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## Islamization Policy toward the Orang Asli in Malaysia

Toshihiro Nobuta\*

オラン・アスリに対するイスラーム化政策

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The Malaysian government has promoted various religious policies to protect Islam since independence in 1957, because Islam is the official religion. Especially since the 1980s, under the influence of Islamic resurgence, the government has strongly promoted various Islamization policies. The state-led Islamization policy toward the Orang Asli began in the early 1980s. As a result of this policy, the Muslim population of the Orang Asli has increased since the 1980s.

This Islamization policy has had various effects on the Orang Asli community. The local Orang Asli community is divided into two groups: Muslims and non-Muslims. In the community, refusal to convert to Islam is regarded as opposition to the government. The aim of this article is to analyze the state-led Islamization policy toward the Orang Asli and examine its various effects on the Orang Asli community.

In this article, I analyze the ethnic boundary between the Orang Asli and the Malays from a historical point of view, focusing on the process of Islamization. I then examine various effects of the Islamization policy on the contemporary Orang Asli community. In conclusion, I discuss two topics; (1) domestication and (2) integration and assimilation, based on that examination.

1957年の独立以降、マレーシア政府は、国教であるイスラームを保護してきた。とりわけ、1980年代以降、政府は、イスラーム復興運動の影響下で、イスラーム化政策を推進してきた。こうした状況のなかで、1980年代初頭、オラン・

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アスリに対する国家主導のイスラーム化政策が開始された。この政策の結果、1980年代以降、オラン・アスリのムスリム人口は増加してきた。

イスラーム化政策は、オラン・アスリ社会に様々な影響をもたらしている。現在、オラン・アスリのコミュニティは、ムスリムのグループと非ムスリムのグループという、2つのグループに分かれている。オラン・アスリのコミュニティでは、イスラームへの改宗を拒否することは、国家に対する反抗と見なされる。本稿の目的は、オラン・アスリに対する国家主導のイスラーム化政策を分析し、オラン・アスリ社会への様々な影響を検証することである。

本稿ではまず、イスラーム化のプロセスに焦点を当てながら、歴史的観点からオラン・アスリとマレー人のエスニック・バウンダリーについて分析する。その後、現在のオラン・アスリ社会に対するイスラーム化政策の影響を検証する。結論では、①馴化、②統合と同化、という2つのトピックについて議論する。

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## Introduction

Islam is the official religion in Malaysia. For that reason, the Malaysian government—the Federation of Malaya (Malaya)—has promoted various religious policies to protect Islam since independence in 1957. Especially since the 1980s, under the influence of Islamic resurgence, the government has strongly promoted various Islamization policies. The state-led Islamization policy toward the Orang Asli, the indigenous people of the Malay Peninsula, began in the early 1980s. As a result of this policy, the Muslim population of the Orang Asli has increased since the 1980s (see Table 1).

This Islamization policy produced tension between Islamic converts and those in the community who refused to be converted to Islam. When I conducted social anthropological fieldwork from 1996 to 1998 at an Orang Asli village in Negeri Sembilan, I encountered various disputes between Muslim and non-Muslim Orang Asli. The village was divided into two groups: Muslims and non-Muslims. In the

**Table 1** Changes in the religious distribution among the Orang Asli population

	1974	1980	1991	1997
animism	89%	86%	71%	77%
Islam	5%	5%	11%	16%
Christianity	3%	4%	5%	6%
others	3%	4%	12%	2%

\* Data of 1974 and 1997 are based on the statistics of JHEOA.

\* Data of 1980 and 1997 are based on the national statistics (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia 1997).

community, refusal to convert to Islam is regarded as opposition to the government. The non-Muslim Orang Asli in the village were afraid that they might be arrested under the ISA (Internal Security Act), if they opposed the Islamization policy.

The aim of this article is to analyze Islamization policy toward the Orang Asli and examine various effects of Islamization on their community. I begin this article by presenting a brief explanation of the Orang Asli. I then provide a detailed discussion of the ethnic boundary between them and the Malays. After that, I examine the historical process of Islamization and various problems of Islamic converts. By way of conclusion, I discuss two topics; (1) domestication and (2) integration and assimilation, based on that examination.

## 1 Who are the Orang Asli?

Orang Asli is a generic name given to the indigenous people of the Malay Peninsula. Eighteen ethnic subgroups fall into this category, which can be classified into three groups, Negrito, Senoi and Melayu Asli, according to language, way of life and administrative customs. The term Orang Asli is a Malay translation of the English word ‘aborigine’, ‘*orang*’ meaning ‘human’ and ‘*asli*’ ‘original’ or ‘traditional’. According to the census of the JHEOA (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli: Department of Aboriginal Affairs), there were 92,529 Orang Asli in 1996.

The Malaysian government began officially using the term Orang Asli in 1966 (Mohd. Tap 1990: 31; Dentan et al. 1997: 66–67). Before then, the Orang Asli people were variously described as Biduanda, Jakun, Sakai, aborigines etc. Those terms, used during the British colonial period, are these days considered derogatory. In this article, for the purpose of convenience, the term “Orang Asli” is used even when discussing these people prior to 1966. In that case, I use the term “Orang Asli” with quotation marks. Malay is also a problematic term. The Malays were institutionalized in the Constitution of Malaysia after independence in 1957. Therefore, in this article, the term “Malay” (not Malay) is used when discussing these same people before independence.

If we ask ordinary Malaysian people (that is, those of ethnic Malay, Indian, Chinese or other backgrounds) what they think of the Orang Asli, the most likely

response is that they are ‘forest people’. The general perception of the Orang Asli is one of primitive peoples dwelling in the forest. This point of view is widespread. It is found on television, in newspapers and other media, and in school education.

The “Orang Asli” were traditionally engaged in hunting and gathering, and in swidden agriculture, but their way of life has changed drastically. This is due to changes in the forest environment caused by development, and because of the government’s policies to encourage settled farming and relocation, with related changes in the local economy. Recently, they engage in rubber tapping, in paid labor on tea and oil palm plantations, in factories, and so on.

Prior to the British colonial period, the “Orang Asli” were subjected to slave-raiding and exploitation and the population was dispersed (Endicott 1983). Under the Japanese military occupation, they were forced to hide deep in the forest. They were interned during the Emergency period (1948–1960). Under the government’s current regroupment schemes, they are being coerced into relocating to farming frontiers. This series of forced relocations has not only caused them economic uncertainty, but also robbed them of their ethnic identity and cultural traditions.

Today, the Orang Asli face numerous problems, such as economic hardship as a result of difficulties in adapting to the changes in their environment and livelihood, discrimination from Malays and others in the wider population, and limited legal and political rights exemplified by their lack of land rights.

## 2 Ethnic Boundary between the “Orang Asli” and the “Malays”

In the Malay Peninsula, there are three main ethnic groups; Malays, Chinese, and Indians. When analyzing the Orang Asli ethnic identity, their ethnic relationship with the Malays is very important. In this chapter, I make a historical analysis of the ethnic boundary between the “Orang Asli” and the “Malays,” focusing on the process of Islamization.

### 2.1 Invention of “Orang Asli” and “Malay”

Since the rise of the Malacca Sultanate in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula have been gradually converted to Islam. This phenomenon was later called ‘*masuk Islam*’, ‘*masuk*’ meaning ‘enter’, and also ‘*masuk Melayu*’, that is, assimilation into the Malay world. With the process of Islamization, most of the inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula have become the “Malays.”

The Biduanda people are a case in point. The Malacca Sultanate categorized aborigines living in the hinterland (Malacca and Negeri Sembilan) as ‘Biduanda’, which means ‘followers of the Raja (king)’ (Wilkinson 1971 (1911): 283–287; Winstedt 1934: 43). In the process of Islamization, most Biduanda were converted to Islam. They became “Malays” in the British colonial period. On the other hand, some Biduanda were not converted and remained non-Muslim. They became the

“Orang Asli” (Sakai, Jakun, and Aborigine) living in the states of Malacca and Negeri Sembilan in the British colonial period.

After colonizing some states of the Malay Peninsula, the British colonial government introduced indirect rule that reinforced the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims (Couillard 1984: 101). Based on a religious criterion, the indigenous Muslims were classified as “Malays,” while the indigenous non-Muslims were classified as ‘Sakai’, ‘Jakun’, and ‘Aborigine’. The British colonial government categorized the “Malays” as ‘Natives’ and the “Orang Asli” as ‘Aborigines’. Thus, the prototypes of “Malay” and “Orang Asli” were invented in the British colonial period.

In the British colonial period, Islamization, along with assimilation into the “Malays,” was accelerated. Just before the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957, there were approximately 20,000 Muslim “Orang Asli” (Baharon 1968; JHEOA 1972). Most of these were categorized as “Malays” after independence.

## 2.2 Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance

There is no congruence of ‘Malay’ and ‘Orang Asli’ in the Constitution of Malaysia (Hooker 1991: 72). In the Constitution, the term Malay refers to a person who practices Islam and Malay customs (*adat*), and speaks the Malay language. On the other hand, in the Constitution, there was originally no reference made to the Orang Asli<sup>1)</sup>.

The definition of “Orang Asli” was given in the Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance, enacted in 1954 before independence (revised in 1974 as the Aboriginal Peoples Act). Section 3 of the Ordinance reads as follows:

### Section 3

- (1) In this Ordinance an aborigine is defined as;
  - (a) any person whose male parent is or was, a member of an aboriginal ethnic group, who speaks an aboriginal language and habitually follows an aboriginal way of life and aboriginal customs and beliefs, and includes a descendant through male or such persons;
  - (b) any person of any race adopted when an infant by aborigines who has been brought up as an aborigine, habitually speaks an aboriginal language, habitually follows an aboriginal way of life and aboriginal customs and beliefs and is a member of an aboriginal community; or
  - (c) the child of any union between an aboriginal female and a male of another race, provided that the child habitually speaks an aboriginal language, habitually follows an aboriginal way of life and aboriginal customs and beliefs and remains a member of an aboriginal community.
- (2) Any aborigine who by reason of conversion to any religion or for any other reason

ceases to adhere to aboriginal beliefs but who continues to follow an aboriginal way of life and aboriginal customs or speaks an aboriginal language shall not be deemed to have ceased to be an aborigine by reason of only practicing that religion.

- (3) Any question whether any person is or is not an aborigine shall be decided by the Minister.

In this Ordinance, the government makes the final decision on who is “Orang Asli,” no matter what his or her parentage, or what his or her religious beliefs may be. Section 3 (2) of this Ordinance, especially, preserves the status of “Orang Asli” despite conversion to any religion (including Islam), provided an aboriginal way of life is maintained (Hooker 1991: 70).

However, the rule in section 3 (2) is in flat contradiction to state law on Islam (Hooker 1991: 61). From 1952 onwards, each state of the Federation of Malaya (Malaysia) enacted its own legislation providing for the administration of Islamic law. The Syariah (Sharia) Courts of each state have exclusive jurisdiction over Muslims resident in the state in all matters of personal status and inheritance. Therefore, the Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance (revised as the Aboriginal Peoples Act) is in direct conflict with the state’s Islamic law enactments (Hooker 1991: 70).

Thus, the Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance has a legal problem concerning Islamic converts among the “Orang Asli.” According to the Ordinance, even if they are Muslims, they are “Orang Asli.” On the other hand, according to the Constitution or state Islamic law enactments, if they are Muslims, they may become “Malays.”

So who are the Orang Asli? What is the relationship between the “Orang Asli” and the “Malays”? Are the “Orang Asli” included among the “Malays” or not? The Malaysian government has been trying to resolve these problems since independence, but without success.

In the 1970s, the Malaysian government introduced a new category, ‘Bumiputra’, in an attempt to find a solution. However, both the Orang Asli and the Malays were placed under the category ‘Bumiputra’, so their relationship remained obscure. Incidentally, there is no constitutional definition of ‘Bumiputra’ (Hooker 1991: 72).

### 2.3 Orang Asli and Bumiputra

The independent Malaysian government released ‘the Statement of Policy Regarding the Administration of the Aborigine Peoples of the Federation of Malaya’ in 1961 (Government of Malaysia 1961). This statement includes two different aims for the integration of the Orang Asli; (1) the integration of the Aborigine Peoples (the “Orang Asli”) within the rest of the national community and (2) the integration of the Aborigine Peoples (the “Orang Asli”) within the Malay section of the community.

The point of this statement is how the “Orang Asli” are to be integrated into the newly-reconstructed nation-state. (1) the integration of the Aborigine Peoples

(the “Orang Asli”) within the rest of the national community means that the “Orang Asli” community is placed at the same level as the Malay community, the Chinese community, and the Indian community, whereas (2) the integration of the Aborigine Peoples (the “Orang Asli”) within the Malay section of the community means that the “Orang Asli” community is included in the Malay community. In other words, (1) the integration of the Aborigine Peoples (the “Orang Asli”) within the rest of the national community shows the kind of integration inherited from the British colonial government’s indirect rule, in which the “Orang Asli” were distinct from the “Malays.” On the other hand, (2) the integration of the Aborigine Peoples (the “Orang Asli”) within the Malay section of the community actually shows the assimilation of the “Orang Asli” into the “Malays,” and also provides legal grounds for the Islamization policy toward the Orang Asli.

After a race riot between the Malays and the Chinese in 1969, the New Economic Policy (NEP), the so-called Bumiputra policy, was introduced in the early 1970s. The NEP offers preferential socio-economic treatment to ‘Bumiputra’, a category including the Malays, the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak, and the Orang Asli. However, at the beginning, there was an argument about whether or not the Orang Asli should be included in the category of Bumiputra. In fact, with the introduction of the new category of ‘Bumiputra’, the JHEOA had to examine the two kinds of integration, (1) and (2) mentioned above.

In the official report of JHEOA in 1974, the position of the Orang Asli under the NEP was discussed. The author of the report, Mohd. Ruslan, analyzed three levels of integration or assimilation: (i) the level of the national community, (ii) the level of the Bumiputra community, and (iii) the level of the Malay element of the Bumiputra community (Mohd. Ruslan 1974: 21).

(i) the level of the national community means that the Orang Asli community is positioned at the same level as the Chinese and Indian communities. The author mentions that, at this level, whether or not the Orang Asli are categorized as Bumiputra is unclear.

(iii) the level of the Malay element of the Bumiputra community is almost the same as the integration of type (2), the integration of the Aborigine Peoples (the Orang Asli) within the Malay section of the community, discussed above. The author rejects level (iii), because it represents not integration but assimilation.

In the end, the author concludes that the Orang Asli fit rightfully and properly into (ii) the level of the Bumiputra community, for which no religious qualifications are necessary. It is true that the vast majority of the Bumiputra are Muslims, but the rest of them are animists and Christians (Mohd. Ruslan 1974: 21–23).

After all, in this report, the Orang Asli community is positioned at the same level as the Malay community under the Bumiputra community. The discussion of the report shows that the JHEOA at that time rejected the assimilation of the Orang Asli into the Malay community.



However, since the 1980s, the situation has changed drastically. In the early 1980s, Islamic resurgence movements in Malaysia became active and had a considerable influence on government religious policies. As a result of this, various government agencies were requested to promote the Islamization policy. In 1983, the JHEOA officially announced its Islamization policy toward the Orang Asli. This official announcement shows that integration type (2) in the 1961 statement and (iii) in the official report of JHEOA in 1974 were gradually adopted to assist the process of Islamization in Malaysia.

### 3 The Islamization Policy toward the Orang Asli

The above-mentioned official report of the JHEOA in 1974 contains a reference to state-led institutionalized Islamic missionary activities. The Malaysian government at that time requested the JHEOA to promote Islamic missions to the Orang Asli. However, the JHEOA did not approve of this request, because it was afraid of losing the trust of the Orang Asli because of such missions (Mohd. Ruslan 1974: 94–95). The JHEOA was opposed to the Islamic missionary activities which the Department of Religious Affairs and other semi-governmental Islamic missionaries promoted.

According to a report of the PERKIM (Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia: the Malaysia Islamic Welfare Organization) (PERKIM 1980), the Islamic missionaries of the Department of Religious Affairs were not so active except for a few states such as Johor<sup>2)</sup>, Perak<sup>3)</sup>, and Terengganu<sup>4)</sup>. In Selangor, no Islamic missionary activities took place until 1977. In Negeri Sembilan, there were no Islamic missionary activities toward the Orang Asli. However, the situation changed when Islamic resurgence movements began to exert a considerable influence on government religious policy in the 1980s.

In 1980, a seminar entitled ‘Resolusi: Seminar Dakwah Islamiah di Kalangan Orang Asli Malaysia (The Islamic mission to the Orang Asli society)’ was held at Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur under the sponsorship of the PERKIM. This seminar had a profound effect on the Islamization policy of the JHEOA. In fact, the JHEOA submitted an official strategic report about the Islamization policy toward the Orang Asli in 1983 (JHEOA 1983). This official report reflected a shift in the goal of the JHEOA from integration to assimilation, which resulted in the Orang Asli being absorbed into the Malay community (Dentan et al. 1997: 80).

The fundamental principle of the Islamization policy of the JHEOA was shown in ‘Strategi Perkembangan Ugama Islam di Kalangan Masyarakat Orang Asli (A strategy for the Islamization of the Orang Asli)’ (JHEOA 1983). This report had two main objectives: (1) the Islamization of the whole Orang Asli community and (2) the integration/assimilation of the Orang Asli within the Malay community (JHEOA 1983: 2). ‘Islamization’ in this report meant not only conversion to Islam but also

re-Islamization, which means becoming 'more Islamic' (Tawada 1997). Targets of the Islamization policy were (i) Islamic converts of the Orang Asli, (ii) Orang Asli communities adjacent to Malay communities, (iii) Orang Asli who are government employees, (iv) Orang Asli living in the interior (JHEOA 1983: 2–3). However, the main targets were (i), (ii), and (iii); (iv) was not considered so important at that time.

The 'positive discrimination' policy, a kind of affirmative action for Islamic converts among the Orang Asli, had a negative effect on the Orang Asli community. The JHEOA tried to provide Islamic converts with better housing (including water and electricity supplies), income-earning opportunities, education, health, and transportation facilities than it supplied to non-Muslims (Dentan et al. 1997: 144). In addition, the JHEOA gave preference to Muslim Orang Asli employees in promotion decisions; it was generally understood that a non-Muslim could not rise to the upper ranks in the JHEOA (Dentan et al. 1997: 144–145).

The aim of this policy was to promote conversion of the Orang Asli to Islam. In fact, the above-mentioned objective (2), the integration/assimilation of the Orang Asli within the Malay community, meant that the Orang Asli would be gradually assimilated into the Malay community by the process of Islamization. The policy-makers might have thought that the Orang Asli would choose to be converted to Islam in order to get various kinds of governmental assistance. On the other hand, the 'positive discrimination' policy also meant that the non-Muslim Orang Asli could not get so much governmental assistance as the Muslim Orang Asli, or, even if they could, they would have a lower priority than the Muslim Orang Asli. In other words, this policy showed that the Orang Asli could not get equal benefit with the Muslim Orang Asli as long as they remained non-Muslim.

Assimilation into the Malay communities is synonymous with conversion to Islam. Under the Bumiputra policy, the Orang Asli are considered to be part of the Bumiputra communities, but the truth is that they do not enjoy the same benefits and entitlements as the Malays, because they are 'non-Muslims'.

The Islamization policy of the JHEOA was carefully kept secret by the JHEOA in the 1980s, because the JHEOA was afraid of criticism. In the 1990s, however, government agencies including the JHEOA began to make the Islamization policy public. For example, former JHEOA Director-General Jimin bin Idris stated in 1990 that he hoped the Orang Asli would become fully integrated into Malaysian society, preferably as an Islamized subgroup of the Malays (Dentan et al. 1997: 80). By 1993 government agencies including the JHEOA built 265 multipurpose halls and religious schools in Orang Asli settlements and the government intended to place religious officials in all these facilities to guide the Orang Asli toward embracing Islam (Dentan et al. 1997: 146–147). The Johor Islamic Religious Department announced that it was to accelerate Islamic missionary activity among the Orang Asli via a multi-agency approach. The program, called 'Socializing the Orang Asli',

was launched in April 1998 and co-ordinated by the Johor JHEOA (Nicholas 2000: 99). In 1999, the Islamic Religious Council of Negeri Sembilan set aside a kind of fund for Orang Asli students in the state. This monetary assistance was to be given only to those Orang Asli students who had recently been converted to Islam (Nicholas 2000: 100). This political and religious situation showed that Islamization of the Orang Asli was closely connected with development and material benefits.

## 4 Problems surrounding Islamization among the Orang Asli

### 4.1 Refusal to be Converted to Islam

The Orang Asli showed various reactions to the Islamization policy. Some were converted to Islam, while others refused to be. In the census of religious population among the Orang Asli, the number of the Muslim Orang Asli were increasing since the 1980s.

The conversion to Islam had a great impact on socio-economic and political order at the village level. For instance, in villages where the *batin* (village headman) and his kin were converted to Islam, they tended to monopolize socio-economic development projects. On the other hand, in villages where politically marginalized people were converted to Islam, the socio-economic and political order changed drastically. In several villages the three religious groups, Muslims, Christians, and Animists dwelt separately. In any case, Islamic converts were still a minority and most Orang Asli refused to be converted.

The Orang Asli can get political and economic benefits if they are converted to Islam. However most of them refuse to be converted. Why is this? Dentan et al. mention several reasons for rejecting conversion: (1) fear of circumcision, (2) food restrictions, (3) prevalence of traditional belief, (4) dislike of Islamic missionaries, (5) refusal to 'become Malays' (Dentan et al. 1997: 148–149). The details are as follows:

- (1) The Orang Asli are afraid of Islamic circumcision, because they have no such custom, except for the Semelai, the Jakun, and the Jah Hut (Dentan et al. 1997: 148).
- (2) The Orang Asli themselves often mention food restrictions as a reason for rejecting conversion (Dentan et al. 1997: 148). They usually eat food such as wild game, which is strictly forbidden according to Islamic food taboos.
- (3) The Orang Asli refuse to be converted because they firmly hold their traditional beliefs. Their beliefs, prohibitions, and rituals are intricately woven into their everyday lives (Dentan et al. 1997: 149).
- (4) Dislike of Islamic missionaries occurs because the missionaries do not sufficiently understand the Orang Asli life-style and culture. Many show little respect for the Orang Asli and, unlike Christian missionaries, they seldom

venture into the backcountry where most Orang Asli live, but instead prefer just to make brief visits (Dentan et al. 1997: 149).

- (5) The Orang Asli might refuse not only to become Malays but also to ‘stop being Orang Asli’. Most Orang Asli prefer to live among their own people, and they derive a sense of security from being part of a community and kinship network (Dentan et al. 1997: 149).

#### **4.2 Islamic Converts among the Elite**

Although the Islamization policy was not officially announced until the 1990s, the existence of the ‘positive discrimination’ policy had already been fully recognized by the Orang Asli themselves.

For instance, it was widely known that school education pursued a goal of persuading the Orang Asli to be converted to Islam. In a 1989 meeting, a JHEOA official said that Orang Asli school teachers should be trained so that in addition to teaching Orang Asli children, they could also conduct Islamization activities among the Orang Asli communities (Dentan et al. 1997: 145–146). In fact, this statement was contrary to the Aboriginal Peoples Act that prohibits giving religious education to any Orang Asli child without a parent’s or guardian’s prior consent (Dentan et al. 1997: 146). However, the actual situation was different. It was true that ‘education’ was being used as a means to achieve assimilation or integration (Nicholas 2000: 128).

According to my own field data, parents tended to tolerate their children not going to school. Some refused to send their children there, fearing that they might be converted to Islam. In addition, because of racial discrimination and bullying at school against Orang Asli children, their dropout rate continued to be very high.

The Malaysian government has taken affirmative action in education toward the Orang Asli as well as Malays under the Bumiputra policy. Although Orang Asli students have gained considerable financial support from the JHEOA until high school level, they have faced economic difficulty after graduating from there. There were no JHEOA scholarships at university level. For this reason, Orang Asli students had to obtain other governmental scholarships if they hoped to enter the universities or other institutions of higher education. However, in applying for scholarships, they were asked whether they were Muslim or not, because most governmental scholarships were given only to Muslims. If they were not Muslim, they were sometimes persuaded to convert to Islam by JHEOA officials in order to obtain a scholarship. Therefore, most Orang Asli students with the ability to enter university gave up the idea for economic reasons, while others decided to convert to Islam in order to obtain a scholarship. In future, those Muslim Orang Asli students will become the elite of Orang Asli society.

Orang Asli government employees of the JHEOA and the Senoi Pra’aq<sup>5)</sup> also were the elite of Orang Asli society. They were implicitly and explicitly persuaded

to convert to Islam in order to obtain promotion. Those who refused to be converted had to abandon the idea of promotion. Some decided to resign from government positions because they did not want to convert, but most chose conversion to Islam.

If the ‘positive discrimination’ policy in education and promotion continues, the number of Islamic converts among the elite of Orang Asli society will increase. In fact, many elite families live in urban and town areas, not in Orang Asli villages. It is true that they are of Orang Asli descent, but they live in the Malay world.

### 4.3 Islamic Converts at the Village Level

The elite’s conversion to Islam shows that Islamic converts among the Orang Asli are separated from their own communities. On the other hand, conversion to Islam at village level shows that Islamic converts are encroaching on Orang Asli communities.

Because of the ‘positive discrimination’ policy, Islamic converts at village level exclusively obtained various governmental benefits and support. For instance, one man who had recently converted to Islam was given a house through a governmental development project. After conversion to Islam, each convert was given financial aid<sup>6)</sup> of RM 150 every month. RM 150 was enough to live in a village for a month. In other cases, Islamic converts were given televisions in order to watch Islamic worship programs. Furthermore, in the case of Terengganu, Islamic converts were given motorbikes in order to go to the mosque of a neighboring Malay village (Dentan et al. 1997: 144–145).

Most Islamic converts at the village level had no religious reason for conversion. They often ate the meat of wild animals, such as monkey, squirrel, and pig, which was strictly forbidden according to Islam. Likewise, they did not observe the religious obligations of a Muslim, neglecting everyday worship and the Ramadan fast. Furthermore, officials were confused when Islamic converts, already registered as Muslim by one state, pretended to be non-Muslim after moving to other villages in other states. Some men spent financial aid on alcohol. Some Islamic converts, who could not endure the strict religious obligations, sought conversion from Islam, although apostasy was strictly prohibited according to religious acts of the Malaysian states. As a result, those Islamic converts at village level were ironically called ‘Muslims in name only’ by non-Muslim Orang Asli and Malays (cf. Dentan et al. 1997: 147).

However, government agencies such as the JHEOA gave priority to increasing the number of Muslim Orang Asli rather than improving their material conditions. Furthermore, Dentan et al. suggest that the JHEOA officials overestimated their success in converting the Orang Asli (Dentan et al. 1997: 147).

### 4.4 Conversion and Resistance

In responding to the state-led Islamization, the Orang Asli have two major

options, conversion or resistance. Some choose to convert in order to gain scholarships or promotion, or to benefit from government development projects. At the village level, people convert for survival, although they are excluded from their own community. Even if they are called ‘Muslims in name only’, they still choose to convert to sustain their existence.

Some Orang Asli resist Islamization by converting to Christianity instead (Mohd. Tap 1990: 457; Dentan et al. 1997: 149). Although the government tries to keep non-Muslim missionaries away, at least 1,500 Orang Asli had become Christians by 1984 (Dentan et al. 1997: 149).

Some Orang Asli parents refuse school education mainly for fear that it will cause their children to convert. The Islamization policy has caused great resentment toward the government and the JHEOA in particular. The Orang Asli resist joining regroupment schemes in part because doing so exposes them to relentless pressure to convert to Islam. They also resist taking government employment such as joining the JHEOA or the Senoi Pra’aq (Dentan et al. 1997: 150). Efforts to propagate Islam do little to increase interaction and integration of the Orang Asli and the Malays, but rather contribute to an increase in tension between the two communities (Mohd. Tap 1990: 455).

## 5 Discussion

Islamization is forcing the Orang Asli to change their ethnic identity. Some have already converted and their offspring may become ‘Malays’. Others have refused to convert, in spite of the benefits.

In this article, I have described the historical process of Islamization among the “Orang Asli.” The ethnic distinctions on the Malay Peninsula developed from a prototype created during the Malacca Sultanate, which was strengthened during the British colonial period, and institutionalized after the independence of Malaysia.

I have also examined the problems of Islamization and the actual conditions of the Islamic converts among the Orang Asli communities. In this chapter, I discuss the meaning of Islamization and its various effects on the Orang Asli.

### 5.1 Domestication

Kato Tsuyoshi (1993) has referred to the process by which an ethnic group becomes domesticated, by policy or other means, as the ‘domestication of ethnicity by state power’. From the rulers’ point of view, the domestication of an ethnic group is a much surer way of controlling them than resorting to the use of military force to suppress uprisings.

Prior to the British colonial period, the “Orang Asli” taken into slavery were referred to by the adjective ‘domesticated’ (*jinak*), while ‘wild’ (*liar*) was used to describe those who remained free and roamed around the forest (e.g. Skeat and

Blagden 1966 (1906): 19–24; Wilkinson 1971 (1911): 15–20). During the British colonial period, the colonial government gave land in the form of the Sakai reservations to those ‘domesticated’ “Orang Asli” who would settle down and live on it. The ‘wild’ “Orang Asli,” who still lived by swidden cultivation and hunting and gathering, were considered unpredictable and dangerous. During the Emergency period, moving the ‘wild’ “Orang Asli” to the resettlement areas and keeping them under surveillance became the most important military strategy<sup>7)</sup>.

As part of the “Orang Asli” policy, the newly independent Malaysian government placed stress on the development of the ‘domesticated’ and settled “Orang Asli.” The undomesticated were regarded negatively. The government never acknowledged the Orang Asli as owners of the vast landholdings. Instead, they implemented resettlement programs including the regroupment scheme under which the Orang Asli were forced to relocate from their areas to far distant settlements.

Whether a group is considered ‘domesticated’ or ‘wild’ is, after all, a product of the domesticator’s perspective. This polarity is often associated with the groups’ levels of settlement, where settled people are tagged with the ‘domesticated’ label, and the unsettled are labeled ‘wild’. On the other hand, from the “Orang Asli” point of view mobility has become a strategic tool to avoid being controlled by the outer world (Mohd. Tap 1990: 208; Nobuta 1996). In this context, the policy of Islamization can be understood as a policy of imposing more control over the Orang Asli who have already settled and been ‘domesticated’. The best way to further ‘domesticate’ the Orang Asli who have previously been resettled and show no sign of pursuing their former nomadic life, is to convert them to Islam and to make them Malays (i.e. Malayization).

## 5.2 Integration and Assimilation

The Orang Asli policy is now in transition from an integration policy to one of assimilation; from gentle Malayization, where Islamization was only hinted at, to radical Malayization where Islamization is a compulsory part of the process (e.g. Hooker 1991). There is also an optimistic view of this process. When assimilation reaches completion and there is no longer an ‘Orang Asli’ people, all will be ‘Malays’ and thus able to enjoy the same benefits (Rachagan 1990: 110).

However, the actual situation has become more complicated. In reality, the policy transition from integration to assimilation has instead caused an identity crisis among the Orang Asli. This is because the assimilation policy promotes the abandonment of historically-constituted ‘Orang Asli-ness’ (e.g. identity as non-Islamic ‘forest people’), rather than retaining what makes them as they are. It has been pointed out that the assimilation policy, being in essence an Islamization policy towards the Orang Asli, promotes the loss of their cultural traditions, or ‘de-culturalization’ (Nicholas 2000: 111).

Table 2 shows the history of Islamization and the changes in ethnic identity

**Table 2** Islamization and the change in ethnic identity amongst the “Orang Asli” (in Negeri Sembilan)

	pre-colonial period	British colonial period	after independence
non-Muslim	Biduanda	Sakai/Jakun/Aborigines	Orang Asli
Islamic convert	↓	↓	↓
	Biduanda	Sakai/Jakun/Aborigines	Muslim Orang Asli (Orang Asli Islam)
Muslim	→	→	→
	“Malay”	“Malay”	Malay

→ conversion to Islam  
 ⇒ change in ethnic identity

amongst the “Orang Asli” in Negeri Sembilan. The Malacca Sultanate categorized the “Orang Asli” as Biduanda. With the process of Islamization, most Biduanda converted, and became “Malays” in the British colonial period. On the other hand, some Biduanda did not convert, but remained non-Muslim, and became the “Orang Asli” (Sakai, Jakun, and Aborigine) in the same period.

Under the British Colonial administration’s indirect rule, non-Muslim “Orang Asli” (Sakai, Jakun, and Aborigine) were distinguished from Muslim “Malays.” Some administrators and anthropologists urged the protection of the “Orang Asli,” fearing their ‘Islamization’ (i.e. ‘Malayization’) might lead to the loss of their culture (cf. Noone 1936). The “Orang Asli” were the subject of protection by the British colonial government (Dodge 1981). However, in the process of Islamization, some “Orang Asli” were converted to Islam. They became Malays after independence.

The “Orang Asli” were set for ‘integration’ into the new nation with the coming of Malaysia’s independence. The logic of ‘integration’ has changed to that of ‘assimilation’ in the context of the increasing influence of the Islamic resurgence movement on the government’s Islamic policy-making since the 1980s.

On a cultural level, Malaysian government policy after independence was to push for ‘assimilation’. Because of the Orang Asli policy since the 1980s, the differences between the Malays and the Orang Asli have been disappearing. The national language, Bahasa Malaysia, has been replacing Orang Asli languages, and Malayization has been continuing in other realms of cultural life. The social reality is that Islamic converts among the Orang Asli are considered to be Malays (Orang Melayu, or ‘*jobo*’, a derogatory term meaning ‘Malays’ used by the Orang Asli at my research site).

However, from the legal point of view, the problem of converting the Orang Asli to Islam has been the main obstacle to assimilation. The legal aspects of the Orang Asli policy do not necessarily accord with its ‘assimilation’ oriented cultural aspect. In the legal system, “Orang Asli” have been differentiated from “Malays”



since the British colonial period. As section 3 (2) of the Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance (revised as an Act) states, an “Orang Asli” can remain “Orang Asli” even after converting to Islam. Perversely, the Act which was based on the principle of ‘integration’ inherited from the British colonial government is perpetuating discrimination against the “Orang Asli.” Up until today, the Orang Asli have never enjoyed the same legal rights as Malays. Accordingly, in a strict sense, the Orang Asli policy in its legal aspect is, even now, not directed towards ‘assimilation’.

Those Orang Asli who have converted to Islam are perceived to be Malay, but in a legal sense they remain Orang Asli and not Malay. This issue surrounding Islamic converts among the Orang Asli remains unresolved. The contradiction I am pointing out here between the cultural and legal aspects of the Orang Asli policy has had a subtle influence on the Islamization policy. As a result, a new classification, ‘Muslim Orang Asli (*Orang Asli yang sudah beragama Islam*)’ has been created.

## Notes

- 1) The Orang Asli are mentioned twice in the Constitution of Malaysia incorporating amendments to July 1985 (Hooker 1991: 71).
- 2) In Johor, the Muslim Orang Asli (Orang Kuala) live.
- 3) In Perak, many Christian Orang Asli (Semai) live.
- 4) In Terengganu, the JHEOA has promoted its Islamization policy toward the Orang Asli since 1976.
- 5) The Senoi Pra’aq is a unit of the Royal Malaysian Police made up almost entirely of Orang Asli. The name Senoi Pra’aq means ‘war people’ or ‘those who fight’ in Semai (the language of one of the Orang Asli sub-groups).
- 6) RM1 was about 50 Japanese yen in 1997. The financial aid consisted of donations from Muslims.
- 7) The best-known document about the life of the “Orang Asli” during the Emergency period is the work of Leary (1989; 1995) who detailed the state of the “Orang Asli” in Perak (Semai and Temiar) compiled from newspaper reports, official documents and interviews.

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