

## **Development as eradication: The pillage of the Jakun “people’s bank” of Tasik**

**Chini, Pahang**

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree, Jonathan Parker, Isabel Crabtree Parker, Miranda Crabtree

Parker

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree, PhD, FHEA, FRSA (\*corresponding author)

Faculty of Health & Social Sciences,  
Bournemouth University  
R206 Royal London House  
Christchurch Road  
Bournemouth, Dorset, UK BH1 3LT  
+44(0)1202 962 801; [scrabtree@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:scrabtree@bournemouth.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

The politic rhetoric of social and economic development in Malaysia is used as a dominant and largely unquestioned discourse to justify the industrialised exploitation of the traditional territories of the indigeneous people of West Malaysia. This paper discusses findings from a condensed family ethnography of the Jakun Orang Asli people of Tasik Chini in the State of Pahang. Tasik Chini is one of two freshwater lakes on Peninsula Malaysia. The lake and surrounding forests have provided the Jakun villagers with abundant natural resources for subsistence but the area is now badly eroded and polluted by the ravages of big business. This presents a serious dilemma for the Jakun concerning whether to resist the destruction of their traditional way of life and the cultural beliefs that provide meaning to this or to comply with Federal and State agendas and thereby collude with their loss of self-sufficiency and autonomy.

Key words: Malaysia, Orang Asli, Tasik Chini, indigenous

## **Introduction**

Malaysia's controversial policy of continuing affirmative action towards the so-called "bumiputera" groups, which comprise the Malay community and Dayak indigenous people on East Malaysia, has been the subject of much on-going debate and critique (Whah and Guan 2017). Perhaps less commented on is Malaysia's social policy drivers relating to the rhetoric of "social and economic development", yet this too carries inherent problems that affect particular ethnic groups over others nationally. In this paper we will discuss how such rhetoric relates to the privileging of the

bumiputera and how this in turn serves to disadvantage and indeed marginalise the poorest communities in Malaysia, these constituting the indigenous groups of West Malaysia – the “Orang Asli”.

Both the Dayaks and the Orang Asli are composed of many different ethnic groups holding their own specific nomenclature but are collectively subsumed under the broad labels as referred to here. Their various ethnic reputations are liable to lead to stereotyping: the ferocious head-hunting Iban, for example, or the more urbanised and peaceful Bidayuh or the coastal, Islamified Melanu of East Malaysia (Authors’ Own 2012). By contrast most Orang Asli in West Malaysia, we argue, are simply lumped together and perceived by mainstream society as a shy people who are “backwater” in lifestyle and backward in capability.

These perceptions of the Orang Asli appear to have changed remarkably little over time in contemporary Malaysia (Nicholas 2000). The prevalent colonial view of the Orang Asli as both children of nature (Ooi 2003) and the hapless prey of predatory traders (dealing in slaves and forest goods) (Leary 1995), have inherently carried constructed hierarchical positions of superiority and inferiority that are accepted, taken-for-granted and continued in post-colonial Malaysia. In this vein, Carey (1976) comments that even the most enlightened colonial attitude in its dealings with the Orang Asli tended to regard them as so anachronistic, they needed the rarefied air of protected reservations to preserve their culture, something that that legal structures reinforced. In turn, Idrus (2011) claims that the general colonial attitude towards the Orang Asli was that of a people occupying the lower rungs of the human evolutionary ladder, and therefore in need of such paternalistic protection. She argues that such

attitudes have permeated post-colonial ethno-politics in Malaysia, where such discourses remain firmly in place in terms of religio-ethnicity and class (Idrus 2011). Gomes (2004) concurs, stating that contemporary Government views of the Orang Asli persist in viewing them as inhabiting an obsolete, immutable and enclosed worldview that permits neither obvious change nor socio-economic development. Commensurately, Nicholas states that a latter-day internal colonisation is clearly discernable in the “management” of the Orang Asli through Government bodies, particularly the *Jabatan Had Ehwat Orang Asli* (JHEOA) (the Department for Orang Asli affairs), being the successor to the former Department of Aborigines (Nicholas 2000; 2010) and now referred to as the JAKOA (*Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli*).

In this paper, the politics of “development” as applied to the Orang Asli within a socio-political discourse, are considered in the light of current research into the Jakun villages of Tasik Chini, Pahang, Malaysia. The ethnographic study discussed here was undertaken under the auspices of the Tasik Chini Research Centre at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). This, by invitation to the authors, sought to offer a social science corrective to the Centre’s predominantly natural science focus on the region and its people. Such alternative views have proved essential in understanding the impact of the socio-economic difficulties the people of the area have experienced in relation to the degradation of their environment, erosion of traditional lifestyles and the precarious circumstances of finding new sources of livelihood.

### **The rhetoric of “development” and the Orang Asli**

As is generally well known, the Orang Asli are composed of many heterogeneous ethnic groups homogenised by a somewhat crude, bureaucratic classification selected

through elimination of other acceptable appellations, rather than originally adopted by the people themselves (Carey 1976). The socio-economic position of the Orang Asli in Malaysia varies across the country, with some communities very much worse off than others. However, altogether they indisputably constitute the most impoverished people in Malaysia, where 35.5% live in hard-core poverty conditions and where 76.9% live beneath the poverty line (Nicholas et al. 2002). As a result of these entrenched positions the people have adopted the homogenising appellation, “Orang Asli” (“original people”) for political ends (Nicholas et al. 2002).

The 1991 Census survey indicates that 88.7% of Orang Asli continue to live in rural areas, although less than 1% retain nomadic lifestyles, typified by the Negrito sub-ethnic group (Nicholas 2000), who are the most impoverished of the Orang Asli groups. Such figures serve, *prima facie*, to endorse the general view promulgated by the government and media regarding the stunted development of the Orang Asli, and thus their need for concerted social and economic development (Gomes 2004). This position reflects Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of *doxa*, a tacit, unspoken “taken-for-granted” self-evidence which permeates the socio-political context in which policies affecting the people’s development, lifestyles and futures are made. Here we explore the application of *doxa* underpinning the general national assumption of the need to bring such development to the Orang Asli, whether avidly embraced or otherwise. This is, of course, extremely important to those with vested interests in contemporary government. As Bourdieu (1977: 166) states: *the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of the ‘doxa’*, because an effective defence allows or even promotes the continuing success of accepted social policies. It retrenches them

through the self-evident need for socio-economic development activity for a people who are taken-for-granted as being backward and in need.

In relation to the Orang Asli, other aspects of under-privilege are indicated by higher morbidity and mortality among such groups. Much of this refers to severely compromised maternal health or general susceptibility to preventable diseases and high rates of malnutrition, particularly among children and women of child-bearing years (Nicholas 2010; Baer 2006). Conventional educational attainment is also described as weak among Orang Asli groups and this has been the topic of academic investigation in terms of the phenomenon of school drop-out, particularly at secondary school level (Ramle bin Abdullah et al. 2012; Sharifa Md Noor et al. 2011). The question of educational curricula and settings, or to be more precise, what constitutes appropriate education for Orang Asli children was one closely interrogated by the Authors' (2016) in their study of schooling principles and practices in the Orang Asli communities.

Owing to these factors in general government efforts have focused on improving the socio-economic demographics of the Orang Asli, through promoting their greater participation in the market economy. Based on such evidence a *prima facie* case would suggest that, on the surface at least, social and economic development of the people is as a welcome if challenging endeavour. In respect of this focus Nicholas et al. 2002, p.12) describes the three main planks of government plans towards the Orang Asli as:

- 1) integration and assimilation
- 2) sedentism and regroupment

### 3) privatisation of their development

The assigned role of the government-body, the JAKOA (previously JHEOA), is to be a departmental tool of government policy and thus to act as the protectors of the interests of the Orang Asli. In addition the JAKOA serve as the people's mouthpiece but also as gatekeepers protecting them from being accessed by other groups and outsiders, which includes research access. In addition the JAKOA is also known to use their influence in the selection of community leaders, traditionally selected through *adat* (customary practice), which is usually decided via inheritance or individual qualities or other selective community-constructed identification processes (Carey 1976). The role of the JAKOA represents an example of the underlying 'doxa' of backwardness and need. Because of these assumptions JAKOA's purpose is seen as benign, empowering and necessary, whilst resistance to it recognised as deviant, all of which reinforces the social policy drive to development as understood by the government and eradication of occupational lifestyles that run counter to those policies.

Moreover, the JAKOA generally represent the Orang Asli and issues pertaining to them in public forums, in Courts of Law, in public policy and at government level (Nicholas 2010). The representative aspect of "speaking for" and "about" the Orang Asli (Alcott 1991; Author, 2012), as undertaken by the JAKOA, is open to being argued to be an obvious continuation of post-colonial paternalistic control, arguably an anachronistic measure that is no longer required. It also continues publicly to perpetuate a myth of incapacity that does little to empower to the people they

represent. Accordingly, many participants in our study expressed highly ambivalent sentiments towards the JAKOA's role and assistance.

Drawing on the previously introduced Bourdieusian notion of 'doxa'. the language of social and economic development, as articulated in Malaysia, forms a dominant public discourse serving to define a socially validated outlook together with a capitalist *modus operandi* (Bourdieu 1977). In these constructions that which is viewed as out-of-step with these modes is regarded as socially incongruent, invalid and hence excluded and marginalised. Such assumptions of right-thinking leads to viewing the very conditions composing underprivileged as a demonstration of the entrenched retarded position of the Orang Asli. This carries the clear implication that the marginalised in these groups exemplify an obdurate form of ethnic pathology serving only to hold them back.

An elucidation of this embedded and seemingly static stereotype applied to the Orang Asli, as a collective ethnic group, is offered by Gomes:

It is possible that the Government's view has been influenced by the existing anthropological literature, it arises more directly from its espousal of the previous modernization model of change which represents the Semai and other Orang Asli as subsistence-oriented, "backward" and "traditional" people in need of modernization through the diffusion of new technology, "modern" values and market orientation (Gomes 2004, p. 2).



In a similar vein, Idrus 2011) outlines the dilemma facing the Orang Asli: to remain the infantilised wards of the State or to attempt to join in and compete in the accelerated development of Malaysia. Although this also poses the connected problem that an inability to seamlessly make the transition from traditional, out-moded lifestyle to modern personal development may be marked as both collective failure and collective culpability by the Orang Asli who wilfully or obtusely holds back the general development of the Nation State (Idrus 2011). Prevailing politicised assumptions like these completely ignore any local desire to maintain traditional, indigenous lifestyles and knowledges.

The rhetoric of development, underpinned as it is by taken-for-granted and seemingly self-evident beliefs, is therefore highly significant to the understanding of the intersections of global, neo-liberal capitalism and the positional constructions of ethnicity and class in Malaysia as experienced by the Orang Asli people. Such experiences are explicitly connected to macro policy towards the Orang Asli. They are found embedded in the deep fault lines between apparently impermeable Ministerial jurisdiction in governance of specific areas of control, which affect Orang Asli lives in terms of which government body manages various resources, where strict jurisdiction create a lack of joined-up approaches leading to gaps in provision. Furthermore the cleavages between Federal and State Government both directly and indirectly, but often severely, affect the lives of Orang Asli communities where to give one example, while the Prime Minister Najib is both the Head of the Federal Government and also happens to represent the local Tasik Chini constituency, it is the State Government who primarily controls these local territories and how they are managed.

### **Who are the Bumiputera?**

The position of the Orang Asli in terms of ethno-politics in Malaysia is ambiguous, which has proved highly disadvantageous to them collectively. The term “Bumiputera” was one that was extended from Malays to embrace the indigenous peoples of Sarawak and Sabah during the negotiations of accession to the new Federation of Malaysia in 1963. While Dayak bumiputeras have gained some advantages from affirmative action policies the main beneficiaries are perceived to be overwhelmingly the Malay middle classes, and where emulating such success may mean adopting Malay Muslim identities and practices (Chua, 2007).

The bumiputera ideology of Malay supremacy, which continues to cling to its privileges with great tenacity in the country (Whah and Guan 2017), was established through constitutional prerogatives at political levels from the time Independence was negotiated (Hew and Ashencaen Crabtree 2014). The bumiputera status also carries a raft of additional advantages via affirmative action policies in terms of education, employment and land/housing rights as enacted under the New Economic Policy of 1970 onwards through higher share of capital in the corporate sector, industrialisation, urbanisation and education. Thus lifting the Malay community out of wide-scale poverty and creating a new affluent Malay bourgeoisie (Tan 2001; Jomo 1994, Whah and Guan, 2017).

Bumiputera privileges are ideologically based on the concept of indigeneity and thus cannot be extended to sojourners. Yet this assertion contains an unavoidable contradiction, for factually the true indigenes of Peninsular (West) Malaysia are the

Orang Asli, as the Malay population in Malaysia is historically composed of migrant groups from other parts of Southeast Asia, primarily Indonesia (Tan 2001).

Yet, owing to a number of factors, including perceived remoteness and dispersal, numerical insignificance, culturally traditional lifestyles and a lack of coordinated voice, the Orang Asli of the Peninsular have received no particular political consideration towards recognised native prerogatives in respect of their authentic indigenous status. Rather they serve as a most awkward anomaly in the ideological positioning of ethno-politicised Malay supremacy in respect of the status of indigenous privileging. In this context, the ‘doxa’ of backward children who need assistance helps maintain the superior positioning of the Malays.

A further complexity arises through the formal and international recognition of the particular and frequently disadvantaged circumstances of indigenous people through the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Nicholas et al. 2007), of which the Malaysian government is a signatory, and, of which, more will be said. In the meantime government policy continues to both strive to utilise the ambiguous positioning of the Orang Asli to best advantage, while “ironing” out the discrepancies. This takes place through such strategies as political “representivity” (control and selection of Orang Asli political/community candidates as opposed to genuine representation) (Nicholas 2000, p. 207). The increasing Islamisation of Malaysia riding on the back of enshrined nationalistic Malay supremacy gives rise to “dakwah” calls to conversion to the State religion Islam (Hew & Ashencaen Crabtree 2014). This is disruptive of traditional indigenous identities, community relationships and ways of being (Toshihiro 2008). An additional factor is

internal interference with community decision-making processes via JAKOA (Authors' Own 2016); and erosion of traditional lifestyles to enforce alignment with the neo-liberal, individualised market economy (Gomes 2004).

These, arguably, aggressive strategies of assimilation of indigenous people, however, stands in opposition to the spirit of UNDRIP where the right to practise traditional life is asserted and is also integrally tied to rights to the land itself (*Nicholas et al. 2010*). Although as the Dayaks of Sarawak and Sabah have discovered - and the Orang Asli of Malaysia, devoid of such rights have long known - traditional native lands are not inalienable in Malaysia (Sharom 2006; Hew and Ashencaen Crabtree 2012).

## **Methodology**

Between mid-January and April 2014 six Jakun village communities at (Lake) Tasik Chini were identified and approached via culturally grounded leadership hierarchies, for consent to conduct a qualitative study of the effects of ecological change taking place in the area on the lives of participants. These were *kampungs* (villages) Gumum, Ulu Gumum, Melai and Ulu Melai, Tanjung Puput and Chenahan.

This study used a condensed ethnographic approach to data collection (Rist 1980; Woolcott 2008), where in keeping with ethnographic approaches, the aim of research was to develop in-depth insights into the phenomena, which from the outset in this case, was entirely unfamiliar to the researchers (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Atkinson 2015). Owing to logistical constraints a limited duration of data-gathering was confined to an intensive three month period in the winter-spring months of 2014. Data collection involved critical observation and the gathering of documentary and

statistical information, together with visits to local sites of contextual importance. Several individual interviews were carried out with villagers of all ages and both sexes together with Human Rights activists, NGO workers and academics, supplemented by small group interviews and three community-based focus group discussions at the individual villages making up the local Jakun community.

Given the overt disempowerment of the communities by outside agencies where the communities had felt their knowledge to be both belittled and dismissed, efforts were made to engage the communities in aspects of co-production of knowledge; and where, in keeping with feminist methodologies, the researchers attempted to dismantle the research hierarchies of “expert” and “subject” (Author’s Own 2012).

This approach resonated with indigenous research methodologies, here defined by Chilisa (2012) as (among other principles) seeking to work with the epistemological and ontological assumptions of what counts as reality within the indigenous community. Furthermore, working within indigenous *Weltanschauung* (world views) requires such research to be a vehicle for the values of compassion, care, togetherness, empathy and respectful important (to generalise) to many indigeneous communities (Chilisa 2012; Davey et al. 2014). Such exhortations also imply that the researcher engages fully with the communities under study in their struggles towards emancipatory raised-consciousness towards the conditions of their oppression – comprising of a somewhat heady combination of Marxist and indigenous ideologies (Davey et al. 2014).

Accordingly indigenous methodologies informed our study in ensuring that respectful engagement of the villages was to the fore (Authors' Own 2015) and that it was seen to be directly relevant to the Jakun community's interests. This required that we attempted to understand the ethno-philosophies of the communities (Chilisa, 2012; Chilisa and Preece 2005), typified by examining the symbolic meanings attached to myth and metaphor that informed the Jakun community's ecological interpretation of their environment and its despoliation by outside industries. Finally, data analysis was grounded in ethnographic methodology, where findings emerged through the coding of raw data at increasing levels of complexity; and where congruities and anomalies were noted in the development of a thematic analysis (Author's Own 2011; Authors' Own 2016; Ritchie and Lewis 2003).

### **Research findings: Disrupted livelihoods**

The process of developing thematic analysis of the data indicated several interconnected themes relating to the domains of wage earning (see Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Braun and Clarke 2013). The reliance of the local Jakun communities on the surrounding environment in this respect meant that the marked ecological changes taking place locally were regularly – indeed habitually - referred to. In the following sections therefore four themes are discussed that connect with and illuminate the overarching issue of social development as a macro ideology in having direct relevance to the Tasik Chini communities studied. These comprise:

- Social development and exploitation of natural resources
- Social development and the eco-tourist trade
- Impact on the communities - the “bankrupt” environment

- Social development and poverty

### *Social development and exploitation of natural resources*

The Jakun Orang Asli of Tasik Chini and those who have married into the Jakun communities) have traditionally earned a livelihood through the collecting of forest plant resources, hunting as well as fishing in the once abundant lake; and small-scale farming activities (Omar 2014). In more recent years they have also engaged in opportunistic, locally grown, eco-tourist enterprises which despite being seen as retaining commercial potential (Habib et al. 2012) have since largely faded away through the deterioration of the lake and the demise of a key community-based entrepreneur, the late Mr Rajan Jones of Kampung Gumum (Authors' Own 2016).

The last couple of decades in particular have witnessed enormous ecological changes to the Tasik Chini environment in which it would be no exaggeration to say that the damage has been profound and demands immediate, vigorous and orchestrated Government action (Pheng 2014; Hezri and Chan 2012).

According to the accounts provided by the communities, rich deposits of iron ore were discovered at Tasik Chini many years ago by an outsider: this apparently being a man from the Jah Hut Orang Asli sub-ethnic group who married a local Jakun woman and settled in the area (Authors' Own 2016). This felicitous discovery, however, eventually spelled catastrophe for the local communities when mining concessions were granted by the State of Pahang to external, foreign companies. This has resulted in the inexorable demolition of forested hills surrounding the lake, such as Bukit Ketaya, regarded as holding sacred significance for the local people. Deforestation

continues to take place on an enormous scale in the area and great swathes of once native territory have yielded to the destruction of the logging, mining and palm oil industries – and where profits are filtered away to powerful interest groups and not to the local communities.

Mining has also resulted in contamination of the lake through seeping metal toxins (Ebrahimpour and Idris 2010). The lake now no longer offers pristine, lotus-laden waters rich in flora and fauna, but is now murky and polluted; and where fish stocks have fallen markedly (Authors' Own 2016). The building of a dam in the mid-1990s was implemented by the Federal Government in order to raise the level of water in the lake. This plan, much criticised at the time by Malaysian environmentalists, and without consultation with the Jakun communities, sought to prevent the great (Sungei) Pahang River and its tributary, Sungei Chini, from seasonally flowing into and out of the lake to create a non-tidal lake. The results have been a stagnant eutrophic environment from which toxins cannot escape nor permit passage to migrating fish (Ebrahimpour and Idris 2009; Shuhaimi-Othman et al. 2008).

All these changes appear to have had a deeply detrimental effect on the local communities living around the lake and their abilities to sustain a livelihood. Based on findings from our group discussions with the communities villagers agreed that there was a serious and notable deterioration to the lake environment; although to what extent was subject to debate. Some villagers claimed that they no longer ate fish caught from it, which were now considered to be inedible and often filled with parasites. Scientific evidence to support this claim is somewhat equivocal where the contamination of food chains by heavy metals on human consumption is noted by



Mustafa and Nilgum (2006), but where in reference to Tasik Chini, Ahmad and Shuhaimi-Othman (2010) suggest that fish caught from the lake are safe to eat.

Commensurately while some villagers stated that fish catches were generally edible, all villagers unanimously agreed that the fish were undersized, tainted and unpleasant to eat compared to the past. Rashid, a local Jakun fisherman who has worked the lakes since he was a child was in a knowledgeable position to make the following comparisons:

“Before the dam there were a lot of fish, but that the dam caused <sup>i</sup>*ekor kucing* to grow. Once fishes from the Pahang River used to flow into the lake especially when it flooded. The last time [prior to the dam] it was heaven – a lot of fish - and [we] could just use a net to catch them.”

Whether fish stocks are now fit for human consumption or not, there was no evidence that there had been serious consideration of the health implications for the Jakun communities in respect of local pollution by any govern agencies we encountered or that this was given due attention in any formal documentary evidence.

### ***Social development and the eco-tourist trade***

The damming of the lake has contributed greatly to its ecological deterioration leading to its predicted collapse as a sustainable, living environment within the next few years (Hezri and Chan 2012). The dam itself appears to have a clumsy and ill-informed attempt to cash in on greater profits from the promising numbers of tourists

that began to visit the lake owing to its undefiled beauty in the 1970s up until the last decade (Authors' Own 2016).

The lake, prior to the building of the dam, was subject to the natural ebb and flow of the monsoon tides that generated its ecological health and uniqueness. Thus at certain times of the year the lake was mostly flushed out to a marshy wetlands where plants could reproduce and provided natural nurseries for fish spawn. Seasonally, the lake was refilled by floodwaters from Sungei Pahang (Pheng 2014). This ecological cycle of renewal is poignantly described by one local participant aged in her mid-twenties.

“The water wasn't really deep at the time. When it was dry we used to play hide-and-seek, among the reeds, like Marco Polo going exploring. ...The waters were really clear and cold and all you wanted to do was jump in and stay there. Sometimes we used to swim until our skin wrinkled.”

The degradation to the lake is regarded as the cause of the collapse of the burgeoning tourist trade by the villagers, although this initially had boasted of the features generally associated with the contemporary eco-tourism model that Malaysia is keen to promote: beautiful, natural habitats; traditional livelihoods where indigenous/local human habitation co-habit sustainably with nature; tourist infrastructure in keeping with and sympathetic to the local environment and human cultures; tourism that helps to support local biodiversity and communities and is prevented from eroding or engulfing it.

Such then, according to the participant accounts, was how local eco-tourism was developing in the area to the benefit of the Jakun communities, who invested in making handicrafts for sale, acted as paid forest guides, put on small-scale cultural shows and operated as tourist boatmen.

As Nubi, a disillusioned participant in his fifties comments:

“[The local people] don’t do handicraft now as we cannot sell to the tourists, so we’ve had to give it up. Before [1980s up to mid 1990s] then about 20 boats would come per a day carrying eight tourists nearly every day. It was a problem for men to bring in though the boats. They didn’t want to bring tourists by road so they wanted to bring them in via Jetty Sungei Pahang.”

Jamaliah, an eloquent and well-informed younger participant adds:

“The dam has spoiled the ecosystem of the lake ... before the dam they [boatmen] needed too push the boats and that was an [tourist] attraction in itself.”

The trade in boating tourists was quickly lost to the Jakun villages when the locally-owned, tourist chalet business was undermined by the building of the State-subsidised Tasik Chini Resort, with the boat concession then given to neighbouring Malay boatmen. Compounding these injuries the damage to the lake eco-system caused the sumptuously lush growth of lotus blooms (the greatest tourist attraction) in the lake to

die back, where few now are ever seen according to the villagers and our own observations.

The incursion of industry into the surrounding forests through deforestation are rapidly diminishing the biodiversity of the area where many species of flora and fauna, including wild elephants and tigers are no longer seen (Authors' Own, 2016; Pheng, 2014). The huge irony that such disastrous manoeuvres to greedily capitalise on the growth of tourism by the State Government has resulted in the eco-system's collapse, is not lost on the local Jakun. Instead it is commented on with scornful anger and despair as both constituting a huge trauma of bereavement on the community; and as resulting in a main loss of revenue that enabled the local people to profit and assisted them to sustain their diverse forms of traditional livelihood.

Admittedly there have been concerted attempts to save Tasik Chini from further destruction such as the successful application by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia to have the area designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Regardless of its new status this has failed to halt aggressive industrialisation and consequent pollution of the area. However, the somewhat wistful idea that Tasik Chini could still be exploited as a viable tourist attraction continues to be offered (Habibah et al. 2013).

### ***Impact on the communities - the "bankrupt" environment***

The loss of the natural habitat represents a grievous loss to the communities who have been so heavily reliant upon the forest as a resource. Nubi, our previously mentioned participant, graphically describes the Tasik Chini as the "bank" of the communities from which a living could always be drawn. The metaphor may be aptly extended to

the forest as the “people’s bank” and one being close to bankruptcy through the unscrupulous financial dealings of others, as the majority of participants perceive the situation, to the grave cost of the local communities.

Now not only are the local Jakun communities unable to find the resources they require for their own food consumption or for trade but that this also carries other serious legacies. As one group led by an eloquent elderly woman, Idah, explained in a focus group interview:

“The children will lack land for homes [and to] collect natural resources from the forest. The forest is the place where [we] really make a living, like the herbs, <sup>i</sup>*tongkat ali*, *rotan* [rattan]. The health of the future generation may be worse. They will have no places to grow <sup>ii</sup>*herbs* to keep themselves healthy”.

The loss of cultural knowledge is a matter of deep concern to the communities in terms of knowledge of plants and their usage, as well as how to exploit natural resources in a sustainable fashion. This stands in contrast to the brutally destructive environmental rape of Tasik Chini, which the communities feel they are powerless to prevent. This indigeneous cultural knowledge is extensive where in reference to the Temiar Orang Asli group Baer (2006) report an encyclopaedic oral knowledge of the names and uses of 1500 different plant species only superseded by their staggeringly impressive zoological knowledge. These aspects of lifestyle clearly question the underlying ‘doxa’ of self-evident need; however, we can see that unspoken

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<sup>1</sup> *Tongkat Ali* is a local species of tree, the roots of which are used commercially to make a male stimulant similar to Viagra for an avid, international consumer base.

assumptions prevail in all aspects of quotidian behaviour contributing to the demise of traditional lifestyles. This is evident in respect of education.

Formal mainstream education forms a main plank for the development of the Orang Asli in Malaysia, where Meyer observed in 1977 that education serves to restructure society, creating legitimation through the construction of dominant discourses.

Therefore, when Ramle bin Abdullah et al. (2013) comment on the need to ensure that the Orang Asli are not left behind educationally, this also addresses the concern to ensure that indigenous people do not continue to slip into the recidivism of preferred indigenous epistemologies over the dominant forms endorsed by the State, leaving hidden discourses unsaid whilst reinforcing those with political power.

Education as a means of addressing the poor general health status of Orang Asli people has been mooted (Hesham Al-Mekhlafi et al. 2007). However, the capacity of Orang Asli people to adjust to these educational norms has been questioned in terms of educational attainment, which are duly linked to low parental expectations, lack of pupil motivation and even assertions of poor retentive memory (Sharifah Md Nor et al. 2011). The lack of critique of the taken-for-granted assumptions and statements is itself self-evident and reflects the need for deeper analysis, and, in terms of indigenous research epistemologies and ontologies, a louder Orang Asli voice.

A hierarchical positionality of ethnic superiority/inferiority can be detected in these discourses but where Nicholas (2010) in turn argues that these dissonances run deep in being embedded in socio-cultural attitudes towards childrearing, where the Orang Asli child is raised in a non-violent context where s/he is taught to observe indigenous

social norms and etiquettes along with valuable life skills in a very different environment to the more regimented mainstream school environment where corporal punishment is common. This is reflected in Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' – those enduring underlying dispositions that influence behaviours and which may underlie the assumptive worlds that people inhabit and in which policy is implemented (Bourdieu 1977). When recognised, these cultural incongruences have led to the argument that bespoke, culturally sensitive schools are required for Orang Asli children (Spice 1996).

Owing to the central position of school education as part of the social and economic development of the Orang Asli, the performance of the local Tasik Chini primary school with its exemplary pass rate of children in the public examinations has been publicly applauded (Authors Own' 2016). Yet our findings indicate that the virtues of formal education are being strongly promoted not as an ends in themselves but where participant accounts clearly articulate that education is seen as the only viable option for the next generation given the devastation of the area and the loss of traditional livelihoods, as well as the cultural knowledge to engage in them.

In reality, however, as findings indicate, there are some conspicuous local examples of low employment of educated young Orang Asli people in the communities, where education may not lead to skilled or professional wage-earning positions and the assumed road out of poverty. This is yet another obvious contradiction between rhetoric and practice seen within the communities that has yet to be recognised or addressed in the push towards modernisation.

### *Social development and poverty*

Social development as an ideological position directly links to Malaysia's drive towards full status, which under former Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir, was popularly referred to as "2020", the year by which the country would have achieved this coveted international status. Social development as a ubiquitous term is therefore continually heard as one that is ostensibly meant to galvanise and unite disparate factions and interest groups in society in the interests of the State. As Idrus (2011) notes, it is also articulated with the position and status of the Nation State; and therefore by logical extension to support social development is a civic duty of patriotic allegiance, while by contrast to appear critical or unallied to it is tantamount to an act of subversion. This vision has not only been articulated overtly at the conscious level but has become embedded within everyday Malaysian culture and society. Again, using a Bourdieusian understanding, it drives policy formation whilst the effects of implementation and popular belief are reflected back onto the policy process (Bourdieu 1977). Taking Bourdieu's analysis a little further we can see that the policy process as a 'structuring structure' constitutes an edifice that influences socio-economic developmental activities and structures the actions of social actors involved, whilst active participation within it recreates and reinforces the assumed rightness of the structure. What Bourdieu fails to overtly indicate in his initial theory of practice is how social change and resistance stems from the interplay of the structuring and structured structures. However, there is no inherent reason in Bourdieu's analysis to reject a non-Hegelian dialectic that consistently produces change through interaction and when this interaction is contextualised within fields of cultural and social capital, such as the wealth of accumulated ethno-historical knowledge of the Jakun Orang



Asli, we can see the potential for a challenge to received notions of backwardness and governmental forms of developmental need (Bourdieu 1986).

The Jakun communities of Tasik Chini are caught in a seemingly impossible contradiction, where they are urged to embrace the capitalist, consumerist lifestyle and associated opportunities to “get ahead”, such as through mainstream education, but at a significant cost. A visit to the Orang Asli Museum in Gombok as part of our ethnographic research offered instructive insights into the ideological investment by the JAKOA towards the public celebration of individual engagement in the capitalist, consumerist society among “developed” Orang Asli entrepreneurs. The message is clear: the road to modernisation and recognised status is via individualistic capitalism, which stands at odds with Orang Asli cultural values of interdependence and sharing of resources (Nicholas et al. 2002).

A further example of assumed assistance is that of oil palm plantations where 22% of Orang Asli families at Tasik Chini have been “given” a small palm oil plot, which provides them with a small income. Managed by RISDA (Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Association) or MIUP (*Majlis Ugama Islam Dan Adat Resam Melayu Pahang*), participants state that they do not even know where their plots are and are fearful of seeking them out in case they are accused of trespassing (Authors’ Own 2016). This is not merely ignorant naivety on the part of participants; experience has shown them that they have good reason to be very cautious in their dealings where land issues are concerned.

As political rhetoric would have it, the Jakun of Tasik Chini and the Orang Asli in general, are currently *undeveloped*, in terms of their attempts to hold on to a traditional and culturally-based, collective, non-capitalist, subsistence lifestyle in their own traditional territories which are felt to be imbued with spiritual meaning. Yet, the destruction of the local environment that supported these livelihoods may also be construed as an overt act of economic development. Certainly the support offered by the State of Pahang in the exploitation of the natural resources of the area has involved trading in the beauty and ecological health of the area. Continued industrial erosion flagrantly trivialises and dismisses Tasik Chini's UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status (one of only two Malaysian reserves) as irrelevant to profiteering.

The rationale of economic development clearly takes priority over all other considerations. However, the loss of sustainable habitat in turn leads to poverty among local people and the risks of poorer health prognoses together with social and cultural disintegration.

Impoverished Orang Asli communities, like the Jakun villages in this study, consequently become the focus of increased government efforts to assist in their "development", albeit only in the direction acceptable to the dominant group.

Deprived of means of earning a self-sufficient living that was previously available to them prior to politico- industrial interference creates an impossible dilemma for such communities, who are then obliged to either collude with their own oppression by accepting the destruction of traditional native lands or became the passive recipients of welfare hand-outs in the form of State-subsidised payments, such as RISDA.

As Nicholas observes of other Orang Asli communities in Malaysia:

It appears that the poor health of the Orang Asli is tightly bound to the destruction of their traditional subsistence base and their resultant material deprivation (Nicholas 2000, p. 29).

Thus the ability of the communities to remain self-sufficient is being substantially eroded by cumulative environmental damage. The option to take reimbursement for palm oil holdings offers no real solution to poverty, as individual families are unable to manage the crops themselves or expand their holdings and control the intensity of crop production. They are therefore reduced to the position of State dependents; and in so doing are relegated to an even more marginalised and disadvantaged position than before, consequently justifying continued State manipulation.

### **Concluding remarks**

The rhetoric of social and economic development constructs a powerful discourse of nationalistic modernity underpinning a range of social policy initiatives designed to enrich and empower the nation state in terms of capitalist enterprise and the shaping of individuals and communities into the ideal model citizens. This is arguably epitomised by the production of a new Malay bourgeoisie rather than by sojourners or indigenous people. The discourses of social development as *doxa* are insufficiently critiqued in public policy and little discussed in the media, where such social policy does not prevent poverty in relation to environment damage caused in its name (Bourdieu 1977). Our analysis has shown that these embedded assumptions have explanatory power but, once brought to the surface allow for an interaction between

socio-political givens and traditional socio-cultural capital to herald resistance and challenge whilst promoting a uniquely traditional lifestyle (Bourdieu 1986). Nor does it create a particular appealing viable alternative for indigenous communities in West Malaysia, which have so much to lose. Essentially such poverty traps erode autonomy and independence and encourage a welfare dependence attitude that is likely to lead to poverty cycles across generations and increased political interventions.

The atrocious irony and insult of this lamentable situation is that such dependency among previously self-sufficient, proud communities merely confirms general ignorance and prejudice that for their own good Orang Asli communities require increased social and political pressure to abandon their claim to traditional land and the right to practice their own culture. They must instead conform with homogenising mainstream majority culture that is overtly destructive to their culture, and therefore their well-being, in the name of social and economic development that inevitably raises the urgent questions of how and for whom?

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<sup>i</sup> *Ekor kucing* (cat's tail) is the local name for *Cabomba Furcata*, an invasive, non-native macrophyte that has colonised the lake over the last few years due to deteriorating changes in water quality

<sup>ii</sup> *Tongkat Ali* is a local species of tree, the roots of which are used commercially to make a male stimulant similar to Viagra for an avid, international consumer base.

<sup>iii</sup> Generic term that when translated into English is used to describe all useful plants: medicinal, edible, practical and/or useful for trade purposes.