

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

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Chapter 11

Islamic Mission

Islamization from Above

Open discussion of Islam in Malaysia is considered taboo. People are aware that Islam is a sensitive issue and that, as the national religion, it is best to refrain from making critical comments about it. Under these circumstances, outsiders to Islam such as the Orang Asli tend to see the religion as dangerous. Yet often they do not have a good understanding of this religion. People who are subjected to something often find it difficult to see the logic and reality behind their subjugation. Whatever the case may be for the Orang Asli, the term “Islam” has many different meanings. The following anecdote reveals part of the picture.

When the anthropologist Endicott was conducting field research into the Batek people, an ethnic group of the Negrito, he asked a Batek man why his family had fled from the regroupment scheme development project. He reportedly answered with a single word, “Islam” (Dentan et al. 1997: 149). In this dialog, the man’s answer did not offer an explicit explanation, yet those familiar with the reality of Islamization among the Orang Asli would readily understand his point. Behind this terse answer, they would recognize the effects of conversion to Islam and almost compulsory participation in Islamic missionary activities, packaged together with the state-led development projects. They would also sense the very forcefulness of the Islamization being imposed on the Orang Asli, as well as their fierce resistance to it. Here, then, we see that Islamization among the Orang Asli is not merely a religious phenomenon to those people who are subjected to it.

Discourse on the development projects and Islamization policy towards the Orang Asli often stresses the marginality of the indigenous people. But these days, the Orang Asli community advocates not only

its political demands but also its attempts to revitalize its traditional and cultural identity (Zawawi 1996a, 1996b, 1996c). As Kagami (2000: 204–05), Tsing (1993) and others point out, the marginal community is seeking to overcome its political and cultural marginality. The Orang Asli policy is aimed at those on the margin, and could thus be interpreted as a “policy to domesticate ethnicity by the nation-state” (Kato 1993; Yamashita 1993). However, the Orang Asli are not just responding passively. This becomes obvious when looking at what is occurring in the Orang Asli community. As far as resistance to government policy is concerned, the Orang Asli are attempting to adapt the government policy to themselves, or perhaps better to adapt themselves positively to the policy.

The main characters in this chapter are Batin Janggut and the people around him, and the central theme is their response, in the conditions described above, to Islamization. The chapter is about the tensions between the Orang Asli community and the state-led Islamization in the periphery.

Following on from the previous chapter, I discuss the relationship between the problem of Islam and particular events in the village. The outline is as follows (see also Table 23). In September 1997 a rumor circulated that the arrest of the allegedly anti-Islam Batin Janggut under the Internal Security Act was imminent. In March 1998 a talk was held with the government, and in the following month, the Malay traditional ruler, the Undang in Jelebu, paid a visit to Kampung Durian Tawar, where Islamic missionary activities were being conducted.

On the next day Batin Janggut made “anti-Islamic remarks” at the POASM general meeting near Kuala Lumpur. After being labeled anti-Islam again, Batin Janggut went into hiding, where he received the news that a son was getting married and converting to Islam.

This series of dramatic events concerning Islam, unfolding right before my eyes, illustrates vividly how the Islamization policy has thrown the Orang Asli into turmoil. This series of events provided me with ideal study material for better understanding the Orang Asli’s response to the government’s Islamization policy.

In reality, it also tested my own responses and the value of my fieldwork. I am not sure if I responded to the ongoing events adequately as a field researcher; all I could do was attempt to describe and analyze the Orang Asli’s responses and struggles against Islamization. In the following section, I describe in more detail the events that occurred in Kampung Durian Tawar.

Table 23
A record of events surrounding Islamization

| Date | Events |
|-----------------|---|
| December 1996. | The Batins were called up for lectures on Islam, to gain their support for Islamic missionary activities (organized by the JHEOA) Around this time, Biru decided to convert |
| January 1997. | A village meeting to discuss important issues was held in order to change the <i>adat</i> rules Wives were now able to seek divorce on religious grounds |
| March 1997. | A talk on divorce took place between Bangkong and Biru The assault of an Islamic missionary staff member by Bangkong A 30th anniversary ceremony was held for Batin Janggut |
| April 1997. | The cancellation of the <i>kenduri</i> feast ceremony organized by the JHEOA |
| May 1997. | An Indonesian divorce case <i>Adat</i> leaders were called up by the JHEOA |
| June 1997. | A rumor is spread about Bangkong and Biru living together |
| July 1997. | Batin Janggut "fainted" |
| August 1997. | A wallet was stolen |
| September 1997. | Police questioned Batin Janggut |
| October 1997. | Hari Kesedaran |
| January 1998. | The wedding of a daughter of Batin Janggut |
| February 1998. | Ayip's <i>tangkap basah</i> dispute |
| March 1998. | Negotiations took place with the government concerning the Islamic missionary activities |
| April 1998. | A visit by Undang and the implementation of the Islamic missionary activities program POASM's annual general meeting was held |
| May 1998. | Ayip's conversion to Islam and his wedding Ribu's rape incident The <i>kenduri</i> feast ceremony was held at Kampung Dalam |

Prelude

After the JHEOA-sponsored lecture on Islam in December 1996 (the main aim being to seek assistance for the Islamic missionary activities), to which all the significant Batins in Negeri Sembilan were invited, a cascade of events occurred in the village. These were obviously the result of the Islamization policy. An increasing number of people began converting to Islam, or at least declared their intention to do so; family feuds between a married couple flared up due to such conversions; an assault took place on the Muslim missionary and there was a subsequent police interview and summons of the *adat* leaders; and so on. Then things seemed to settle down, but beneath the surface a second act was in progress.

Because Batin Janggut seemed “uncooperative” in his dealings with the government regarding Islamic missionary activities, most government staff assumed that he was anti-Islam. The government was equally concerned about the Islam issues in Kampung Durian Tawar, as frequently there were fights and other incidents involving police. The government issued all sorts of direct and indirect advice and warnings to Batin Janggut in order to contain anti-Islam activity, even though this did not exist in the first place.

Police Visit

In mid-September 1997 a police officer from the headquarters in Kuala Lumpur came to question Batin Janggut at his home. He asked Batin Janggut if he had anti-Islamic sentiments. It was later revealed that a forged letter had been sent to the police, allegedly signed by Batin Janggut, stating that “punishment (including the death sentence) will be applied to anyone converting to Islam”. The police came to see if Batin Janggut really had anti-Islamic beliefs, to which he told them that he did not. The officer told him that an anti-Islamic letter signed by the Batin had been sent to them. When the Batin said, “I’ve never written such a letter”, the officer replied, “it may have been written by one of your relatives (*daging*, meaning flesh)”. Though it was not possible to be certain who had written the letter, Batin Janggut guessed it was part of a conspiracy involving his son Tikak. Batin Janggut suspected that Adunan, the leader of the Islamic converts, must have played a part in it as well. The police visit did not result in Batin Janggut’s arrest, but it certainly was effective in delivering a “warning shot”.

In 1997 the annual Hari Kesedaran festival took place on October 1. Hari Kesedaran in Kampung Durian Tawar is the Orang Asli version of the Malay Hari Raya Puasa festival, which is held after the fasting month

and involves visiting relatives and holding feasts. It so happened that on that evening a recording for an Orang Asli program on the nationwide Radio Malaysia was being conducted in the village. The recordings included songs and dances of the village youth, as well as an open-air concert by Malay singers.

Many dignitaries were invited for the occasion, including the principals of the primary and middle schools that the Orang Asli children attended, a senior bureaucrat from the JHEOA, a representative from POASM,¹ and state and federal Members of Parliament. On that evening, a state Member of Parliament warned Batin Janggut that he should be careful about what he said and did, as some people in the government were advocating his arrest. The *ibubapa* (brother of the mother) of this Member of Parliament was a well-known village medicine man (*dukun*) and was very influential in the area. As a fellow medicine man, he had contact with Batin Janggut, and had once advised the Batin to stop using sorcery. This Member of Parliament said to Batin Janggut, “I am giving you an unsolicited warning because you are close to my *ibubapa*”.

Since then, similar warnings have come to him from various sources. One was from the now-retired Malay headman (Pengahulu) of the Pertang area (Mukim Pertang). The son of the Pengahulu, who worked at the police headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, accessed Batin Janggut’s file and then informed his father of its contents. Being on close terms, the retired Pengahulu told Batin Janggut what he knew and to watch his words and actions. The file apparently contained a copy of the abovementioned letter with the forgery of Batin Janggut’s signature. A warning also arrived from POASM. A member of POASM, who was also a JHEOA staff member, stated that a file on Batin Janggut contained the now infamous letter. The same POASM representative who had attended the Hari Kesedaran festival told Batin Janggut this. Batin Janggut thereby learned what was going on in the government from various sources. In short, they all warned him “to be careful what he said and did, as he was an anti-Islam suspect”.

Seclusion

Batin Janggut took these warnings seriously, and from October 1997 began spending more time in Kampung Dalam, the native village of his sixth wife. Kampung Dalam is situated deep in the forest, where a jungle fort once stood during the Emergency. With 1,500 acres of reserve, the village is known as the largest Orang Asli reserve in Negeri Sembilan. We must note that Batin Janggut was involved in the development of both this village and Kampung Durian Tawar, which has 800 acres of reserve. As a

staff member of the JHEOA at the time, he had significant influence in the initial application and approval process for the reserves in these villages.

Life deep in the forest in Kampung Dalam, where there was no running water and no electricity, was nothing like that in Kampung Durian Tawar, where development was in full swing. On top of this, Batin Janggut's house in Kampung Durian Tawar was by Orang Asli standards a mansion, while the one in Kampung Dalam was nothing more than a shed. In that tiny hut, Batin Janggut (in his mid-sixties) lived with his sixth wife (who was just over forty), and occupied himself with rubber tapping and gardening. *Adat* recommends that a husband live in the birthplace of his wife. In this light, Kampung Dalam was the appropriate place of residence for Batin Janggut. In fact, it had been his home before he inherited the title of Batin. But after the title was given in 1967, he had relocated with his third wife and children and based himself in Kampung Durian Tawar. Most of his sons with his third wife are now settled in Kampung Dalam, having married local women. Because his sixth and current wife came from the village, he began living with her in Kampung Dalam.

Batin Janggut began his life of seclusion in Kampung Dalam for another reason also. He was in dispute with his sons by his third wife, now living in Kampung Dalam. His dispute with Singah and his other sons concerned RISDA, and centered in particular on the distribution of profits from logging forests and rubber trees. This dispute had spread through the whole village and fighting was taking place routinely between the supporters of Batin Janggut and those of Singah in Kampung Dalam. During this time, Singah and others enlisted an Orang Asli magic medicine man (*pyang*) in Pahang to "curse Batin Janggut to death".² In fact, Batin Janggut fainted (*pengsan*) more than twice in July 1997 due to this "curse".

In Kampung Durian Tawar in August 1997 a dispute erupted whereby the daughters of his daughter of his third wife accused his daughter by his sixth wife, who lived next door, of stealing their father's wallet. After running out of patience with them and their parents, and with his own daughter and her husband because they had long issued similar insults, Batin Janggut stormed into the house of his daughter by his third wife. During the confrontation, Batin Janggut declared, "I know you are hiring a *pyang* to kill me". In the end, a superficial reconciliation was brought about by police officers, but the lingering distrust between them was only to worsen.

Batin Janggut's house with his sixth wife in Kampung Durian Tawar stands next to that occupied by his former third wife. Because the wife of

Singah, his eldest son with his third wife, is also the elder sister of his sixth wife, the relationship between the two families is filled with complicated tensions and emotions. Batin Janggut, who is also in dispute with his son Tikak and with the Islamic convert Adunan, considered that living in Kampung Durian Tawar would only further incite those against him. Of course, Singah and other brothers were living in Kampung Dalam, but the houses there were so sparse that one could get by without making daily contact. In contrast, in Kampung Durian Tawar there is increased possibility of conflict.

As in Kampung Durian Tawar, Singah's sympathizers would not dare to attack Batin Janggut directly in Kampung Dalam. To some degree, this may be because he is their father, but it is more likely due to his magical power. The very fact that Singah and others employed a *pyang* to cast a curse of death on Batin Janggut is proof that Singah and others are afraid of their father's curse. Yu, the husband of Batin Janggut's daughter with his third wife, openly claimed that the foot injury he carried was the result of the Batin's curse. Batin Janggut's move to Kampung Dalam put a stop to Singah and the other followers' brazen behavior in the village. As mentioned, they directed their "attacks" not at Batin Janggut himself but at his sympathizers. Sometimes, drunken followers of Singah burgled a sympathizer's house. Had Batin Janggut not lived in Kampung Dalam, his ever-dwindling sympathizers there could have all been persuaded to switch sides. Since taking up residency in Kampung Dalam, many of his sympathizers have moved closer to his house out of fear that Singah's group may attack them.

When any troubles broke out in Kampung Durian Tawar, accusatory fingers were pointed at the alleged anti-Islam Batin Janggut, and, almost without exception, the police questioned him. When Bangkong assaulted the Muslim missionary in March 1997, Batin Janggut was questioned. He was labeled anti-Islam if he gave any wrong responses. Having heard a lot of advice and numerous warnings with regard to his imminent arrest, he grew careful not to get involved in any conflict over Islam.

With Batin Janggut absent from Kampung Durian Tawar, his opponents in the village lost the target of their attacks. In fact, while he in Kampung Dalam negligible overt conflicts occurred between the opposing groups. Unlike their counterparts in Kampung Dalam, the supporters of Batin Janggut in Kampung Durian Tawar were well organized under the leadership of Genreh and other *enekbuah* of Batin Janggut.

When Batin Janggut was living in relatively accessible Kampung Durian Tawar, government officers such as the JHEOA staff would call

him or drop in at his place. But in Kampung Dalam, which is inaccessible by car (except for jeep) and has no telephone connection, no bureaucrats would attempt to contact him unless the matter was of very high importance. When they found Batin Janggut was no longer living in Kampung Durian Tawar, they simply gave up. For him, the simple hut in Kampung Dalam was an ideal “hide-out”. Thus, until the end of December 1997, when the “curse attack” by the *poyang* was supposed to have ended, Batin Janggut lived a life of seclusion in Kampung Dalam. As a result, during this period the issue of Islam did not rise to the surface.

Tangkap Basah

In January 1998 the wedding of Batin Janggut’s daughter by his fifth wife was held in Kampung Durian Tawar. As such, in this period he often went back to the village.

In the following month news arrived of Ayip, his son by his fifth wife, and his encounter with the *tangkap basah* in an Orang Asli village in Selangor. Ayip’s partner was a Muslim Orang Asli. In April 1997 he had met with the *tangkap basah* and, with this same girl, arranged a marriage. Since then, Ayip had bided his time before seeking his father’s approval. Because of his dislike for Islam, and because of other issues, Batin Janggut would not approve his son’s marriage (which would also mean conversion to Islam). Ayip’s siblings (Batin Janggut’s children by his fifth, sixth and seventh wives) opposed the marriage as well, saying, “Islamic conversion would only make the problem flare up again, due to Batin Janggut’s antagonism towards Islam”. As a result, Ayip had been unable to discuss the matter with his father.

In February 1998 Ayip visited his partner’s house and met the *tangkap basah*. Subsequently, her relatives visited Kampung Durian Tawar with a piece of Ayip’s clothing as evidence, and demanded that either the marriage be approved or a fine be paid. At the time, Batin Janggut was absent. Menteri Gemuk and Jekerah Asang, along with Batin Janggut’s fifth wife, the mother of Ayip, met the visitors. After telling the visitors that “we cannot make the decision”, Menteri Gemuk and the others left for Kampung Dalam to see Batin Janggut. In town they bumped into him; worried about what was happening, he was on his way to Kampung Durian Tawar. They sat in a Chinese cafe and discussed possible courses of action. Batin Janggut was determined not to allow his son’s marriage and conversion to Islam, and said to Menteri Gemuk and others, “I have no intention of attending any meeting to discuss this with the woman’s relatives”.

When she heard this, Ayip's mother asked Batin Mampas, her brother and Ayip's guardian, to fetch Ayip back from the Orang Asli village in Selangor, where he was "in custody". With Lan (Ayip's elder brother) driving a car borrowed from Menteri Gemuk, Batin Mampas traveled to the village. Negotiations with the woman's relatives became quite complicated, but it was eventually agreed that the marriage would be canceled and a fine (rumored to be as much as 2,000 ringgit) would be paid. On the way back to Kampung Durian Tawar after dropping Batin Mampas off, Lan, tired after the long day, fell asleep at the wheel. The car went over the railings of a bridge and smashed into an embankment. Ayip was taken to the hospital in Seremban with a broken jawbone, while Lan suffered a minor leg injury.

The 6,000 ringgit damage bill was to be paid by Lan's siblings to Menteri Gemuk, but Batin Janggut initially shouldered it. The reaction to Ayip was distant and critical; nobody showed any sympathy. Ayip was considered a "delinquent son", one who had acted recklessly despite the knowledge that his father had experienced problems with the issue of Islam. Ayip had been living in an Orang Asli village, where his elder brother Ribut lived following his marriage to a village woman. Ayip quit the factory job he had held for a short while, and was just "hanging around". When he returned to Kampung Durian Tawar he was not interested in helping with the rubber tapping, but led a debauched life of billiards, betting and drinking, and going around on a motorbike that was not fully paid for. He had a bad reputation among his siblings because he had not yet paid a telephone bill incurred when he was regularly calling his "fiancé". After this *tangkap basah* episode, his relatives gave up on him.

The relatives of the woman Ayip wanted to marry probably saw the cause of the failed relationship as Batin Janggut's refusal to allow his son to convert to Islam. Around this time, a rumor circulated in the JHEOA that one of Batin Janggut's sons, well known for his staunch anti-Islam stance, might be converting to Islam. Thus, the suspicion resurfaced that Batin Janggut was not cooperating with the Islamization process. The notion that he was in opposition to Islam was now widespread.

Implementation of Islamic Mission

Around mid-March in 1998 a meeting with PERKIM (the Malaysian Islamic Welfare Organization) was held in the village *adat* hall. It was attended by Batin Janggut and Jenang Misai, as well as Adunan and other Islamic converts. For several weeks prior to the meeting, a weekly Islamic lecture with a guest Malay lecturer from the neighboring village

had been held on Thursdays at the village Islamic prayer room (*surau*). The PERKIM meeting sought assistance from the village for Islamic missionary activities such as this. The following account is my record of what Batin Janggut later told me.

Batin Janggut alleged that “the converts are disturbing the order of the village by not obeying the *adat*”. The Islamic converts kept quiet, though they must have felt anxious about receiving critical comments from Batin Janggut. The staff from PERKIM and bureaucrats from the Department of Islamic Affairs attempted to calm him down and to achieve conciliation between the Islamic converts and the non-Muslim villagers. During the talk, the PERKIM people suggested inviting PERKIM people from Kuala Lumpur to conduct an Islamic missionary activity program in Kampung Durian Tawar, in which they would present Islamic missionary programs house to house. Batin Janggut had been able to knock back the proposal to hold the feast ceremony that the JHEOA had requested in April 1997. However, given the government’s suspicions of his anti-Islam stance, this time he could not refuse this request. During the meeting, Batin Janggut again explained the *adat* that the village observed. “Because we follow the *adat*”, he explained, “we cannot be easily converted to Islam”.

Undang and Batin

PERKIM announced that the Undang (of the Jelevu district) would be invited to Kampung Durian Tawar. The Undang is well respected in the area as a guardian of Islam and of *adat*. Inviting him was a government move to counter Batin Janggut’s claim that “we don’t need to convert to Islam because we have the *adat*”. The Undang was not only the region’s *adat* leader, but also the honorary chief of the Department of Islamic Affairs of the Jelevu district; that is, the nominal head of Islam. We also see here the role of the traditional rulers, such as sultans and rajas, which had endured from the days of the British colonial period to the present, and which defined their position as the custodians of tradition as well as religion.

The Batins, the leaders of the Orang Asli community, draw their authority from their relationship with the Undang. In Negeri Sembilan, because of the historical belief that the Minangkabau, after migrating from Sumatra, married an Orang Asli woman in order to gain land rights, it is claimed that in the early days of national history the Orang Asli Batin was given the right to choose the Undang, the Malay ruler. The Batins were always invited to the inauguration ceremonies of the new Undangs (Dentan et al. 1997: 53–54). It is believed that a Batin converted to Islam

and changed his title to Undang, while Batin remained the title for the leader of the non-Muslim community. In other words, they are both of the same origin.

While the Undang derives his authority from the Batin's approval, the Batin can claim his title only through his appointment by the Undang. Tsubouchi (1984) argues that the network that arose from the conferring of titles was the backbone of the political and economic structure in Negeri Sembilan. From Yang-Pertuan Besar, the "king" of Negeri Sembilan, down to the Undang, and from the Undang to the Penghulu or Batin, the Orang Asli (or Biduanda) were also made part of the political and economic network of Negeri Sembilan society. But when in the mid-nineteenth century the Orang Asli ceased taking part in Malay politics, the Malays forgot about the Orang Asli's role in the early days of the Malay kingdom (Dentan et al. 1997: 53–54).

These traditional networks based on the conferring of titles may be found within Malay society but not within that of the Orang Asli. This is because the former "traditional" relationship between the Malays and the Orang Asli was gradually severed from the political process during the British colonial period and since independence. The Malays' relationship with the Orang Asli has become very restricted because under the special administration it is handled by the JHEOA, which means that the JHEOA appoints or approves the Batins.

Islamic Missionary Activities

On April 24 and 25 in 1998 Islamic missionary activities were carried out in Kampung Durian Tawar. On the afternoon of the first day, a PERKIM group from Kuala Lumpur visited the village, staying at the house of the Muslim missionary and at the kindergarten (the upper floor being the prayer room) while they prepared for the next day's activities. As far as I was able to observe, the visiting group included students from Universiti Malaya and teaching staff from the International Islamic University Malaysia. Also taking part in the missionary activities was an Orang Asli woman who had converted. She was a granddaughter of Aki Main from Kampung Bukit Lanjan in Selangor.

Up until this point, I had not directly observed incidents concerning Islam. A couple of negotiations had been held between the government and the village leaders. I had known of these beforehand, but did not go. However, I decided to involve myself in this missionary activity, as I thought this would be my last chance and also because it included the Undang. I had only three months left for my research, and I would not

worry too much if this was cut short. Fortunately this did not happen, but following the Undang's visit a professor at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia received informal enquiries about me. The professor encouraged me, saying "anthropologists cannot help encountering this kind of problem", but nonetheless the seriousness of the issue of Islam was once again brought home.

Let us return to those April days. On the morning of April 25, a children's sports carnival was held in the front square of the *adat* hall. Rather than being an actual sports carnival, it seemed that the children were competing against the PERKIM staff, while other PERKIM staff visited village houses to carry out missionary activities and distribute leaflets. They also distributed rice, eggs, tiny dried fish (*ikan bilis*) and so on. Initially *batik* cloths had also been suggested as suitable handouts, but the village leaders refused because this required a list of the names and signatures of the recipients. They were afraid that such a list might result in them being registered as Muslims without their knowledge. The leaflets distributed by Universiti Malaya students explained Islam, but were not comprehensible to the non-literate villagers. One villager gave me one, saying, "I don't need it". The Malay lecturer who had been coming to the village for the weekly Islamic lectures asked a convert if he understood the contents of the leaflet, to which he shook his head apologetically.

PERKIM's organizational staff and the Islamic converts busily prepared for the Undang's visit. The PERKIM staff had control over the program procedure with the help of the Islamic converts, while the village *adat* leaders were not asked to help. The Islamic converts, who usually did not take part in village activities, were having difficulty finding the necessary tools and cooking implements. Malays hired by PERKIM prepared the food, with no involvement from the village women. The people who would usually run village events were absent, having left the village early that morning to work in the fields. Also, a burial ceremony happened to be taking place in a neighboring village. Many villagers, who under normal circumstances would not have attended the burial because of their distant relationship with the deceased, decided to attend. Most of these villagers were pillars of the community and supporters of Batin Janggut. Batin Janggut would normally have been critical of this "disruptive" action, but it seemed he had actually encouraged and helped to plan these actions.

The villagers who presented themselves for the Islamic missionary activity were Islamic converts, several *adat* leaders including Batin Janggut and Jenang Misai, Tikak's supporters, young people who attended



Plate 80: The blowpipe dart competition. The blowpipe dart competition is always held at events that have something to do with the Orang Asli. There are two Islamic converts in this picture: one man wears a white shirt and the other wears a white Muslim skull-cap (*kopiah*). [NT-1998]

out of curiosity, and some lower people who turned up for the free meal. Tikak apparently told Genreh, “I don’t like this kind of stuff”, by which he meant Islamic missionary activities. This was an implicit criticism of Batin Janggut for giving his approval to such activities.

I observed the village preparations along with Jenang Misai and Batin Awang from Kampung Baning, who had come on a “reconnaissance” mission. We decided to go over to Batin Janggut’s house, and found him in an altercation with the PERKIM and the JHEOA staff. He looked enraged. We learned that a dispute had been raging for more than three hours. The PERKIM people seemed to be asking for more understanding for the Islamic converts in the village. Batin Janggut was accusing them of being impolite and disrespectful to the *adat*. The PERKIM people expressed their fear that, after the recent riot in Penang between Muslims and Hindus, rioting could occur among the Orang Asli. The argument went around in circles, and eventually ended in disagreement.

The PERKIM people left and I went back to the *adat* hall square. The marquee was up and preparations were in progress for the Undang’s visit. A blowpipe dart competition, indispensable to any Orang Asli ceremony, was in full swing. Several competitors were taking aim at balloons more than thirty meters away. Adunan, now wearing a Malay cap (*songkok*), led the competition.

Undang Visit

Dignitaries arrived at the village just as the blowpipe dart competition was ending to great cheers and laughter. The dignitaries included the JHEOA heads from the Negeri Sembilan and Melaka branches. Some Malays associated with the Undang were also there. The police had arrived to ensure there would be no breaches of security. A plainclothes detective asked me about Japan. An Islamic lecturer from the neighboring village who had noticed me videotaping the competition, wondered “who I was” and asked the police to stop me from filming. The police and I were already on friendly terms, and they allowed me to continue filming and taking photographs.

A solemn atmosphere prevailed as a police vehicle, followed by the Undang’s party traveling in a limousine, arrived at the square. Adunan and Haji Konin, Islamic converts from the village, were the first to greet them. After exchanging pleasantries, the Undang sat on a rattan sofa brought out from Batin Janggut’s house. The Undang’s wife sat next to him, and they were flanked by representatives from PERKIM, the Department of Islamic Affairs, a JHEOA branch leader and Batin Janggut. In front of this “stage”, the marquee was filled with the villagers and Malays from PERKIM and neighboring villages. Thus began the Undang’s welcome ceremony.

A prayer (*doa*) was performed first. The Undang, the Malays and the Islamic converts all assumed the prayer position, stretching their hands forward with up-facing palms. The non-Muslim villagers, including Batin Janggut, did not take part, and instead sat imperviously as if resisting something. It was the typical Orang Asli response evident at any Malay-organized school event or public ceremony, but here it caused a strange sense of discomfort. After the prayer, representatives from PERKIM and the Department of Islamic Affairs each gave a speech. Both stressed their hopes for reconciliation between the Islamic converts and the non-Muslim residents in the village, and for good relations between the Orang Asli and Malay communities. A reconciliation ceremony had apparently been planned between Adunan and other Islamic converts and non-Muslim residents in the village (in particular Batin Janggut), but in the end it was canceled. Neither the JHEOA nor Batin Janggut performed a greeting speech, and the JHEOA staff attended but were only given observer status.

When the Undang rose to talk, everyone in attendance stood up in deference. The microphone was moved closer to him, and he read a script prepared by either PERKIM or the Department of Islamic Affairs staff.



Plate 81: Undang visit. The Undang of Jelebu, wearing a black songkok, sits in the middle of the honour row. Batin Janggut is seated at the far right, while on his right is the JHEOA Director (Pengarah) for Melaka and Negeri Sembilan. [NT-1998]

After reading the script, he talked about how he had been a primary school teacher near Kampung Durian Tawar before his appointment as Undang. He went on to talk about the traditional relationship between the Undang and the Batin. The PERKIM people did not seem to have expected this development. He apologized for the discontinuation of the tradition, and to Batin Janggut suggested they should take this opportunity to build a fresh relationship. In a rare response, Batin Janggut nodded approvingly. This was hardly surprising, because the historical relationship the Undang spoke of was the same as that which Batin Janggut consistently espoused. At the end of his speech, he awarded a gift to the winner of the blowpipe dart competition. Then Batin Janggut handed a gift to the Undang (incidentally, PERKIM had prepared all these gifts). At the close of these official proceedings, they went on to the reception (*jamuan*), thus concluding the missionary activities. As the members of the Undang's party left, the villagers lined up, shook hands and saw them off.

Batin Janggut and some other villagers immediately left the village for the funeral ceremony in the neighboring village. There Batin Janggut talked about the Islamic missionary activities and the Undang's visit, denouncing the government authorities and the Islamic converts. Tikak was among those listening to Batin Janggut. Back in the village, the PERKIM staff and the Islamic converts were cleaning up.

That evening I chatted with Asat, my research assistant, about the missionary activities and the Undang's visit. I expressed my fear that, if this continued, all the villagers would be pressured into Islamic conversion. Asat responded, "If worst comes to worst, we could nominally convert to Islam, like Botak". "There is a way", he added. Botak was a friend of Asat's who lived in the next village. He had converted to Islam, but restricted his devotions to the times when government officials were around, and happily dined at the Chinese cafe. Behind Asat's comment was a steely resolve that, even if forced to submit to nominal conversion, the Orang Asli spirit would not be undermined. Asat also remarked, "we don't need to take such measures as nominal conversion in Kampung Durian Tawar, because we have Batin Janggut".

Aftermath

POASM Meeting

On April 26, the day after the Undang's visit, a general meeting of POASM was held at Gombak in Selangor, near Kuala Lumpur. In December the previous year, a meeting of POASM had been held in Kampung Durian Tawar, during which Batin Janggut was appointed as a consultant to the Negeri Sembilan branch of POASM. Until then, because he had been cooperating with the JHEOA, he was not involved with non-governmental organizations such as POASM. But as his relationship with the JHEOA over the issue of Islam deteriorated, he had begun making contact with POASM, even though such a move was still considered "dangerous".

At the Gombak general meeting, Batin Janggut renewed his support for POASM.³ Towards the end of the meeting, he asked to have a final word and then spoke at length on the conflicts over Islam in his village. He spoke about the history of conflict between Islamic converts and the rest of the village, the negotiations with the government and the government responses, and concluded with the missionary activities of the previous day. He asked the participants, "What can we do (*Apa nak buat*)?"

Batin Janggut seemed frustrated and exasperated with the powerlessness of the Orang Asli against Islamization. As well as having to deal with feuds in his own family, he had been put under the spell of a *poyang*, rumors of his "imminent arrest" had been rife and his authority as Batin had been under attack. Yet, his fighting spirit did not seem to have waned at all. One of the audience members was so moved by Batin Janggut's words that he stood up and declared, "I support (*sokong*) you!"



Plate 82: POASM meeting at Balai Adat in Kampung Durian Tawar. Standing is the President of Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli Association, POASM. He is from a neighboring Temuan village. On the wall behind the POASM leaders are the portraits of a former Prime Minister, a former governor of Negeri Sembilan, and a former king of Malaysia. [NT-1997]



Plate 83: Exhibition of village dancing at the POASM general meeting in Gombak. The 1998 POASM General Assembly was the first time the youths performed outside the village. Since then, the traditional dance troupe have made it a point to perform at every annual village festival. [NT-1998]

At the conclusion of the meeting, a POASM member working for the JHEOA in Negeri Sembilan approached Batin Janggut to warn him that his comments on Islam were too subversive – the government had a surveillance network in place, even in non-government bodies like POASM. As such, participants at POASM meetings carefully avoided making comments on Islam.

Kenduri in Kampung Dalam

In May 1998 I went with the villagers of Kampung Durian Tawar to attend the *kenduri* feast ceremony in Kampung Dalam. Strictly speaking, this ceremony is called *bayar niat* and is held to thank the ancestors for the at least temporary end to hard times. At the ceremony, Batin Janggut announced that his son Ayip, who was at the center of the *tangkap basah* story, would convert to Islam and get married. He also reported that Ribut, Ayip's elder brother who was married, had been indicted for rape in an Orang Asli village in Selangor. While their father had been fighting the issue of Islam, his delinquent sons had been involved in dishonorable behavior. People could not hide their surprise and dismay. Batin Janggut also then told me that he and other POASM leaders were under suspicion of being anti-Islam because of his comments at the general meeting. He added that he would have no choice but to spend more time in Kampung Dalam.

Struggle over Islamization

Different Viewpoints

The enforcers and the enforced upon have differing views on Islamization among the Orang Asli. From the enforcers' point of view it is more important for people to be engaged in missionary activities, in other words to show that they are involved in the Islamic resurgence movement, than to seriously convert to Islam. As a result, it does not matter much whether conversion is nominal or not. For them, Islamization among the Orang Asli is a peripheral aspect of the Islamic resurgence movement, though it must be remembered that the government's involvement in this is a peculiar feature of Malaysia (cf. Zainah 1987). For the enforced upon, Islamization is not the religious salvation of the soul. From the non-Muslim Orang Asli point of view, in other words, Islam is not a religion but a political threat to their lives. The nominal converts see it as simply a tool, a means by which they can enjoy the benefits of economic development. The religious values and awakening that religious faith may bring about are rarely considered.

Those nominally converted Muslims may bring the non-Muslim Orang Asli into conflict with the government, and the non-Muslims therefore consider them very dangerous.

When I talk about Islam, I am talking about what the non-Muslim (and nominally converted) Orang Asli mean by it, the way the subjugated see it. On occasion, therefore, this may differ widely from the definition used by the enforcers. Nonetheless, the enforcers' point of view (that the Orang Asli understanding of Islam is misunderstood and insufficient) fully explains the Islamization phenomenon of the Orang Asli. That is why this chapter dares to deal with what Islam means to the Orang Asli people – what it means to the people subjected to Islamization.

Domestication of the Orang Asli

The domestication process of the Orang Asli is carried out through the Batins. It is the Batins who negotiate with the JHEOA, the Department of Islamic Affairs, PERKIM and other government bodies in the process of Islamization. The Batins have to deal with all their advice and warnings. Calls for assistance with missionary activities are also made to the Batins through workshops. The Batins have to be present at any negotiations with the government. In the process of Islamization, government authorities make it a rule to approach the people through the Batins.

Batin Janggut's "anti-Islam" stance attracted a great deal of advice and warnings, most of which were given informally. Whenever he made a reckless comment, he was promptly warned. When rumors of his "arrest" became widespread, he had to curb his opinions and activities, regardless of whether or not the rumors were based in reality.

In the first place, the Batins have to perform their role as leaders of Orang Asli communities, and the JHEOA had for a long time followed a policy of delegating some authority to the Batins. According to the Aboriginal Peoples Act, the government has the power to appoint and dismiss the leaders of Orang Asli communities. This legal framework allows Batins chosen by the government to be appointed, no matter how unpopular they are. For example, it is even alleged (by Batin Janggut) that the JHEOA actively conspires to appoint alcoholic (*kaki engkem*) Batins (Nicholas 2000: 210). This Batin appointment system has eroded the autonomy of the Orang Asli, as it no doubt helps to domesticate the Orang Asli. Many development schemes are carried out through the Batins, and the main beneficiaries are those close to the Batins. Backed by an authority given and approved by an external authority, the Batins have exerted great power in the local communities.

Batin Janggut, a former JHEOA staff member, was typical of these Batins. His role in the history of development in Kampung Durian Tawar was extremely significant. What the government authorities (including the JHEOA) had not expected was his non-cooperative attitude towards the Islamization policy. If Batin Janggut had been positive about state-led Islamic missionary activities, most villagers of Kampung Durian Tawar would have converted.

The “domestication of the Orang Asli” is only meaningful from the subjugators’ point of view. In this phrase, one can see the whole system of subjugation, from slavery, settlement and development through to Islamization. Daring not to become a slave (i.e. to remain a “wild” Orang Asli), daring not to settle down (i.e. to remain mobile), and to resist development and Islamization is to counter subjugation. The consistent rumor about the “imminent arrest” of Batin Janggut gained currency only because he had been vocal against Islamization, one of the domination mechanisms of subjugation.

The ultimate outcome of all these events around Islamization would be, as far as I can see, the end of his authority. External pressures such as development and Islamization would contribute to his downfall. In the matter of development, the government appointed his son Tikak as a go-between. The mediator for the process of Islamization was Adunan, leader of the Islamic converts. The authority of Batin Janggut, which Tikak had already undermined in development matters, was further diminished in the process of Islamization.

Batin Janggut, though suffering from his treatment, is facing his adversaries and mounting a resistance against Tikak, Adunan and the government by enlisting the support of next-generation leaders. Whether his attempt will succeed or not depends on these leaders. The outlook does not necessarily look bright. It does not look promising for Batin Janggut because future Batins will not resist unless they are tested as severely as he has been. In the first place, the JHEOA would not approve such Batins. Even if the people chose Batins like him, the government would no doubt undermine the Batins’ authority by using others as mediators.

The Hybrid Batin Janggut

According to Batin Janggut, he cannot bring himself to allow Islamic conversion “because we have *adat* and magic (*ilmu*)”. His descent (*keturunan*), in fact, may have influenced these comments. Batin Janggut is not “pure blood” Orang Asli – he is as much Malay or Chinese as he is Orang Asli. He makes the best use of his hybrid ethnicity according

to each particular situation. For example, when dining with his family at home he eats like the Chinese, using a bowl and chopsticks. When he eats with the villagers, such as at the ceremonial feast at the *adat* hall, he eats with his fingers, just like the Malays and the Orang Asli.

He possesses knowledge of magic, botany and *adat* learned from the Orang Asli and the Malays. He has a wide network of acquaintances among Orang Asli and Malay people, obtained from his past position with the JHEOA, as well as from his present status as a Batin. His father was Chinese, he can speak Chinese and he is considered by the local Chinese to be Chinese. He has an economic network based on his Chinese ethnicity. He is an outsider in every cultural group, but has a distinctive niche in each. In understanding his responses to Islamization, his hybrid ethnicity is important. In particular, his Chinese-ness seems to have given him the confidence to resist compromise with the government by converting to Islam. Shortly after I left, his daughter married a Chinese businessman. She was in her early twenties, and he was middle-aged. Known to the villagers as Atau, he is a durian wholesaler and is very close to Batin Janggut.

It can be assumed that this marriage between a middle-aged Chinese entrepreneur and Batin Janggut's young daughter is a strategic move. The Batin's strategy for survival is to get closer to the Chinese community and to strengthen his social and economic ties with it, rather than make compromises with the Malay-centered government, which enforces Islamization. This survival strategy is only possible because his father was Chinese; this has enabled him to construct a personal network among the Chinese.

Domesticating Islam

As previously mentioned, a fusion of *adat* and Islam exists in the Malay Muslim communities, which Wazir (1992: 16) calls the "*adatization of Islam*" (when *adat* is interpreted as compatible with Islam and becomes the primary mode of articulation) or the "*Islamization of adat*" (when *adat* is interpreted as incompatible with Islam and Islam becomes the mode of articulation). The Undang is the head both of *adat* and of the Muslim community. Such fusions can exist in the Malay community because it does not follow the Western practice of the separation of religion and government.

The visit by the Undang and the Islamic missionary activities were an attempt to impose this relationship between *adat* and Islam on the Orang Asli; they were symbolic expressions of the fusion between *adat*

and Islam. What we can see here is the enforcers of Islam's notion that the Orang Asli, being followers of *adat* like the Malays, can also, like the Malays, fuse it with Islam. As the Islamic resurgence movement has intensified, the "Islamization of *adat*" has become more important than the "*adatization* of Islam". The Malays have come to place more importance on Islam than *adat* and to idealize becoming "more Islamic" (Tawada 1997). For these reason, the authorities considered it more important to conduct missionary activities than to hold a visit by the Undang.

In contrast, for those who are subjected to Islamization, such as the Orang Asli, it is not possible to fuse *adat* and Islam because, in reality, they are opposing systems. The Islamic resurgence movement, while indicating for the Malays the Islamization vector, reinforces "*adatization*" for the Orang Asli. Because of this, the Orang Asli felt the visit by the Undang to be more important than the missionary activities. As a result, the Undang's visit during the Islamic missionary activities reminded the villagers of the relationship between the Undang and the Batin. The villagers had the impression that the long-severed relationship between the Undang and the Batin had been restored to "what it should be". While the villagers felt antipathy towards the PERKIM staff and the Malay bureaucrats from the Department of the Islamic Affairs and the JHEOA, they gave the highest respect to the Undang.

Local Malays helped with the Undang's visit, while PERKIM staff and the Department of Islamic Affairs bureaucrats from Kuala Lumpur and other areas assisted with the missionary activities. The PERKIM staff and the Department of Islamic Affairs bureaucrats from the capital were more enthusiastic about the missionary activities than were the Malays in the rural areas. For the Malays in the remote and rural areas, exerting so much effort to convert the Orang Asli, with whom they have daily contact, did not seem important. Indeed, it would suit them better to keep the non-converted Orang Asli as non-Muslim. The relationship the Undang previously had with the Batin was symbolic of the preferred cohabitation between the Malays and the Orang Asli. The Undang gave the Batin a role as a leader in the forest, where the Batin ruled the "forest people". They had an economic relationship based on trading forest products. The Malay farmers also relied on labor provided by the Orang Asli during the busy seasons. The Malays in rural and regional areas, content with this relationship with the Orang Asli in the forest, did not see any need to convert them to Islam.

The Malays only came into daily contact with the Orang Asli when the Orang Asli came out of the forest. They considered them as "others"

and even today do not see them as fellow Muslim community members. Instead, they perceive the Orang Asli as outsiders and discriminate against them. It may in fact be inconvenient for the Malays if the Orang Asli are converted because this would mean admitting them as equals, and would potentially nullify the discriminatory relationship. PERKIM, the Department of Islamic Affairs, the JHEOA and others in the center control the state-led Islamization policy. They usually do not take actual opinions of local Malays and Orang Asli into consideration. In this respect, the Orang Asli reaction to the Islamization policy should also be seen in the context of center and periphery. The respect shown to the Undang by the villagers of Kampung Durian Tawar indicates that the symbolic relationship between the Orang Asli and the local Malays was still intact, and indeed could be revived again.

Since the missionary activities and the Undang's visit, the Islam issue in Kampung Durian Tawar has abated for the time being – both sides could reinterpret or redefine what “Islamization among the Orang Asli” meant in their own logical framework, even though their individual interpretations might differ. Those who want to Islamize the Orang Asli achieved a certain outcome by staging the missionary activities. The other side was reassured that the Undang endorsed their *adat* and the authority of the Batin. They were also reassured that the missionary activities were just one of those occasional activities conducted by those at the center, the government. They were reassured that the local Malay people (represented by the Undang) did not share the same level of urgency to convert them to Islam. The experience of having been through the missionary activities may have marked a turning point for the villagers to gain the confidence to “domesticate” Islam, which was previously seen as a threat. After the missionary activities and the accompanying Undang visit, the villagers of Kampung Durian Tawar practically never mentioned conflict over the Islamic converts, although the rumor of Batin Janggut's arrest was still rife.

This story about Islamization and the related events in Kampung Durian Tawar might well be described very differently from the perspective of the JHEOA, the Department of Islamic Affairs, PERKIM and others who were wishing to impose Islam on the Orang Asli, or by the Islamic converts in the village. There is a wide gap between how the Orang Asli are portrayed in the mainstream media in Malaysia and in this study. My perspective concords with the way the non-Muslim Orang Asli view the Islamization policy and the converted Orang Asli. I might have given the impression that Islamic missionary activities are “bad”. Then again, that

in itself may be proof that there is a fundamental lack of understanding between those who want to “Islamize” the Orang Asli, and the Orang Asli who are “subjected to Islamization”.

Future

Batin Janggut once told me that the Orang Asli will become extinct in thirty years (*tiga puluh tahun nanti, Orang Asli habis*). Their society has experienced drastic social change because of development, and they have lost what could be called their cultural tradition. They are in a state of “de-culturalization” (Nicholas 2000: 111), and are destined to be assimilated with Malay society by the government’s overpowering pressure to Islamize them. Batin Janggut was worried about this future. Whether or not the Orang Asli community will be assimilated into Malay society as he feared is unclear at this stage, but it is certain that the community is greatly affected by the current Islamization policy. This will no doubt be the decisive factor in shaping their future.

The marriage of Batin Janggut’s daughter to a Chinese entrepreneur, which took place after I left the village, indicates that he is seeking a possible alternative to assimilation with Malay society. The Orang Asli may no longer be able to survive as Orang Asli. The children of the converts may live as Malays, while the children of Batin Janggut’s daughter may live as Chinese. Then again, Batin Janggut himself has lived in a peripheral and hybrid world. Those who dwell in a peripheral and hybrid world may not belong to any *one* ethnic category, but can belong to various ethnic categories. The Orang Asli could construct their own future by making the best of the ambiguous definition that is Orang Asli.

Notes

1. The POASM representative was from a neighboring village and had previously been a resident student at the dormitory for the Orang Asli in Kampung Baning. As a JHEOA staff member, Batin Janggut used to be the caretaker there.
2. A *panyang*’s power of sorcery is summed up in the concept of *tuju* (to point) (Logan 1847: 308).
3. Without identifying who it was, Nicholas (2000: 210) describes an old Batin criticizing the practice of “JHEOA appointing alcoholic (*kaki engkem*) Batins”.