

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

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## Chapter 7

# *Developing the Forest*

To conclude Part II, in this chapter I consider how the villagers of Kampung Durian Tawar, and in particular the upper people, have responded to development. To do so, I take into account the villagers' relationship with the forest.

### **A History of Forest People**

The history of Kampung Durian Tawar begins in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the ancestors of the villagers moving into the present territory from Tampin in Negeri Sembilan. The first areas in which they settled are where the present-day durian orchards in the forest are located.

Later, under the leadership of the Malay warrior Batin Siuntung, they came out of the forest and settled close to a Malay village. In this new area they undertook wet rice cultivation. In the later stage of the British colonial period, some villagers intermarried with the Chinese and friendly contacts with the Malays occurred. In their contacts with other ethnic groups, the villagers gradually changed from being "the people living in the forest" to, increasingly, those living outside the forest.

However, this situation changed with the invasion by Japanese forces. People took refuge in the forest, severing the contact and exchange they had maintained with other ethnic groups until then: having emerged from the forest, they went back into it, this time as refugees. In contrast to their relatively free and mobile lives as forest people, as refugees circumstances were extremely difficult both economically and psychologically. They had trouble finding food and sometimes had to eat a kind of yam (which they normally would not have done). When Japanese soldiers appeared in the area, they had to move elsewhere.

When the Japanese forces left and British soldiers told them that the war was over, they came out of the forest and resumed the life they had been living before the war. Several years later, however, fighting broke out again on the Malay Peninsula. This time it was between the Chinese-led Communist insurgents and British Commonwealth forces.<sup>1</sup> This was the period of upheaval known as the Emergency.<sup>2</sup>

Having lived through these periods of upheaval, the people who returned to Kampung Durian Tawar were no longer the same group of people who had previously lived in the village. Much of the knowledge on traditional rites, ceremonies and magic had been lost. In addition, most of the traditional knowledge for living in the forest had also been lost, due to the deaths of most of those people who had remained in the forest during the upheavals. Their lives as refugees had even changed their means of livelihood.

As refugees in the resettlement camps, the villagers had come to learn rubber tapping as a means of obtaining a cash income, and they became more accustomed to town and village life near the camps. The waves of the market economy were lapping at their door; these were to have a significant impact on their lives.

Their relationship with the Malays, who had taken political control after Independence, also changed. The British colonial welfare policy towards the Orang Asli was taken on by the Malaysian government as an assimilation policy. Those categorized as Orang Asli in the new nation were seen, partly due to the poverty they experienced as refugees, as a poor people in need of development and future assimilation into Malay society. The Malaysian government implemented a development policy concerning the Orang Asli who had recently emerged from the forest. The Orang Asli themselves also brought about changes to their lives.

As discussed in Chapter 6, development and the arrival of the cash economy caused significant changes to economic life in Kampung Durian Tawar. This is symbolized by the abandonment of wet rice cultivation and the increase in rubber tapping in the mid-1970s. This was a significant turning point for the villagers in terms of their livelihoods, their economic lives, their relationship with the forest, and their view of the natural environment and the world in general. The introduction of rubber tapping rapidly increased the importance of the cash economy in the village.

In Chapter 6, I also touched on the qualitative change that occurred to hunting and gathering in Kampung Durian Tawar. Although appearing to be part of a subsistence economy, these hunting and gathering activities are now undertaken for cash. Nowadays most forest products are sold



**Plate 62: Dusun Ilam.** Dusun Ilam is one of the durian orchards in the forest. Before the durian harvest begins, the owners of durian orchards clear the undergrowth around the trees. Durian orchards in the forest are often the common property of a matrilineal descent group. At first, the matrilineal descent group of Menteri Gumuk and Jekerah Asang took care of Dusun Ilam, but later the matrilineal descent group of Genreh and Asat acquired ownership over Dusun Ilam. [NT-1998]

to traders, and animals caught through hunting are occasionally sold for cash. In other words, in present-day Kampung Durian Tawar most of the activities that once constituted the villagers' livelihoods are now undertaken to "look for money" (cf. Gomes 1986).

Under the principle of the subsistence economy, it was enough to gather forest products for direct consumption or usage.<sup>3</sup> With the arrival of the market economy, these products have been pillaged both to meet outside demand and through the villagers' own desires for cash. As commodities easily converted into cash, forest products that were readily accessible have now become scarce. The market economy has dried up many forest resources. In response, tree planting as a part of development has become important. Currently rattan is planted in between the rubber trees in gardens. The government provides aid for some of the rattan cultivation.

To consider the relationship between the villagers and the forest in the context of development and the market economy, I now look at durian cultivation in Kampung Durian Tawar.

### Forest Developers

The spread of the cash economy into the villagers' lives also brought about a change in their identity, from forest people to farmers, and from nomads to a settled people. They came out of the forest to establish their lives in a village. Once they had experienced life in the village, it was difficult for them to return to their lives in the forest. On the other hand, the phenomenon of a return to the forest by the people who have come out of the forest is also evident. This phenomenon is connected to the practice of tree planting; in other words, development work in the forest. The practice of tree planting is different from forest clearing (logging and deforestation). Forest development, in this sense, does not entail the felling of trees and the clearing of land to open up new fields; rather, it is the forming of fields through planting durian seedlings where durians have long been growing wild in the forest. The act of planting durian trees would have been unimaginable in the worldview of the hunter-gatherers, who gathered products growing wild in the forest.<sup>4</sup>

Within the general trend of moving away from the forest, in present-day Kampung Durian Tawar there is a movement to again develop the durian orchards inside the forest. This movement centers on the upper people. The emergence of limitations concerning the durian orchards in the village area (i.e. a lack of land) and a re-evaluation of the quality of the forest durians<sup>5</sup> are both factors in this movement towards developing the forest. As the harvest season for durian orchards in the forest sometimes occurs at a different time to that in the village area, developing these forest orchards can also yield higher prices for the durians. For example, the story is sometimes recounted of the profit Mangku Hasim made when he was able to sell the durians from his rich crop in the forest at a high price (those in the village area had produced a poor crop).

However, this return to the forest does not constitute the people's return to being the "forest people". The villagers, especially the upper people, go into the forest on motorbikes, using the logging roads and new roads they themselves have opened up. They also use durable materials, such as tin roofs, to construct huts by durian orchards in the forest. In addition, the upper people have redeveloped the durian orchards in the forest, planting new seedlings and cultivating durians, which require hot weather and cool soils.

The villagers, especially the upper people, are, in the fullest sense of the word, forest developers. The durian orchards in the forest are not the semi-wild orchards of the past, left alone and used only during the durian harvest. Now they are maintained as orchards and have permanent huts



**Plate 63: Durian orchard in the forest.** It takes about one hour by bike to go to Dusun Serdang, which is owned by Mangku Hasim. During the durian season, Mangku Hasim and his family will stay overnight at the durian hut (in the middle of the picture) to collect durians and protect the fruit from wild animals. [NT-1997]

built in their vicinity. The villagers have created orchards in the forest, just like those in the village area. Locating the durian orchards in the forest is also a strategic choice: they are undetected by outsiders, like government officials and Malay villagers.

The harvest season for the durian orchards in the forest coincides with the wet season, making transporting work difficult. The villagers intentionally leave the roads in a virtually impassable condition; this is part of their strategy. The Chinese wholesalers say to the villagers, “These roads don’t get much sunshine and it takes a long time for them to dry out. You should cut down the trees alongside the road.” The villagers said to me, “We deliberately don’t cut down the trees because we are afraid of being discovered by the officials of the Department of Forestry”.

The villagers also know that opening up a new road would allow them to reach the durian orchards in the forest without having to traverse the mountains. However, this alternate route (which uses the old road running from Titi to Pertang) passes a Malay village. The villagers are afraid that the Malays would easily enter the forest and collect forest products, and may even destroy the durian orchards. This sort of thinking reveals the villagers’ strategy concerning the durian orchards in the forest. For the villagers, the forest and the durian orchards in it are “treasures”, which they do not want destroyed by outsiders.

Although the upper people have left the forest, they have in this way become forest developers. The upper people have gained knowledge enabling them to cultivate durians, as well as agricultural knowledge in general. They now have the economic ability to provide funds for such things as fertilizers, agricultural chemicals, and wooden boards and tin roofs for their huts at the durian orchards in the forest. As forest developers, they have begun a new form of involvement with the forest.

In contrast, the lower people have also left the forest but have become impoverished and are now unable to reuse it. The lower people do not have the knowledge or the funds to cultivate durians and so are unable to take advantage of such forest development. Currently they only sell the small number of durians they obtain from the trees they own in the forest and those in the village area left to them by their ancestors. They do not develop new durian orchards or plant new durian trees.

### **Identity of Forest People**

The upper people have become forest developers. They have returned to the forest, but they are not the same people as they were when they lived there. They are now forest developers who have carried durian seedlings and tin roofs into the forest on their motorbikes. In fact, they have developed areas that should normally not be used for cultivation because they lie inside the forest reservation area. The land the villagers have developed for durian cultivation in the village area beyond the borders of the Orang Asli reservation is referred to as stolen cultivated land (*tanah corobo/ceroboh*). The borders of the Orang Asli reservation are complex, and government officials have turned a blind eye to this development of stolen cultivated land. In exchange for turning a blind eye, and to keep the officials happy, the villagers send them durians as “bribes” during the durian season. By contrast, outsiders are completely unaware of the durian orchards in the forest. The villagers deliberately leave the roads leading to the forest orchards in poor condition. In these secret places, they plant durian trees and obtain extra money from the orchards.

The identity of the forest people is a relic of the past. Based on their memory of the fact that their ancestors were forest people, however, the forest developers are forging a new relationship with the forest. They carefully protect the forests from outside intrusion and, at the same time, develop the durian orchards in the forest and gain a profit from them.

The forest hides the villagers’ secret durian orchards. While this remains the case, the villagers’ lives will, for the time being, be secure. However, the forest is gradually disappearing through development. In

addition, the forest environment has become polluted, the durian season is now irregular and unpredictable, and the quality of the durians themselves has decreased. Despite these problems, it seems to me that the “forest developers” can still be described as “forest people”. This is because, though it goes without saying, they are the only ones who are able to develop the forest productively rather than destructively.

Certainly, in the past the forest people plundered the forest resources, in that they simply took the forest products. However, given their use of forest resources for personal consumption only, they had a negligible influence on the forest environment. With the arrival of the market economy, however, forest products were indiscriminately gathered and forest resources dried up. The limit of the previous plundering type of relationship with the forest was soon surpassed. In response to this situation, the upper people as forest developers are re-establishing a sustainable method of forest resource management. The fact that they are forest people enables them to have this new relationship with the forest; in other words, they are people with a thorough knowledge of the forest.

Their use of the forest resources, however, maintains a delicate balance. In other districts, the Orang Asli relationship with the forest has produced a variety of tragic situations. For example, forest resources have been exhausted through indiscriminate gathering of forest products. Others have failed in their attempts to switch to being forest developers (i.e. to switch to settled agriculture or, due to development on forestland and logging and deforestation, to retain forest territory they owned in the past). There is also evidence of impoverishment and social maladjustment due to changes in the forest environment.

Regarding the current situation in the forest, a villager states the following:

Development undertaken by the government has destroyed the forest and changed it so completely that it is unable to reproduce itself. Who knows what will happen? Whatever happens, though, is the government’s responsibility. There is nothing we can do. Certainly we do not have enough power to resist what is happening.

The villagers’ use of forest resources does not fundamentally alter the forest environment in the ways that forest logging, deforestation and forest development projects do. Their method of forest management is in accordance with the customary practice of using only a part of the forest.

In Part II, I identified the division of Kampung Durian Tawar villagers into the upper people and the lower people (a division the villagers themselves make) and discussed the two groups’ responses to government-



led economic development. I have also looked at the economic disparity resulting from these different responses. To conclude Part II, in this chapter I have looked at the responses of the villagers to the development and the market economy, through a consideration of the villagers' relationships to the forest.

The responses of the villagers (particularly of the upper people) to development and the market economy considered thus far are intimately connected to their use of *adat*. I discuss this further in the following chapters. The villagers' response discussed in this chapter, while influenced by the "logic" of the outside world, is one of fitting development to the villagers' particular circumstances. The villagers have thereby re-established a new relationship with the forest through revitalizing what had become a moribund forest for them. The villagers' response to Islamization using *adat* will be discussed in the following chapters, but can be summarized in the following way: in response to the friction the villagers experience with the outside world in the form of Islamization, they have re-constructed their identity using *adat* as a discourse of resistance that emphasizes non-Islam-ness and serves as a counter to Islamization.

## Notes

1. The British Commonwealth forces moved Orang Asli living in the forest to resettlement camps surrounded by barbed wire. In some cases trucks suddenly appeared and the people were forcibly removed from the forest. Orang Asli who sided with the Communist insurgents died fighting the British Commonwealth forces. Many of the people living in the resettlement camps also died, either from malnutrition or from being unable to adjust to life in the camps. Along with the period of Japanese occupation, the period of the Emergency was tragic for the Orang Asli.
2. This time the battleground was the forest, the basis of the peoples' lives and resources. The Communist insurgents used the forest as a base from which to engage in their resistance against the British. They also used the Orang Asli as food providers, as guides and as fighters against the British. Many Orang Asli sided with the Communist insurgents and participated in the fighting. The repression of Communism was to have a subtle effect on future policies towards the Orang Asli.

3. The villagers speak of how the wild animals of the forest were both food (*lauk*) and at the same time friends (*kawan*) or companions (*sahabat*). Here we get a glimpse of their awareness that the forest resources were previously not harvested indiscriminately.
4. This is evident in the fact that even nowadays villagers (mostly the lower people) still lead a hunter-gatherer lifestyle and never plant durian trees. According to them, buying durian seedlings is a “waste”. For people accustomed to a system where forest products growing naturally in the wild are gathered for personal consumption, and where any surplus is sold to wholesalers to obtain money, investing a lot of energy in forest products that grow naturally in the wild is inconceivable. If the new, planted trees are not successful, they reason, an unnecessary “loss” of energy is incurred. For the villagers who think along these lines, it is even a “waste” to clear the grass and weeds from around the trees before the durian harvest so that the fallen durians can easily be spotted. Consequently they very rarely engage in this sort of practice.
5. Because of the environment in the village area, sometimes the growth of the durians is hindered and the durian fruit does not mature. This has prompted a re-evaluation of the commodity value of the more natural forest durians.

