiliation and rightful base (*telapak*). He must be an adult, without serious physical or mental handicaps, outstanding, i.e. virtuous in the sense that he is not greedy (*hakap*) and possesses sound knowledge of traditions (*adat*). Close examination, however, reveals a lack of consistency between theory and practice, causing people to distinguish between those holders of office who are properly qualified called *nerima pesaka*, *megang pesaka* and those who are not, called *nyandang pesaka* (to wear the inheritance).

Temuan traditions elaborate very succinctly the force of traditional “edicts” which help to maintain law and order in society. The pristine authority structure according to the *adat* is enunciated in the passages p. 137:

<i>Batin</i>	substance of state
<i>Menteri</i>	Adat levels
<i>Jenang</i>	safeguards Adat
<i>Jekerah</i>	has kin
	morning opens
	evening closes

Pelima' Kicking horse
 Sailor boat
 Hunter dog
 Order directed by Jekerah

Baharon explains that the *batin* is the chief custodian (*ibu Adat*, "mother of Adat") and reflection of the Temuan political "state"; the *Menteri* serves as "leveller" and counsellor, specially in the administration of law; the *Jenang* is master of all official ceremonies as well as "the eyes and ears" of the community, appointed to see that traditions are not flouted; the *Jekerah* organizes day-to-day affairs such as work in the community (a "sergeant," said Baharon's informant!) and the *Pelima* helps discharge the day's work by leading work groups. The idea of a corporate unit working under the dictates of meticulous traditions symbolizes a sophisticated approach to social problems.

The Temuan concept of society effectively underlines the need for an integrated and harmonious articulation between group life and social choice. Compared with *Orang Asli* communities in other parts of peninsular Malaysia, Temuan social life seems to be clearly marked by underfined social rules. The main question must be whether the Temuan are *Orang Asli* in the accepted sense or whether they are been conceived as *Orang Asli* through some accident of history.

OBSERVATION

The important question in this paper is the ethnographic description of authority and leadership. Systems of leadership in small-scale societies change in time, depending on developments within the society. But even more significantly, most of the changes in these societies have come about as a result of the more dramatic changes from outside influences. This may point to several things.

Firstly, small-scale communities, once relatively isolated from external changes, could no longer withstand the imminent impact of such changes. Instances of this nature are usually preceded by the encroachment on such communities of outsiders in pursuit of their economic interests. Secondly, economic changes taking place in these small-scale communities sooner or later generally transform relationships among their members. These include affecting their view of the world, resulting in tensions between groups, dislocating the traditional political structure of authority, even imposing new values on people without them being fully aware that such changes have been systematically orchestrated by foreign sociopolitical forces.

The *Orang Asli's* response to changes from the wider national Malaysian society illustrates this point. It is therefore apparent that

within the stage of the historical development of Orang Asli communities, one of the most significant social facts that have brought about dramatic changes has specifically been the progressive incursion of economic and political values from outside their traditional domain of life. This has steadily eroded time-honored relationships regulating conduct between members of the community and the different segments within it. This point can be illustrated clearly in a case study in Pahang. In a remarkable account of the Jah Het of the Krau Game Reserve, Couillard (1980) described how social changes brought about a conflict in value-orientation among two groups of woodcarvers whom she calls "orthodox" and "unorthodox." Conflict between the two groups created a tense situation between those who adhered to the traditions of woodcarving and those who "modified" it. This tension, however, was symptomatic of the wider changes in the Jah Het structure of social relations. What took place in the community was an all-encompassing sweep of changes, in the economic, social and political fields.

Jah Het's increased commitment to middlemen-traders who had come to their doorsteps (after the government built a road into the Game Reserve) with their higher expectations had not been compensated by the fall in the supply of forest products such as *gaharu* wood and rattan. With these changes in the local scene, concepts of change in leadership followed. New leaders emerged as the traditionally defined headmen lost their clout.

What happens to traditions of oral exercises and beliefs which have supported authority structure among the Temiar and Temuan? Both communities present contrasting facades in this matter. In any case, established positions of leadership and influence have taken different forms through the stability in the modes of livelihood, in a way which has enabled members of the society to carve out an ecological niche in order to survive well. Over some years, the Temiar have practised swidden horticulture, supplemented by fishing and foraging. The Temuan have achieved a more sedentary existence, even though swidden cultivation, collecting and fishing are important sources of income and daily subsistence. Authority structures in these two communities have evolved and become enjoined in their "oral traditions" because the society has managed to respond positively to the environment, through a process of adaptation and exploitation. Perhaps from his viewpoint we can understand how the Temiar may be mistrustful of outsiders and how they could yet accommodate, rather than reject, them. The bases of authority lie in the stability of the social order which, if it was not subject to forces of change (specially the changes in the modes of livelihood), would continue to function. Orang Asli had in the past generally found a "place" in Malayan forest because they had forged a relationship resembling symbiosis with it. They did not exploit the whole of nature but only a portion of it.

The Temiar and Temuan models of traditional authority — contrasting as they are in many respects — also seem to have some ideological similarities. For instance, although neither Benjamin nor Baharon had mentioned it, there seems to be a marked absence of a concept of psychological superiority/inferiority in the social fabric of both societies. Apart from the few individuals whom the Temiar agree to call their leaders, the rest of society are all lumped together as *kaki* and *kulih* (coolies), a term clearly “pitchforked” from Malay usage. The confusion of terms may even be a deliberate attempt by the Temiar to turn concepts imposed by outsiders upside down. In any case, this is a clear instance of the incongruity of the alien notions of leadership as it pertains to the Temiar milieu. In a similar vein, the Temuan’s facade of hierarchy persists in an ideological vacuum. There are absolutely no social classes in Temuan society and if anyone was asked to define the structural relations between groups in any cluster of clans, the defining principles would be based on kinship and marriage. For the most part, the Temuan insists on the *adat* functions of their *Batin* and his retinue because the tradition of the ancestors made it imperative. There appears to be little indication that the social structure of today’s Temuan actually depends on the idea of ranking as a base. My own interpretation is that Temuan society is essentially very egalitarian; the mechanisms in the traditional authority structure ensure that this is perpetuated.

In both Temiar and Temuan and possibly Orang Asli cases in general, the notion of authority and leadership does not relate to socially pure and impure ideas, as in is in the Hindu case (see Dumont 1970). If anything, its absence is conspicuous. And this fact assumes increasing importance as, for instance, when a researcher tries to understand dichotomies of the clean and unclean among them. The ideas of an inherent essence present in the pure and the impure would exclude abstract classifications of good and bad, right and wrong, high and low in society. Little, if any, of such classifications exist in Orang Asli societies. Further investigations on this aspect may be worthwhile.

Age-old Temiar and Temuan societies will change as they continue to be incorporated into the Malaysian political system. As the structure of the Orang Asli economic system continues to be more “open” as they depend on the capitalistic system outside, new leaders with radical concepts of authority will emerge. Education and improved communication have forged a new consciousness among young Orang Asli today, which should be the subject of another paper.

NOTE

¹The term Orang Asli refers to the aboriginal people of peninsular Malaysia, as defined in Act 134 of the Malaysian constitution. They number about 70,000 speaking some 12 languages of the Austroasiatic and Austronesian variety. Linguistic research on these languages is still in its

infant stage while classification into ethnic divisions has made some headway. The term *Aslian* was suggested as a better alternative to the term *Orang Asli*, but this has not received official sanction by the government. The application of this term, however, is not relevant to *all* *Orang Asli* as pointed out by Benjamin in this volume.

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