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## Characteristics of Hunter-gatherers in Asia

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### ABSTRACT

Hunter-gatherers in Asia are highly diverse, ranging from small groups of foragers to settled populations that have incorporated agricultural products into their diets. They occupy a variety of habitats, from equatorial and subequatorial forests to temperate islands and mountain ecosystems. Hunter-gatherers in Asia have engaged in symbiotic relationships with non-hunter-gatherer groups for hundreds of years, exchanging forest products for ceramics, metal tools, and agricultural goods. Characteristic features of Asian hunter-gatherers include residential mobility, sharing, living in bands (social units linked by kinship, marriage, exchanges, and friendship), extensive knowledge of their habitats, communal use of land, and, in some cases, providing specialised services to other groups. Asian hunter-gatherers fall into the category of indigenous peoples, though some Asian governments do not recognise this concept. Challenges facing Asian hunter-gatherers include the impacts of globalisation, land privatisation, and efforts of governments to modernise, assimilate, and change their cultural systems. Sedentarisation and resettlement programs, large-scale development projects such as dams and monoculture agriculture, the use of land for wildlife conservation that excludes people, deforestation, and environmental degradation are also major concerns. Hunter-gatherers in Asia today have become increasingly involved in human rights and social justice efforts, which have led to some improvements in their status and well-being.

### INTRODUCTION

Hunter-gatherers in Asia today are highly diverse. They range from small-scale egalitarian foragers to larger-scale populations who could be characterised as middle-range societies (Vaughn, Eerkens, and Kantner eds. 2009; Sapignoli 2014). Asian hunter-gatherers are generally described as ‘foragers’ as opposed to ‘collectors’ such as the Nunamiut of the Brooks Range of Alaska (Binford 1980: 5–9; 2001: 252–253, 276–279) who are logistically organised, with task groups

operating out of long-term residential locations. Binford highlights groups such as the Penan ('Punans' Harrison 1949: 134), Semang (Schebesta 1929: 150), and Aeta (Vanoverbergh 1925: 432) who are either equatorial or subequatorial hunter-gatherers (Binford 1980: 7, Table 1). In the past, most if not all Asian hunter-gatherers, as foragers in tropical forests were highly mobile, moving their residences sometimes as often as every other day (Kelly 2013: 78–96). Ainu hunter-gatherers in Sakhalin and Hokkaido, Japan, on the other hand, moved only

**Table 1** Population sizes of Asian nations and hunter-gatherer groups

Country	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Population size (2020)	Hunter-gatherer groups
Bangladesh	148,460	162,650,853	Munda
Bhutan	38,394	782,318	Monpa
Brunei	5,765	464,478	Penan
Cambodia	181,035	16,926,984	Swidden groups
China	9,596,960	1,394,015,977	Orochon (Elunchun), Dulong, Loplik
India	3,287,263	1,326,093,247	Birhor, Jirula, Jiwara, Onge, Nayaka, Paliyan
Indonesia	1,904,599	267,028,366	Orang Rimba, Kubu, Punan Tubu, Tobelo, Masuani
Japan	377,915	125,507,472	Ainu
Korea North	120,538	25,643,466	none
Korea South	99,720	51,835,110	none
Laos	236,800	7,447,396	Khmu, Mlabri
Malaysia	329,847	32,652,083	Penan, Orang Asli, Batek
Maldives	298	391,904	none
Mongolia	1,564,116	3,168,026	Pastoral groups
Myanmar	676,578	56,590,071	Swidden groups
Nepal	147,181	30,327,877	Kusunda, Raute
Pakistan	796,095	233,500,636	none
Philippines	300,000	109,180,815	Aeta, Agta, Batak
Singapore	719	6,209,660	none
Sri Lanka	65,610	22,889,201	Wanniyala-Aeto
Taiwan	35,980	23,603,049	Agricultural and marine resource utilising groups
Thailand	513,120	68,977,400	Mani, Mlabri (Phi Tuong Labang), Moken
Timor-Leste	14,874	1,383,723	Bunak, Fatalaku, Makasae
Vietnam	331,210	98,721,275	Hill people, swidden groups
25 countries			

Note: Data obtained from *The World Factbook* ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov), accessed 30 November 2020), *Ethnologue* ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), accessed 30 November 2020), and from government reports and censuses, work of researchers, development agencies, national archives, government and international agency reports, and documents of non-government organisations including Minority Rights Group International, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Survival International, the Forest Peoples Program, the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, and from fieldwork.

twice a year and were much more logistically organised (Watanabe 1973; Ohnuki-Tierney 1977). The Ainu occupied a more temperate environment than is the case for southeast Asian hunter-gatherers.

Many of the hunter-gatherers in South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia reside in tropical or subtropical forests, and they depend heavily on forest products and other natural resources. There are also Asian hunter-gatherers who live in mountainous zones (e.g., the Raute of Nepal, Fortier 2009a; Inamura, Khamai, and Kawamoto 2016). Some Asian hunter-gatherers live on coasts and utilise marine resources for part of their subsistence (e.g., the Agta of Luzon, the Philippines, Peterson 1978; Griffin and Griffin 1999; Minter 2010), while others reside further inland (such as the Birhors of India, e.g., Williams 1974; Adhikary 1999). There are also Asian hunter-gatherers who live on islands (e.g., the Andaman and Sentinelese Islands in the Bay of Bengal, Radcliffe-Brown 1922; Venkateswar 2004). A few Asian hunter-gatherers reside in estuarine ecosystems (e.g., some of the Agta of the Philippines). (see p. 9 in this volume, Figure 3 for a map showing the indigenous peoples of Asia)

A number of Asian hunter-gatherers fit the category of 'hill tribes' living in the highlands, such as the Mlabri of Laos and Thailand (Bernatzik 1938; Poorkajorn 1985, 1992; Nakai and Ikeya 2016). The Mlabri used to interact with Hmong and other groups in the past. Since the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they have also been involved in development and modernisation programs (Nan 2012; Ikeya and Nakai 2017). A characteristic feature of Asian hunter-gatherers is that they are nearly all involved in what can be described as fast-paced change (Reyes-García and Pyhälä 2017). All of them are what have been termed as 'sharing societies' (Woodburn 1980; Wenzel, Hovelsrud-Broda, and Kishigami eds. 2000; Widlok 2017; Bird-David 2019).

Overviews of Asian hunter-gatherer groups have been provided by Headland and Reid (1989), Bird-David (1999), Endicott (1999), Fortier (2014), and Griffin (2019). Asia is the largest of the world's continents. The United Nations holds that there are 48 countries in Asia. For purposes of this paper, I have excluded those countries that fall into the Middle East. I have focused on those Asian countries stretching from India east to the Philippines. Of the 25 countries in Asia, 17 have hunter-gatherer groups (see Table 1). Hunter-gatherers in Asia are minorities in every country where they reside. Most of these peoples also consider themselves to be indigenous even if the states where they live do not accept that categorisation. Virtually all Asian hunter-gatherers see themselves as indigenous to the countries in which they live. From a global perspective, there are more hunter-gatherers in Asia than in any other part of the world, something that is also true for Asian indigenous people.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF ASIAN HUNTER-GATHERERS**

General characteristics of Asian hunter-gatherers are as follows: The depend at least in part on wild natural resources. In the past, and in some cases in the

present, they tend to move from one location to another, depending on the availability of key resources and the presence of other groups. This residential mobility was quite frequent, sometimes on a daily basis or every other day, especially in rainforests as was the case in the past with the Mlabri of northern Thailand (Bernatzik 1938). All of them have sophisticated tool-kits that are well-suited to the environments in which they live (e.g., blowguns). They all have extensive indigenous knowledge about their habitats and the ways to utilise them. Some Asian hunter-gatherers have a high degree of dependence on specific species such as sago palm (*Cycas revoluta*), which make up a significant part of their diet.

Asian hunter-gatherers are generally 'sharing societies' who allocate food and other goods within families, bands, and marriage pools and assist each other in various ways. Trading and exchange represent important characteristics of Asian hunter-gatherers who not only trade among themselves but also exchange goods and services with non-foraging groups. Asian hunter-gatherer groups usually live in bands, social units of 25–80 people, which have links to other bands through kinship, marriage, exchange, and friendship. The Ainu of northern Japan and eastern Russia were more complex socially and lived in sedentary villages. They had institutionalized differences in their social system, with high status individuals, commoners, and in some cases slaves (Ohnuki-Tierney 1977; Ōnishi, this volume).

Asian hunter-gatherers tend to have collective (communal) rights to land and natural resources, but relatively few have *de jure* (legal) rights to land. There are Asian hunter-gatherer groups such as the Batek and Penan of Malaysia who signal their presence on the landscape by marking the boundaries of their territories. There is considerable variation in the degree to which Asian hunter-gatherers mark their territories, with the Ainu, for example, being highly territorial and restricting access to their resources.

Many Asian hunter-gatherers supplement their foraging activities with the production of domestic agricultural crops. In some cases, Asian hunter-gatherers provide specialised services to other people such as blacksmithing, healing, and forest guiding, as seen, for example, in the hills of India. Some Asian hunter-gatherers procure, use, and exchange high-value forest products such as rattan (e.g., those species found in the genus *Calamus*).

Many Asian hunter-gatherers are having to cope with deforestation, forest fragmentation, and environmental degradation related to the loss of forest cover. Asian hunter-gatherers are nearly all affected by government policies and by both state and private company development programs and 'land grabbing.' The health of Asian hunter-gatherers varies, with some evidence of malnutrition, parasites, respiratory problems, malaria, and tuberculosis. While COVID 19 has made inroads into Asian hunter-gatherer populations only to a limited extent, it is likely to expand substantially (see, for example, Tuck-Po 2020). Their belief systems vary, but many of them can be characterised as 'animists' (see, for example, Endicott 1979; Sager 2008).

As Lee and DeVore (1968: 11) note, 'We make two assumptions about hunters

and gatherers: (1) they live in small groups, and (2) they move around a lot'. The groups in which they live each have their own ranges, and they visit other groups for a variety of purposes, including social visiting, seeking marriage partners, and taking part in group ceremonies. There is variation in the degree to which Asian hunter-gatherer groups mark the boundaries of their territories and seek to protect their areas (see for example, Tuck-Po 2016). The reasons for mobility are varied; they are not only 'utilitarian' and economic in nature but also involve social and ideological motivations (Whallon 2006).

Asian hunter-gatherers fit the various categories of mobility, from nomadism to semi-nomadism, and from semi-permanence to permanence. The concept of nomadism is contested (see, for example, Ikeya 2017a; 2017b). 'Nomadism' has been used as a justification for states and government agencies to encourage or require hunter-gatherers to settle. Moreover, currently, no society in Asia is completely nomadic; all of them remain residentially stationary for at least a portion of the year. Judging from the archaeological record, Asian hunter-gatherers began to settle down and reside permanently only in the past 4,000 years, with the increase in agricultural practices (Underhill and Habu 2006; Habu 2014; Ikeya 2017c). Ainu in Japan had ceramics and agriculture and they moved only twice a year historically (Watanabe 1973; Ohnuki-Tierney 1977). The Wanniyala-Aetto (Veddas) of Sri Lanka used to move three times a year at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Seligman and Seligman 1911). Subsequently, their mobility was circumscribed by the establishment of agricultural and large-scale irrigation projects (e.g., the Mahaweli Project, Stegeborn 2004: 60; Scudder 2005: 138–187, 2019: 126–133).

Mobility reduction and settlement occurred among the Eastern Penan of the Baram River when the Bakun Dam, which was completed in 2010, was constructed. (Jettie Word, personal communication 2015). Dams have affected hunter-gatherers in several parts of Asia (see Table 2). Impacts include the reduction of land available for their use, forced establishment of permanent settlements, construction of roads which increased outsiders' access to riverine and reservoir areas, and a reduction in the number of wild plants, animals, and fish. Water quality also declined in some areas because of reservoir sedimentation and the presence of toxins in the water from construction (Scudder 2005).

Some Asian hunter-gatherers live inside or on the peripheries of protected areas, such as the Orang Rimba of Indonesia, who number between 3,000 and 4,000. Approximately 1,000 Orang Rimba reside inside Bukit Tigapuluh National Park, a biologically diverse tropical forest area, 1,432.23 km<sup>2</sup> in size, that was established in 1995. Some 1,200 Orang Rimba live in Bukit Duabelas National Park (also known as Twelve Hills), established in 2000, which is a smaller protected area of 605 km<sup>2</sup>. The problem that the Orang Rimba face in both of these parks is that they do not have clearly defined rights to any of the resources inside the protected areas, an issue that they are contesting with the Indonesian government (Murray Li 2001; Elkholy 2016; Prasetijo 2017a, 2017b, this volume). In a number of

**Table 2** Major dams in Asia that have affected local communities

Name of dam and year(s) of completion	River and country	Numbers of households of individuals displaced or resettled
Arun III, 2014	Arun River, Nepal	775 people displaced, reservoir 43 hectares in size
Bakun Dam, 2000	Balul River, Borneo, Malaysia, mostly state funded	Toxic impacts, removals of Penan hunter-gatherers
Dahla (Arghandab) Dam, 1954, additions, 2012–2018	Arghandab River, Kandahar, Afghanistan	Estimated 25 households were resettled as a result of the heightening of the dam wall
Nam Ngum Dam, 1972	Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos), state funded	3,500 people displaced by the project, 37,000 ha reservoir; fishing concession to a private entrepreneur
Nam Theun 2 (NT2) dam, commissioned 2010, water from Nam Theun River was released into the Xe Bang Fai River	Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos); World Bank and Asian Development Bank and private funding, one of the largest internationally financed project in Asia	10,000 people resettled, some of them hunter-gatherers; 40,000–150,000 total project-affected people; conservation areas were developed as part of the project, 450 km <sup>2</sup> (170 m <sup>2</sup> ) reservoir
Nam Theun-Hinboun hydropower project, 2010	Nam Theun Hinboun River, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos)	630 ha reservoir, 6,000 people from 25 villages resettled, some of them indigenous
Sardar Sarovar Dam, 1987–2017, second largest concrete megadam in the world	Narmada River, India	Estimated 100,000 people resettled, 140,000 people affected by infrastructure, canals, irrigation systems, 90,820 ha reservoir
Three Gorges Dam, China, 2006, powerplant 2012	Yangtze River	1.3 million people impacted, 600 towns, 1,084 km <sup>2</sup> (419 mi <sup>2</sup> ) reservoir

Note: Data obtained from fieldwork and from the International Commission on Large Dams; <http://www.dams.org> and International Rivers <http://www.internationalrivers.org>, accessed 2 December 2020; (Scudder 2005: 59–60, 2019: 1–9; Baird, Shoemaker, and Manorum 2015)

Southeast Asian parks, hunter-gatherers assist in wildlife conservation and patrolling efforts, and some of them interact extensively with tourists, as seen, for example, in Taman Negara National Park in Peninsular Malaysia, which is 4,343 km<sup>2</sup> in size (Nurul, Mustafa, and Salleh 2011; Endicott et al. 2016). It should be noted that tourism has declined in 2020 in Malaysia, as elsewhere in Asia, because of COVID 19, so hunter-gatherers and other people are faced with having fewer income-generating opportunities.

A portion of the 10,000 Agta in the Philippines (N=1,800) reside in the Northern Sierra Madre National Park (Minter 2010, 2017; Minter et al. 2014). While they are allowed to exploit some of the resources in the park, the Agta have little say in how the park is managed (Minter et al. 2014). They also have little influence regarding the extractive industries that are occurring in their area, particularly timber and minerals extraction (Minter et al. 2012).

Some of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, which are part of the Union Territories of India, are off-limits to visitors. The resident Jawara and Sentinelese are hunter-gatherers who have been relatively hostile to outsiders (Mukherjee 1995, 2003; Venkateswar 2004). In 2006 the Indian government designated certain indigenous groups in the Andaman Islands as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), a classification that confers on them a certain degree of protection (Venkateswar 2018: 2). There have been conflicts between Andaman hunter-gatherer groups and outsiders who have attempted to come to the islands to fish, and they have been unwilling to accept missionaries who wished to come to Sentinel Island to promote Christianity (Venkateswar 2018).

Unlike some of their shifting cultivator compatriots, Asian hunter-gatherers have not been as extensively involved in Asian indigenous peoples' movements which began largely in the 1980s (Erni 2008; Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2014). This is not to say, however, that hunter-gatherers did not take part in resistance movements; the Orang Asli were a key part of the anti-colonial struggle in Malaysia in the 1940s and 1950s (Leary 1995). Hill tribes were involved in some of the fighting in Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos in the 1960s and 1970s. There have been conflicts between hill and valley peoples in southeast Asia for generations (Scott 2009). There are also hunter-gatherers (e.g., the Semang) who do not engage in intergroup conflict.

## **Nepal**

In Asia the level of recognition of indigenous peoples' rights is very uneven (Clarke 2001; Erni 2008; He 2011). One country, Nepal, recognises the concept of indigenous peoples both in its constitution and legal system. Officially in Nepal, indigenous people are called Adivasi Janajati (indigenous nationalities), and they make up 35% of the population of the country. The legislation relating to them is called the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act 2002 which defines them as 'a group or community with own mother tongue and traditional customary practices, distinct cultural identity, social structure, and oral or written history'. In the case of Nepal, 59 indigenous nationalities were recognised in 2002. One of these, the Raute, are hunter-gatherers who not only obtain a significant portion of their livelihoods from hunting and gathering but also supply other groups with goods such as wooden bowls and meat from the forest (Fortier 2009b; Inamura et al. 2016). As in India, the indigenous nationalities have a right of proportional representation in the country's legislature (Erni 2008: 412).

## **The Philippines**

The Philippines, which is made up of some 71,000 islands, both large and small, refers to indigenous peoples as 'Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples' in the national constitution and in several pieces of legislation. The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997 uses the terminology 'indigenous peoples' and 'indigenous cultural communities' (ICC) while the constitution only



uses the term Indigenous Cultural Communities (see Article XII, Section 5, Article XIV, section 17, and Article XVI, Section 12.). In some ways, the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act can be seen as quite progressive in its dealing directly with indigenous peoples. The act contains provisions concerning the right to ‘ancestral domains’ and ‘ancestral lands’. One of the problems facing indigenous people, including a number of hunter-gatherer groups like the Agta, Aeta, and Batak, is that they have difficulties getting secure titles over land. Some of the indigenous ancestral domains in the Philippines have been taken over by private companies such as hotel operators and logging companies. Of the 110 indigenous peoples recognised by the government of the Philippines, between 20 and 33, such as the Batak (Eder 1987), Atta, and Agta, identify as hunter-gatherers.

### Indonesia

In the case of Indonesia, the Constitution of 2001 recognises indigenous peoples’ rights in Article 18, Paragraph 2 relating to regional government. The article says, ‘The state recognises and respects indigenous communities along with their customary rights as long as they still exist, in accordance to the society/cultural development and civilisation within the Unitary State of Indonesia, and they are recognised legally by law’. At international forums, however, the government of Indonesia says that it does not believe that the concept of indigenous peoples is applicable in Indonesia, suggesting that all Indonesians (with the exception of ethnic Chinese) are indigenous. Indonesia, like a number of other Asian nation-states, did vote to accept the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations General Assembly on 13 September 2007. The Summer Institute of Linguistics *Ethnologue* says that there are some 737 living languages in Indonesia, many of them indigenous ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), accessed 30 November 2020). The Indonesian government’s Ministry of Social Welfare recognises *masyarakat hukum adat* and *masyarakat tradisional* in line with the Constitution and says that 365 groups fall into the category of isolated *adat* communities, with a total population of 1.1 million (Erni 2008: 381). Issues that hunter-gatherers have to deal with in Indonesia include the expansion of agricultural projects, commercial forestry operations, and land resettlement programs (Fox 1977; Murray Li 2001; Napitupulu, Guèze, and Reyes-García 2017). These projects have affected hunter-gatherer groups ranging from the Orang Asli to the Punan Tubu, who have little recourse to courts in Indonesia.

### Japan

Japan has one group of hunter-gatherers, the Ainu (*Utari* is the name the Ainu use for themselves). Numbering between 25,000 and 50,000, the Ainu were finally recognised as an independent people by the government of Japan in June 2008. In the government’s Former Aborigines Protection Act of 1899, a distinction was drawn between the Japanese and the Ainu, and the act was aimed at assimilation of the Ainu into the larger Japanese society (Erni 2008: 386). The Japanese

government attempted to ‘uplift’ the Ainu of Hokkaido through promotion of employment, industries, and education, including setting aside grants for Ainu students to attend secondary and tertiary educational institutions. The Law for the Promotion of the Ainu Culture and Dissemination and Advocacy for the Traditions of the Ainu and the Ainu Culture was passed in 1997. This law was aimed in part at promoting and protecting Ainu culture, traditions, and language. It did not, however, protect the human rights of the Ainu as a distinct people. Originally a hunting-gathering-fishing people, the Ainu have undergone considerable social, economic, and political change. Urban migration by Ainu has been a feature of their lifestyles for several decades, and it is estimated that there are some 10,000 Ainu in Tokyo alone. The Ainu are some of the more politically active indigenous peoples in Asia, seeking social justice, political participation, control over human remains, grave goods, and objects of cultural patrimony, and economic equality. Cultural heritage activities are strong among the Ainu, and promotion of Ainu culture has become a major focus of Ainu groups (Okada and Kato eds. 2014).

## **India**

India has the largest number of people defined as indigenous in Asia, and also has a sizable number of hunter-gatherers. The government of India designated its indigenous people as ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (STs) and the popular term for them is Adivasi which means ‘original inhabitants’. There were 104,000,000 Adivasis in India according to the 2011 census. STs are designated in Section 342 of the Indian constitution, but there is no specific definition of the term ‘tribe’. STs in India have certain protections in the constitution and there are stipulations that promote their interests, including representation in the Lower House (Lok Sabha) of the Parliament, rights to education, economic development assistance, and access to employment. There is significant diversity among the Adivasi both in a geographic and in a socioeconomic sense. Some groups such as the Nayaka (Bird-David 1990; 2017; 2019), Paliyan (Gardner 1972), Hill Pandaram (Morris 1982), and Birhor (Williams 1974; Adhikary 1999) are hunter-gatherers, numbered at between 2,000 and 30,000, while others engage in agriculture, livestock production, and fishing.

Many Indian hunter-gatherers live in the forests and hills of India. Links between hunter-gatherers and agricultural people are important in India since the former provide forest products and agricultural labour to the latter; thus, symbiotic relationships are common. Indigenous people in India face severe discrimination and marginalisation, and in recent years many of them have had serious difficulties in gaining secure access to land. The draft Indian Forest (Amendment) Bill of 2019, circulated in March of 2019, is aimed at re-establishing state power over forests and allows for the state forest bureaucracy to implement measures to protect the forest and its products, including arresting people who are seen as poachers. This draft bill essentially reduces the rights of forest-dwelling tribal people and other forest dwellers which they were granted under the Forest Rights

Act of 2006 (FRA). The number of conflicts between tribal people and the state in India's forests have increased, especially in the past several years. There are also numerous cases of involuntary resettlement of tribal people out of parks and reserves, including tiger reserves, in India (Neelakantan 2019).

Hunter-gatherer groups in India who are not officially recognized are seeking to obtain formal recognition so that they can benefit from government and state assistance programs. There are over 194 Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs), aimed at poverty alleviation in India, in those areas where Scheduled Tribes make up over 50% of the area's population (Erni 2008: 370). Nearly 90% of the labour of Scheduled Tribes is today involved in the agricultural sector. In terms of health and well-being, the STs are generally worse off than other members of India's population, with higher rates of morbidity (illness and disease), mortality, and malnutrition. Efforts are being made by the national and various state governments in India to enhance their health assistance programs, some of which have been expanded as a result of concerns about the potential impacts of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which has been on the rise in India in late 2020.

### **Thailand**

Thailand has hunter-gatherers in three parts of the country: hunters-gathers and fishers in the south, those hunter-gatherers living in the highlands (categorised as *chao khao*, 'hill-mountain people') in the north and some in the northeast. The Mlabri are an important hunter-gatherer group in that they occupy both sides of the Thai-Lao border, and they have been studied relatively intensively. The Thai government was suspicious of hill tribes because of their reputation for involvement in swidden agriculture, cultivation of opium and other illegal products, smuggling of goods across borders, and supposed sympathies for communist governments. Thailand has no laws that are geared toward protecting indigenous peoples. The 2007 Thai Constitution (Articles 66 and 67 of Part 12) does refer to the 'traditional community' which it says can benefit from recognition of economic, social, and cultural rights. Some government policies have been aimed at addressing the problems faced by the 'hill tribes'.

Particular concerns of Thai hunter-gatherers include their social and physical security, rights to citizenship, deforestation, and environmental degradation. Forest-related laws such as the Forest Act of 1941 have been aimed at promoting conservation, including the curbing of small-scale logging, and restrictions on access to wild animals and wild plants in the forests; the law has thus contributed to the disenfranchisement of forest-dwelling Thai people. While indigenous people in Thailand have the right to be consulted, they lack any decision-making powers (Erni 2008: 446). Indigenous forest communities' rights were further abrogated by the Community Forest Act of 2007. None of the Thai indigenous groups reside only in Thailand; all of them have members in two countries. One interesting point about some Thai hunter-gatherers (and the Wanniyala-Aeto of Sri Lanka) is their

involvement with elephants (*Elephas maximus*) which they work with in plantations, tourist operations, elephant orphanages, and logging activities. Thai hunter-gatherers see their bonds with nature and wild animals as symbiotic ones.

### **China**

China, the largest country in Asia, does not recognise any of its residents as indigenous; instead, the government designates 55 ‘ethnic minorities’ who are non-Han Chinese groups that pursue diverse livelihood strategies and have customs and traditions that differ from the majority Chinese. In 2000 the national census of China estimated the ethnic minority population of the country at 105,226,114, or approximately 8.47% of the total population. Some of these groups have sought to be identified as indigenous in an effort to obtain international support (Hathaway 2014). Unlike India, Indonesia, and Malaysia, China has only a small number of hunter-gatherers, including the Dulong (Song 1999); Orochon, also known as Eulachon (Meng Zhang, personal communication, 2020); and Liplike (Ståhlberg and Svanberg 2017).

Hunter-gatherer populations in China reside in areas of low population density where they are able to obtain natural resources, some of which they exchange with neighbouring agricultural and pastoral people. Chinese government representatives often attend the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in New York, where they argue that the country has no indigenous people, and thus, there are no ‘indigenous issues’ to be concerned about. Nevertheless, efforts are being made by China to expand development programs among its ethnic minorities, including hunters and gatherers.

### **Malaysia**

Malaysia is an interesting case to examine because it has had long-term research into some of its hunter-gatherer populations, including the Orang Asli, which means ‘original people’ (Endicott 1979; Endicott ed. 2016; Erni 2008: 403–409). The Orang Asli are not included in the Malaysian Constitution, but some groups are referred to as ‘natives’ (Article 153) who have a special position relative to other groups in Malaysia, for example in employment opportunities and protection of their culture and traditions. The Native Court Enactment 1992 allows for legal pluralism, recognises the native legal system, and it includes Native Courts. Native Customary Rights (NCR), however, are contested. Large proportions of the land on which hunter-gatherers and other indigenous people in Malaysia reside have been taken over by private logging companies and some serve as palm oil plantations (Nicholas 2000). The agricultural projects promoted in Malaysia are like many others in Asia which emphasise monoculture over polyculture and diversified agricultural production systems. A number of Asian hunter-gatherers have gotten more involved in slash-and-burn (swidden) cultivation which, in some cases, governments are opposed to, pursuing programs that are aimed at settling shifting cultivators.

The Penan of Malaysia and Brunei were leaders in resisting logging companies in the 1980s and 1990s (Brosius 1997; Davis 1998: 39–48; Sercombe 2020). They remain some of the most active indigenous groups in Asia who are involved in addressing the impacts of forestry projects and hydroelectric dams such as the Bakun Dam on the Balul River in Sarawak (Shirley and Kammen 2015). Malaysian hunter-gatherers have been very active in pushing for human rights and fair treatment. Members of a number of different Asian hunter-gatherer groups, including the Penan, Batek, and Orang Asli, attended the 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS XII) held at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, Malaysia from 23–27 July 2018. There is evidence of growing activism among Malaysian hunter-gatherers, something that is also true in Indonesia. Long-term interdisciplinary research is being carried out among Malaysian hunter-gatherers which has shed light on such topics as the impacts of tourism, development, deforestation, climate change, and health changes (see, for example, Endicott ed. 2016).

### **Other Asian countries**

Other Asian countries contain relatively small numbers of hunter-gatherers, including the Munda of Bangladesh (Siddiq, Habib, and Chowdhury 2018) and the Monpa of Bhutan (Barbara Savage, Tribal Trust Foundation, personal communication, 2020). Taiwan is an interesting case since its 16 currently recognized indigenous groups have not lived exclusively or even mostly by hunting and gathering for thousands of years. However, in the central mountains groups such as the Atayal, Bunun, and Tsou are documented as largely focused on hunting in addition to small scale agriculture (Yuasa and Segawa 2000). Southeast mountain piedmont groups such as the Paiwan and Rukai combine agriculture, hunting, and the exploitation of wild plants of culinary and medicinal importance (Lu et al. 2011). Along Taiwan's east coast the Amis (Pangcah) augment agriculture, edible weeds, hunting, and wild plants from the piedmont with marine resources including algae and kelp (Butal and Tung 2009; Lo and Hu 2014); Yu this volume, Pei-Lin Yu, personal communication, 2020). Island groups such as the Tao Yami are largely dependent upon marine resources and taro based agriculture (Chang 2020; Hu 2006). Indigenous based tourism is affecting Taiwan's indigenous peoples in complex ways, not always positive; one benefit is a community-based revitalization of traditional use and values surrounding wild plants, animals, and fish.

None of the hunter-gatherer groups in Asia were considered to be 'peoples under threat' in 2020 according to Minority Rights Group International ([www.minorityrights.org](http://www.minorityrights.org), accessed 30 November 2020), unlike minorities in Pakistan and Myanmar, neither of which have hunter-gatherer groups. There are some Asian hunter-gatherers whose lands are being taken away and who are facing major challenges; this is true, for example, in Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. A number of Asian indigenous peoples'

organizations provide support Asian's indigenous, minority, and hunter-gather peoples, including the following:

Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), Bangkok, Thailand  
 Asia Indigenous Youth Platform (AIYP), Chiang Mai, Thailand  
 Association of Newar Women (ANW), Newar, Nepal  
 Association for Taiwan Indigenous Peoples Policies (ATIPP), Yonghe City, Taipei, Taiwan  
 Center for Orang Asli Concerns, Subang Jaya, Malaysia  
 Center for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas (CSDM), Tay Nung Muong, Vietnam  
 Community Education Program, Partners of Community Organisations (PACOS) Kadazandusun, Malaysia  
 Indigenous Knowledge and Peoples of Asia (IKPA)  
 Indigenous Peoples Human Rights Defenders Network (IPHRD)  
 Indigenous Voice in Asia Network (IVAN)  
 Network of Indigenous Women in Asia (NWA)  
 Tebtebba (Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education), Baguio City, Philippines  
 Tribal Research Institute, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Many of these organizations work on issues of concern to indigenous peoples, from land rights to health, and from education to economic development.

## CONCLUSIONS

Asia has the largest number of indigenous people in the world, approximately a third of the 370,000,000–750,000,000 existing today. Nearly all Asian hunter-gatherers have undergone processes of sedentarization, some of them at the hands of nation-states. They have also been incorporated extensively into the global regional, and local socioeconomic systems. An important feature of Asian hunter-gatherers is that many of them work for other people, including agriculturalists, and they engage extensively in trade with other groups, exchanging forest products for ceramics, metal tools, and agricultural products.

Asia is an important part of the world to examine, not only because of its enormous diversity of hunter-gatherers and other indigenous people, but also because it is an area which has had some of the most significant debates about hunter-gatherers. One example is the so-called 'wild yam' debate which focused on whether hunter-gatherers could exist in Asian tropical forests without agriculture (Headland 1987; Bailey et al. 1989; Headland and Bailey 1991). Archaeological evidence suggests that hunter-gatherers could and did exist in Asian tropical forests, as seen in the cases of Thailand and Sri Lanka which have early dates of hunter-gatherer occupation of forests around 10,000 - 48,000 years ago (Conrad et

al. 2016; Roberts, Bolivin, and Petraglia 2015; Langley et al. 2020). The Penan of Borneo have also lived over the long-term in tropical forests independently of agriculture (Brosius 1991).

Another debate in Asia is whether or not there are ‘isolated hunter-gatherers’ who are not in contact with non-hunting and gathering groups, as seen in the discussion of the Tasaday in the Philippines in the 1980s (Headland ed. 1992). Unlike South America, there are relatively few areas in Asia that are set aside for ‘isolated peoples’ though there is discussion about the possibility of creating such special-purpose protected areas in some Asian countries.

Several Asian countries stand out with respect to their treatment of hunter-gatherer peoples, including the Philippines and Nepal. All Asian countries have participated in the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). While human rights of indigenous people vary across the region, Asian hunter-gatherers have sought political recognition, gender equity, and fair treatment before the law. Among the major concerns of hunter-gatherers and other indigenous people in Asia today are (1) food security, (2) land rights of foragers and shifting cultivators, (3) climate change and (4) health, including COVID 19 (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact 2014; Erni 2015; IWGIA 2020). From the perspective of hunter-gatherer studies, Asia is very important because of its large population, diversity, resilience, and the activism of its hunter-gatherer peoples.

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