

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

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# PART 1



## An Outline of the Orang Asli



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Part I discusses the characteristics of the Orang Asli and the Orang Asli policy. The Orang Asli comprise approximately 100,000 people – less than 1% of the population of Malaysia, which totaled approximately 24,000,000 during my fieldwork period (1996-98). The Orang Asli form a minority that is situated at the periphery of the three mainstream ethnic groups in Malaysia: the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. Although the Orang Asli tend to be forgotten in this ethnic context, the Orang Asli form the focus of political and economic interests, as well as academic interest, because of their unique existence. Specifically, during the Emergency period (1948-60), the British Commonwealth forces showed a great interest in the Orang Asli because of military and strategic considerations and provided legal provisions for them. The Malaysian government initially



**Plate 3: Youths watching television.** They are watching the promotional videos (VCDs) of Orang Asli bands. Prior to this, they watched the English Premier League. [NT-2007]

retained the paternalistic policies of the British colonial government, but has gradually changed their significance and substance as a result of its increasing Islamization.

The government's Orang Asli policies have been put into practice independently of the expectations of the Orang Asli themselves. On the surface, the Orang Asli appear to be tossed about by the almost capricious policies. They also look as though they have lived without having anything to do with the policies. However, it is necessary to have a full understanding of the history of the Orang Asli and the policies towards them in order to comprehend the current situation; the Orang Asli are now in a position in which they cannot ignore these policies. They have no choice but to face the unilateral policies.