

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

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# PART 2



## Life-World of Kampung Durian Tawar



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Kampung Durian Tawar is different from traditional Orang Asli villages, where life is centered in the forest.<sup>1</sup> The villagers of Kampung Durian Tawar moved repeatedly, as did most Orang Asli in other areas, to take refuge during the invasion of the Malay Peninsula by Japanese forces and during the Emergency. In the mid-1960s Kampung Durian Tawar settled in its current position adjacent to a Malay village, about four kilometers from the nearby town of Pertang.<sup>2</sup>

Baharon, a Malay, undertook fieldwork study in Kampung Durian Tawar from June 1971 to September 1972, when a housing construction project was being carried out.<sup>3</sup> As Director-General of the JHEOA, his connection with Kampung Durian Tawar influenced development projects subsequently undertaken there. From the 1970s and into the 1980s, rubber, fish farming, bananas, goats and various other cash-crop cultivation development projects were carried out intensively in Kampung Durian Tawar,<sup>4</sup> which has been regarded by the JHEOA as a success case among Orang Asli villages. The JHEOA actively refers to Kampung Durian Tawar for promotional activities and material.<sup>5</sup>

Of significance to development projects in Kampung Durian Tawar is the fact that the village leader, Batin Janggut, was a field officer of the JHEOA and performed the role of mediator between the village and the government. From the JHEOA's perspective, the success of the projects is a reflection on the success of the JHEOA itself. Yet even though the development projects may have been planned to suit the JHEOA, Kampung Durian Tawar itself must surely also have welcomed the implementation of the projects.

Along with the close relationship between village leaders and the government, another factor in the economic "success" of Kampung Durian



**Plate 6: Men of village.** They made a gate in front of the rubber trader's shop to prevent cattle of the neighbouring Malays from encroaching into the village. In the end, however, the gate did not serve its purpose as it collapsed. [NT-1998]

Tawar is that, under the leadership of Batin Janggut and his older brother Jenang Misai, the villagers studied and put into practice the methods of farming and farm management of the local Chinese. Batin Janggut and Jenang Misai have a close relationship with the local Chinese. Both are able to speak Chinese (*bahasa Cina*) because their father, who was killed by the Japanese forces, was Chinese (*orang Cina*).<sup>6</sup>

The government has presented the villagers of Kampung Durian Tawar with an Orang Asli reservation of approximately 800 acres. Since receiving the land, however, they have illegally expanded their area of cultivation, to date opening up land within the surrounding forest reservation at least three times.<sup>7</sup> During these acts of expansion, Batin Janggut has been arrested for illegal tree felling. In addition, the government forcibly removed rubber tree seedlings the villagers had purchased and planted.<sup>8</sup> Even so, the villagers continue to open up new areas of cultivation today.

In addition, during the 1980s rattan (*rotan*) and aromatic wood (*gaharu*) were increasingly sold as commodities, and there was a boom in the harvesting of forest products. Some villagers gained sufficient wealth to be able to build new homes with their own money. The durian is an important source of income for the villagers, and durian orchards (*dusun durian*) provide the villagers with harvests not only in the Orang Asli reservation but also deep within the forest where their ancestors (*moyang*) lived.

In this way, Kampung Durian Tawar has been successful through agricultural practice. This success has not been seen elsewhere in

Orang Asli society. At the same time, however, political and economic inequalities have emerged in the village between a group led by Batin Janggut and another opposed to his agricultural practices. In contrast to the Orang Asli groups described as egalitarian, Temuan society is known for its status-differentiating system of titles (see Table 10) for community leaders (Hood 1989). For this reason, in Kampung Durian Tawar, which is representative of Temuan society, the implementation of development projects arguably served to strengthen the pre-existing status structure.

The core villagers of Kampung Durian Tawar, with Batin Janggut at the center, live on the top of the hill in the village, having built their houses there under the abovementioned housing construction project undertaken at the beginning of the 1970s. They have come to be called the upper people (*orang atas*). In contrast, those who opposed Batin Janggut and who did not participate in the development projects live at the bottom of the hill. They have come to be called the lower people (*orang bawah*). In addition, in Batin Janggut's categorizations, the majority of the upper people follow the customs (*adat*) in Kampung Durian Tawar and are therefore also called the *adat* group (*puak adat*). By contrast, because some of the lower people have converted to Islam and some have succumbed to alcohol addiction (the majority of them men), some in this

Table 10  
The village title system

Title	Primary role	Notes
Batin	The village leader	Endorsement and salary provided by the JHEOA. The village head.
Mangku	Represents the Batin when he is not in the village.	When the Batin is in the village, no role at all.
Menteri	The Batin's deputy	-
Jenang	Executor and protector of the <i>adat</i>	-
Jekerah	Protector of the villagers as a whole	-
Panglima	Protector of family and relatives	Often bestowed on people from other villagers who have married villagers

group are also known as the religion group (*puak ugama*) and the drunk group (*puak mabuk*).

The upper people comprise those who, under the leadership of Batin Janggut, actively participated in the development projects promoted by the government through departments and agencies such as the JHEOA. They have made a shift in livelihood from a lifestyle centered on the forest involving hunting and gathering to a village-centered lifestyle involving rubber tapping. They have adopted the matrilineal *adat* of the Malays of Negeri Sembilan as the guiding basis for their lives and have applied them in the new environment of village life. Every one of them, however, has resisted Islamization. That is to say, they have taken the position of rejecting conversion to Islam.

In contrast to the upper people, who have made rubber tapping their chief means of livelihood, many of the lower people continue to engage in the collection of forest products or are employed by the Chinese as day laborers. In a sense, they have been the “forest people”, those who place importance on living in the forest. Because of a reduction in forest products due to development and deforestation, and changes in the forest environment in general, it is no longer possible for these people to survive solely through living in the forest. In addition, there has been a strong tendency in the past, under the policy of positive discrimination (a policy of positive discrimination towards Islamic converts), for there to be effectively no development or assistance available for them because they are non-Muslim. Since the 1990s, however, a number of the lower people have converted to Islam and, through this, have become recipients of development projects and aid.

Government officials (including those from the JHEOA) want to see role models created in the process of the “Islamization of the Orang Asli”, which is personified by materially wealthier villagers whose improvement in circumstances is a result of the state-led economic development projects and conversion to the Islamic faith. In Kampung Durian Tawar it is among the economically poor (the lower people), who initially refused the development projects and later were excluded from them, that we see an increasing number “nominally” converting to Islam. Meanwhile, among the original targets of the Islamic conversion (the upper people), opposition to Islamization is emerging as a reaction to the nominal converts.

In Kampung Durian Tawar the emerging reality is in direct opposition to what the government was hoping to gain from the economic development projects and subsequent conversion to Islam, or from integration and assimilation into Malay society. Thus, Kampung Durian Tawar is

ambiguous; it is a model village for the official development projects and yet is a village with unexpected outcomes.

### Notes

1. JHEOA estimates the Orang Asli living in the forest comprise 40% of the total Orang Asli population. Data from the 1990 census show that Orang Asli living in rural areas comprised 88.9% of the total Orang Asli population, with the rest living in cities and towns (Nicholas 2000: 17). It seems that JHEOA has not been counting the number of Orang Asli living in cities (Nicholas 2000: 19) and that it continues to seek to associate the Orang Asli with forest dwellers. Lim's analysis of unpublished JHEOA data includes the following calculations: in 1990, of the 774 existing Orang Asli villages, 120 (16%) were located within easy access of towns (Kampung Durian Tawar fits into this category); 379 (49%) were located on the fringes of the forest; and 275 (35%) were located in isolated areas deep within the forest (Lim 1997: 42).
2. Kampung Durian Tawar is located two-and-a-half miles (approximately four kilometers) from Pertang and fifteen miles (approximately twenty-four kilometers) from Kuala Kelawang (Baharon 1973:51). Its population in 1972 was 165 (thirty-three households) (Baharon 1973: 55–56).
3. Among the aims of Baharon's study were investigations of the villagers' responses to the development projects and social change (Baharon 1973: 30). His study was conducted with the full support and assistance of JHEOA. For example, the Department paid his fieldwork assistant (Baharon 1973: 45).
4. When implementing economic development projects, JHEOA divided the Orang Asli into three geographically defined groups: (1) deep jungle groups, (2) fringe groups and (3) settled groups. The deep jungle groups were literally those who resided deep in the jungle, while the fringe groups resided on the edges of the jungle (either inside or outside). The settled groups were those people who lived in the farming villages, especially the "islands in the sea of development" of Malay society. In the development projects, the fringe and settled groups were preferred to those of the deep jungle (Mohd. Ruslan 1974: 6–11). Kampung Durian Tawar falls into the settled category. In Kampung Durian Tawar, development projects have been carried out in situ, instead of implementing the Regroupment Scheme, which requires migration to new large-scale development settlements (Mohd. Tap 1990: 129).
5. The February 1985 edition of *Dewan Masyarakat* (one of Malaysia's major

magazines), for example, carried a special feature report on Kampung Durian Tawar. The economic success of Kampung Durian Tawar was also discussed in an article in the *New Straits Times* (July 13, 1987).

6. The fact that they are Orang Asli and not Chinese, despite their father being Chinese, requires some explanation. With the invasion of the Japanese forces, their family, which had been living in a Malay rural village (their father was a carpenter), fled and went to live with their mother's relatives (their mother was Orang Asli). At the time, the children had Chinese names and, up until just prior to the Japanese invasion, Jenang Misai attended a Chinese school. When their father went missing (he is said to have been killed by Japanese forces) after going into town (he was an opium addict) following the Japanese occupation of the Malay Peninsula, the mother and children took refuge in the forest, moving from place to place under the guidance of the Orang Asli. They changed their names during the time of the Emergency: the Malay Penghulu (a local administrator at the time), fearing that their Chinese names would cause them to be suspected of being Communist insurgents (who were primarily Chinese), advised them to enter "Orang Asli names" (i.e. using the Malay, that is to say the Islamic, method of bin/binti) on their identity documents. With this situation in mind, Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance at the time recognized children who lived in Orang Asli society as Orang Asli. Even if they were actually adopted, as long as they were living in Orang Asli society, they were regarded as Orang Asli. After the Emergency period, their father's relatives came to see them and encouraged them to come and live in Chinese society. However, they already had Orang Asli wives, and were living as Orang Asli, and so did not take up the invitation. Their father's relatives are regarded as a prominent family, amongst them (in 1997) Deputy Minister of Finance in the federal government (Wong See Wah). Local Chinese regard Batin Janggut and Jenang Misai as Chinese, though to the Chinese who live as Orang Asli, and to Batin Janggut and Jenang Misai themselves, they are regarded as "having Chinese blood". In Orang Asli society in the south of the Malay Peninsula, there are members of the Orang Asli who are, in this way, of mixed Chinese blood, and they often hold leading positions within village society.
7. The first time this is said to have happened was at the time of Hari Raya Puasa in 1984. The villagers, counting on the fact that the forestry officials were on holiday because of the festival, felled trees and cleared an area in the forest reservation. They view this illegal act with confidence. Amongst the villagers it is an open secret, but very few outsiders are aware of it.
8. Similar instances of forest reservation development have been reported in Semai (Gomes 1990: 30).