'Behaving like a Jakun!' A case study of conflict, 'othering' and indigenous knowledge in the Orang Asli of Tasik Chini

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a condensed ethnographic study of the indigenous Jakun Orang Asli of Tasik Chini in West Malaysia. The title of the paper refers to a Malay verbal chastisement in making derogatory associations of the Jakun with barbarous and uncouth behaviour. This in turn is heavily implicated in the *bangsa* 'race'/ethnic politics of contemporary Malaysia and the socio-political pre-eminence of the Malay *bumiputera* ('sons of the soil') majority in contrast to the historically oppressed and the contemporary marginalized position of Orang Asli indigenous people. The aforementioned pejorative saying is here deconstructed through an analysis of traditional forms of social interaction in localised conflict resolution among the Jakun, who culturally gravitate towards indigenous forms of peaceful negotiation and democratic dialogue. The efficacy of this preferred approach is discussed in relation to the devastatingly damaging incursions of big industry into their traditional territories connected to Government-mandated social and economic development policies. The Jakun people's struggles to find effective strategies to resist the destruction of their environment is integrally bound up with their traditional way of life and beliefs, which are explored through binaries reflecting the confluence of the 'old' and the 'new'.

Keywords: Orang Asli, indigenous, Malaysia, conflict-resolution, development

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Introduction

This article examines some of the ways in which the Jakun tribe of Orang Asli, the indigenous peoples of peninsular Malaysia, have been treated as contemporary Malaysia moves forward in its bid to secure ‘developed’ status by 2020. The term ‘Orang Asli’ itself has a recent history with indigenous peoples in peninsular Malaysia recognizing greater diversity between different tribes and groups than this terminology affords. It has only been since the 1948-1960 ‘Emergency’ period that they were accorded this all-encompassing descriptor, seeing potential political benefits in its later adoption (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016; Nicholas, 2000). This paper stems from ethnographic work conducted by the authors with the predominantly Jakun peoples of the Tasik Chini area of Pahang, Malaysia in 2014.

The phrase *anda berkelakuan sama seperti Jakun* ‘you’re behaving just like a Jakun[5]’ educes similar connotations to those resulting from the earlier pejorative use of *Sakai* (meaning ‘slave’), employed as a homogenising adjectival noun to describe the Senoi people (Carey, 1976), particular groups such as the Semai (Gomes, 2004), and the Orang Asli as a whole. The depreciatory use of the phrase emphasizes a sub-human and slave-like status (Nicholas, 2000). So, to say to a child that they are behaving like a Jakun implies the child is acting badly and the unspoken assumptions underlying its use perpetuate a myth of low morals, poor behaviour and backwardness that traverses accepted social norms (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016). These norms are largely those constructed by the assumed elite of Malaysia, the Malay people. Since *Merdeka* (independence from British colonial administration), the Malay people have an assumed superiority politically and financially as well as by virtue of religious pre-eminence, Islam. This is further embedded by the constructions of a natural indigenous lineage: that of being Malay Muslim ‘*bumiputeras’* (translated as the ‘sons of the soil’) (Ooi, 2003). The inherent contradictions of indigenous elitism, as constructed by the Malay *bumiputera* discourse, in opposition to the claims of the indigenous Orang Asli, is a topic discussed elsewhere (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2018). However, for the purposes of this paper, the presumptions of superiority-inferiority in the relationship between the Malay majority and the

[5]This phrase was mentioned in a discussion with Prof Hood Salleh, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, when considering the contemporary position of the Orang Asli in society.

Orang Asli minorities foregrounds the socio-political, economic and identity marginalization of indigenous minority ethnic (ME) groups, as discussed here, and demonstrates the pervasive discriminatory discourses against them epitomised by the pejorative language 'behaving like a Jakun'.

Malaysia has long grappled with the politics of *bangsa* ('race') (Hew and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2012) in this multicultural, multi-faith nation. Having failed to shrug off the former colonial preoccupation with racial classification, race politics are used as a convenient tool for rationalising the nation's idiosyncratic and openly politicized ethnic caste system (Ooi, 2003; Whah and Guan, 2017).

Regarding appellations and the resonances of labels the term 'Jakun' in Bahasa Malaysia can also be translated as 'Adam's apple', which, apart from presenting one of the physical attribute of males, indicates a turning point into sinfulness and being separate from God in Abrahamic religious traditions. Accordingly, this reinforces the notion of an ethnic group of lowly, animistic beliefs and almost irredeemable baseness. A semantic and moral burden of conspicuous stigma is thereby attached to the Jakun by the powerful Malay ethnic majority.

This evokes a potentially negative connotation that Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *doxa* (the assumed, unspoken, taken-for-granted understandings) helps to explain as permeating a long-standing view of the Orang Asli as backward and in need of help. The judgmental phrase introduced above is an insult not only to the child to whom the phrase is applied but also to the Jakun Orang Asli as a people. It also legitimates the exclusionary and discriminatory treatment meted to the Jakun throughout their history and through sanctioned beliefs in their backward, undeveloped and uneducated positions, demonstrated, according to those in power, by not accepting governmental development initiatives (Idrus, 2011).

The Jakun living around the twelve *lauts* (lakes or 'seas') forming Tasik Chini (Hezri and Chan, 2012) display various traditional behaviours and knowledge that challenge the perpetuated myths of these peoples that ignore or define them by negative behaviours associated with them by contemporary Malaysian non-Orang Asli society (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2016). Indeed, their dialogic, conflict-resolution behaviours, based on traditional knowledge and practices, have much to offer to the modern and modernising world. Indigenous Jakun concepts and approaches towards conflict resolution are duly explored

here in relation to a specific but significant example, the despoliation of the Tasik Chini traditional territories by the rampant incursions of big business. Yet although this is a locally confined instance, the gravity and significance of this crisis is part of a greater theme of usurpation and domination that has affected the Orang Asli people as a whole. This example in turn forms a motif in a much more extensive pattern recording the assault on the lands, lifestyles and values of indigenous people globally, which has been recognised as an international concern through the ratification of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, (UNDRIP), to which Malaysia is a signatory (Nicholas et al., 2007).

Background and literature review

Tasik Chini, the second largest natural fresh water lake in Malaysia, represents the traditional land of the Jakun Orang Asli tribe of that region. The Jakun community remains highly dependent on the local ecosystem and the lake system of Tasik Chini for their livelihood and for the maintenance of their culture, reflecting their status as indigenous peoples (Nicholas et al., 2010; UNDRIP, 2007). The people’s economy has been primarily lake- and forest-based, including fishing, hunting and gathering of forest products including herbs and medicines, although modern business developments have had an impact on these traditional livelihoods and on everyday practices amongst the Jakun. However, the Jakun people are settled, not nomadic and, whilst having a fundamental connection with the forest for their lifestyle, earning power and spiritual wellbeing, operate within the modern context; albeit at times in a liminal state ‘betwixt and between’ the traditional and ‘modern’ social structures and mores (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1906).

The Jakun belong to the group of Orang Asli often referred to as ‘Proto-Malays’ (Carey, 1976; Rahman, 2012). This ascription, however, carries a suggestion of subordinacy, of being valued less than contemporary Malay ethnic groups; it adds to the lexicon of derogatory language introduced earlier that carries an inherent ‘othering’ effect that constructs significant value and status distinctions between peoples. Nicholas (2000) follows Benjamin in employing the term ‘Aboriginal Malay’ as a means of appropriately describing the Jakun without demeaning them. We adopt this nomenclature in the present paper.

Historically, it is believed that the Jakun people descended from early migrants, around 2,500 BC, from the Yunon province in China (Osborne, 2013; Rahman, 2012). The Jakun have built a lifestyle based on specialized forest knowledge, considered so valuable for trade with Malay groups from the 16th century CE at least (Carey, 1976; Gomes, 2004; Nicholas, 2000). Such trade links probably existed in some form going back to the 5th century CE and where trading networks with Malays (and other groups) continued right up to the 'Emergency' period of 1948-1960 and beyond (Leary, 1996).

More recent historical data concerning the Jakun around Tasik Chini is limited and sketchy before the recorded floods of 1926 (van der Helm, nd), but villagers we have spoken to tend to corroborate suggestions that more permanent and 'settled' *kampung* (village) sites began to be developed from about 1915, with Orang Asli groups previously living more nomadic lives, and practising a swiddening lifestyle: clearing a forest site, growing and hunting food, and moving on to new grounds. Villagers around the lake talk about five generations having lived in fairly similar *kampung* configurations to those of today, where villages grow and expand as the population increases through marriage across and within their original *kampungs*. The people's understanding of the land and their traditional knowledge use are not static concepts but ones that reflect deep connections with the land around the lake; and these views evolve as the land, and, importantly, social and political life changes.

Tasik Chini, itself, is renowned as an area of scientific and aesthetic significance, but one which has suffered over recent years from a number of serious ecological problems (Pheng, 2014). The first of these was the misguided planning errors in damming the Sungei Chini in the mid-1990s which prevented the ebb and flow of the lake waters according to season badly disrupting the seasonal cycle of growth of flora and fauna, and preventing the cleaning of the lake (Shuhaimi-Othman et al., 2008). The increased pollution from mining activities dangerously close to the lake has resulted in soil erosion from sedimentary run-off into the stagnating waters following logging activities. The aesthetics of the lake have been damaged, resulting in a loss of tourism, the forest areas have been depleted and reduced leading to a diminished area in which the people around the lake can practice their traditional lifestyles. Now the once limpid lake has become so polluted so that the waters are no longer considered potable nor are the fish of the same quality as the people were used

to, although the scientific evidence on this to date remains equivocal (Ahmad et al., 2010; Mustafa and Nilgum, 2006).

Alongside these changes, 'big agriculture', in the form of FELDA (Federal Land Development Agency) and FELCRA (Federal Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority) plantations, have consumed great swathes of forest area for oil palm production reducing further the land traditionally inhabited and worked by the Jakun, before being 'resettled' by the Government in the gazetted village of Gumum[6].

These changes have been profound and have generated much anger and anxiety among locals, resulting in scientific developments designed to protect the area through Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's (UKM) Tasik Chini Research Centre, gaining United Nations Biosphere Reserve status in 2009 – a significant status where Tasik Chini is one of only two such sites in Malaysia. Additionally, the 2012 'Save Tasik Chini' Campaign enabled NGOs and social activists to bring concerted action to expose the situation to wider national and international attention through direct lobbying, documentary films and social media. With a submission to and hearing at the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia and the development of a Taskforce taking up the issue of land rights some attempts have been made to address these significant issues.

However, the Orang Asli of the Tasik Chini area have been marginalised from the debate by both assumptions and claims of backwardness and indolence. A strong political rhetoric of the national need for socio-economic modernization equates these persistent stereotypes with social deviance and a lack of commitment to development which, concomitantly, demands the diminishment of traditional lifestyles. This is a tactic of 'othering', which whether employed intentionally or not, serves to legitimise the continued despoilment and assumption of the Jakun's perceived traditional lands (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016; Gomes, 2004; Nicholas, 2000). It is a 'taken-for-granted' approach to the Jakun's assumed need for and rejection of development and modernisation that allows the conditions for external, non-Jakun economic development activity to assume a privileged position in Malaysia's vision for developed status.

[6] Although Gumum is an officially recognised land of the Jakun, which contains the majority of those living around the lake, there are other villages not recognised in which the people live and to which they move on marriage or for work purposes.

Study and methods

Our ethnography of the Orang Asli at Tasik Chini conforms to that of a condensed study (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016), where owing to academic and logistical constraints, the classic excursion of deep ethnographic immersion for months, indeed perhaps years on end, was not possible. Thus, the study was confined to the first half of 2014. Yet in developing this ethnography of the five main *kampungs* around the lake (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) our approach garnered data from as wide a variety of sources as possible in the time, drawing on Wollcott's (1999) approaches to shortened ethnographies. In addition to close critical observation of *kampung* life, we sought information from NGOs, university researchers, advocacy and campaigning groups as well as from the people themselves through numerous interviews across generations, gender and community-based focus groups, collecting group and personal narratives as experienced by those living at Tasik Chini during our time with them.

Indigenous methodologies also informed our approach, where the 'ethno-philosophy' of the Jakun villagers (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012) gave us important insights into the conceptual, symbolic and mythological understandings of significance to the people. Located in these narratives it was possible to excavate how interpersonal conflict and resolution strategies were interpreted within the ontological framework of these Jakun participants. Equally, an appreciation of indigenous methodologies informed fieldwork relationships implicating both researchers and participants (Chilisa and Preece, 2005), where our acknowledged lack of power to alter the material repercussions we were studying in the life of the community was viewed by the participants as of less consequence than our ability to capture their words and amplify them through our greater academic privileges in an international forum (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016). Through these means the study yielded rich, complex data reflecting the kind of differences one would expect within a developing group, but also one with a rootedness within the traditional *knowledges* and associations with the land.

Methodologically, our study seeks to give voice to a people who project little volume in an increasingly noisy global environment; one that is encroached upon and annexed by an antithetical modern world. It seeks to allow marginalized people a presence in a complex contemporary world and as such is steeped in emancipatory research principles (Clarke, 2010; Kennedy, 2013). The

narratives are, of course, filtered through our lenses as researchers, despite the views put forward being those of the people themselves. This may lead to some degree of bias and privileging of information but these issues are acknowledged throughout our study. The people explicitly asked that we tell their stories.

This paper reports some of the ways in which the Jakun face the onslaught of modernity and neoliberal givens replicated in the pejorative phrase in the title to this paper, how they approach and resolve conflicts and what this can offer to wider society and draws upon participant narratives as exemplifying case studies of localised ontological and ethno-philosophical exemplification. These consider traditional knowledge and ways of dealing with conflict and contemporary dissonance in approaches to socio-economic development.

Traditional knowledge and practice: conflict and future hopes

Levels of conflict and disagreements between people and families within the *kampung*s around Tasik Chini were consistently said to be low during our visits to them, and any disputes were resolved within and by the community as this early interview exchange indicates:

Q. How do you deal with difficulties and arguments in the village?
R: We don't have any arguments.
Q. How are disagreements within families dealt with?
R: We don't have any disagreements in our families. If anything is wrong we sort it out and we go to the *Tok Batin* (community sage and leader) who will work things out if we need to.

This dialogue suggests an acceptance of traditional social structures that invests families, elders and community, alongside the *Tok Batin*, with authority to determine the outcomes of disagreements. However, the initial response seemed somewhat guarded taking place early in the working relationships with the people. Later villagers informed us of the increasing concerns that parents have for their young people who are going out in the evenings, getting up to things their parents did not (drinking and using drugs), associating with the modern world and increasingly in conflict with traditional Orang Asli *kampung* life and the conflict resolution articulated in the exchange above. Indeed, we did see evidence of alcohol use amongst young people, and had it confirmed from the

health clinic that alcohol use and illicit drug use were an increasing problem. The extent of this was not clear, and some village informants said it was predominantly outsiders who came in and that the villagers attempted to dissuade people from these activities. Having said this, there was concern that customary authority and ability to resolve disputes were not working as effectively as before.

Other types of conflict were also discussed, often in focus groups and with passion. These were mainly externally focused and concerned disputes with Malaysian contemporary life interacting with the people of the *kampung*s and their traditional lifestyles and knowledges, such as through university involvement in research, non-government organizations (NGOs) pursuing their own agendas, and corporate and state bodies 'developing' the land for economic gain.

Often it seemed the views of external others would be listened to politely and followed with a period of inaction because the views did not align with expectations of *kampung* life. They were not resisted by argument or protest. This has caused some difficulties with external bodies, which have taken silence for assent rather than deliberation or dissent, and demonstrates an incompatibility of two cultures. This is not a clash of civilizations, perhaps, akin to that identified by Huntington (1993), but rather two parallel ways of dealing with disagreement or conflict that has the potential to create misunderstandings, which can then be used to privilege one way of life above another. However, the villagers also claimed that sometimes messages had been given to them by external parties, which they had later had cause to suspect when these appeared to be contradicted by media accounts quoting these bodies on the topic of Tasik Chini. Observed practices of external bodies could also create local suspicions of a level of duplicity or hidden agendas being practised, which eroded local trust.

Although the Orang Asli are an artificially homogenized group and this homogeneity is generally accepted by society without question rather than recognized as more complex, the non-violent and peaceful nature of the Orang Asli as a whole has been noted throughout history. It also stands in contrast to the fiercer reputation of the Orang Asli's indigenous neighbours, the Dayaks of East Malaysia (Hew and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2012).

Thus Carey (1976) described the fundamental peacefulness of the Batek Negrito people, another Orang Asli group. Dentan (1968; 2009) echoes this view in respect of the Semai and it became something taken to characterise the Orang

Asli as a whole, especially during the Emergency (Leary, 1996). Carey thus describes this peaceful, shy people as reluctant to take part in disputes or dissension thus:

> their immediate reaction to any threat, real or imaginary, is one of flight …, an ability to compromise, to be able to express the opinion of the majority and to draw conclusions are the most valuable attributes required of a leader of the Negritos (Carey, 1976: 49).

Leary (1996) challenges the thesis that the Orang Asli people were all peaceful and reluctant to take part in violence, however, and Gomes (2004) also contributes to our understanding of conflict between Semai and Malay groups in history. Certainly, our discussions with the Jakun at Tasik Chini confirm the idea that they are prepared to fight when necessary. We found that Jakun participants had a well developed sense of historical narrative from which, as people do, they drew social and moral meanings. For instance, they indicated to us that part of their current dispute with Malay contractors and anger at the lack of support against mining and logging initiatives was because they protected the Malay people from the Japanese during the occupation in World War Two. Apparently they claimed to the Japanese occupying forces that the Malays were actually Orang Asli so that they would not be shot but, because of what is now happening, they now feel betrayed. There is also the, perhaps, apocryphal story rehearsed by van der Helm (nd) of the fear the Japanese forces had of the Jakun resulting from a blowpipe dart being fired right across the lake of Tasik Chini – an incredible, almost supernatural feat given the distance. This act of bold defiance against a powerful and ferocious, invading enemy led to them being left alone.

Also quite telling, when talking with one of the villagers about the means of current protest at deforestation and mining, our informant left us for a short while returning later with his blowpipe and darts and demonstrating to us his ‘means of protest’ by firing darts into a nearby tree. Finally, in a focus group discussion an elderly lady leaped to her feet and mimed an angry boxer’s punch as an expression of what she would like to say to those culpable for the mismanagement of the area.

We may be sure, however, and despite the above, that violent resistance and protest are something the people tend to shy away from, preferring democratic discussion, dialogue and the reaching of consensual agreement. This is artfully

portrayed in an autobiographical essay by van der Sluys (2006) who describes the Jahai thus:

> The absence of quarrels or fighting among the Jahai is obvious to any outsider like myself who stays for a long time in a Jahai settlement. I never witnessed any scolding, any open quarrel, or violence against another person, although people did sometimes gossip with me about their dissatisfaction with others (van der Sluys, 2006: 45).

The desire to avoid or mitigate potential conflict is inscribed on the fabric of Jahai social organisation regarding, for instance, the *telan* (taboo) on sexual intercourse during the daytime as a means of securing marital fidelity. This is also inherent in the rituals undertaken to appease the anger of *Karei*, the spirit who causes thunderstorms, demonstrating the dangers of uncontrolled violence in society and therefore to be eschewed.

It is also notable that dialogue does not appear to take place along gendered demarcated lines and where men and women participants chose to be interviewed together in focus group discussions. In our study it appears that the Jakun village elder, the Tok Batin, is traditionally a male, although a powerful portrait of a female Negrito leader is given by Endicott and Endicott (2008), Baer et al. (2006) also note that the more gendered egalitarian relationships of the Orang Asli, compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia, are becoming disrupted by modern Malaysia's capitalist, patriarchal inequities.

Whilst the myth of non-violence may perhaps be taken too far, the desire for peaceful, negotiated resolutions appear deeply embedded in the Orang Asli social practices we noted at Tasik Chini. Indeed, at one of our group discussions with a village group these focused on what kinds of protest villagers were engaged in after hearing a deeply passionate set of accounts of their lands being ravaged by logging, mining and oil palm plantations; and their ability to move freely throughout the forest, considered their own traditional territory, being eroded or forcibly curtailed.

The villagers expressed unwillingness to expose some of the practices of registering and licensing mining and logging they believed to be sanctioned by State Government and bolstered by the (in)actions, at best, of the *Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli* (JHEOA) the Government department whose specific remit is to protect the Orang Asli and defend their rights. The villagers indicated, they did not wish to 'embarrass' the State Government or the Sultan and preferred to

negotiate resolutions of disputes using dialogue and reaching settlement over a protracted period of time as a preferred means of problem-solving and social engagement. This demanded, first of all, agreeing amongst themselves in dialogue what they wished to see happen. It should be said, however, that a fear of oppressive repercussions by the Federal Government was referred to in individual interviews and thus reliance on more traditional means of reconciliation was likely to be considered far safer, as well as more culturally congruent, as indicated in this research dialogue with two villagers.

Researcher:	Has anyone told UNESCO [about the situation]?
M:	No, no one has.
Researcher:	Why not?
T:	We want to discuss with the State Government first – we have to think about the Sultan....
M :	If we tell UNESCO the Government will blame us.
T:	The people here are worried about protecting the Malaysian reputation. We will do things step-by-step. We will have discussion with the Government and with NGOs to try and resolve this.
Researcher:	Yesterday we heard [from someone else] that not all the community are with you in forming a protest.
T :	They are all afraid of the risk they have to make if the protest. The police will come. They use gangsterism against them, so they are afraid.
M :	No use to protest against the company without the permission of the State government – we are protesting to the State government.
T :	The problem is that the villagers have no confidence to say what is happening, to tell others. We have asked JAKOA and Government to come here but they haven’t come. We need money to go to NGOs, to take the case forward.
M :	We want this published to the media - the media is the best way to expose what is happening here. We need

> outsiders to come here and give us some knowledge...to give us motivation, to give us confidence – some motivator to talk about the eco-community.

Traditional practices and knowledge come into direct conflict with contemporary drives towards modernization and development. However, traditional conflict and dispute resolution knowledge could offer some hope for the Orang Asli and other communities in reaching an agreed future if it were to be more widely adopted. As a social practice it also displays a disjuncture between traditional and modern life exemplified by the Orang Asli's striving for recognition as an indigenous people and more cynical perceptions of the "1Malaysia" concept promoted by the then (now disgraced) Prime Minister Najib Razak, whose constituency, ironically, covered the Tasik Chini area.

Contemporary conflict and development politics

The villagers seemingly experience great tension in terms of a deep wish to resist the destruction of their land, yet an equally profound desire to find a peaceful resolution, not disconnected to some fear of violent retribution for active resistance. Here the stories of Akitand Jinjing[7], as recorded in our fieldnotes, exemplify some of this traditional knowledge of resistance set in the contemporary and intolerable context of dispossession and oppression.

Story of Akit[8]

A middle-aged man called Akit told us a personal story at one of the village groups discussions (FGD 15/2 UG) 'I was in the forest cutting down small trees and cleaning the area to plant some rubber trees. I wanted to grow trees for my livelihood, to sell'.

Officials from the Forestry Department (*Jabatan Perhutanan Semenanjung Malaysia*, (JPSM) patrolling the forest saw him and moved to arrest him when they saw he was cutting down small trees and clearing a piece of ground. The

[7]Names have been changed to preserve anonymity, although participants expressly requested their stories be told.
[8]A pseudonym to preserve confidentiality.

men from JPSM asked him ‘why didn’t you run away when you saw us?’ To which he replied, ‘Why should I, I am not stealing. I am a human being and the forest belongs to God and to every human being not to one person.’ Faced with this rebuff, the men chased him out of the forest and he left not wanting to be arrested or, as he feared, physically assaulted. He did not resist.

Akit described how the men from JPSM informed him that he was not allowed to cut down a small area of trees to plant his rubber trees. This led him to ask himself later ‘If I can’t cut down a small area of trees to make a living, how could they allow the mining and the logging to take place on their land then?’

One of the central principles for the work of the JPSM is to ensue sustainability and to protect the rainforest. However, it seems that the modern and the traditional come into sharp conflict in achieving an aim that concerns both groups. The JPSM act to prevent the cutting down of trees, and yet appear to the Orang Asli to condone large logging and deforestation projects. It has also argued by ecologists that the slash-and-burn practices of swiddening and small plantation clearings is sustainable subsistence farming in causing very little damage, compared with big business forestry; yet state governments are quick to blame indigenous people for environmental damage (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact Foundation, 2004).

The story also raises a difference in response to conflict with the modern world seeking to impose through, at least, perceived force and threat, and the traditional response to move away and not to meet threat with further threat.

The story of Jinjing and her mother

At another of our focus group discussions (FGD 23/2 UM) we asked ‘What does the future hold for the *Kampung*?’ The villagers began despairingly, saying there was little hope at all for the future, and less still for their children. They looked to the future rather in terms of escape stating that ‘maybe some can get away through studying but most do not complete their education’.

We probed this negative view of the future by exploring what aspirations and hopes the villagers would have if they could secure the future. The villagers replied that they wanted to farm their land, expatiating further that they want to be able to be able to cultivate their crops and rubber trees using traditional

swiddening techniques. However, our field notes contain the following commentary:

> If they were to swidden: the villagers expressed concern that the Forestry Commission will summon them to court where they will be given either a 10,000 RM fine or be sent to jail for up to one year. We replied to this that is appears that it is all right for the lands to be logged and mined and but they are not allowed to plant and farm in their traditional way? This evoked signs of assent and anger with one villager saying 'Yes, the government say it is their land'.

There appeared to be a clear clash of land ownership with legal rights resting with the State and traditional land rights being consigned to a past that is rapidly disappearing or 'being disappeared'[9]. We deliberately employ a grammatically clumsy term here, reflecting an erroneous translation from the Spanish *desaparecido(s)* during the Argentinian Junta of the 1970s, but one which implies active and complicit involvement in something, in this case land rights. This is shown clearly in the following field description:

> It was at this point that Jinjing, an intelligent and vocal young activist and rubber tapper in the village, says she will show us the summons. She then went riding off on her motorbike to collect the original and copies of the summons relating to both her and her mother. Jinjing returned a few minutes later and showed us the summons. We looked in some amazement at these; she was quite right, and the penalties were just as she had described. We are allowed to keep the copies of the summons. We said that this information makes us disgusted: sad and angry. The community showed their assent with murmurs and gestures.

Not only were these tactics preventing any form of active protest and preventing the villagers from practising traditional farming methods, a means of making a living, they were also eroding traditional knowledges that helped people to

[9]A grammatically clumsy term reflecting an erroneous translation from the Spanish *desaparecido(s)* during the Argentinian Junta of the 1970s, but one which implies active and complicit involvement in something, in this case land rights (http://lavengro.typepad.com/peter_harvey_linguist/2013/03/on-disappearing-and-being-disappeared.html)

practise this type of farming. The knowledge was being lost and villagers expressed fear that their children will grow up not knowing the names of the trees and forest plants, what they are used for and how best to cultivate them. This bank of knowledge represents a vast archive of information of irreplaceable universal importance, where in reference to the nearby Semelai Orang Asli, Baer (2006) records an indigenous repository identifying 1,500 plant species, 340 vertebrates and thousands of invertebrates. Traditional knowledge is thus losing ground to the modern farming methods of large plantations and rapid and intense farming methods. This is leading to problems in forest areas and depletion of natural resources that traditional knowledge could, of course, assist with keeping.

Alongside illustrating the traditional versus modern ways of negotiating the resolution of disputes and conflicts, these stories exemplify a potential decline and loss of traditional knowledge of plants and herbs of the forest amongst the young. This was reiterated at a number of focus groups and interviews that we held – see the following field note:

> At one group (FGD 15/2 UG), a question was put to the women, although everyone joined in answering including the men, about what traditional work they undertook and whether this was gendered. The women told us how they used to gather herbs to reduce swelling and to heal internal injuries, especially after childbirth. However, they can no longer find the herbs and plants as easily as the forest has reduced in size so much and the variety of flora diminished. They brought some withered examples of leaves and branches which are apparently boiled up to produce a brew to drink.

Other informants at *Kampung* Cendahan exemplified these difficulties further stating how hard it now was to find *Tongkat Ali* roots (a popular herbal aid promoting male virility) and prepare them for sale to tourists. Those from a sponsored community cottage industry, the ‘Tongkat Ali Factory’ in Gumum, described how they were losing out to big business, producers who can pay more and sell for less, slowly choking their small-scale entrepreneurial avenue out of poverty. These contemporary idiomatic practices of traditional knowledge were also in danger of being surpassed by modernisation. The conflict between traditional practices and the modern world and the different knowledges employed was distinctly illuminated in these stories.

Discussion and understanding the stories

We need to ask what these conflicts mean for the lives of the Jakun people at Tasik Chini, for the deployment and sustainability of their traditional knowledge and in respect of the 'othering' experienced by them. The binary classifications emanating from the work so far offers a beginning perspective. Although such a structuralist approach, based around Claude Levi-Strauss' (1968; 1983) anthropological analysis, may not illuminate the complex more nuanced aspects of contemporary social life, they do offer valuable insights into our understanding of some of the conflicts faced by the Orang Asli of Tasik Chini. Relevant binaries include here:

1. Modernization vs Traditional lifestyles
2. David and Goliath– the voice of the individual vs the voice of received power.

Modernization vs traditional lifestyles is seen in a number of contemporary practices. The policy of integration of all ethnic groups and peoples into one Malaysian society carries potential dangers as well as benefits. Modernization practices reflect engagement with global capitalism and the market economic policies, which in turn may challenge traditional cooperative socio-economic practices and, concomitantly, may promote the erosion of lifestyles considered incompatible with that aim, such as forest-based traditional lifestyles of the Orang Asli. The modernization perspective represents a post-*Merdeka* (Independence) social isomorph seeking to develop all Malaysian peoples and settings along similar received lines reflecting other developed nations [10]. Traditional lifestyles may, however, emphasise the many perspectives that jostle for a hearing and challenge a one-size-fits-all approach to social and economic policy and concepts of integration. The reduction of the Jakun to a troublesome, backward people against whom it is 'legitimate' to discriminate helps to maintain these binary distinctions.

[10]The term 'developed' and 'developing' as applied to nations is contested. Malaysia's ranking as a high Human Development Index (HDI) country according to the United Nations Development Programme provides a means of comparison for social and economic development.

Of course, it could be easily construed that the Orang Asli are setting themselves up in opposition to Government policy on integration and development by maintaining the importance of traditional knowledge and practices. This becomes circuitous when referring to the dialogic and negotiated approaches to conflict resolution favoured by the Orang Asli, since socio-economic development is prescribed in a top-down fashion with the implicit assumption that it does not need to be debated just implemented.

So, in this sense, to ‘behave like a Jakun’ by wishing to enter dialogue to resolve disputes would be made illegitimate, thus rendering their attempts at negotiating a settlement that reflects their perspectives redundant or even anti-integration. This leads to a deep sense of powerlessness and a ‘learned helplessness’ (Maier and Seligman, 1976) that prevents further action, resistance and protest, whether or not those means are considered appropriate or otherwise by the Orang Asli. This clash is demonstrated in the next binary reflecting the power of size.

The voice of the individual vs the voice of received power is exemplified in ‘big’ farming (e.g., FELDA – Federal Land Development Authority/ MUIP – *Majlis Ugama Islam Dan Adat Resam Melayu Pahang*), mining, and logging contrasted to local small rubber plantation, localized clearing for fruit or vegetable cultivation, fishing, and other small production. Unfortunately, it seems that the rationale for big business and received power is not subject to critique or questioning and the small, individual efforts often reflecting the traditional approaches of the Orang Asli are castigated. David has not yet developed his slingshot to challenge Goliath!

There is also an unresolved conflict between individualized engagement in the world of capital and a more cooperative production. This can be over-romanticized and the on-going poverty of the Orang Asli should be remembered given that, according to Nicholas (2010), 35.2 per cent of the Orang Asli people are experiencing extreme poverty and there is continuing poverty amongst the Jakun at Tasik Chini who are increasingly unable to practise traditional cultivation and hunting (ECE Report, 2011). However, the tense encounter between traditional practice and contemporary capitalism reflects a clash of, perhaps irreconcilable, social and economic productive technologies. Gomes (2004), employing a Leninist analysis of the impact of capitalism on traditional non-capitalist societies, illustrates how the hegemony of capitalism gradually erodes and disenfranchizes traditional practices.

The loss of indigenous knowledge of forest practices exacerbates the persecution of the Orang Asli as convenient scapegoats by erroneously blaming them for causing environmental and ecological damage (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact Foundation, 2004). This is happening whilst great areas of forest land are being stripped by logging, and subsequently turned to mining or mono-cultural oil palm plantation. Sustainable forest practices represent an area of wide agreement globally, and importantly within the JPSM and amongst Orang Asli communities living in and from those areas. To achieve a level of sustainability it will be important to foster indigenous practice and utilize that knowledge so that modern forestry can learn and develop traditional ways of managing the forest resource for the future. Centuries old traditional knowledge and practice can be retained through traditional forest management if there is recognition that these knowledges share weight alongside contemporary science and the latter is not privileged as a more weighty truth. In this the Orang Asli represent a valuable potential resource and ally with whom the JPSM could work. This requires, however, a genuine acknowledgment of the authority of that knowledge and a reciprocally advantageous relationship, which is not always present (Gill et al., 2009).

Conclusions

Dialogue and negotiation over protracted periods of time, represent traditional conflict resolution techniques that we have witnessed and recorded during our fieldwork. Whilst we must remember this knowledge is not monolithic, it offers possibilities to preserve and pass on indigenous knowledge and practices to others that promote mature, peaceful and fresh approaches to development and the realization of the social goals implicit within the earlier '1Malaysia' policy and, more recently, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as they operate for the Orang Asli communities at Tasik Chini. The people are adamant that they wish to preserve the good name of Malaysia and so have not taken their concerns over the despoliation of the lake and forest areas, as one villager described his 'bank' and 'supermarket', to UNESCO. Neither have they taken direct protest action, not only because of fears of victimization (a not unrealistic fear it would seem) but also because they wish to negotiate and reach democratic engagement over time internally within the communities and externally within federal Government, the State and society as a whole. To reject the value of such

traditional knowledge and practices carries dangers whilst the counter position offers new opportunities that value the importance, culture and lifestyles of these indigenous Malaysian people. Such traditional knowledges are embodied and thereby enacted in the people’s everyday practices. It is this embodiment that offers much for the future and clearly rejects the discrimination against the Jakun people inherent in such phrases as ‘behaving like a Jakun’.

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