



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Malaysia : Orang Asli

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication
Date January 2018

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Malaysia : Orang Asli*, January 2018, available at:
<https://www.refworld.org/docid/49749ce85.html> [accessed 19 March 2019]

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Updated January 2018

Profile

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

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

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

Religion/s: Animism, Islam, Christianity

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

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

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

Historical context

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

The Orang Asli remained largely isolated until the middle of the nineteenth century and were able to maintain control over parts of the interior of the Malaysian peninsula, as they had little economic or strategic interest to colonial authorities. During the 1950s insurgency known as the Emergency however, communist (and ethnic Chinese) guerrillas often fled to the mountainous areas inhabited by the Orang Asli, some of whom cooperated with the guerrillas because of their traditional hostility towards Malays. The British established fortified settlements, often with health clinics or schools, to resettle the Orang Asli and isolate them from communist contact. A Department of Aborigines was created, which, after independence, eventually became the Department of Orang Asli Affairs. Official government policy is to convert the community to Islam.

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

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

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

Current issues

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

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

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

In 2013, the government attempted to weaken the 1954 Aboriginal Peoples Act. The law, which forms the backbone of protection mechanisms for Orang Asli communities, has already been criticized for its diluted land rights provisions. According to the Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli Villages Network, the changes will result in the loss of over 645,000 hectares of ancestral lands and are being pushed through without adequate consultation. Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to land encroachments due to traditional patriarchal structures, which may exclude them from individual land rights.

Updated January 2018

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