Kirk Endicott (ed.)

Malaysia's Original People: Past, Present and Future of the Orang Asli. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2016, xiv + 520 pp. ISBN 9789971698614, price: USD 34.00 (paperback).

Kirk Endicott brings together a landmark-collection of twenty-one essays by a distinguished cast of contributors in the field of Orang Asli studies to pay tribute to Robert K. Dentan and Geoffrey Benjamin, whose lifelong work on Semai and Temiar communities, respectively, have laid the foundation for modern anthropological understandings of the Orang Asli. To my knowledge, no other book presents an overview of the Orang Asli with such depth, breadth, and conceptual clarity as *Malaysia's Original People*.

An introduction by Endicott that begins with invaluable ethnographic information about what the term “Orang Asli” entails, their demography, areas of habitation and social organization launches the book, and covers an enormous range of issues on what it means to be Orang Asli in a rapidly changing world. The volume is divided into seven parts. Each is devoted to a different theme, yet together they weave together remarkable insights that advance our understanding of the historical continuities and disjunctions in Orang Asli landscape, history, and identity.

Part One on “Studying Orang Asli” presents a longitudinal review of Orang Asli studies. The first of three chapters is an analysis by Holaday of the intellectual and political developments in Orang Asli research over the past half a century. Following this in Chapter 2 is Howell’s thought-provoking discussion of the deep perspectives that only multi-temporal fieldwork can yield and which are a necessary background for any understanding of the challenges faced by vulnerable minority populations. Manikam in Chapter 3 traces the development of classification schemes for the indigenous peoples of the Malay Peninsula and probes into their impact on racial theorizing.

Part Two focusses on the theme “Orang Asli Origins and History”. Fix in Chapter 4, and Bulbeck in Chapter 5, provide a wealth of genetic and historical data to show the interconnections between Orang Asli and other populations. They bring to light Orang Asli mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) lineages to reveal that some of their ancestors were among the first modern humans to arrive in Southeast Asia during the late Pleistocene exodus from Africa, while other ancestors came later from other parts of Asia. Baer in Chapter 6 expounds on the significance of the bamboo and rattan tool kit in Orang Asli prehistory that has enabled long-term survival on the Thai-Malay Peninsula.

Part Three spotlights “Aslian Languages”. Burenhult and Kruspe in Chapter 7 look into the lexical terms of ingestion in Aslian languages and uncovers a

clear distinction in semantic categorization strategies reflecting the difference in modes of subsistence between foragers and non-foragers.

Part Four goes into “Orang Asli Religions”. Gianno in Chapter 8 and Laird in Chapter 9 introduce cosmological maps and soul journeys to dreamed landscapes. The journeys facilitate perceptiveness into Semalai and Temoq knowledge of the interconnections between the human and non-human inhabitants of the cosmos. With increasing exposure to outsiders and the penetration of world religions, Juli and Kamal in Chapter 10 demonstrate how this has touched upon Orang Asli identity and solidarity to influence their collective pursuit of native customary rights.

Part Five examines the “Significance of Orang Asli Cultures”. Hickson and Jennings in Chapter 11 show how they have adopted Temiar practices of peaceful resolution in their therapeutic work with children and adults in Western societies for the purpose of teaching and developing caring, nurturing and peaceful relationships. In Chapter 12, Gomes presents another remarkable feature of Orang Asli cultures, that is, their merging of religious beliefs, views of nature, and economic practices. This posits respect for nature so that nature is utilized in an ecologically sound and sustainable manner.

Part Six focuses on “Challenges, Changes, and Resistance”. The cluster of essays by Karim and Razha (Chapter 13), Nowak (Chapter 14), Riboll (Chapter 15), Tacey (Chapter 16), and Dallos (Chapter 17) survey how Orang Asli communities have responded to their loss of land and resources. Former foragers are now living in displacement villages surrounded by secondary forest, plantations, and non-Orang Asli villages. Environmental destruction and changes in subsistence activities have affected marriage choices and post-marital residence patterns. In spite of their “social suffering” (Riboll, Chapter 15), the Orang Asli have demonstrated great resilience. Some have transitioned relatively smoothly to life in the contemporary life in a market economy. Others have realigned their religious and moral geographies in an increasingly globalized world. Most noteworthy is that in recent times, with the support of pro-bono lawyers, some Orang Asli have successfully asserted their customary rights in court for compensation to lands seized from them by government agencies and private enterprises (Subramaniam, Chapter 18).

Part Seven closes the book with a look toward “The Future”. In Chapter 19, Shanthi Thambiah, Zanisah Man and Rusaslina Idrus recount the trials and tribulations of Orang Asli women in the Malaysian educational system, where the demands to be competitive run against traditional Orang Asli sociality. Finally, in Chapter 20 Heikkilä and William Hunt show that the story of Malaysia’s Original People continues to unfold. Many educated and computer literate Orang Asli are now mapping spaces of self-determination via Orang Asli blogs and networking sites.

The themes of the book display comprehensively the broad interests among Orang Asli specialists. We are shown stunning insights into fieldwork methods, ways whereby the Orang Asli perceive webs of interconnectivity, their enormous ability to adapt to new situations, and how western communities have much to learn from Orang Asli cultures. All these are at once a meditation on questions central to the way we think about human history, human ecology, and human creativity, as well as a path to multiple discourses into wider analytical, methodological, and epistemological questions. The twenty-one essays so skillfully brought together by Endicott is a wonderful tribute to Robert K. Dentan and Geoffrey Benjamin, who recast the field of Orang Asli Studies.

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