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LIVING ON THE PERIPHERY; Development and Islamization among the Orang Asli in Malaysia

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Chapter 12

Conclusion

Fifty-three year old Ukal, the brother-in-law of Batin Janggut and father of Asat, once told me the following in a hut in a durian orchard: “In the past our life was poor, but it was comfortable: today our life is comfortable, but it is hard (*Dulu susah tapi senang; sekarang senang tapi susah*)”.

“What do you mean?” I asked. This in essence was his reply:

The Orang Asli in the forest used to have no clothes on their backs and the Malays and other people around them probably thought they were leading a poor life. But in reality it was more comfortable than others might have thought, because it was easy to get food from hunting and people got on with each other and helped each other out. Today we look much better off as a result of economic development. People think our life is comfortable. However, the fact is that we have to earn cash, and people fight all the time about Islamic conversion. Times are much harder now.

Ukal was expressing his concern over the state of the village, which had been torn apart by family members and relatives feuding with each other over Islamization and economic development. Just how utopian life in the forest had been is debatable, but Ukal’s observation that life is now more comfortable and harder, while seemingly cynical and somewhat paradoxical, well describes the nature of development and Islamization among the Orang Asli.

The Orang Asli were once defined by the outside world as “undeveloped” and “unreligious”. Therefore their lives must have been poor (according to reason) and the development projects and Islamization



Plate 84 & 85: Ukal making blowpipe darts, straightening a blowpipe barrel. In Kampung Durian Tawar, only a few old men, including Ukal, can make a blowpipe. Ukal makes blowpipes on request and sells them to other Orang Asli villagers or to the Chinese. He is a grandfather now, with 10 grandchildren. [NT-2003, 2007].

would deal with that poverty. But in reality their lives were, as Ukal says, quite comfortable. The outside world judges that life for the Orang Asli has “improved” since development and Islamization. But Ukal contends that life has become “harder”, certainly not “more comfortable”. This is what I have attempted to describe in this book. I have described the state of the Orang Asli, based mostly on what I saw in Kampung Durian Tawar. Now I attempt to draw some conclusions.

Revisit

In March 2001 I had the opportunity to revisit Kampung Durian Tawar for the first time in two-and-a-half years. One significant change I saw was the increase in converts to Christianity. Poteh (No. 26) had become the leader of the converted Christian villagers (*puak Kristian*). Badak (No. 32) and Kasai (No. 31) had now been employed by a Chinese as guards at a fishpond farm, and lived at the former tin mine site to the southeast of the village, a part of which had been turned into the farm. There, the Christians of the village had gathered for a church service. Aru's wife (No. 22) had become a Christian, they had divorced, and Aru had left the village with his children. The entire families of Katup (No. 44), Gat (No. 49) and Gobek (No. 55) and some of the *adat* group members among the lower people had also converted to Christianity. All were suffering from poverty. I would not have been surprised if they had converted to Islam.

The Muslim families of Sieu (No. 30) and Kepah (No. 56) have followed the Islamization program and relocated to a village for new converts (but Kepah's family could not manage there and returned to Kampung Durian Tawar). Adunan (No. 46) was very busy trying to carry out the extraordinary plan of establishing a new village between Kampung Durian Tawar and a neighboring Orang Asli village.

As for the development plans, the village had resigned from the neighboring Malay village's JKKK. When I was there, the village was applying for the establishment of its own JKKK, indicating that the influence of Tikak had waned. He had also resigned from the position of branch president for UMNO. Leadership over economic development had shifted to Genreh and other younger leaders.

Most villagers seemed to consider all the incidents I had witnessed during my previous stay as events from the long-distant past. But Batin Janggut and Jenang Misai had certainly not forgotten them. Batin Janggut told me that the three groups in Kampung Durian Tawar were now the *adat* group, the Islam group and the Christian group (*puak Kristian*). It seemed that the drunk group had lost ground, while the influence of the *adat* group had increased.

Both Batin Janggut and Jenang Misai stressed the importance of education, and looked very proud of their children and grandchildren attending universities and other tertiary education institutes. While stressing the importance of education, they were of the opinion that it was dangerous to give education to the children of converted Muslim and Christian villagers. At present, these religious converts do not have the power to assume leadership roles in the village. However, there is the

danger that their children, if educated, might do so in the future. They therefore insisted that the education of the children of the *adat* group should be given priority. During this visit, I also realized the importance of the *adat* group, those who base their identity on *adat*, as the core of the upper people.

Reaction to Islamization

In his discussion of the potential for analyzing development phenomena, Adachi (2000: 111) states:

It may be a worn out metaphor, but development phenomena is like the film “Rashomon”. The actors discuss various aspects of development based on their individual perspectives. None of them can tell the whole story, but their fragmented narratives formulate a story about “development”. Is everything then, really “shrouded in mystery”?

As for the “incidents” that occurred due to Islamization, which I described in Part III, there were many narratives based on the individual perspectives of the participants. I described the Islamization process mainly from the perspectives of members of the *adat* group. In other words, those from the non-*adat* group are not well represented. As mentioned in the Prologue, I carried out my research while constructing a rapport with the *adat* group, which often excluded the non-*adat* group from my research. Therefore, it is not possible for me to construct an informed story of the Islamization process in Kampung Durian Tawar from the narratives of the non-*adat* group.

Hierarchy

In Part II, I described in detail the stratification of the village as a result of the changes caused by development. A division between the upper and lower people has formed in the village due to development projects carried out since the 1970s.

The very meaning of the terms “upper” and “lower”, and the notion of rich and poor embodied in those words, came to the village along with development. Those who accepted development embraced not only its economic aspects but also the logic it embodied. Hunting and gathering does not fit in with the logic of development, nor does mobility. As such, these are no longer considered important by those people who have accepted development. The upper people were so deeply imbued with the logic of economic development that they criticized the economic inefficiency of hunting and gathering. This is proof that economic development alters the consciousness of those who have accepted it.

Because I became one of the upper people, I was also following the logic of development in much the same way as the rest of the upper people. The lower people's perspective went largely unnoticed. To me, the most distant "other" were the lower people. I saw the lives of lower people, surviving by hunting and gathering or day laboring, through the eyes of the upper people.

The stratification of the village society arose from the developments' unequal distribution of economic benefits. The lower people, who had been excluded from having a role in development, had no choice other than to engage in traditional hunting and gathering, or in day laboring. Development brought about a division in Kampung Durian Tawar between the "haves" and "have-nots". The "haves" were the upper people, who reaped the benefits of development; the "have-nots" were the lower people, who were excluded from development and were impoverished. Relatives became divided and behaved as though they belonged to two totally unrelated groups. The upper people, who had become rich from development and who based their opinions on a way of thinking fostered by their economic development, began denouncing traditional hunting and gathering and the more mobile way of life associated with it. The lower people, too, by accepting that economic yardstick, began to believe in such measures of poverty.

The hierarchy in Kampung Durian Tawar has been built on the uneven distribution of development projects. Only so many houses could be built during the housing construction project, and only a certain number of people could benefit from the rubber development project. Batin Janggut had control over development, and he distributed the projects primarily to those close to him. The hierarchy was thus constructed with him at the top.

Kampung Durian Tawar was the model village of state-led economic development projects, and the JHEOA definitely also wanted it to be a model for Islamization. In the first instance, economic development was meant to be a precursor for future Islamization. Ironically, the government's intention was blocked by Batin Janggut, who had earlier been heavily backed by the government. The JHEOA sought a replacement leader for Batin Janggut. Tikak, his son, was one possibility, and Adunan, the leader of the Islamic converts, was another.

From the 1980s onwards converting to Islam had become an administratively effective tool for winning development projects. In the late 1990s some of the lower people who wished to benefit from development decided to convert. As they were so impoverished due to their exclusion

from development, the only means they had to take part was by conversion to Islam. Another factor was that women with malnourished children converted to Islam out of desperation. As such, the main move towards Islamization in Kampung Durian Tawar came from the people at the lower end of the strata. This meant that the progress of Islamization would threaten the hierarchical order created by the development projects. One reason the village leaders of the upper people opposed Islamization was to protect their position. For the lower people, their chance of improving their social status increased if they became Muslim.

As a means of dealing with the threat to the upper people, Batin Janggut came up with alternative groupings such as the *adat* group, the drunk group and the religion group. As of March 2001 there were the *adat* group, the Islam group and the Christian group. While the previous distinction between the upper and lower people was based on the acceptance of the development projects, these new groupings were made according to ideologically divisive criteria. The man who had created the new groupings, Batin Janggut, talked about how threatened the *adat* group felt by Islamization. His reasoning did not include the fact that the upper people had excluded the lower people from taking part in the economic development projects. In addition, he discussed the increasing numbers of Islamic converts among the lower people in negative terms as a threat to the *adat* group. Batin Janggut talked about resisting Islamization while preserving the hierarchical structure of the village brought about as a result of development. The *adat* group comprised those people who subscribed to Batin Janggut's strategy.

Adat Group

If we follow Maeda's (1976, 1991) definition that *adat* is a "community religion", we can conclude that the *adat* group uses *adat* as a symbol of its community's autonomy against Islamization, although in this case "the community" is limited to the *adat* group, not the entire village. The Malays do not regard the *adat* of the *adat* group as having long existed in their community, but rather something that has been "borrowed". Its actual origin is regarded by the *adat* group as less important than utilizing *adat* for its own initiative.

The fact that the *adat* group uses *adat* as a symbol of autonomy is culturally significant as well. Contemporary Orang Asli society has been busy looking for symbols of its identity. "What is our identity (*indentiti kita*)?" is a question often energetically discussed at POASM meetings. The Orang Asli are looking for the cultural symbols, not

connected to Islam or Christianity, that they previously had “by right”: the *adat* advocated by the *adat* group in Kampung Durian Tawar is one such symbol. Without doubt, Islamization for the *adat* group is a major force that shakes its fundamental identity. This shows that the external pressure of Islamization can penetrate right to the core of Orang Asli society.

The *adat* leaders, though angry and critical, stood by and watched as Haji Konin (No. 52), Adunan (No. 46), Sieu (No. 30) and Kepah (No. 56) converted to Islam. By contrast, they could not resist involving themselves in Biru’s (No. 34) conversion and her subsequent divorce from Bangkong because Biru’s case directly affected the group. As they did with Biru, the *adat* leaders expelled the Islamic converts from their group.¹ If they had not done this, their reasoning held, converts could have taken over the group. Biru’s case showed a family could be torn apart by conversion among its members. This kind of tragedy became possible when state-led Islamization permeated to the family level.

The *adat* group response of excommunicating the Islamic converts was a measure taken to prevent the possibility of the Islamic converts taking over the community. The *adat* leaders were afraid that Islam might spread throughout the community like an epidemic. The Islamic converts seemed to be taken aback at being thrown out of the village’s most influential circle. Superficially, this action was extremely selfish; the *adat* leaders’ only concern was the well-being of their group members. Their response was very cruel to the converts, but we must also remember that this was the best the *adat* leaders could do to protect themselves and their own interests from the pressure of Islamization being exerted by powerful authorities.

At the same time, members of the religion group, which comprised converts to Islam and Christianity, were also forced to make a difficult choice for their own lives and survival. In their desperation, they did not have the luxury of making strategic decisions about how they would live. They had to get money from somewhere for their survival and the only option was to convert, even though this would lead to their expulsion from the community.

We can observe the hierarchical chain of discrimination where the stronger people discriminate against and oppress the weaker ones, not just in Kampung Durian Tawar but everywhere surrounding the Orang Asli. To alter this, one can try various measures: religious conversion, economic improvement through development projects, improvement of education and social welfare, and so on. Indeed, these are exactly the

measures suggested and implemented by the JHEOA and other government bodies, and were initially intended to integrate and assimilate the weaker with the stronger. For one reason or another, including resistance from the weaker ones, the measures have evolved into something completely unrecognizable from the original intention.

Source of Resistance

In the previous section I examined resistance to Islamization at the village level. In this section I would like to discuss the source of the resistance at the level of interaction with the government. I will do so with Batin Janggut and the *adat* group in mind, those who are, in reality, resisting Islamization. To reiterate what I stated in the introductory chapter, I am interested in understanding the reasoning employed by these people in their resistance to the pressure of Islamization. Why refuse, when the benefits are plainly to be seen? This is the key question I have been exploring.

The Orang Asli are a people oppressed and discriminated against by the Malays. It must be humiliating for them to convert to their oppressors' religion. Even if it is a politically sensible option, in today's context their pride as Orang Asli cannot easily be set aside. Converting to Islam means being treated as Malays, which brings about a change to their Orang Asli identity. They are deeply disinclined to abandon their Orang Asli identity and to become identified as the Malays, who despise them. On a family level, conversion to Islam means becoming Malay and separating oneself from family and relatives. The bodies of Islamic converts are not buried in the village cemetery but in a cemetery in a nearby Malay village. When these things are considered, the psychological conflicts among family members and relatives of Islamic converts are obvious.

A big difference between Christianity and Islam in Malaysia is that Christian missionary activities, unlike those of the government-backed Islamic missionaries, do not entail coercion. More people convert to Islam than Christianity out of desperation. Conversion to Christianity is also a means of avoiding conversion to Islam. As the prevalence of nominal converts indicates, most do not convert to Islam out of religious conviction.

We can conclude that resistance to Islamization is not, in fact, resistance to Islam itself but to "being forced to convert to Islam". It must be unbearable to be told by others how to live, no matter how politically and economically justified it may be. Orang Asli rage is directed at the government that imposes Islamization on them. The government forces

the Orang Asli to become Muslim. To become Muslim means to admit defeat for these persecuted people, the marginal dwellers. That is why they are angry about the forceful drive towards Islamization, and why they do not kowtow to their oppressors.

The *adat* group comprises those people who have accumulated economic wealth and are able to resist Islamization, having participated in the government-initiated development projects. They operate in the market economy and have ties with the Chinese community through Batin Janggut. These close ties with the Chinese community are especially important and have given them confidence and pride without having to make compromises with the government. Ironically, the government, itself, through the JHEOA and other departments and the economic development projects, unwittingly provided the Orang Asli with a base for resistance.

The source of resistance of the *adat* group members is their pride as the leaders of the village community, and their anger against the government that forces Islamization on them. Having gained pride and confidence through economic development and by utilizing *adat*, they can resist Islamization. In this context, *adat* has become their ideology for the reconstruction of their identity. As members of a marginal group, they cannot alter their origin as Orang Asli. Arguably, they could leave the Orang Asli society and look for a completely different life, but that decision would have to be made voluntarily. They consider it more dignified to remain as Orang Asli with their relatives in their community, no matter how difficult it is, rather than live as second-class Muslim Malays. Or perhaps they just do not want to be converted. Those who are pushing to convert the Orang Asli to Islam cannot accept their simple desires. That is why the Orang Asli are resisting.

Throughout this book, I have argued the case of development and Islamization among the Orang Asli, mostly with reference to the perspective of the *adat* group with whom I built a rapport. For various reasons, it was impossible for me to incorporate the perspectives of the rest of the people. The story told by other people would be different from the one I have told in this book. I would like to deal with that story in the future.

Notes

1. Even Christian converts are expelled from the *adat* group unless they are the relatives of *adat* leaders. “We do not carry out rituals based on *adat* for Christian converts”, say Batin Janggut and Jenang Misai. Traditionally, converting to Christianity was not as despised as converting to Islam, because it does not involve a change of identity. Christian converts are not considered to have become Malays. Having Christian converts in the family should not break up that family. However, due to an over-reaction to religion in general, the *adat* leaders forced Aru to divorce. This indicated that conversion to any religion could trigger a break-up of family and relatives. This can also be interpreted as the *adat* group reacting to Christian conversion as an aftermath of Islamization.