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UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF REMOTENESS ON CULTURE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC OF THE ORANG ASLI IN MALAYSIA

Erlane K Ghani¹, Kamaruzzaman Muhammad², Razinah Hassan³

^{1,2,3}Faculty of Accountancy, Universiti Teknologi MARA Selangor, Malaysia

¹erlanekg@uitm.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the influence of remoteness on the culture and socio-economic of the indigenous people known as the Orang Asli in Malaysia. Specifically, this study focuses on the largest tribe of Orang Asli in Pahang known as the Jahut tribe. This study utilises semi-structured interviews to achieve the research objective. Three Orang Asli were selected as participants for the interview. The findings of this study record the remoteness, culture and socio-economic that shape the way of life of the Jahut tribe. This study finds that the culture and customs and unique taboos of the Jahut tribe are seen to be disappearing due to the currents of modernization and globalization. However, this study finds that the socio-economic situation of the Jahut tribe is still behind compared to most other Malaysians. There are also some unique customs and taboos that are still practiced among them. This findings show that such scenario are highly influence by the remoteness of location of the village which is quite far from the city. In addition, the inhabitants of a settlement are only inhabited by the same tribe of which in this study, Kampung Pian. This study can be used as an input for the government, academics and NGOs to plan their respective assistance and responsibilities activities.

INTRODUCTION

The indigenous community known as the Orang Asli is an indigenous community living in the Peninsular Malaysia with majority of them living in forest areas. Most of them still practice a traditional way of life that is heavily influenced by the environment and the old practices left by their ancestors. They are part of the Malaysian population that have inhabit the country since thousands of years ago although they are still struggling to get on with their lives. The Orang Asli have survived all the hardships and challenges since from the beginning of their migration to Peninsular Malaysia to this day. Being the earliest human to occupy the Peninsula Land (Mat Jidin, 1994), naturally they should be more forward compared to the other races in Malaysia. However, in reality, what occur is often the opposite situation (Md Adam & Yusop, 2020). In realisation to this, since the independence of Malaysia in 1957, the government has embarked into various development programs to help increase the quality of life of the Orang Asli. Masron, Masami and Ismail (2013) identified two main development programs namely public development and planned development. The first development programs aimed at impacting the community whilst the second development programs aimed at targeting the community (Mohd Asri, 2012). Mason and Arifin (2005) and Khor (2001) noted that the government have provided the Orang Asli with various development programs that benefit the Orang Asli by provisioning modern facilities, village resettlement programs, provision of electricity and water supplies and access to education among others.

Due to their way of life however, poverty among the Orang Asli still exist and is still at a serious level, particularly in developing countries such as Malaysia. They have the highest poverty rate which make up less that 1% of the population (Bedford, 2018). Their poverty rate as reported in the Eighth Malaysia Plan is 50.9% (Mohd Harun, Idris, Berma & Shahadan, 2006) which is significantly higher than the poverty rate of other communities in Malaysia at 7.5% and poverty rate at 1.4%. In 2010, the Department of Statistics Malaysia reported that 76.9% of the Orang Asli population remains beneath the poverty line of which 35.2% was still classified as hard-core poverty. Official information released by the government also found that the average monthly income of the Orang Asli is much lower than that of other ethnic groups.

Two main issues can be raised attributed to the poverty among the Orang Asli could be their nature of economic activities which is synonymous with forest products and traditional agriculture. However, these economic activities are no longer relevant when resettlement of their residential areas occurred due to various reasons related to both economic and non-economic events. Such scenario indirectly forces the Orang Asli to change the focus of their economic activities which further led to the increase rate of poverty. Another issue is on the way the Orang Asli live their lives. It is generally known that the way individual lives his or her life can influence their way of thinking and how he or she sees the world in general (Ross & Mikalauskas, 2018), which can be attributed by their remote location (Dockery, 2010) in the Peninsular Malaysia.

This study aims to examine Orang Asli's way of life in Malaysia. Specifically, this study aims to get an understanding on the influence of remoteness on the culture and socio-economic background of the Orang Asli. The need for this study is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals. The findings in this study could assist Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKO), a department in the Prime Minister Office and the Ministry of Rural and Regional Department to strategize ways such as education and awareness in improving the quality life of the Orang Asli people. The next section, Section 2 presents the literature review relevant to this study. This is followed by Section 3 that explains the research design used in this study. Section 4 presents the findings and the last section, Section 5 provides the conclusion of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous people have distinct characteristics from the other segments of the national populations as they possess ‘*unique languages, knowledge systems and beliefs and own invaluable knowledge of practices for the sustainable management of natural resources*’ (Mason et al, 2013, p.76). Mason et al (2013, p.27) further highlighted that the ‘*indigenous have their own diverse ideas of development, based on their traditional values, visions, needs and priorities. Indigenous peoples often have much in common with other neglected segments of societies, such as lack of political representation and participation, economic marginalization and poverty, lack of access to social services and discrimination. Despite their cultural differences, the diverse indigenous peoples share common problems also related to the protection of their rights. They struggle for recognition of their identities, their ways of life and their right to traditional lands, territories and natural resources*’.

The definition of Orang Asli in the Constitution of Malaysia has been provided in in Article 160(2). The article states that the Orang Asli is considered as the people of the Land Peninsula Malay. In pursuant to Act 134 of the Orang Asli Act 1954 under Clause 3, an individual is an Orang Asli if:

- i. His father was a member of an Orang Asli clan, who speak the language of the Orang Asli and usually according to the way of life Orang Asli and beliefs, and includes a descendant through that man;
- ii. Any individual of any race who has been adopted as a child while still children by Orang Asli and have been educated as a Native, prevalent in manner to the Orang Asli life and customs of the Orang Asli and is that person from Orang Asli or;
- iii. A child of any association between one Orang Asli women with a man from one race to another, provided that the child usually speaks in the language of the Orang Asli, common according to the way of life of the Orang Asli and the beliefs and customs to be someone from the Orang Asli community.

The Orang Asli in Malaysia are not homogenous and consists of various tribes. There are 18 tribes that are split into three main umbrella groups namely, the Negriti, the Senoi and the Proto-Malays. The Negriti tribe often live in the Northern Malaysia specifically in Perak, Pahang, Kelantan and Kedah. They resemble the characteristics of the Pigmi in Africa and are different from the Senoi tribe and Proot-Malays tribe. Under this tribe, there are sub-tribes namely, Batek, Jahai, Kensiu, Kintak and Lanoh (Ismail, Amini, Abdul Razak, Mohd Zaini, Farhour & Alwi (2013). The Senoi tribe often live in the Central Malaysia specifically in Selangor, Putrajaya and the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur. However, this tribe have recently moved to Perak and Pahang (Bedford, 2018). The Senoi is the largest i Orang Asli in Peninsula Malaysia (Nicholas, 2000). The Senoi tribe resembles the characteristics of Mongoloid although some believe that they are from the Australoid from Australia and Veddoid from South India (Lim, Ang, Mahani, Shahrom & Md Zain, 2010). Under this tribe, there are sub-tribes namely, Semai, Temiar, Jahut, Chewong, Semoq Beri and Mahmeri. The Proto-Malays on the other hand, often reside in the Southern Malaysia specifically in Johor and Melaka. Under this tribe, there are sub-tribes namely, Jakun, Kanaq, Seletar, Semelai, Temoq and Temuan. This tribe is believed to be originated from the middle part of Asia (Lim et al., 2010).

To assist the Orang Asli, the Malaysian government plays a big role in developing the Orang Asli. To assist the Orang Asli, the government have implement various transformational programs, and the implementation of such programs have been seen to be more extensive and vigorous to ensure that the Orang Asli are not left far behind. However, the implementation of these programs may provide positive or negative impact depending on their readiness and resilience in accepting the programs. All plans development that has been implemented now seen to have caused change especially from the social and economic aspects them. These changes can be described by sociological

theory, social change. Itam Wali (1993) stated that there are two types of change namely, social that can occur in society or a country. The first type of social change is the change planned for develop a community while the second type of change is the change that occurs as a result of a development (Rosley, 2009).

In a study on Orang Asli, Rosley (2009) used the sociological theory in examining the effects of social change on the Orang Asli community which can be seen from two aspects development. The first development relates to the activities conducted specifically for the Orang Asli community alone. For example, the result of a plan regrouping has resulted changes in the environment of the Seletar people that is, from life on the sea to conduct life on land. As efforts to encourage them to live on land, the government has gazetted a reserve land gazette for Aboriginal people under government gazette GN.229 at Kampung Simpang Arang, as a residence that the Orang Asli recognized and protected below Orang Asli (Act 134). This leads to various effects and changes on life that the Orang Asli are involved in such as Orang Asli entrepreneurship. Hindle and Moroz (2010, p.372) defined it as activities that *“focused on new venture creation or the pursuit of economic opportunity, or both for the purpose of diminishing Indigenous disadvantage through culturally viable and community acceptable wealth creation”*. Bodle, Brimble, Weaven, Frazer and Blue (2018) posited that the indigenous entrepreneurship have been firmly entrenched in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies through trade and other commercial undertakings long before the arrival of Europeans. However, there is not many studies that have examine Orang Asli way of life in the Malaysian context.

A group of studies suggested three factors in identifying the way of life of the Orang Asli (Dockery, 2010; Wagland & Taylor, 2015). The three factors are culture, socio economic background and remoteness, and that these three factors are often interconnected (Altman, 2000). In relation to culture, Cairney, Abbot and Yamaguchi (2015, p.8) defined culture as *‘experienced as connection to country, kinship, language, law and spirituality*. Dodson (1989, p.52) stated that *‘It is very difficult for an Aboriginal to have total propriety right over anything. You are always obliged to share with your brothers in law, your fathers in law, family, to give things away but you would give it away without worrying about whether you would get a return for it. Because you know in the society there will be return sometime when someone is in a position to do so’*.

Wagland and Taylor (2015) suggested that although the indigenous people live and participate in the 21st century, their culture and value system is not similar to the Australian way of life. They also noted that the indigenous people do not see the importance of financial matters due to their physical environment being created and shaped by the actions of the spiritual ancestors and existed as a consequence of their ancestors’ action (Peterson & Taylor, 2003; Purdue, Dudgeon & Walker, 2010). The indigenous people believe that their resources including money are to be shared; individual needs cannot be prioritised ahead of the family, extended family or the community (McDonnell 2003). This forms part of the Indigenous culture, of kinship, exchange and sharing (Wagland & Taylor, 2015). However, maintaining this culture is often associated through residing in remote areas (Dockery, 2010).

Studies have also examined the socio economic background of the indigenous people (Altman, 2000; Guenther et al., 2015). These studies show that in comparison with the non-indigenous background, the indigenous people have a higher rate of unemployment rate, occupation, income, housing, education and health (Altman, 2000). Subba, Pyakuryal, Bastola, Subba, Raut and Karki (2015) studied on the socio economic status of the indigenous in Nepal and found that more than one quarter of the Nepali are living below the poverty line. They also found that within the indigenous people, there is a significant disparity of poverty, an indication a different level of socio economic background.

In terms of remoteness, studies have attempted to examine area remoteness and linking this to the way of life of the indigenous (Martin & Taylor, 1996; Taylor & Bell, 2004, Memmott, Long, Bell, Taylor & Brown, 2004). Remoteness reflects the distance that people have to travel to obtain services. The indigenous people often known to live in remote areas which lack their ability to access to many facilities and opportunities such as housing development, hospitalisations and education among others (Dockery, 2010). For example: in education, Guenther, Disbray and Osbourne, (2015) provided evidences that the indigenous children have lower rates of attendance and below the average performance on the mainstream indicators of achievement, and outcomes by such metrics are lower in more remote areas. There is however, a lack of rigorous evidences on the influence of remoteness on culture and socio-economic of the Orang Asli in the Peninsular Malaysia.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants

The Orang Asli located in Pahang, Malaysia have been used as the participants in this study. The Orang Asli from this location are chosen as they represent the highest number of Orang Asli in the Peninsular Malaysia. According to the Annual Report of the Department of Orang Asli (JAKOA), there were about 147,412 Orang Asli living mostly in Pahang and Perak (JHEOA, 2006). One of the tribes residing in Pahang is the Jahut tribe. The Jahut tribe often reside in Kuala Krau and Temerloh, Pahang of which, one of the village is known as Kampung Pian. There are about 5618 of Jahut tribe (Md Adam & Yusop, 2020). This study approached three Orang Asli individuals from the Jahut tribe to assist in achieving the research objectives of this study. The three individuals, Encik Atan, Encik Rizal and Encik Jefri are currently entrepreneurs basing in Taman Negara Pahang. Two of the individuals are involved in commercial agriculture and one of the individuals own a convenient store. These individuals are chosen as all of them are involved in business activities and therefore, are believed to have some financial knowledge. These individuals have been involved in the business activities of more than 10 years.

Research instrument and data collection

This study relies on the qualitative approach and hence, interview using semi-structured questionnaire is designed. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured survey basis in order to have a problem-focused approach, thereby allowing more personalized discussion to be conducted with the survey. The use of face to face interview allows the researchers to obtain view points of the participants with some flexibility to adjust and explain the questions (Curran & Blackburn, 2001). The participants were given the flexibility to provide answers to obtain other relevant information. In addition, the interviewees have the opportunity to explain their thoughts and highlight area of interest and expertise (Horton, Macve & Struyven, 2004). The questionnaire was developed on the basis of this study of which was later discussed and refined in a discussion with a panel of academics experienced in conducting qualitative research. It consists of two sections, namely personal questions about the participants and on the types of business that they are involved in as well as their financial literacy and the factors influencing their financial literacy.

The participants were approached at their convenient time, often during lunch time. An appointment was set beforehand with the individuals to meet for the interview. Questions were posed to the individuals and it took about an hour to two hours for each interview. Upon completion of the data collection, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The text results were then structured and categorized according to major

themes, followed by a specific coding, which was subsequently used to structure and guide the data evaluation process.

FINDINGS

This section provides the findings of this study based on the interviews conducted with three representatives of the Orang Asli. The interviews were transcribed and coding analysis was performed using a category system that led to providing three main themes namely, culture, low socio-economic background and remoteness.

Culture

The Orang Asli community are part of the national treasure which of course has customs that are specific to a particular tribe. Thus, this is common for the Jahut tribe where beliefs, customs and taboos of the old people are still practiced to this day. The findings shown in this study are consistent with Faaizah and Sharifuddin, (2020) that found that among the ancestral customs that are still practiced include:

- The custom in life of the Jahut tribe is different compared to other communities in Malaysia. For example; a newborn baby, the umbilical cord will be cut using bamboo that has been in Jampi, the boy circumcision event will go through several stages such as soaking in the river and the ceremony will be held on a large scale to be accompanied by a banquet. Newly circumcised children are not allowed to leave the house for three days and cannot walk or chicken poop. In the wedding ceremony, the event of eating betel to the guests present is an event that is still practiced among the Jahut tribe.
- The custom of protecting different houses compared to other communities is by hanging a fruit called *Pak* that has been enchanted in front of the door of the house to protect the house from the interference of jinn and devils.
- There are also some unique taboos of the Jahut tribe such as the taboo of pregnant women where they are prohibited from doing the work of tying, nailing and burning plastic as well as arranging wood.
- In terms of medicine, bomoh or puyang services are still in demand among the Jahut community to this day. The preparation of traditional medicines and herbs from forest products is still practiced among them.

Most Orang Asli regardless of their locations and countries often possess high life skills and survival skills. This is not an exception among the Jahut tribe in Pahang. From the observation in this study, the Orang Asli community in Kampung Pian do various works and economic activities. The activities include running grocery stores, operating oil palm and rubber plantations and at the same time, they are also involve in commercial agriculture. During the fruit season, they would trade in garden produce such as durian and rambutan.

Another culture practiced by the Jahut natives is that they like to help each other. This is clearly evidenced by them agreeing to join together in expanding their vegetable farming activities with new participants of their own tribe. The start-up capital for each new site is funded from profits from existing sites. As noted by Encik Rizal:

With the desire to help my own people, I started my agricultural project in Kampung Pian. We plan to continue opening new sites and now we have 5 sites. Planning for the future, with the surplus profit of this existing project, we will allocate partly to open new sites.

Another participant, Encik Atan agreed with Encik Rizal. He noted that:

In our planning, if successful, we will find other areas so that later each participant will have their own site. Profits from existing sites will be used to open other sites. That is

how we want to develop this agricultural project. We also plan to expand it to other nearby villages. That was the initial planning for the start of this project. So far, we have had five agricultural sites run by five different people.

Based on the interviews, this study finds that the Jahut tribe is a diligent community. This study shows that the Jahut community will do two or three different jobs a day to improve their economic status. For example, Encik Atan does some work in his daily schedule. He noted that:

For this grocery store business, I have no employees. If I am not there, the store will close. I opened this grocery store at 7 am. About 8 am, I will go tapping. Then I go to the agricultural project site and in the afternoon or evening, I will reopen this grocery store..

The Orang Asli in Kampung Pian have also faced a negative impact from the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown announced by the Malaysian government earlier. During the curfew, agricultural produce could not be sold because the wholesalers from Selayang and Kuantan could not come to their location due to cross-border restrictions. As a result, the agricultural produce harvested was sold at a very low price and some were given for free to the villagers. Encik Rizal provided his comment:

During COVID, business is down a bit because travel to Selayang and Kuantan wholesale markets is limited. The market price dropped sharply, from RM2 per kilo to only RM0.50 per kilo.

Similarly, Encik Jefri noted that:

During COVID time that day, the agricultural yield was considered a loss and give for free to villagers.

Encik Atan's grocery business was also affected. The grocery store experienced a significant reduction in stock and sales as the suppliers were unable to deliver stock due to cross-border restrictions. He noted that:

The grocery store business is very slow during COVID due to the lack of sales items. Suppliers do not come to deliver goods.

In addition to pursuing agricultural and business activities for a living, this study finds that the Jahut tribe are also interested in preserving and continuing the cultural treasures of their ancestral heritage. Among the cultural aspects that still remain among them is the retention and use of customary halls that are still used to this day. The custom hall is a public hall for community members to gather and hold discussions. The design of the custom hall still retains the characteristics of their tribal identity. This custom hall is a public hall holding meetings from time to time. The design of this hall still maintains the identity of the Jahut tribe and the construction cost is borne by an international NGO.

This study finds that efforts have been to carve statues characterized by the Jahut culture and such efforts are still ongoing on a small scale basis due to lack of demand. However, one of the participants, Encik Jefri is optimistic that handicrafts can be developed and rediscovered if the plan to develop eco-tourism in the indigenous village of Kampung Pian becomes a reality. He noted that:

The community there together with PERHILITAN is planning to introduce their village as a tourist destination such as the Kuala Gandah National Elephant Conservation Center. The community here together with PERHILITAN proposes to make this village as a tourist destination like what has been worked on by the village next to our village, Kuala Gandah. Here, we plan to start a tourism product that can attract tourists such as a visit

to a nearby Cave and also a visit to a sculpture site that has been our tribal art since time immemorial. And this statue can be used as a handicraft for tourists as a token of remembrance that they once visited our village.

Low socio-economic background

The economic situation of the Orang Asli population in Kampung Pian is quite backward compared to the community elsewhere. This study shows that the population in Kampung Pian consists of more than 140 families and all of them are from the Jahut tribe. Encik Rizal commented:

The number of families in Kampung Pian, Krau is more than 140 families. The population is Muslim (30%), Christian (30%) and the rest have no religion. But we live in peace and there is no quarrel even though we are from different religions. Here, there are still houses that do not have electricity facilities.

As a result of the researchers' observation, the average residential house in Kampung Pian is in a moderate condition although there are utility facilities such as electricity and water. There are some houses that are still not equipped with electricity facilities. Internet access can only be reached by those who use the Maxis network. In some areas, there is no internet access at all. The main transportation is motorcycles and it is very rare to see cars in their home garage.

In term of educational background of the people here, most of them are only in primary school. With this, they do not have the opportunity to work on a fixed salary in the government or private sectors. Most of them only go to primary school and do not have the opportunity to continue their studies to a higher level due to economic factors and also the long distance from school. Eventually, they had to drop out of school and involved in agriculture activity for living. Encik Atan managed to study up to grade 2 only, while Mr. Rizal up to grade 6.

My educational background is only as far as primary school (grade 2). My job is to run a small grocery store and farm. I have no formal education in business (Encik Atan).

I am a native of Kg Pian, Kuala Krau Pahang from the Jahut tribe. Education up to grade 6. My current job is running a commercial vegetable farm (Encik Rizal).

However, they are always looking at how they can improve their economic status in particular and the Orang Asli community in general. With the help of government agencies such as the Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA), PERHILITAN and other government agencies as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the economic status of aboriginal people can be improved from time to time. They can slowly enjoy the facilities as enjoyed as others. Encik Atan noted:

I used to apply for help from JAKOA and then look for other participants who are also interested in starting this agricultural project. JAKOA helps us by providing agricultural equipment.

They have a target to expand the project to other sites. With the opening of new sites, it can provide opportunities for others to participate in this project. In addition, they plan to diversify the production of vegetables, not just focus on cucumber yields. As opined by Encik Rizal:

The target of this commercial agriculture project is to reduce unemployment in Kampung Pian. Currently we grow various vegetables such as cucumbers, chilies and other vegetables. We are constantly opening new sites and now we have 5 sites for this

agricultural project. Planning for the future, with the surplus profit of this existing project, we will distribute partly to open new sites. This will reduce the risk of unemployment and provide alternative income to the people here apart from tapping and oil palm.

Remoteness

The original life of the Jahut tribe is nomadic who are always on the move (Faaizah & Sharifuddin, 2020) in the Krau forest area. According to Rosley (2009), the majority of them live in forest areas and still practice a traditional way of life that is heavily influenced by the environment and the old practices left by their ancestors. After the forestry area was gazetted as a national reserve area, the Malaysian government has provided a new settlement area for permanent residence. Although there are still a small number of families still living in the Krau forest, most of them have moved out and settled in the villages provided by the government and built permanent homes. Their new village area is located on the edge of a reserve area and is located quite far from the nearest town. Although there are roads, the journey by car to the nearest city takes up to 45 minutes and to the nearest school takes 30 minutes. The remote location and no public transport facilities provided make it quite difficult for the community here for daily necessities.

Based on the interviews, this study finds that the children of Orang Asli in Kampung Pian is facing a problem in getting education compared to the students in other places due to the remote location from the school. Students here have to stay at a nearby dormitory provided by the school to ensure they are not left behind. Encik Jefri noted:

There are also school buses coming into our village to transport students to school. But most students stay in dormitories due to the long distance of the school. They (students) stay in dormitories provided by the school.

In addition, the Jahut entrepreneurs are also having difficulty in getting stock for their grocery store due to its location away from the city. If their grocery store runs out of stocks, they would have difficulty in getting extra stock while the supplier will only deliver the stocks in every 3 to 4 days a week. As opined by Encik Atan:

....if I buy goods from the supplier, in a week there are 2 times the supplier comes to deliver the goods. Demand is there, but the stocks are not available.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to understand the culture, remoteness and socio-economic background of the Orang Asli community in Malaysia. In general, the socio-economic situation of the Orang Asli is still behind compared to most other Malaysians and there are some unique customs and taboos that are still practiced among them. This may be due to the location of the village which is quite far from the city and the inhabitants of a settlement are only inhabited by the same tribe. The results of the research can be used as a reference for other researchers who want to do research on Orang Asli communities, their socio-economic situation and culture. As the culture and customs and unique taboos of the Orang Asli are seen to be disappearing due to the currents of modernization and globalization, the results of this study are a contribution to the existing literature where it can be used as a future reference document related to the field of Orang Asli culture.

This study is not without limitations. First, the number of participants involved in this study is only three participants. Although this study feels that this is sufficient to represent 140 families in Kampung Pian, perhaps increasing the number may provide more evidences on the way of life of the Jahut tribe. Secondly, this study only focuses on the Jahut tribe. Future study may be conducted to include others tribes of Orang Asli. The

findings in this study could assist Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKO), a department in the Prime Minister Office and the Ministry of Rural and Regional Department to strategize ways such as education and awareness in improving the quality life of the Orang Asli.

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