
ORANG ASLI IDENTITY IN THE NATION-STATE

(An Exploratory Analysis)

I. Introduction

A challenging task facing anthropologists concerned with indigenous minorities (in this context, the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia) and their identity question is how best to represent and mediate the differentiated tones of 'the Other' and yet at the same time, convey in the analysis, the wider relational, historical and political economic processes which locate these expressions of identity.

Serious work by Aslian anthropologists on Orang Asli identity in the context of the Malaysian nation-state has hardly begun. This is all the more alarming considering the present global concern with the plight and status of indigenous people as minorities in the confines of their respective nation-states.¹ In part such a 'lag' has to do with the traditional delineation of Orang Asli field of study as a domain of 'tribal' society (as opposed to 'peasant' society) in anthropological studies² and possibly also, its identification as a subject-matter problematised in the context of the nature-culture (ecology/cosmol-

¹Burger, Julian, *Report From the Frontier: The State of the World Indigenous Peoples*, (London: Zed Books, 1987); Waterson, Roxana, *What to Celebrate in the United Nations Year of Indigenous Peoples?* Working Paper No. 117. Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. 1993; *States of the Peoples. A Global Human Rights Report on Societies in Danger*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

²(Wolf 1966)

ogy) discourse³ rather than with social change or political economy. Thus the relationship between Orang Asli society and the external units of analysis such as capital, state/nation-state, or the world-system (currently globalisation), has not been treated with the same importance and theoretical rigour as the internal dynamics from within the 'tribal' natural economy itself.

In the current era of post-colonial developmentalism⁴, with the state embarking to embrace both the NIC status and globalisation, Orang Asli society has increasingly been subjected to the peripheralising forces of change,⁵ it is clear that Aslian anthropologists concerned with issues of 'tribal' cosmology or their nature-culture discourse, and

³Dentan, Robert, "Identity and Ethnic Contact: Perak, Malaysia 1963", in *Intergroup Relations: Asian Scenes* (ed.) Tai S. Kang. (Westport: Greenwood Press. 1979); Rambo, Terry, "Primitive Man's Impact on Genetic Resources of the Malaysian Tropical Rainforest". *Malaysian Applied Biology*. 9 (1) 1979;—"Of Stones and Starts: Malaysian Orang Asli Environmental Knowledge in relation to their Adaptation to the Tropical Rain Forest Ecosystem", *Federation Museums Journal*. N.S. 25 (1980);—*Conceptual Approaches to Human Ecology*. East-West Center. Research Report No. 14. (Honolulu: East-West Environmental and Policy Institute. 1983); Wazir Karim Jahan, *Ma Besitek Concept of Living Things*, London School of Economics and Political Sciences Monograph in Social Anthropology. (London: Athlone Press. 1981); Howell, Signe L, *Society and Cosmos*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1984); Benjamin, Geoffrey, "In the Long Term: Three Themes in Malayan Cultural Ecology", in *Cultural Values and Human Ecology in Southeast Asia* (eds.). Karl L. Hutterer, A. Terry Rambo and George Lovelace. Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia No. 27. Center for South & Southeast Asian Studies. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1985).

⁴McMichael, Philip. *Development and Social Change. A Global Perspective*. (California: Pine Forge Press. 1996): p. 39

⁵Zawawi Ibrahim, *Regional Development in Rural Malaysia and the "Tribal Question"*. Occasional Paper No. 28. Hull: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Hull University. 1995;—"Mengungkap Orang Asli Sebagai Subjek dalam Wacana Pembangunan", *Kami Bukan Anti-Pembangunan. Bicara Orang Asli Menuju Wawasan 2020*. (ed.) Zawawi Ibrahim. Bangi: Persatuan Sains dan Sosial Malaysia, 1996;—"Orang Asli Citizenry and Nationhood: Mediating the voices of the Bumiputera "other" in Malaysia, *Asian Studies Review*. Vol. 21, No. 1. July 1997; "The Making of a Subaltern Discourse in the Malaysian Nation-State". —(ed.) *Cultural Contestations: Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysian Society*. (London: ASEAN Academic Press. 1998)

lately, environmentalism⁶, can no longer ignore these external units of analysis and dynamics of change in both their empirical and theoretical considerations. A failure to take cognizance of these realities means that we as anthropologists (both indigenous and foreign) are equally guilty of doing a 'Nuer' thing⁷ on Orang Asli society, or repeating the kind of 'orientalising' once identified with American anthropologists 'fieldworking' among the Red Indian people on their reservations in America.⁸

II. Recontextualising Orang Asli Identity

From the above, it follows that the question of Orang Asli identity too, has to be subjected to a different kind of recontextualisation, i.e. one which problematises it as a question of ethnic/indigenous minority in the context of an evolving Malaysian nation-state which is sensitive not only to historical specificity and political economy but also to social change. Indeed, the term 'evolving', connotating a process of movement or a situation of non-fixity, applies equally to the question of identity as it does to the notion of the Malaysian nation-state, which itself should be problematised⁹. On the question of identity, Stuart Hall, for instance, has emphasized how important it is "to think of identity which is not sealed or closed totality"¹⁰, for "identities are never completed, never finished . . . they are always . . . in process . . . Identity is always in the process of formation"¹¹. It is by adopting

⁶Hood Salleh, *Dunia Pribumi dan Alam Sekitar. Langkah ke Hadapan*. (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan. 1997).

⁷James, Wendy, "The Anthropologist as Reluctant Imperialist", in Talal Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. (London: Ithaca Press. 1973).

⁸Deloria, Vine Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins*. (New York: Avon, Boston. 1969).

⁹Shamsul, A. B., "Debating About Identity in Malaysia", in *Cultural Contestations: Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysian Society*, (ed.) Zawawi Ibrahim, (London: ASEAN Academic Press. 1998).

¹⁰Hall, Stuart, "Old and New Identities: Old and New Ethnicities", In *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, (Ed.) Anthony D. King. (Binghamton: Macmillan. 1993).

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 47

the above flexible yet dynamic notion of both the process of identity and nation-state formation that we shall approach the analysis of Orang Asli identity in the nation-state context of Malaysia.

What then are some of the relevant issues at stake in this whole orang Asli nation-state contestation with regard to the question of identity?

III. Ethnicity, Developmentalism and the Nation-State

Dentan¹², one of the first few anthropologists in the field to analyze Orang Asli identity, sees their identity (in this particular case, the Semai) arising out of an ethnic contestation between the Semai and the Malays. Gomez¹³, also working on the Semai, follows suit by also emphasizing ethnicity as the basis of their identity. He poses the ethnic consciousness of the Semai against an ethnically-driven state which mainly focuses on their 'integration' into the Malay community. Wazir¹⁴, on the other hand, evokes the notion of Orang Asli 'pluralistic consciousness' as against the homogenising policy of the state. Whilst not denying the ethnic component of the Malaysian state, it is misleading to project an ethnicised notion of the state without also discussing the non-ethnic interests (especially those which relate to capital and dominant class interests) that the state serves and embodies. The developmentalist state, for instance, should be conceptualized beyond the 'ethnicism' of the state. It points to the relationship between the nation-state and capitalism and it is analytically useful to delineate how state policies relating to such interests have impacted on Orang Asli economic resources, their culture and identity.

¹²Dentan, Robert, "If there were no Malays, who would the Semai be?", *Contributions to Asian Studies*. Vol. VII, 1975.

¹³Gomez, Alberto G., "The Semai: The Making of an Ethnic Group in Malaysia" in *Ethnic Diversity and the Control of Natural Resources in Southeast Asia*. (eds.) T. Rambo, K. Gillogly & K. L. Hutterer, Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia. No. 32. Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan. 1988).

¹⁴Wazir Karim Jahan, "Malaysia's Indigenous Minorities: Discrepancies between Nation-Building and Ethnic Consciousness", (ed.) Rezha Rashid, *Indigenous Minorities of Peninsular Malaysia. Selected Issues and Ethnography*. (Kuala Lumpur: INAS. 1995).

Stavenhagen, in this context, sees the nation-state as embodying the component of "ethnocide", an element which is antithetical to "ethno-development", the latter being defined as a self-reliant type of "looking inwards" development seeking to find both the local and grassroot-based economics and cultural resources for identity formation among the indigenous populace of the state¹⁵. The author proposes two dimensions of "ethnocide". The first, "economic ethnocide", "embedded in the theory and practice of development . . . means that all pre-modern forms of economic organisation must necessarily disappear to make way for either private or multinational capitalism or state-planned socialism . . ."¹⁶. "Cultural ethnocide", on the other hand, as Stavenhagen further elaborates, "means that all subnational ethnic units must disappear to make way for overarching nation-state" . . . hence "development and nation-building have become the major economic and political ideologies, . . . Both of them . . . have been ethnocidal in that they imply the destruction and/or disappearance of non-integrated, separate ethnic units. This is frequently carried out in the name of national unity and integration, progress and of course, development"¹⁷.

A variation of the above view is expressed by Eriksen¹⁸ who concludes that "Indigenous peoples stand in a potentially conflictful relationship to the nation-state as an institution. Their main political project is often presented as an attempt to survive as a culture-bearing group, but they rarely or never envision the formation of their own nation-state. They are non-state people"¹⁹.

¹⁵Stavenhagen R., "Cultural and Development in Latin America", in (ed.) Eleonora Masini, *The Futures of Cultures*. (Paris: Unesco. 1994).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p.54

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Eriksen, Thomas Hylland, *Ethnicity & Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives*. (Boulder: Pluto Press. 1993).

¹⁹*Ibid.*, at p. 126

IV. Orang Asli Identity and the New Political Economy: The Commodification of a Cultural Landscape

Orang Asli believe that land is God-given (*pemberian Tuhan*) and a living thing and as such, it is able to produce resources of food and life. Even death is a return to the land. Nobody can prevent Orang Asli from working their land except the *semengot* (spirit) of the land. For Orang Asli, land is a trust (*amanah*) which must be upheld and safeguarded in order to ensure the survival of the next generation.

Land is the lifeline (*nadi*) of Orang Asli . . . Land cannot be separated from Orang Asli. To chase Orang Asli from their land means to destroy their identity and life . . .²⁰

For the Orang Asli, their spiritual and cultural identity is intricately tied to a pre-colonial (pre-capitalist) notion of land, the concept of *tanah saka* (ancestral land). Thus land is not only an economic base but has both cultural and symbolic value. However, with the emergence of the nation-state and its attendant capitalist imperatives (private property, commoditization, the pursuit of exchange-values etc.), these very resources and bases of their cultural life and subsistence have become re-defined and dictated by others from outside. In the process, they have been relegated merely as "tenants-at-will", with access to use rather than own land, and their conduct of such relations has now become legally mediated by the state, through the enactment of Act 134, *The Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954*, amended in 1974²¹.

As the following explanation by Romeli, in a recent dialogue on identity, testifies:

²⁰Romeli Dollah, "Orang Asli Tiada Tanah, Tiada Jatidiri, Diterkam Pembangunan dan Terjun Kedalam Kemiskinan". POASM Paper delivered at *Persidangan Tanah & Jatidiri Orang Asal SeMalaysia*. 2nd-3rd September, 1996. (IPT. University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur): pp. 2-8.

²¹For a detailed analysis of the implications of the above Act on Orang Asli relations to the land see Chua Kim Wah, Michael, 1990/91, *The Orang Asli Problem: A Comparative Analysis of Aboriginal Land Rights in Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand*. Project paper submitted for the Degree of Bachelor of Laws (L.L.B.Hons) University of Malaya, Faculty of Law.

When I was small, we never talked about land rights. . . . These things did not exist. I was free to do what I wanted, I could move here and there . . . as what my old folks used to do before. But today Orang Asli are faced with a foreign concept of land which has been imposed from outside, and which they had never before imagined. Before, Orang Asli used to say: "This is my land and it has no borders." Yes, no borders. Maybe during our time before we were already living in a borderless world. But now, with the presence of the nation-state, we don't know how to go back to that borderless world. We are now trapped in the concept of the nation-state. With the nation-state, Orang Asli have to accept the reality that the present system of land tenure is the one which is demanded by the nation-state. But until today, for instance, with the Semelai . . . we do not accept the system imposed upon us by the nation-state. Why should we accept a concept which was never a part of our vocabulary? We have been forced to accept it. And when we talk about the land, no Semelai tells me that he wants a title over his land. 'Why should we have a title?'. He asked. 'For isn't the land given to us by God? Anyone has a right to cultivate and own without having to show any evidence as long as the community recognizes these rights as his'. Thus among the Semelai, what has emerged is some sort of conflict with the nation-state . . . they refuse to accept what the nation-state is trying to impose on them.²²

But as the many cases of Orang Asli being encroached upon or 'moved about' (part and parcel or what I call "the dispossession crisis") testify²³ there are inherent limits to such a show of 'spiritual' resistance. For a true reappropriation of Orang Asli identity, a meaningful empowerment, rather than one which only 'spiritually' or 'ritually' "decolonises" is crucial²⁴. Such is possible through a political movement and a framework of organisation or action which has a both viable 'spiritual' and material base. Ultimately, as I will elaborate

²²Romeli Dollah, *Dialogue with the other: Orang Asli Identity in the Nation State*, A workshop of the second Asian Regional Pacific Conference of Sociology. Chairman: Zawawi Ibrahim, University Malaya, 20th September 1997.

²³Zawawi, (ed.), *Kami bukan Anti-Pembangunan. Bicara Orang Asli Menuju Wawasan 2020*. (Bangi: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia. 1998). see also *supra* n. 5

²⁴Roseman, Marina, *Colonizing the Imagination: Dreams, Songs, and Other Encounters of a Rainforest People* (University of California Press. Forthcoming).

later, it must be one which is also able to engage itself both politically and culturally in the whole contestation for "epistemological space"²⁵ between the "authority-defined" and the "everyday - defined"²⁶ in the Orang Asli identity discourse.

V. Re-negotiating Identity and Epistemological Space

My own research based on the various 'peoplespeak' data based on conversations, dialogues and statements during my face-to-face encounters with Orang Asli subjects²⁷ reveals certain de-centred expressions of Orang Asli as the Bumiputera "Other". These 'voices' reflect not only the current sense of displacement of Orang Asli identity in the Malaysian nation-state but more disturbingly, the possible presence of a 'native diaspora', albeit one which is without both immigrant subjects and the usual transnational base-factor, which are normally associated with such a "diaspora" phenomenon²⁸. A 'native diaspora' points instead to a fragmentation of identity generated from within the borders of a single nation-state itself.

As emphasised earlier, it is perhaps useful to see identity, as a process "in formation". And as Benjamin recently reminded us²⁹, the phenomenon of the modern nation-state, in most parts of the world, has been imposed "literally overnight on populations most of whom

²⁵Cohn, B., *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1996): pp 4-5.

²⁶Shamsul A.B, "Ethnicity, Class or Identity? In Search of a New Paradigm in Malaysian Studies", Paper presented to the *First International Malaysian Studies Conference*, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 11-13 August 1997.

²⁷For ethnographic detail see Zawawi Ibrahim, *supra* n. 5

²⁸Lavie, Smadar & Swedenburg, Ted, *Displacement, Diaspora and Geographies of Identity*. (Durham & London: Duke University Press. 1996); Brah, Avtar, *Cartographics of Diaspora. Contesting Identities*. (London & New York: Routledge, 1996); Clifford, James, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century*. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1997) Chapter 10: 'Diasporas'.

²⁹Benjamin, G, *Dialogue with the Other: Orang Asli Identity in the Nation-state*, A workshop of the Second Asian Regional Pacific Conference of Sociology. Chairman: Zawawi Ibrahim, University of Malaya, 20th Sept. 1997.

are still not ready for the nation state and citizenship". Thus the shift or oscillation of identity-formation is not just from 'tribal' to 'ethnic'³⁰ but should rightfully, however slow, also incorporate their attempt to participate and negotiate their identity as members of a larger moral and political community³¹ - i.e. as citizens (*rakyat*). For the Orang Asli, this means moving back and forth from a specific 'tribal' identity to that of a pan-Orang Asli identity (provided by the political organization of POASM - the Association of Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli) to that of a *rakyat* (citizen) of Malaysia.

It is no wonder that Orang Asli leaders would always attempt to use any opportunity to negotiate space and identity for their people with the authorities. But as we shall see, such an appeal is not always successful. In one of such encounters, a former POASM President articulated in the following way to the Minister of National Unity and Community Development:

With regard to land, this is a crucial issue for the Orang Asli but as *Datin Paduka* has said: "If possible, we should not apply too much pressure on it." But it appears that we may not have a choice. We have to apply "pressure"; if not, the Orang Asli will forever be victims of development. So I feel that as *rakyat* (citizens) of Malaysia, Orang Asli have the right to benefit from development and they should not be marginalised by it. Therefore, I feel that the land issue must be resolved as quickly as possible especially in areas which are experiencing rapid development ... As Orang Asli do not hold land titles (*geran*), those areas where there are a lot of Orang Asli inhabitants normally become targets. ... So when land is taken, on what grounds can the Orang Asli apply to retain it, let alone replace it? The authorities will say: "There's no basis!". "There's no status!". "There's nothing!". This I feel is a real sense of injustice. Matters such as these should be resolved as quickly as possible, if not, we are "Asli" in name only, without any rights!

³⁰Jenkins, Richard, *Rethinking Ethnicity. Arguments and Explorations*. (London: Sage Publications, 1997), pp. 16-24.

³¹Brosius, Peter J, "Between Development and Deforestation: Negotiating Citizenship in a Commodified Landscape," *Akademika*, Special Issue: Environmental Conservation and Management in Malaysia: Focus Editor: Sham Shani, 42 & 43 (1993).

In the same meeting, a young Orang Asli leader, Yusoff, also spoke of his inability to negotiate for land replacement for the reserved land at Bukit Tampoi which had been appropriated by the authorities for the building of a new highway for the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Apparently, thirteen houses had to be demolished and rebuilt. Out of the forty or so acres which were involved, he was only negotiating for seven acres of new land in order to replace the house sites of the affected homes. He poignantly concluded with the following words:

But when we went to the Land Office, the District Officer said: "How can we give it (the land) to Orang Asli - we can't! Under what status can we grant it to the Orang Asli?"

So, I replied: If you can't grant the land to us on the basis of our status as Orang Asli ... then grant it to us on the basis of our status as *rakyat* ... that's good enough!"

But he said: "No, it cannot be done because Orang Asli will always be Asli!"³²

In the above case, Yusoff's appeal couched in the identity of *rakyat* Malaysia was rejected by the district officer, who confirmed that "Orang Asli will always be Asli". There seems to be a lack of political will on the part of the state to empower Orang Asli to negotiate their identity as full-fledged or complete citizens. As a former Orang Asli state-appointed senator, concludes: "*Kuasa yang ada pada Orang Asli buat masa ini ialah lidah, dengan gigi dan dengan perut kosong. Kuasa mencakar tidak ada*"³³. (which after translation reads: "The power that Orang Asli possess at this time is merely their tongue, with teeth and an empty stomach. The power to bite is not there"). It would also appear that the Orang Asli have also been 'trapped' in the imposed category of "Orang Asli". The above - constructed category "Orang Asli" - has become more than just a technical term. It has become imbued with certain meanings and images, and these have been further strengthened by the creation of a separate department which differentiates the governance of "Orang Asli" as a 'different' type of citizen

³²Cited in Zawawi, (1997) *supra* n. 5 at p. 112.

³³*Ibid.*

from other Malaysian citizens. Thus the category 'Orang Asli' itself has created its own set of "adjectives"—imagery and perception of what Orang Asli identity (often pejorative and stereotyped) should be, in the eyes of the majority.

As Romeli reflects: "*Kita telah ditanamkan, dipahatkan dengan suatu nilai bahawa Orang Asli itu yang begini. Yang bukan Orang Asli itu yang begini. Apabila kita nampak lain sedikit daripada apa yang sudah tertanam dalam pemikiran mereka, maka mereka seolah-olah tidak mahu menerima orang itu yang itulah identitinya.*"³⁴ (which after translation reads: "We have been conditioned and moulded by a value system which characterises the Orang Asli as being one way. Those who are not Orang Asli are depicted as being another way. When they see something different from what they have been conditioned to see, they somehow cannot accept the fact that, that is the real Orang Asli identity").

For Itam Wali, "Orang Asli identity must be determined by Orang Asli themselves"³⁵. For the former senator, this will be a long process for it requires more Orang Asli to be educated. For him, it is a question of the development of the mind (hence, knowledge) - which together with formal education will give a strong resource base for the empowerment of Orang Asli identity. To my mind, the question is at once an issue of the struggle for epistemological space. Cohn, cited earlier, as the author of the above concept, attempted to show that British colonialism in India was more than just the invasion and conquering of territory and physical space. The American anthropologist, is one of the few scholars who have applied an anthropological perspective to the history of colonialism and its forms of knowledge. Cohn's contribution is one which "detailed how the colonising of the epistemological space was developed and systemetised within British colonial project and how the system subsequently dismantled, reconstituted and replaced, almost completely, the indigenous thought system"³⁶.

³⁴Dialogue with the 'Other', *supra*, n. 22.

³⁵Itam Wali, *Ibid*.

³⁶Shamsul A.B., (1997), *supra*, n. 26 at p. 4.

Indeed, there is a similar argument which can be made against the "internal colonialism" to which the Orang Asli have been subjected³⁷ in relation to their dominated epistemological space. The question has become one in which Orang Asli have to reappropriate back this space so as to claim their status as 'subjects' rather than as 'objects' of history³⁸. The discourse on Orang Asli identity is one which has been dominated by "regimes of truth"³⁹ propagated by the "authority-defined"⁴⁰ rather than the "everyday-defined"⁴¹. The struggle to claim Orang Asli's epistemological space is therefore a struggle for the freedom to define, deconstruct and reconstruct the image ("adjectives") of their own identity. Whilst education would certainly foster such a process, already first-hand experiences of the 'dispossession crisis', as I have shown elsewhere⁴² have enabled some Orang Asli subjects to evolve their own "subaltern discourse" to challenge the existing authority-defined "regimes of truths" propagated about Orang Asli. This process of deconstruction and reconstruction of identity should be seen as an ongoing "cultural struggle" among Orang Asli subjects caught in the contestation with the state (it should also be noted that the state itself is not unitary, but confronts the Orang Asli at different levels and in different forms, although the JHEOA (the Department of Orang Asli Affairs) normally acts more cohesively as the bureaucratic arm of the state).

Therefore in the State/JHEOA - Orang Asli contestation, any attempt to claim epistemological space is not only a cultural struggle (i.e. to contest for one's rightful meaning-system/identity) but is at once also political. As Majid Suhut, the president of POASM recently asserted:

³⁷Zawawi, "Regional Development in Rural Malaysia and the Tribal Question," (1995), *supra*, n. 5 at p. 41.

³⁸Zawawi, (ed) "Mengungkap Orang Asli sebagai subjek dalam Wawancara Pembangunan", Kami bukan Anti Pembangunan. Bicara Orang Asli Wawasan 2020. (1996) *supra*, n. 5.

³⁹Foucault, M., *Madness and Civilization*, (London: Tavistach. 1967); —*The Archeology of Knowledge*. (London. Tavistoch. 1972); —*The History of Sexuality*. (Vol. 1. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1976).

⁴⁰Shamsul, A.B., (1998) *supra* n. 9.

⁴¹Zawawi. (1998) *supra* n. 5.

⁴²*Ibid.*

Orang Asli and JHEOA is like a 'bird' to its 'cager'. In reality, the 'bird' can fly like other birds if it is not locked up (*dikurung*) by its cager. So today there is a group of Orang Asli who feel that is better for these birds to be freed . . . and the cage simply demolished . . . JHEOA . . . is no longer capable of protecting the rights of Orang Asli, especially from being assaulted in the name of 'development'.

Of the 10 claims of Orang Asli rights which he laid down at the end of the recent 8th Annual Assembly of POASM, in order for them to be given their "rightful place" (*tempat yang sewajarnya*) in the Malaysian nation-state, items (i), (v) and (vi) are worth noting:

- (i) The government must respect and recognise the rights of Orang Asli as Malaysian citizens (*rakyat Malaysia*) including the International Declaration of Indigenous People . . .
- (v) To provide a package of social justice for Orang Asli society which includes a recognition of their rights, such as land.
- (vi) To protect Orang Asli identity and their religious freedom as enshrined in the Constitution. This includes the development of Orang Asli culture as a national heritage (not as a tourist attraction). Planned assimilation and integration should be avoided as it has led to negative effects on the progress and identity of Orang Asli society. Orang Asli have experienced cultural erosion (*hakisan budaya*). 80% of Orang Asli culture has been lost and only 10% of Orang Asli admit that they are Orang Asli; in reality, there is no more 'Aslihood'. They have been assimilated into other communities⁴³.

VI. Concluding Remarks

It is important, I think, to get away from the limitations of the top-down account of the nation-state⁴⁴, and its rather static, elitist and

⁴³Majid Suhut, Teks Ucapan Presiden Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia (POASM) Sempena Perhimpunan Agung Tahun Kali Kelapan. (1997).

⁴⁴Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1983).

conflationary notion of identity⁴⁵. As the historian, Hobsbawn, despairingly concludes: "We know too little about what went on, or for that matter what still goes on, in the minds of most relatively inarticulate men and women, to speak with any confidence about their thoughts and feelings towards the . . . nation-states which claim their feelings"⁴⁶.

A part of the paper is to make sense of Orang Asli identity in the process "in formation" as their social relations of contestation expand from the micro to the macro arena of nation-state terrain. In problematising the question of identity in the nation-state, it is equally pertinent to maintain a notion of flexibility and "non-fixity" in order to capture the dynamics of their inter-relations and its theoretical directions or possibilities. In distancing our perspective from the top-down account of the nation-state, the anthropological ethnographies provide the 'peoplespeak' data of the "everyday defined", useful to examine how Orang Asli social actors "on the ground" make sense of "identity" as they become reconstituted by the state, capital and globalisation. Ultimately, the challenge is also for Anthropology to transcend its traditional micro confines by opening itself up to wider units of analysis as it theoretically confronts the nation-state and global society.

Zawawi Ibrahim*

* Professor of Sociology and
Dean of Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

⁴⁵ Herzfeld, Michael, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁴⁶ Cited in Herzfeld, *Ibid*.