**The Orang Asli of Malaysia**

In the eyes of the government, developers and investors, the Orang Asli (Malaysia's indigenous peoples) are in the wrong time and place. Seen as lacking a sense of time, place or history, they are deemed backward peoples in need of assistance. In other words, they should be modernised. Their purported nomadism is unsettling to the government, which advocates their sedentarisation to resolve the ‘problem’ of their frequent mobility. The Aboriginal Peoples Act (1974) permits the Orang Asli to collect minor forest products but, under the Forestry Act of 1933, the Forestry Department has regulatory rights. The Act requires traders to obtain licences to purchase or trade forest products and to pay levies and taxes on commodities. By such means the Department can regulate resource control and Orang Asli access to the forests. While Orang Asli are not permitted to collect forest products from national parks, this restriction is not always enforced. As Colin Nicholas (2000: 134), Director of the NGO Centre of Orang Asli Concerns has observed, personnel of the Department of Wildlife and National Parks even act as middlemen in the trading of minor forest products gathered by Orang Asli from Taman Negara National Park.

It is more than the contest for resources that concerns government officials. In an attempt to ban tourists from visiting an Orang Asli community in Taman Negara, a government minister in 1997 remarked, ‘Although it is natural for women of the tribe to live half naked in the village, their photographs may give a wrong impression that Malays here are dressed in that manner’ (Nicholas, 2000, p.134). One may conclude that the Orang Asli are not only in the wrong place and time, they are, in their marginal position, also a wrong people in Malaysia.

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**References**


Alberto G. Gomes is Senior Lecturer at the School of Social Sciences at La Trobe University, Australia and has conducted research in the Orang Asli community since 1986. He has just completed the manuscript SETTLING THE FOREST ‘Nomaids’ Modernity and the Semang of Malaysia, forthcoming from Rodopi/Leiden.

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