

## Lifestyle Transformations of the Orang Asli through Participations in the Palm Oil Plantation Projects in Terengganu State, Peninsula Malaysia

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### Abstract:

*The Orang Asli are one of the indigenous ethnics, with its majority living in suburban and remote areas of Peninsula Malaysia. Such settlement patterns result in their traditional economy being synonymous with hunting and gathering activities. The poverty rates among Heads of Households (HoH) are also high. Statistics in 2008 showed a total of 13,946 (50.92 %) Orang Asli HoH as being poor with 9,004 (32.34 %) belonging to the hardcore poor group (JAKOA, 2011). Various efforts have been undertaken by the government to solve the problem. Implementation of the commercial crops project comprising palm oil and rubber are among the efforts undertaken extensively, and a number of them can be considered successful in alleviating the poverty rate. A study had been carried out on the local Orang Asli community in Terengganu to identify how the projects have impacted the socio-economic status and lifestyle transformations of the local residents. Data were collected through the process of observation techniques, interviews and document review. Study results showed that the implementation of commercial crops have now become instruments in improving the socio-economic transformation of HoH and transformations of the overall lifestyle. Based on income indicators, the average income of HoH has exceeded RM2,000.00 per month. This income is a substantial increase compared to the amount of income they received in the 1990s, which was below RM500.00 per*

*month. In line with the income increase, community members no longer focus on traditional economic activities such as hunting and gathering, but began to shift to activities that enabled them to receive wages such as laborers in palm oil plantations. Similarly, such is the case in the usage and savings indicators. A large number of HoH can afford luxurious items including cars, while other HoH have bank savings as preparations for future use of family members.*

**Key words:** Orang Asli, Orang Asli socio-economic transformation, socio-economic levels, commercial crops, Orang Asli development.

## **Introduction**

Terengganu is among the states in Peninsula Malaysia with an Orang Asli population. To date, there are 980 Orang Asli residents within this state residing in three villages, namely Kampung Sungai Pergam in Kemaman, Kampung Sungai Berua in Hulu Terengganu and Kampung Sungai Sayap in Besut. The location of each village is shown in the map attached. They consist of the Semaq Beri and Batek tribes. Approximately 704 persons or 96 % of the total amount consist of the Semaq Beri tribe living in Kampung Sungai Pergam and Kampung Sungai Berua (JAKOA, 2011) while the remaining figure are those of the Batek tribe living in Kampung Sungai Sayap.

The lifestyles of the Orang Asli communities in Terengganu are basically similar to other Orang Asli communities in different states. Traditionally, their lives are closely connected with the physical world; forests, hills, mountains and rivers that form the backdrop surrounding their settlement areas. The physical environment, forest and others are part of the heritage that are the fundamentals to the economic activities as well as in obtaining daily necessities (Karim, 1981; Hood Salleh, 1993; Lye Tuck Po, 2000, 2002). In terms of sustenance sources, Kuchikura (1987) states that in the 1970s more than half of the Semaq Beri community's food

resources in Terengganu were obtained from the forest. This situation continued until the mid-1990s (Ramle Abdullah, 2001). The lifestyles practiced by the Orang Asli only positioned them further more behind and were furthermore left neglected within the national development mainstream, and were often labeled as marginalised communities.

Indeed, the Orang Asli issue as marginalised communities has long been realised by the Malaysian government ever since the early days of independence in 1957. Thus, the Orang Asli were not left to evolutionally develop in the usual development momentum. Various development programmes were created with aims to develop and experience transformations more rapidly and be able to compete with other ethnic groups.

Focus and planning towards the development of Orang Asli communities begun as early as the 1960s, when the Malaysian government issued the Government Statement Policy in regards to the Orang Asli Administration in Peninsula Malaysia. Although the development intentions were not clearly stated in the statement due to hidden agendas of integrating the Orang Asli communities with mainstream communities, but what was sought to be implemented was heading towards the progress of the community. A concern was made towards improving their socio-economic status in order for them to not be marginalised and left behind by other ethnic groups in terms of mainstream development.

Inquiries on the Orang Asli development issue gained further attention in the 1970s. The implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which began in that early decade also focused on solving the poverty problem among Orang Asli communities and at the same time integrating them with other ethnic groups.

Similar situations occurred within the years 1991 - 2000, as continuation to the implementation of the National Development Policy (NDP). Efforts were continued with aims

towards the well-being of the Orang Asli communities, in order for them to also enjoy the prosperity and progress of the country. The policies and efforts made to achieve these goals were comprehensive, covers all Orang Asli communities across the country, including the Orang Asli in Terengganu. In accordance to this, various development programmes were planned out, ranging from structured settlement programmes, economic development programmes and social development programmes. JAKOA functioned into a one-stop agency in managing and implementing these programmes.

### **Orang Asli Poverty Issues**

The Orang Asli are generally known as communities who are dependent on forests and the natural environment by leading subsistence economic activities, such as shifting cultivation, hunting and collecting forest products as well as fishing (Kuchikura, 1987; Ramle Abdullah, 200; Lye Tuck Po, 2000, 2002). Economic relations with the outside communities only occurs on a small scale by marketing forest and agricultural products (Dunn, 1975; Rambo, 1979), besides efforts to obtain required items which they cannot produce themselves (Endicott, 1974; Gomes, 1986; Kuchikura, 1988).

In the context of economic networks at the national level, the economic activities practiced are non-viable, and often implicated as a causal factor to the poverty of Orang Asli (Lim Hin Fui, 1997, Ramle Abdullah, 2010). In addition, other factors also contribute to the issues of poverty. Among these, cultural factors are said to be the dominant factor. The Orang Asli on average are too tied up to the economic activity inherited from previous generations, and is difficult for them to accept such a development programme introduced by the government (Zainal Abidin Hj.Ali, 2004; 2008). On the other hand, the poverty issues faced seems to be associated with the effectiveness of the development programmes implemented

(Itam Nawan Wali, 1993). Most development programmes do not fit the interests and skills possessed by members of the local community. The low levels of education among the community have also a similar effect. Hasan Mat Nor (1997) explains that the majority are only educated at primary school level. The percentage of population who had received secondary school education is much smaller, and less than two percent of the students made it to university level (Juli Edo, 2012; Ramle Abdullah et.al, 2013).

The issues of poverty among the Orang Asli are indeed the most often raised by many parties, especially when discussing about their development. Among other things, Nicholas (1998) explains that in 1997 about 80.8 % Orang Asli HoH were below the poverty line. On the other hand 49.9 % of them were in the hardcore poor category. A similar situation existed in 2003. An estimated 86.53 % of Orang Asli HoH that year was under the hardcore poor, poor and vulnerably poor groups (Zainal Abidin, 2004). Up to 2008 the poverty rates among them still remained high (Angeline Ames and Todd Ames, 2010). Statistics from JAKOA showed more than 50 % of Orang Asli HoH are poor, with 4,942 (17.75 %) of Orang Asli HoH classified as poor, while 9,004 (32.34 %) HoH categorised as hardcore poor (JHEOA, 2008). However, in 2010 the poverty rate had dropped below 50% with only 31.16 % or 11,423 from the total 36,658 Orang Asli Heads of Household (HoH) were categorised as poor and hardcore poor (JAKOA, 2011).

Such poverty situations also exist among the Orang Asli communities in Terengganu, especially prior to the year 2000. In the 1980s the majority of heads of household (HoH) could be categorised as poorest with an average monthly income of approximately RM150.00 (Ramle Abdullah, 1993). Similar situations persisted right into the 1990s. More than 80% of Orang Asli HoH still earned between RM200.00 to RM300.00 per month (Ramle Abdullah, 2001).

However, up to 2009 income among the Orang Asli have increased with a large number of HoH earning a monthly income of more than RM2,000.00. This increase in income has led to the poverty rate among HoH to decrease to 40.18%. While the poverty rate of the Orang Asli community in Terengganu in 2010 was at 32.5%.

The situations described above clearly indicate that the recent poverty levels among the Orang Asli of Terengganu have shown constant decrease from time to time. The question at hand now is what are the factors that influence this situation, particularly with its relatively fast rate, and what is the impact on their overall standards of living?

## **Objective**

The Malaysian Government has taken certain actions to reduce and eventually eradicate poverty among the Orang Asli community. Among them is the implementation of land development projects through the plantation of commercial crops such as palm oil. Discussions in this paper lead to the following objectives: (i) to explain on how the development projects have successfully reduced poverty rates or improved the socio-economic status of the local community. (ii) to highlight on the lifestyle transformation situations that occur in the community due to an uplift in socio-economic status, particularly in increased income.

## **Literature Review**

The Orang Asli community, being one of the ethnic groups in Malaysia has received the attention of many researchers since the turn of the 20th century. Many studies have been carried out by academics of the West, including British colonial officers with aims at truly understanding the unique and untouched culture of the Orang Asli community. A handful of notable

researchers in this era are such as Skeat and Blagden (1906), Evans (1915, 1920), Williams-Hunt (1952) and Slimming (1958). Their findings have highlighted in general the ethnographic aspects of Orang Asli communities as an ethnic group residing in remote areas of Peninsula Malaysia.

Subsequently, after the mid-20th century, beginning in the 1960s until the end of the century there were researchers such as Dentan, R. (1968), Benjamin (1967, 1968, 1976), Baharon Azhar Rafie (1973), Schebesta (1973), Rambo (1979), Needham (1974), Endicott (1974, 1979), Dunn (1975), Carey (1968, 1976), Karim (1977), Hood Salleh (1978), Howell, S. (1982, 1983), Gomes (1986), Kuchikura (1988), Juli Edo (1988, 1993), Ramle Abdullah (1988, 1993), Hasan Mat Nor (1997, 1998), Nicholas (1990) and Lim Hin Fui (1997) who had studied and written in depth and detail on any one aspect of Orang Asli ethnography . By the early 21st century, a number of researchers as mentioned above as well as the emergence of new ones continued to contribute on their research and write-ups in the same form. Among others were Ramle Abdullah (2001), Nicholas (2006), Lye Tuck- Po (2000, 2002), Gomes (2004), Zainal Abidin Hj.Ali (2004, 2008, 2012), Kazuhiro Suda (2008), Nurul Fatanah (2009), Juli Edo (2012), Asmawi Ibrahim (2013) just to name a few.

Almost all aspects of Orang Asli ethnography had been explored by various researchers with each one having their own study focus. The issues on poverty as well as their transformation are among the highlights that have attracted the attention of researchers right from the start. In the 1970s, Carey (1976) had specifically written concerning the future and the participations of Orang Asli in development. Among others explained was the welfare of Orang Asli mainly in terms of providing health facilities by the government since the early 1960s. During this period a special hospital was built in Gombak, Selangor for this purpose. Besides this the air medical services and health posts built within remote Orang Asli

settlements were also provided with the same purpose.

The 1980s and 1990s period witnessed an emergence of many researchers discussing on this issue. Among the quite popular issues at the time were the ones related to economic status and problems of Orang Asli participation in the national development mainstream. Among others, Ramle Abdullah (1993) explained that the ways of life of Orang Asli communities are considered 'primitive' with a 'self-sustained' form of economy and does not involve a market economy. The community applies traditional approaches in whatever activities they undertake. This is in line with the explanation given by Endicott (1979) and Kuchikura (1988) that the Batek Negrito and Semaq Beri communities in Hulu Terengganu uses tools such as blow pipes, catch fish and gather forest products as their primary occupation. Such descriptions are indeed true. However, according to Gomes (1987), with the rapid rural development process taking place in Malaysia and the adoption of capitalist economic systems making it inapplicable in the economy of certain Orang Asli groups. A study by Gomes (1987) on the Semai community in Perak found that the economic activities carried out by all Orang Asli communities are more or less similar. He had categorised the economic activities of the Orang Asli into two: economic activities with aims of earning money such as rubber tapping, in search of rattan and aloeswood, and self-sufficient economic activities such as fishing, hunting animals and agriculture. These activities are usually carried out separately, based on conditions and seasons, market and one's own tendency. However, in whatever situation it may be, both forms of economy are still carried out concurrently.

Such economic activity patterns are the cause of why the majority of Orang Asli are in the poor category. As previously stated, in 1997 about 80.8 % of Orang Asli Heads of Households were below the poverty line (Nicholas, 1998). On the other hand, 49.9 % of them belong to the hardcore poor category. A

similar situation existed in 2003. An estimated 86.53 % of Orang Asli Heads of Households were categorised in the hardcore poor, poor and vulnerably poor groups (Zainal Abidin, 2004).

The high poverty rate situation had once again attracted the attention of researchers in providing explanations on the existing situations. Gomes (1987), describes the situation as caused due to the adoption of the capitalist economic system within the rural economy, including the Orang Asli community. Ramle Abdullah (2001) on the other hand explains that such situations are directly related with the failure of Orang Asli communities to participate in the various development programmes implemented by the government due to diachronic and synchronic factors. From the diachronic perspective, a lack of transparency in the planning of development projects are said to have led to its failure. While the synchronic perspective shows how local culture has also had an influence in this issue.

Although many projects implemented by the government had least attracted participations from the Orang Asli, but efforts to develop the community and reduce poverty rates among them were still continuously implemented. In order to achieve these goals, to date (towards the 10<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan), the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) had identified 10 strategies for their development plans, namely:

- i. To implement viable economic projects especially land-based, that can generate income, employment and business opportunities.
- ii. To develop cost-effective facilities by clustering and re-organising Orang Asli villages in outskirt areas.
- iii. To assimilate Orang Asli villages in outskirts areas into village communities or nearby towns.
- iv. To accelerate the education, training and mind development programmes among Orang Asli children, teenagers and youths as preparation for

- them to abandon their dependence towards land-based economy.
- v. To maintain the welfare assistance and subsidies to community members in the hardcore poor group and enable them to respond to the socio-economic programmes by the government.
  - vi. To foster the development of social and economic institutions as well as Orang Asli NGOs through the process of participation and empowerment.
  - vii. Proactive target approach in gaining candidates and participation in the government programmes.
  - viii. To emphasise on improving the image of Orang Asli communities to a more modern and progressive level and to eliminate any negative stereotyping.
  - ix. To collaborate with other governmental departments and agencies in implementing the Orang Asli development programmes.
  - x. To increase the IT usage in departmental management as well as the planning, implementation and monitoring of physical and mind development projects.

(Zainal Abidin, 2008)

Based on these development strategies, it cannot be denied that up till now there have been a number of successful development projects that have been implemented and has improved the socio-economic status of the Orang Asli. Therefore this paper gives focus on this, and provides a different angle of discussion from what have been carried out by previous researchers.

## **Methodology**

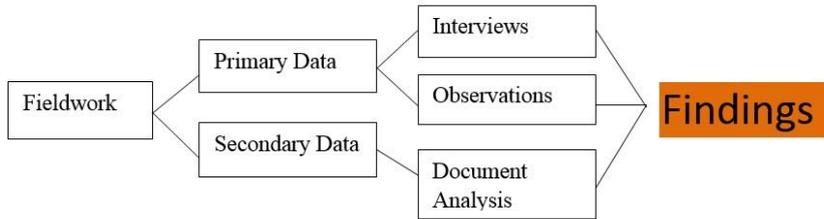
The contents of this paper are the fieldwork findings carried out on the Semaq Beri tribe in Terengganu, particularly in Kampung Sungai Pergam, Kemaman. The village is located south of Terengganu, approximately 40km north of Kuantan, Pahang. The village was selected as the study area based on its status as a village provided with palm oil plantation projects.

The study was performed with qualitative methods, where data was collected through observation techniques, interview sessions carried out either individually or focus group discussions, and the study of documents; covering documents related to the lifestyles of Orang Asli communities particularly in Terengganu, traditional economic activities and development programmes. Administrative documents as well as documents regarding implementation of development were also examined. The rationale for each of the data collection techniques within the study implementation context are as follows.

The use of various techniques for data collection as mentioned aims towards obtaining valid and reliable data. Each technique has its own significance in the context of the study. Observation techniques used to observe and obtain information on current lifestyle patterns of the local community. The interview techniques were used to gain further clarification on the issues as stated in the objectives. The respondents interviewed cover a variety of parties, ranging from village residents, local leaders, staffs of the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) and FELCRA. Document study techniques were used to acquire an accurate and comprehensive picture from secondary sources on the issues studied. Various earlier results, records from relevant departments and other reading materials have been used in this context.

In short, the study findings were based on two sources of information, namely primary and secondary sources. The

coupling pattern of these two related data sources in producing the study findings are shown in the following figure.



**Diagram 1: Data collection structure**

The data collected from the various techniques were analysed to provide a pictorial pattern or meanings related to the issues studied. The analysis process is based on the following procedures: (i) data review and purification, (ii) organise data according to the themes that have been determined, and (iii) data coding.

## **Findings**

Beginning in 1960 and right up till now, various programmes and projects have been implemented for the Orang Asli communities in Terengganu, whether in the context of economic development or social services facilities. Whereas these development programmes are entirely based on the goals of uplifting socio-economic status, and to integrate them with the mainstream community (Ramle Abdullah and Abdul Razak Arshad, 2007).

The financing of development programmes are largely from the federal government's annual allocation. In addition, development allocations were also obtained from the state government and other agencies. In order to accelerate the development process, the federal government has also channeled the Special Monetary Fund effective as of 2002 with

an actual cost of RM667,999.20. This provision had been increased on a yearly basis. For example, from 2005 till 2007 a total of RM5,029,950.00 was used for the comprehensive development of the Orang Asli in Terengganu (Ramle Abdullah and Abdul Razak Arshad, 2007).

On a clearer note, the development programmes that have been implemented can be shown through the following table (Ramle Abdullah and Abdul Razak Arshad, 2007).

**Table 1: Orang Asli Development Programmes and Projects in Terengganu**

<p><b>Economic Development</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land development (Commercial Crops Project, palm oil and rubber)</li> <li>• Agricultural tools subsidies</li> <li>• Livestock and Fisheries</li> <li>• Entrepreneurs Consultant</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social Service Development</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide road facility in village</li> <li>• School</li> <li>• Electricity</li> <li>• Clean Water</li> <li>• Houses</li> <li>• Religious Place</li> <li>• Kindergarden</li> <li>• Provide motivation program</li> </ul>
<p><b>Minds Development</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide course</li> <li>• Provide learning tour program</li> <li>• Explanation program</li> </ul>

The implementation of development programmes are generally made in cooperation between various agencies, with JAKOA acting as the coordinating agency (Zahidi Daud, 2007). Many economic development programmes were executed in collaboration with the Federal Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (FELCRA) and Rubber Industry Smallholders' Development Authority (RISDA) (Kamarudin Hassan, 2007). While the social and mind development programmes were mostly in collaboration with the Terengganu Tengah Development Authority (KETENGAH) and Community

Development Department (KEMAS) (Mukhtar Che Ali, 2007). At the same time institutions of higher learning (IPT) such as Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) as well as others also contributed in the academic and social programmes.

Economic development programmes through the palm oil plantation project is among the projects that have successfully uplifted the socio-economic status of local residents. This project was implemented by FELCRA in collaboration with JAKOA and the Terengganu state government since early 1990. Further information on the project to all Orang Asli villages in Terengganu is shown in the following table.

**Table 2: Palm Oil Project within Orang Asli Villages in Terengganu**

Village	Width(Hectares)	Year Commenced	Yield Production Year
Sungai Pergam	393.81	1992	1996
Sungai Berua	59.73	1993	1996
Sungai Sayap	87.36	1991	1995

Source: Kamarudin Hasan (2007)

The project implementation involved plantation development activities and provided estate management skills to the Orang Asli community. The approach taken by FELCRA in implementing this project was that the participants were shareholders as well as plantation workers. The scheme introduced a work-and-manage type of environment. It provided job opportunities for participants, and at the same time giving them a sense of responsibility towards the plantation lands. Under this scheme FELCRA played its role in providing management training, leadership as well as entrepreneurial skills.

The success rates of these projects have had a big impact on the socio-economic status and lifestyles of the local Orang Asli residents. Their income had increased from year to year. As explained earlier, prior to the implementation of the palm oil project the average income for HoH in Kampung Sungai Pergam was around RM200.00 to RM300.00 per month (Ramle Abdullah, 2001). However, once the project implemented began to produce its yields, especially post 2000 their average income had increased vastly. For example, for the years 2007 till 2009 the average HoH income was set between RM983.00 to RM2,067.00 per month. This amount of income was only that earned from the dividends and does not include other sources of income such as the wages from working in the plantations as well as other side income. According to Ramle Abdullah (2010), the average income of HoH when accumulated from all sources in 2009 reached RM2,715.00 per month. Based on such wages the percentage of poor HoH for that year decreased to less than 40%.

The increase in income had also led to a transformation in lifestyle. First, transformations within economic activities. Before the mid-1990s the majority of the Kampung Sungai Pergam residents were only focused on the economy of gathering forest products such as rattan and aloeswood. However, until the late 1990s it can be stated that most of them have abandoned such economic activities, and began to engage in other economic activities which are considered more profitable, especially working as a labourers in palm oil plantations and others. For example, in 2009, the economic activity pattern or sources of income of Orang Asli residents in Terengganu are as shown in the following table.

**Table 3: Pattern of Income Sources for the Orang Asli in Terengganu (2009)**

Source of Income	No. of Families			Total Families
	Sg. Pergam	Sg. Berua	Sg.Sayap	
Palm Oil	109	60	6	175
Rubber	47	-	6	53
Forest Products	10	88	-	98

Source: Ramle (2010)

Table 3 shows that only 10 from the total HoH in Kampung Sungai Pergam that year still maintained the activities of searching and gathering forest products. Statistics showed a significant lifestyle transformation had occurred among these local residents.

The culture of saving money also started to exist among the local population. The relatively higher income earned compared to expenditure had given them the opportunity to make savings on the income balance. During the study, all 109 HoH which were participants in the palm oil project had owned a bank account, and a number of them had expenditure balances within their accounts.

The lifestyle transformation can also be seen in terms of selection of daily necessities, which includes food, clothing or self care items, media equipment and other home appliances. A large number of the community is also able to own private vehicles such as motorcycles and cars as a means of transportation. Affordability of owning these luxuries and facilities can be regarded as a new development in the lifestyle of the local Orang Asli community which had never been experienced previously.

The lives of community members also seems to be more vibrant and harmonious with the existence of other facilities

provided by the government such as schools, residential houses, electricity and clean water supply, roads, community halls as well as other basic facilities. All these facilities provide a new form of landscape design for the living environment of local residents.

## **Conclusion**

The development programmes implemented are capable of triggering transformations to the Orang Asli residents. However, the changes achieved by the community are closely related to the sincerity levels of the parties that are responsible in implementing these developments, the transparency of the development programmes and the perception as well as acceptance of the local community towards the development brought to them. Such similar situations are also prevalent among Orang Asli communities in Terengganu.

Nevertheless, the success of development programmes and projects are often associated with the factor of local perception towards development. Residents that possess positive perceptions towards development, are not too defensive towards their traditional economic activities and other heritage values and are seen to resolve the many arising issues in implementing development better. Simultaneously this only allows faster changes among the community. Such a phenomenon can be witnessed through the progress achievement levels and socio-economic status of the Kampung Sungai Pergam community. Positive perceptions towards development and no more high reliance on traditional economic activities only leads them towards faster progress rates.

As an implication, the economic and social transformation process happens smoothly. As discussed previously, this transformation can be seen either in terms of economic activities, socio-economic status and lifestyles. The transformation that is taking place is indeed an interrelated

process. The shift in economic activities from traditional to more modern activities is seen to increase income, thus uplifting the overall socio-economic status. The local Orang Asli residents can now afford to obtain consumer goods in a more complete and quality-wise way.

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