

Education and Health Awareness Among Indigenous People: A Study in Perak, Malaysia.

Edwin Michael, Eng May Chuen
Faculty of Arts and Social Science
Universiti of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia
edwinm@utar.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Malaysia a multi-ethnic country is famously dubbed the melting pot of Southeast Asia. Rich with its diverse cultures and traditions we have always been the centre of tourism attraction. Unfortunately, what some Malaysians tend to overlook is the almost-forgotten ethnic amidst our society-Orang Asli. They are the “original people” or “first people” in Malaysia. Although supposedly the Bumiputeras, they are now considered the minorities and have since been not given their rightful privileges. This paper investigated the education benefits and health benefits distributions amongst the Orang Asli. This qualitative researches study comprising 20 respondents respectively. Based on our results, it was found that majority of the Orang Asli were unhappy with the current benefits they were given and the way they are being treated. They expressed deep dissatisfaction on how their children were not given adequate help from the school officials regarding their poor academic performance. Not only have these students been neglected but to make matters worse some had to tolerate physical and verbal abuses from their schoolmates. On the other hand, the Orang Asli do not receive special medical treatments or free check-ups. They are still left in the dark and unaware of certain diseases that may pose a danger to them. Having to travel miles away to the nearest clinic or hospital is definitely a burden to them.

Keywords: *education benefits, health awareness, Indigenous people, Malaysia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is country that is undoubtedly rich with unique culture and heritage thanks to our multi-ethnic background. We have the Malays, Indians and Chinese as the majority. We have many ethnics as the minority and one of it is the Orang Asli. The Orang Asli or also known as the aborigines are the indigenous minority peoples living in the Peninsular Malaysia. The name is a Malay term which transliterates as '*original peoples*' or '*first peoples*'. It is a collective term used by anthropologists and administrators for the 18 sub-ethnic groups that are generally classified for official purposes. There are mainly three tribes in the Orang Asli community, with each carrying distinct and rich culture among them, which are; Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay. The Orang Asli community is found largely in states like Pahang, Perak, Sabah and Sarawak due to its still undeveloped jungle.

The Orang Asli lives in small tribes in the jungle area. The Orang Asli, nevertheless, are not a homogeneous group as presumed by most of us. Each tribe has its own language and culture, thus prevailing different from the others. Linguistically, some of the northern Orang Asli groups

(especially the Senoi and Negrito groups) speak languages - now termed Aslian languages. During the early 18th and 19th centuries, the Orang Asli people were mostly kept and treated as slaves. They were unfairly treated and suffered name-calling such as “jungle beast” and the most degrading term, “*sakai*”-meaning slave or dependent. Slavery and abduction affected the Orang Asli community for centuries, despite the official abolition of all forms of slavery in 1884. Even till the 20th century, The Orang Asli still relived the dark history they wished to forget, through the heartless people who till today label them as “*sakai*”. The Orang Asli, were viewed as the less civilised group; although there was some interest in them as an 'exotic', 'primitive' community, they were not considered important subjects that should have a voice in governance. They were more an object of intellectual curiosity than of administrative interest [1].

Today, the Orang Asli mostly lives in reserved land called Asli Reserve Land and these lands are their traditional hunting, farming and fishing grounds. Some are rubber tappers, independent farmers and also labourers. It is estimated that there are 869 Orang Asli villages throughout the country and about 322 villages are in the remote areas [2]. Some of these villages have been

provided with up-to-date modern facilities such as village resettlement projects, access to education and health and etc [3].

The Orang Asli's are mostly still sticking by their original religion and belief- animisme. However, as time has changed, a relatively big number of the Orang Asli have embraced monotheistic religions such as Islam and Christianity, following some active state-sponsored missionary by Muslims, and evangelism by Christian missionaries. The languages used in their respective Holy Book are altered to suit their different dialects. Some Christians have come to now use Bibles and songs from Indonesia as it is the nearest alike language to theirs. The Orang Asli, by Malaysian Federal Constitution are classified as *Bumiputras*-the original people that carries a status signifying indignity to Malaysia which carries a certain social, economic, and political rights, along with the Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak. There are several law acts established to protect the Orang Asli. For example, the National Land Code 1965, Land Conservation Act 1960, Protection of Wildlife Act 1972, National Parks Act 1980, and most importantly the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954. The Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 provides for the setting up and establishment of the Orang Asli Reserve Land.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The most interesting and provocative issue about Orang Asli is that, the attitudes of the Malay ruling class towards the Orang Asli. The evidence of persistent patterns of discrimination, exploitation and denial of rights to Orang Asli by the Malay ruling class is compelling and the argument is salient [4].

The Malay ruling class viewed the Orang Asli especially the Sakai communities as a backward, lazy and deviant. It was never a term of self-reference and is inherently pejorative. Repeatedly they were referred to by comparison with the dominant population and there emerged an assumption, still in evidence today, that the Sakai represented an early stage of Malay development, a pre-civilised society that had not yet progressed into the modern era [5].

The indigenous people in Malaysia are still citizens of the country. As a member of the Bumiputera community they share the political leverage for advancing their legitimate interest. In Malaysia, there will be no artificial barrier to their achieving success. Their path will be facilitated by the government through specific affirmative action. Despite their "Bumiputeraism", Orang Asli's claim to "indigenoussness" with regard to land rights and the law seems to nullify such a status [6].

However, they are not recognized as the lawful owners of the lands. The Malaysian government maintains the obnoxious position that the Orang Asli's "have no rights in the land itself" as they are mere "tenants" on the lands [7].

Recent years have seen several established Orang Asli settlements having to make way for significant development projects such as the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), highways, private universities, the Sungei Selangor Dam and golf course, and for private housing and industrial development projects. It was clear to the Orang Asli that whenever the Government had to take the traditional territories away from them, it was for altruistic reasons [8].

The government has driven the Orang Asli away from the forest and has subjected them to various restrictions on hunting and other forest resource-extraction activities. The Orang Asli have been demanding the restoration of their land rights, most of which have been neglected or shelved, but only a tiny proportion of land has been returned to them as "Orang Asli reservations". With limited access to forest resources, the Orang Asli can no longer lead a traditional forest life. As a result, many have become impoverished. Ironically, the nation, which in the first place drove them into poverty, now has to initiate development programs to assist them. Most programs involve conversion to the Islamic faith. Being a forest person and being Muslim are increasingly mutually exclusive. Though still often referred to as "forest people", the Orang Asli these days also are seen as an "impoverished people". The government believes that impoverished people need financial assistance (that is, development) and a spiritual backbone (that is, the Islamic faith). Islamization, interwoven with development, is forcing the Orang Asli to change their ethnicity to Malay [9].

The rights of the Orang Asli over their traditional lands are spelt out in the Aboriginal Peoples Act, 1954. In effect, the Act provides for the establishment of Orang Asli areas and Orang Asli reserves. Previously, the view of the government was that under the Aboriginal Peoples Act, 1954 the best interest the Orang Asli may obtain from their traditional lands is as a tenant-at-will. This was due to the perception that the traditional lands the Orang Asli sit on are, in principle, state lands. The Orang Asli were therefore considered to occupy or stay on their traditional lands at the pleasure of the government; whenever the government needs the lands for any reasons, it would be just a matter of revoking the status of these traditional lands and issuing to the affected Orang Asli a short notice to vacate their traditional lands - notwithstanding the fact

that the Orang Asli and their families may have been living in the area for generations [10].

It is no coincidence that the Orang Asli's should experience both a disproportionately high rate of poverty and a disproportionately high rate of school dropouts. The two are intimately related. Orang Asli schoolchildren are also frequently bullied or ridiculed as a consequence of the prejudice and ignorance of their origins and their culture. Most Orang Asli children are able to cope, but a significant number choose to leave school, usually in the early years, in order to avoid having to face such distressing behavior from their non-Orang Asli peers [11].

Orang Asli first-year schoolers are also generally 'slower' than the other students primarily because they do not have the exposure that the others got. For example, not all Orang Asli children have the opportunity to attend kindergarten, and therefore are not able to read and write when they enter Primary 1, let alone be conversant in Malay. Nor do they have the advantage of access to all sorts of educational toys or TV programmes during their preschool years. This puts them at a great disadvantage compared to other students and can sometimes be the reason for them being 'left behind' in the academic progress [12].

The Orang Asli community is the sole recipient of a discrete government-run medical service. Whilst Orang Asli's are entitled to receive free treatment at any mainstream government clinic, the Medical Division caters almost exclusively for the Orang Asli. The flipside to this positive discrimination is that the community, already a minority numerically, socially, economically, politically and culturally, is further marginalized by a healthcare system which is outside the mainstream provision of the Ministry of Health. In addition to these inequities, the standard of Orang Asli health remains far below the national average and the community carries an increased burden of illness and disease. The disparities in both health status and healthcare provision continue to set the Orang Asli apart from the rest of the population, in direct contrast to the call for assimilation. The healthcare offered to Orang Asli through existing medical channels was limited and problematic. The scarcity of resources hindered anything but the most trivial of services and issues of access and location were major impediments [4].

Based on the observation done by Ng *et al.* [13] on the Temuan and Mah Meri communities, there are several barriers to effective health and nutrition intervention to promote child health need to be addressed. These include lack of transportation to the health clinics, difficulty in

communication with health personnel and lack of culturally sensitive health promotion strategies.

Personal hygiene of the Orang Asli child including clothes and body parts, cleanliness of the home inside and surroundings and foods for consumption (e.g. wash food items before cooking or eating) were identified by as important contributors to Orang Asli child health [14].

3. METHODOLOGY

The research carried out was a qualitative research in nature. It can be said so due to the fact that, qualitative research seeks out on 'why', not the 'how' education and health benefits are lacking among the Orang Asli through the analysis of unstructured information – things like interview transcripts, open ended survey responses, emails, notes, feedback forms, photos and videos. It doesn't just rely on statistics or numbers, which are the domain of quantitative researchers. By carrying out this qualitative nature research, it enables our respondents to express their views and dissatisfaction in a more open and liberal way. These results may not be achieved through quantitative research as it is more based on facts and figure. Since we used the open ended survey responses and short interviews as our main research instrument instead of quantitative figures, the validity of the results should not be a problem.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Based on our findings, the quality of education and healthcare for the Orang Asli that resides in Perak, Malaysia is relatively low. The Orang Asli claims that the lack of proper education for the children is due to the lack of educational support provided by the government. The Orang Asli are required to pay school fees yearly, as to provide education for their children. Besides that, The Orang Asli has to travel approximately half-an hour everyday to their nearest school. The only school available in their village is the primary school located at the neighbouring village. Due to the long hours of journey they have to endure daily, the children tend to lose concentration in class as they are fatigued. In addition, they do not have anyone in their family to refer to solve any doubts as most of them are illiterates.

The reason for the lack of medical facilities is due to the lack of educated Orang Asli in their respective village. Due to the lack of education, the Orang Asli do not realise the importance of medical facilities needed in the village. They are oblivious towards the threat of sickness such as hepatitis A and B. The lack of medical facilities in the village is also due to low income. With the burden of school fees and daily necessity the family needs, Orang Asli do not have the resources and time to worry

about the lack of medical facilities they have. Many were not even immunized with jabs or given treatment beforehand to prevent untoward diseases. Only once have they had their blood test taken in their village but were unaware of the reason. The Orang Asli complained that they had no proper transportation to commute to the nearest hospital as it was quite far. As such, our respondents preferred using herbs as medicines as it was free and easier to obtain. Due to lacking in both education and healthcare system, the Orang Asli does not put much thought into it. Their main concern is to earn income to support their family. The Orang Asli do not think that they have the need towards healthcare, because they claim that they could get herbs from the forest and use it as medicine for their sickness. But if there is a need to be hospitalized, the nearest hospital is a 40 minutes drive away, located in *Malim Nawar*. Unlike healthcare, the Orang Asli does put importance towards education for their children. But due to the lack of educated parents in the Orang Asli tribe, they do not know how to help educate their children aside from going to school. And because Orang Asli mostly stays in the outskirts of town, there are not tuition classes available for their children even if they are able to afford it.

Our respondents are willing to spend for their children's education but also hope for financial aid from the government to ease their burden. Some have opted to stop sending their children to school due to financial problems. Some even wanted their children to further their education so they could help their community in return but the high cost of education proves to be a barrier they are unable to overcome. This was evident in the case of a young respondent. The head of the village, really hoped government officials would visit and hear their plight. They do not wish to help the Orang Asli move forward rather leaving them in their comfort zone. It is also due to the lack of concern and understanding by the government. Government agencies do not take the initiative to understanding the living standards and problems the Orang Asli are facing. The Orang Asli also does not have the opportunity to voice out their problems due to language barrier and the lack of Orang Asli politicians in the Parliament. The government claims that the Orang Asli has equal rights towards resources, education and healthcare as the other Bumiputra races which are the Malays and the Baba and Nyonya's. Still the Orang Asli are not well develop in forms of education, healthcare and resources. Their main source of income is still what they did a few decades ago, which is collecting forest resources and handcrafting.

The reason that the government has not granted equal rights to the Orang Asli might be due to the stereotype thinking that Orang Asli are already contented with what they have, and they do not wish or ask for more from the government. Another reason is due to the lack of concern towards the Orang Asli. The government tends to overlook the importance of them because they are the minority ethnic group in a multi-racial country. Due to the lack of education about the origins and the nature of the native people in Malaysia, other races might be hostile towards them because of the prejudice thinking such as Orang Asli are barbaric and uncivilized. The Orang Asli are also a tribe that likes to keep to themselves and not mix around with other races due to them living in the outskirts of town areas, this will create an image of unfriendliness in the eyes of other races. One of respondents even complained off verbal abuses and name-calling in the school they go to. Some were even shunned away as they seem "indifferent" than the Malays in the school in terms of language pronunciation and appearance as they are of darker shade. They are always looked down and given less attention from the teachers as they assumed Oang Asli children would never make it through.

5. CONCLUSION

It is evident that the Orang Asli has been undermining in our society and they have been subjected to discrimination and unfair treatments despite being the origins in Malaysia. They are not enjoying the benefits and privileges that were promised while their counter parts, Malays are enjoying all the benefits given by the government. Orang Asli are afraid their community might just stay backward rest of their lives if they continue to be shunned away. Their problems can be overcome if the government look into their needs and wants and help them build their lives for the better. Similar projects like the *Felda* for the Malay community can be funded by the government for this Orang Asli's to make sure they too are better off socially and economically.

REFERENCES

- [1] Idrus, R. The discourse of protection and the Orang Asli in Malaysia. (2011). *Kajian Malaysia*, 29 (1), 53-74.
- [2] Khor, G. L. (2001). Resettlement and nutritional implications: The case of Orang Asli in Regroupment Schemes. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2, 123-132.
- [3] Mason, R. & Arifin, S. M. (2005), The 'Bumiputera Policy': Dynamics and dilemmas. Special issue of Orang Asli. *Journal of Malaysian Studies*, 21(1), 315-329.

- [4] Means, G. P. (1999). Indigenous peoples and the state: Politics, land, and ethnicity in the Malaysian Peninsula and Borneo. In G. P. Means. Vancouver: Pacific Affairs.
- [5] Bedford, K. J. (2009). Gombak Hospital, the Orang Asli hospital: Government healthcare for the indigenous minority of Peninsular Malaysia. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 37(107), 23-44.
- [6] Ibrahim, Z. (1996). The making of a subaltern discourse in the Malaysian nation-state: New subjectivities and the poetics. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 34 (3), 100-132.
- [7] Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Network. (2006, June 26). In Orang Asli's rights: Malaysia's federal court faces acid test. Retrieved July 23, 2011, from Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Network: www.aitpn.org
- [8] Alias, A. (2007). An acquisition of Orang Asli native land in Malaysia: Perceptions and challenges in quantifying of the compensation. Paper presented at the 12th Asian Real Estate Conference, 9-12th July 2007, Macao-China.
- [9] Toshihiro, N. (2009). Living on the Periphery: Development and Islamization among the Orang Asli. In Toshihiro N., *Chapter 1: Forest, Development, & Islamization* (p. 30). Subang Jaya, Malaysia: Center For Orang Asli Concern.
- [10] Schwartzman, S. (1997). Developing indigenous rights. *American Anthropologist*, 99(4), 829-831.
- [11] Nicholas, C. (2006). The state of Orang Asli education and its root problems. In Orang Asli: Rights, problems, solutions. Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM).
- [12] Kamaruddin, K., & Jusoh, O. (2008). Educational Policy and Opportunities of Orang Asli: A Study on Indigenous People in Malaysia. *The Journal of Human Resource and Adult Learning*, 4(1), 86-97.
- [13] Ng, W.C., Zalilah, M.S., Khor, G.L, Norlida, W.N., Haslinah, A, Shashikala, Mirmalini, K., Nawalyah, A.G., Hejar, A.R. (2005). A qualitative study on perceptions and knowledge of Orang Asli mothers on child health and nutrition. *Malaysian Journal of Nutrition*, 11(2), 75-88.
- [14] Phua, K.-L. (2009). Does the Granting of Legal Privileges as an Indigenous People Help to Reduce Health Disparities? Evidence from New Zealand and Malaysia. *Pacific Health Dialog*, 15(2), 117-27.